

Spa Day

By Gwendolyn Harwood

I hear my nurse's signature humming (*da da daaaaa*) as he walks through the door. He pushes past the blue curtain that divides the room and asks if I'm ready. "Well, let's see, morning rounds are done, and lunch isn't until twelve. I think I can fit you in." I smile.

He blushes, "OK. I'll be right back." I'm happy Sam (not his real name) is my nurse today. I feel comfortable with him, and he's always a good sport, perfect for the task at hand. We share a unique bond from our first meeting a year ago in another life before everything changed.

We met when he assisted with a routine procedure to remove two hemangiomas from my upper chest. The removal itself was textbook. However, the surrounding gauze caught fire when the doctor began to cauterize the site. Sam sprung into action, smothering the flames without hesitation. Thanks to his quick reflexes and the Lidocaine, I didn't suffer a burn or feel anything. At the time, all I could think was, *I hope my bra doesn't catch fire* (it didn't). So, instead of fading into obscurity in my mind, Sam was burned into my memory bank. As for me, rather than being one of many unmemorable patients that day, I became an anecdote, an unforgettable incident in the monotony of ambulatory care.

It was serendipitous that Sam appeared at my bedside six weeks ago when I was admitted to the hospital with a broken ankle. My recent diagnosis, Chronic Inflammatory Demyelinating Polyneuropathy, led to both the break and the extended stay. I was deteriorating quickly, physically and psychologically. It mattered that someone recognized the active, ambitious, and independent woman trapped inside my wilted frame. When we first met, there was no pain, no tingling or numbness, and no paralysis. I could work all day, walk the dog, cook dinner, and still have energy to make love to my husband. Never mind all that: I could walk – period, I could work – period, heck, I could take care of my own personal needs.

The cast came off yesterday, and today, with Sam's help, I'll take a step toward normalcy. I push myself up in the bed and send my husband a text.

Me: He's going to do it! This is the best hospital day ever:)

Him: Better than getting the cast off?

Me: It's the little things.

I cringe at the cliché affirmation but can't deny that the small delights help me keep everything in perspective. Over the last six weeks, I've learned to surrender my body to the ministrations of others in ways I never imagined. Modesty and shame, it seems, are the privilege of the well. What remains is dignity, which I uphold by paying attention and, wherever possible, taking back control.

Sam walks in carrying a can of generic shaving cream and a package of disposable razors. He sets up on the bed table and snaps on a pair of gloves as if preparing for surgery. He pulls back the blankets and places a few towels under my legs. Somehow he manages not to recoil at the sight of the unruly forest. He can't resist commenting though: "Jeez, you have more leg hair than I do!"

"I'm a Chia Pet; what can I say."

"You're going to have to talk me through this."

"You shave your face, don't you? Same principle. Start by soaking my leg as best as you can, then lather, shave, rinse, lotion."

He dips a towel into the basin and uses it to dampen my left lower leg. The water, though steaming, is imperceptible through the invisible nylons of neuropathy and numbness. The pressure of the towel, however, is like a relaxing massage. Six weeks is a long time to go without a proper soak or shower. I close my eyes, picturing myself at a spa:

I'm sitting in a soothing pool while sipping a Southside daiquiri. Madeleine Peyroux singing "Dance Me To The End Of Love" fills the room from invisible speakers. I look to my left and see my husband walking over, a towel slung over his bare shoulder.

My daydream dissolves with a tap on my shoulder. So much for my spa day, I think. I learned the value of daydreaming from the wisdom of books. Well-thumbed copies of "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly" and "Man's Search for Meaning" sit on my nightstand. The hours I spend lost in reverie, imagining things my husband and I will one day do, help keep me sane. Opening my eyes, I see that Sam's face is flushed, his forehead is creased, and the can shakes in his hand.

Faced with the return to reality, I snap at him: "Just do it!" But quickly catch myself and smile.

"You're sure about this?"

"Yes!"

He swallows and aims, covering my leg in a thick lather of cool foam that smells of menthol. He puts down the can and picks up a razor. Slowly, the blade lowers and begins to scratch its way up, carving a path through the brambles and shaving cream. Every two inches or so, he stops and dips the razor in the basin before continuing the clear-cutting. I hadn't realized shaving could be such an ordeal. But then, why shouldn't it be – everything I once took for granted is now monumental.

The simple rituals of hygiene and aesthetics, ones I performed daily without a thought a few months ago, have become a near obsession in the hospital; my toenails are painted, my fingernails trim and neat, my skin softened with lotion, and I am forever grateful to the friend who washes my hair. I'm beginning to realize that looking one's best is more than vanity; it's

something much deeper. For me, I understand it to be an achievable veneer of control to cover the chaos inside.

While Sam scrapes away at my legs, I start to think of what life will be like when I go home. I don't medically need to be here anymore, but I'm on the wait list for the physical rehab hospital. I'm hopeful that I'll be walking by the time I go home that we won't need to make any permanent changes, and life as we knew it would resume. But a little nagging thought keeps attacking my armor of positivity – what if I don't get better? I'm normally quick to parry with affirmations and statistics (*I'm young and otherwise healthy, 80% of people recover – of course, I'll be one of the majority!*). Today I allow the thought to grow. My body tightens, and my jaw clenches as I consider all the hardships ahead. I fight the urge to shut down. Instead, I breathe and focus on a small detail. I imagine my husband shaving my legs and laughing a little at the absurdity. The pit in my stomach dissolves. I realize I'll be fine and that we'll be fine. I tuck away the image of us laughing, hoping to recall it later.

We're covered in bits of shaving cream and lukewarm dirty water. Four dulled razors and a pile of wet towels are on the table. Sam is sweating from the effort, and I am ready for a nap. But my legs are smooth with only a few nicks to show for it. I feel almost human.

"You never know what you'll get up to with me as a patient." I smile and wink at him as he puts my socks on and slides my feet back into the bed. "Now I just need a proper shower."

He turns beet red and laughs. "I think my job is done for today."

Gwendolyn Harwood lives and writes in rural Nova Scotia. She left a career in university administration following her diagnosis with Chronic Inflammatory Demyelinating Polyneuropathy and later, POEMS syndrome. Ms Harwood writes about everyday experiences as a patient in the hopes of providing new insight for healthcare professionals. A previous story appeared in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. She is a student in the Creative Writing Certificate program at the University of Toronto.

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