

## Pretending Not to Know

By Priscilla Mainardi

Doritos for breakfast, at seven a.m. I scoop up a handful from the open bag on the desk at the nurses' station. They're chewy, as if they've been sitting there for days. Kat, the night nurse, tells me about a new patient. "Rosalie Romero, forty-nine, came in with infected hardware in her right femur. Dr. Harvey removed it yesterday in the OR and put in a new rod and screws. There's a dressing on her thigh but you can't see much of it because her leg is in a brace. She has MS and needs a lot of help. Can you take her some Tylenol? She has a headache. I just got the order."

We have to call a doctor for every order, even Tylenol. Kat glances around the nurses' station to see who's nearby, then drops her voice. "This is the woman who murdered her husband, out in Chester County."

I stop writing and look up from Rosalie's printout. This is more than I need to know. I'm wary enough with new patients, not knowing what to expect, and this adds another dimension. I'd rather think of her as an ordinary suburban housewife, whose physical troubles I can deal with and whose emotional ones are largely left at home. But murdering your husband is too big to leave at home and will have to be dealt with somehow, by both of us, so I can take care of her.

"Who knows about this?" I say to Kat.

"Everyone. It happened a couple months ago. She shot him in the back, from her wheelchair. Her kids were asleep down the hall."

One more thing I don't want to know, that I can't unknow.

"Don't worry," Kat says. "I've got your back."

"Oh, don't. Please," I say, biting my lip to keep from laughing. Because what's funny, really, about a woman with MS who's accused of murder?

I walk down the hall to Rosalie's room, reminding myself of the effects of multiple sclerosis on the brain and nervous system: decreased attention span, poor judgment, memory loss, difficulty reasoning and solving problems. Suppose pulling the trigger was just another symptom of the disease? I know both too much and too little about Rosalie, too much from what Kat told me, and too little, the way we can never really know another person. Here's what Rosalie doesn't know about me: that my thirteen-year-old daughter Belinda has been demanding to meet her father and isn't speaking to me because I can't find a way to tell her she's the result of a one-night stand with a drug felon.

Rosalie's room is dark. I go to the window and turn the blinds, letting in little slivers of light.

"Hello, my name is Devon," I say, the way I always do. "I'll be your nurse today."

Her long dark hair is tangled all over the pillow. She opens her eyes. One eye looks at me, while the other wanders to the window. "Did you bring the Tylenol?"

“Yes. Tell me about the pain.” I set the cup with her morning medications on her overbed table and pour her some water.

“My leg’s okay,” she says, “it’s just my head.”

“Can you give me a number?” I point to the zero to ten pain scale tacked to the wall by the bed. I need the number for my notes. I also need description, pattern, duration, when it started, where it radiates, what helps it, and what makes it worse, but I don’t bother with these right now.

“Eleven,” she says. She lifts her arm so I can scan her name-band, then dumps the pills onto the table. She picks out the two Tylenols, puts them in her mouth and swallows them dry.

“Leave the others,” she says. “I’ll take them later.”

We’re not supposed to leave pills lying around but I don’t argue. I put them back in the cup and leave it on the table. “I need to look you over,” I say.

Rosalie closes her eyes and turns on her side. “I’m fine. Can’t you just get out?”

I want to, but I have a sudden vision of her leg, the dressing saturated, blood pooling on the sheet and dripping down the side of the bed to form a sticky puddle on the floor. I lift the blankets and take a quick peek. She’s right. She’s fine.

I escape then, relieved to return to the warmth and activity of the nurses’ station. But the lights in the hallway seem too bright, giving off a toxic fluorescent hum. I stand for a moment at the med-cart. That wasn’t the scrupulously good care I’d planned to give Rosalie, to prove to myself that I wasn’t blaming or judging her.

“What’s the story?” I say to Dr. Harvey at ten thirty. He’s sitting at the desk with her chart. “Why is she here? Why not in jail?”

“She made bail, and she needed the surgery.” He shrugs, as if he operates on patients who are out on bail every day. “How is she?”

“She won’t do anything. She threw me out. Threw Becky out, threw out physical therapy.”

“She’s depressed, but she won’t hurt anyone,” Dr. Harvey says. “She needs to get up and moving, do her therapy, especially with the MS. At least get her sitting on the side of the bed. She’s wheelchair bound anyway.” He stands, shaking his head. “What a bum deal. I’ll go talk to her.”

“Please,” I say.

Dr. Harvey comes back a few minutes later. “I laid down the law,” he says, writing an order in the chart. “She’ll cooperate. Can you change her dressing, Devon?” He hands me the chart.

“Why’d she shoot him?” I say.

“Allegedly,” he says. “She allegedly shot him. They were in the middle of a divorce. They were arguing.”

He makes it all sound so plausible, reasonable even. I wonder why she frightens me. She can’t hurt me, and our situations aren’t even similar. I don’t have MS or a gun, or even a husband.

I go back to her room when the lunch trays come. Rosalie has turned on the light, and is eating dry Cheerios with the phone pressed to her ear. She gives me a brief smile, one of those downturned ones where the lips barely move. I straighten her belongings while I wait

for her to hang up, an open package of chocolate chip cookies, her hairbrush and make-up case.

“In my dream,” she says into the phone, “I was walking and my legs worked fine.” There’s a pause, then she says, “I gotta go. The nurse is here. I had such a terrible headache this morning I think I scared this poor nurse.” She hangs up and gives me the almost smile again, fixing me with one eye, while the other wanders past me to the window.

I smile, accepting her indirect apology. “Headache better?”

“Much.”

“Okay if I change your dressing now?”

She nods. I lift the covers. Dr. Harvey left the Velcro straps of the brace undone and the old dressing, brown with dried blood, dangles from her thigh. I remove it and toss it in the trash, then tape fresh gauze over her incision, which is closed with clips that look like short fat staples.

I refasten the brace and wash my hands in the bathroom, looking at myself in the mirror above the sink. I look the same as I did yesterday, and the day before and the day before that, though in theory I’m a different person today than I was yesterday and I’ll be another person tomorrow. Who can say I won’t someday be a person who has murdered my husband? Who will need surgery due to complications from MS, who will need a nurse to help me and need that nurse to pretend she doesn’t know the first thing about me?

Rosalie’s phone is ringing again when I come out of the bathroom. She ignores it. “Probably my mother,” she says. “I don’t feel like talking to her right now. I told her I was lonely and you know what she said? I shouldn’t have shot my husband if I didn’t want to be alone.”

“That must be difficult,” I say, drawing on a stock nursing phrase.

“It was a joke, Devon,” she says. “You can smile.”

So I do. “Do you want to talk about it?” I say. Pretending not to know isn’t helping anyone.

“It’s all such a mess,” Rosalie says, shaking her head. She raises herself on her elbows. “I’d like to get in the wheelchair for lunch if you’ll help me.”

I lift her shoulders and pull her around until her legs dangle off the side of the bed. She combs out her tangled hair while I unfold the wheelchair, pressing down on the seat with both hands. I help slide her into the chair and move the overbed table in front of her, glad to return to the realm of the physical; perhaps this is, after all, the best way I can help her.

I bundle her dirty linen into a ball. I smooth clean white sheets on the bed and turn them down, so the bed is ready for her when she wants to get back in.

That night at home I turn down my own sheets, but I don’t get in bed. I go down the hall to Belinda’s room to tell her about her father.

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