

Gloved

By Philip Glennie

Margie always told me this would happen. She complained that today's nurses were too squeamish, too proud to get their hands dirty. "What'll be the *point?*" she'd ask, "when we stop touching each other altogether?" I was healthier then. My voice was still loud as a lion's. But I knew if I argued, Margie would puff up her chest, beat her wings like an angry goose, and that'd be that. Whenever she finished ranting at my bedside, she'd lean over and take hold of my bad knee, bending it until the pain got too horrible to bear. I'd curse at her, but she'd keep pushing until stars exploded in my eyes. Sometimes the pain was so awful I even giggled.

But that was then.

Now there are two of them, one older and one younger. So I call them Old and Young. They're pushing me down the hallway in my chair, neither one concerned that the toe of my slipper keeps catching on the tiles. Someone's wailing in a room somewhere, but there's always wailing here. We come around a blind corner and I see a bed with some strange metal rack standing next to it. There are pictures on the walls. Familiar ones. I think the dark-haired man in most of them is supposed to be me.

"Mr. Reid?"

I turn to the bed and feel a growl rising in my throat. Old points at the metal rack and says they're going to use it to lift me back into bed. It's called a Hoy-Arr something or other. I tell Old to do her goddamned job and lift me herself. Hug me round the waist and all that. Like always.

"Mr. Reid," she says. "Some of our nurses are getting older now, and we need to start using Hoyer Lifts to make sure we don't have staff throwing their backs out." She's always trying to sound fancy when Young is around.

"Looks like a damned coat rack," I say. "Not a chance in hell it'll hold me."

"Have faith," says Young.

I want to argue more, but can't look at Young without smiling. The way she speaks is more mature than you'd expect, with that long golden hair, those pretty green eyes. "Well fine," I say. "I guess I'm not much more than a coat these days anyway." Both of them smile. Old comes at me with some sort of blue hammock and slides it under my bum. Then Young, so pretty, reaches for my nightstand and pushes a little potted plant to the side. A geranium I think. She wants to get at the box of plastic gloves behind it. I tell her to be careful with the poor plant, but she just smiles. The two of them take ages to make sure I'm sitting properly on

the blue hammock. When they finally get it the way they want, Old steps around the rack and pumps a long shiny handle back and forth. Twelve times before I feel a lift.

“This is taking forever,” I say. “Margie does it better. She sits me on the edge of the chair and just tosses me in and out.”

“Methods change over time,” says Old, “and this lift will be easier on you.”

“You mean easier on *you*.”

“Mr. Reid, Margaret was not necessarily – ”

I pretend like I haven’t heard her. “I know Margie was supposed to use some sort of belt when she brought me in and out of bed. But she never needed it. She’d just give me a big bear hug and carry me around chest to chest. I can still feel her warmth, you know. Her body was like a teapot.”

“Mr. Reid– ”

“Sometimes she held so tight she’d tear my gown.”

“You’re getting too worked up, Mr. Reid. Try to calm yourself.”

I feel like I just woke up. Can’t tell if I’ve slipped away these last few minutes. The room is strange now. The man in the pictures on the wall isn’t me anymore. I lift my hand and grab one of the wires holding me in the air. I want to know what’s going on. “Where’s Margie?!” I shout.

Young turns to Old and whispers something. The pumping under my bum stops. I feel a bed beneath me. But where’s Margie? Why isn’t she here to tell Young and Old what’s what?

Young lays her hands on my shoulders and lifts me onto my pillow. “Margaret’s not with us anymore, Mr. Reid. Don’t you remember? It’s been two years.”

Yes. I remember now. Not dead, just gone. I let my eyes wander to the door. But then I spy the box of plastic gloves and feel an awful, lonesome ache in my chest.

“Okay, now I need you to roll onto your right side,” says Young. She wants to get her hammock back, but I won’t move. I grip the rails on either side of me.

“Please Mr. Reid. I need you to roll away from me now.”

I try to frown at her, but her smile melts me like butter on a biscuit. I wish so badly that a younger version of me could strut through the door right now and ask her to a movie. She’s got her hammock back now. I’m lying on my side and staring at the pictures on the wall again. I remember it’s me who’s in them. My children too, all grown up. It’s the youngest ones I have trouble with. School portraits mostly. Gap-toothed darlings. Grandchildren, I imagine. I call to Young and ask her to remind me which little ones belong to which parents. She glances at the

wall and points them out one by one. She might not know what she's talking about, but I'll take her word for it. One picture catches my eye, and I order her to bring it over. Maybe too sharply.

Young goes to the wall and takes down the picture without a word. Hands it to me. I run my hand over the framed glass and study the two people beneath it. I recognize myself as a younger man who doesn't exist anymore. A man who lived in his own house and bought his own slacks. The other figure in the picture is a little boy, kissing my stubbly cheek while I lift him into the air. I turn back to Young and ask, "How old are boys when they stop kissing their fathers and grandfathers?"

"Oh, I'd say right around his age," she says, tapping on the boy in the picture. "Probably four or five years old. I can't see a boy still doing it in grade-school without seeming weird."

I lower my eyes and lay the frame on the bed. "They don't come much anymore."

"Come now, Mr. Reid. They visit almost every day."

"The children come, but not the grandchildren. I frighten them."

"That's not true."

I peer up at the ceiling. The shiny metal arm of the rack hangs over me like a mobile on child's crib. One of the nurses has hung her plastic gloves on it. I'm afraid I might be getting sick again. I want to know what happened to Margie. Young calls me back to her face. She reaches toward my waist with a smile. What is she doing? Is she really going to touch me there?

No. I forgot that the picture of me and the kissing boy is still lying beside me. Young picks it up and backs away. "Please leave that one on the nightstand," I say, trying to hide my disappointment. "Does it have a little flap in the back that'll make it stand?" Young checks the frame and nods, then takes away the box of plastic gloves and stands the picture in its place. She and Old go away, and I am alone again.

I pick up the television remote. But it isn't long before my fingers are stiff and sore from clicking through the channels. I open a book, but can't concentrate on the words very well. I suddenly feel a bowel movement coming on and reach for my bedpan. But once the shiny thing is in my hands, I turn it over and examine its metal. It could be made from the same stuff as the rack that's still standing over my bed. I glance up at the rack, and frown again at the used gloves hanging from it. I'm so upset that I hurl my bedpan across the room. It crashes across the tiles. I can hear shuffling in the hallway, but the nurses are too late by the time they reach me. My bowels have let loose, and I smile with triumph at the warm feeling that creeps between my cheeks.

Young moves to draw a new pair of gloves from my nightstand. But when she remembers that the box isn't there anymore, she takes the used pair that's hanging from the rack and pulls them on. She's annoyed with me. Cleans my bum with quick, loveless wipes. Old asks me if I'd like something to drink. But I shake my head.

Now I'm alone again. I can tell dusk is coming by the way the sunlight comes through the window and moves over my blanket, warming different parts of me. My body is a sundial. There used to be a clock in this room, but I asked them to take it away. The light has almost reached the little plant on my nightstand. I reach for the fuzzy leaves. I can't remember who brought the plant to me, but I'm glad they did. I can tell that it likes to be touched. Can almost feel it purring like a cat when I rub its furry leaves between my fingers.

"Dad?"

I must have dozed. The metal rack beside my bed is gone.

"Hi, Dad. Are you okay for a visit?"

I peer up at the face of my daughter, P—? *Pauline*. She's brought two of my grandchildren. I check the pictures on my wall to make sure they're her only two. It's a terrible shame I can't remember their names anymore. At the foot of my bed stands a young woman, probably in her late teens, dressed in tight black jeans and an even tighter white shirt with red stripes across it.

"Pirate shirt," I say with a little laugh.

The other grandchild stands with his back to me, staring at the pictures on my wall. He's in his early twenties, smartly dressed in a collared shirt and sweater. It's the sort of outfit I would've worn on dates in my younger days. "Look at you," I say. "Some sensible girl has gotten a hold of you and fixed you up."

He turns from the wall and forces a grin. I peer past him and try to match his face with a picture of his younger self, but it's no good. Then I notice him staring at the frame on my nightstand.

"You took that one from off the wall," he says, stepping toward me. I can tell from his eyes that he means to take the picture away, and I grab at it. But I'm not fast enough.

"This belongs on the wall with the others," he says, snatching it up. "There's no reason to single it out."

"*Adam*," his mother says. "Don't do that. Let him have it back."

He ignores her and hangs the picture back on the wall. When he turns again, my daughter waves him into the hallway and follows him out. I glance to the foot of my bed where my granddaughter still stands, fiddling with the earphones of a music player. She lifts her eyes to the door when the voices grow loud enough to hear—

"What are you talking about, Mom? You can't just repeat the words *family* and *duty* over and over, hoping they'll mean something to me. I'm going to choose the people I want to be around. I won't be forced into it."

"Adam — "

“I’ve got exams this week, and GPAs are really fragile when they’re as high as mine. Any slip-up and my ranking will fall. Brendan Jones is right there behind me, and that Pakistani kid has a dad who makes him study like ten hours a day.”

A long pause, and I can tell their argument has ended. I remember enough to know that Pauline has never taught her children to honor any responsibility other than schoolwork. Her son just played his trump card.

“Well if you’re going to leave, just make sure to go in and hug him first.”

I twist my head to see them, but can’t make it. My granddaughter has returned her eyes to her music player.

“I don’t *want* to hug him, Mom.”

“But you used to love him so much when you were little. Did you see the photo next to his bed? You used to run into his arms and kiss him on the face.”

“*Stop it*, Mom. The guy doesn’t even know who I am anymore.”

“I think it’s important.”

“Well that’s where we’re different.”

“Fine. But at least go in and say goodbye *nice*ly.”

A few seconds later, he’s standing beside my bed with a half-hearted smile. But before he can speak, I fix him in a stony glare. I sit up in bed and heave my arms at him, silently commanding him to hug me. Touch me. Hold me. *Here. Now!* My grandson draws a step backward, glancing from his mom to his sister. My arms are already getting tender, but I keep shaking them. The strain must show on my face, because Pauline rushes to my side and tries to push my hands into my lap.

“You’ll hurt yourself, Dad. Just try and rest for a moment.” She uses more pressure, but I refuse to drop my arms. My grandson glances down the front of his shirt. After a few moments, Pauline surrenders and backs away. She knows she might hurt me if she uses too much force. I want to smile about this, but won’t break the gaze I’ve fixed on my grandson. He tries to shake me off by pacing the room, but I turn my chest with him, raking the air with my bony fingers. Terrible sounds rise in my throat. From the corner of my eye, I can see my granddaughter getting upset.

“Just hug him, Adam.”

“Margie,” I hear myself say.

The boy throws his hands into the air and shouts at his mother, “You see?! He must’ve heard you call me Adam ten times since we got here, and he still thinks I’m his old nurse!” He comes at me now with a violent step and floats his nose within an inch of mine. His eyes frighten me, but I’ll never relent. Not now.

“You don’t know who I am! What’s my name, Grampy? What’s my goddamn name?”

I glance past him to the picture of the little boy kissing me on the wall. He follows my eyes and shakes his head.

“Tell you what. I’ll give you a hug if you can tell me my name. I think that’s a fair enough deal.”

My whole body lets go again, and this time it’s a warm pool of urine that gathers at my crotch. My grandson flares his nostrils and twists his face. Darkness gathers at the edges of my eyes, and my heart aches more with every beat. I grunt from the pain, trembling all over. But I keep my arms stretched toward him. He still won’t hug me, but his face has softened.

“Listen, Grampy. I’ve got some big exams coming up, but I’ll see you next month. Okay?” He’s desperate to leave, but I’ve no pity for him. I keep my arms up. Shaking, quaking, almost fainting. Margie would love to see this.

Now it happens.

A great sigh shudders through his body. I can see something crumble inside him. His hands fly into the air one last time. He comes to me and I take him. His mother and sister let out deep breaths. The heat between him and me overflows its borders, and for this moment, I forget where my body ends and his begins. It lasts only a second before he gives me a little pat on the back and starts to break away. But I only hold him tighter. Pauline steps to the bed and tries to take him, but I snatch her by the wrist and pull her into our fold. Now my granddaughter comes at me and tries to pry my grip loose, but there’s no way she can do it without snapping my old fingers. My weakness makes prisoners of us all. My granddaughter’s tears overflow the cups of her eyelids. My head lolls to one side as the last of my strength bleeds away. The hold is complete. More darkness. Only time for one last look, which I turn to my nightstand. I smile to find that the box of plastic gloves is gone. My picture of the kissing boy is back up on the wall, and now there’s much more room for my little green plant to stretch out its lovely leaves.

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