

I looked around the room once more. Everything about it was dull and depressing. The faded floral bedspread, the plastic lawn chair in the corner, even the off-white walls were repulsive. I couldn't believe this was it. My last few months were going to be spent in this awful, putrid roadblock between me and a quick and painless death. I still couldn't understand what provoked my doctor to put me here. I've lived alone my whole life, perfectly healthy, and still, Dr. Brown decides to have me end in a place as torturous and unpleasant as hell itself, a nursing home. Just thinking about it made my blood hot. I lay down on my creaky twin bed, and tried to get used to the idea of living here. For it was, despite my objection, my new home.

The ceiling fan above me made a soft, rumbling sound. I grabbed the remote and cranked the volume of the television, trying to block out the annoying drum sound. Two women approached my doorway, one in a uniform, and the other casually dressed in jeans and a soft, cream-colored sweater. The one in the nurse uniform quickly put on a sweet smile.

"Why, hello Mr. Larson. Lorna is going to help you unpack your things, okay?" Her tone was obnoxious, belittling me like I was a puppy, but I kindly thanked her.

As the too-sweet nurse walked away, the other woman walked straight to the dresser without a word. She seemed shy, uncomfortable almost, but as she unpacked my clothes and belongings, she acted nearly as if they were her own. As she continued, I observed her. Her outfit told me she wasn't a nurse. I assumed she was a volunteer, but I wouldn't ask. She had a very innocent look. She was quite petite and looked rather young, almost childish, yet very graceful and lady-like. She looked rather sad though, and worried too. Her brow was tight and her lips drooped with despair. We continued without conversation, only the blare of the television, until she was done.

She then turned to me, her eyes now teary, and asked in a sheepish voice, “Can I do anything else for you?”

I felt bad for her, and strangely, I felt we had a strong connection. “I’d love some company,” I said. Her face brightened a bit, still teary but a bit less concerned. She sat on the lawn chair next to the bed and joined me as we stared into the television set, though it seemed as if neither of us cared about whether or not Gilligan would ever get off the island. It seemed as if we had bonded, at least it did to me. I heard a few whimpers, and sniffs come from her direction, but I never looked.

I awoke to the annoying voice of the too-sweet nurse.

“Good morning Mr. Larson! Did you sleep well?” She said this as she poured a couple of unknown pills into a small paper cup. I sat up and yawned. I didn’t have the energy to be irritated with her because I had not slept well.

I replied with, “Fine, thanks.”

She turned to me, her fake, toothy smile shining in my face, and handed me the pills. I poured them down my throat and finished off with a glass of water. The nurse cheerfully hummed and glided about the room. She opened the curtains, letting in a blinding streak of light from the outdoor world.

“What a beautiful day!” she sang, as she stared into the sad, gray city beyond. I turned to my left and realized the lawn chair was empty, leaving no trace of Lorna’s visit the night before. The too-sweet nurse continued to waltz around the room preparing my clothes and checking my chart. She bounced to the door. “Breakfast time!” she sang.

I walked into the cafeteria. Sick, elderly beings flooded the salad bar, hoping to be the first to get to the cream of mushroom soup. I avoided the chaos by grabbing an apple and a little packet of peanut butter. I turned to the first table I saw and sat down before another soul could scoot his way over fast enough to steal the seat from under me. As I opened my peanut butter, a man carrying a checkerboard made his way over to my table. He seemed a bit younger than most of the geezers here, including myself, and very cheerful. His rosy cheeks and big blue eyes glimmered against his friendly smile. He was large. Very large. Almost unbearably so, and he looked very happy to see me and excited to have a friend to sit with.

“Hey Buddy!” he said to me in an overly friendly fashion. He placed his hand on my shoulder and gave me a big grin. “Up for a game of checkers at breakfast?”

I looked at him strangely. His kindness and optimism seemed to be so out of place in this miserable hellhole. It made me uncomfortable. But I accepted his offer and invited him to sit down and join me. His face lit up even more and he quickly took the pieces out and placed them on the board. I watched in disbelief at his kid-like enthusiasm. It made me feel older than I was, almost ancient.

“So what’s your name?” I asked him casually. His ecstatic expression quickly melted off his face, as if the question confused or offended him in some way.

“Uh...Howard. And you?”

“Hank Larson. I just came in from Indiana. My doctor sent me here, said this place would be the best for me.”

Howard's face, still cold and confused, was glued to the board as he concentrated on the setting of the pieces. "You got any family out here or anything?" He asked.

"No. No family."

His face became even more stone-like. He seemed suddenly upset. Had I done something? Had I said something to offend him? I couldn't think of what it could be, so I continued the conversation.

"You ready?" I asked as I prepared myself for the beginning of a great battle. He looked at me quickly. His face became soft again, but this time, it seemed a bit forced, not as sincere as before. We played our checkers with polite conversation, asking simple questions like, "Do you know what they're serving for lunch?" and "What's the weather look like this week?" It seemed normal to me, but he seemed confused still.

When the game was over and he had won my apple, he smiled kindly at me and announced, "You're a good man, Hank." This confused me. The man sitting across from me had met me but an hour ago and he spoke to me as if he had known me his entire life.

I smiled back politely and replied with, "Thank you. You seem like a good man too." He stared at me for a few seconds, and I stared back. Then he firmly put his hand out in front of me, and I grabbed a hold and gave it a good shake, as men do. He walked away without a word and I finished my packet of peanut butter without my apple.

The too-sweet nurse's voice rang across the cafeteria like a siren. "Mr. Larson!" she called, in that degrading tone. I first ignored her, acting as if I couldn't hear. But as the call continued, I grew irritated and finally gave in. I walked toward her.

When I got to the doorway where she was standing, she announced, “I saw you playing checkers with your brother. Was it nice to see him?” Her statement didn’t register in my brain. I didn’t understand what she was talking about. I had only played checkers with Hank, who I had met only that day. I didn’t reply. She spoke again.

“Oh! I almost forgot to tell you! Your daughter Lorna said she loved coming to see you yesterday and is coming back to see you again! Come on Mr. Larson, let’s go get you ready for company.”