Here, In The Hospital

*(I can't find the journal itself, and I have some doubts as to how well the two typescripts I've found represent the version that was published. There are handwritten notes on them, suggesting revisions. And did I really include those Violet sections? I don't know. There are 2-3 more pages of Violet in the typescript than I've included here; I may post a deleted section later. I've emended some of the rest also in the version below, but most it is fairly faithful to the draft. Oh—Fred's "little red Corvette" line is from the late 70s, pre-dating Prince! So it's not an allusion.)*

1.

Here, in the hospital, a woman in a beige dress sits rocking. In her hand there's a telephone, at whose far end California opens smaller than a flower. Is it dawn yet? Has she woken someone to tell her this? The wheels of her chair squeal and wheeze, cutting in and out the rhythms of what she says and doesn't say.

She says, falling silent, "I'm at the hospital with your father…" The silence says more.

Behind my eyes, ten minutes ago on an Operating Room table, a very fat woman lies sprawled: face down, flop-limbed, her torso hoisted over pillows. The hard work's done: pilonidal cyst excised, her pink flesh patched. The blue drape with the hole where her ass smirked through tossed to the floor. Beside her waits a stretcher.

Soon, she'll be wheeled out to me, arriving at the window; sorry I'm late! We'll roll to Recovery, where I'll pick up Mr. Gardiner, to bring back to S5; where I'll swab the stretcher, I'll re-sheet it, and I'll head to ICU—here; where I am now—to pick up Mr. Gregory.

In feel, stretchers are much like a loaded shopping cart, but longer, so that the twists and turns are tighter. They corner way better, though, and it's a joy to handle them right when the O.R.'s suffused with its usual urgency, when there's someone to be helped and no time to waste.

I've been an O.R. nursing assistant for a year now. Mostly, I fetch and ferry. Push stretchers, run for blood, carry specimens to the labs. But I'll also shave and prep the pre-ops, assemble the orthopedic table, set up and clean the surgical rooms, lend muscle. Be the general handyman and factotum. Next week, though, I'm transferring back upstairs, to 4 North, a medicine floor. I've missed *talking* with my patients. Mostly these days they're too apprehensive, too asleep, or just too post-op groggy. Sometimes, like big Fran Glenning, a woman I've said "Hi" to for five years—and am still picturing ten minutes ago, through an O.R. window, laid out on a surgical slab, naked and obese—they seem more meat than human.

Right now, I'm sipping water from an ICU water cooler, waiting for the nurses to be ready for me. Sorry I'm early. Across from me Mrs. Gregory is on the telephone, rocking in the squeak-wheeled Nurse's Station chair, choosing her words: "Come if you must, dear, but don't worry, he's in good hands, he's comfortable." This week I've carried him downstairs twice already; he's probably dying. Well, who knows. As she tilts forward, the chair squirts back; the wheels, squealing and wheezing, gather momentum; before I'm more than half aware of what's about to happen my arms are reaching out to her—but she's a good way too far away…

In the O.R., behind my eyes, the very fat woman has been floating up through her drugged sleep; still fathoms below its surface. Fran works in housekeeping, on the fourth floor, where I'll be headed back next week. She's nice. Efficient. I'm watching them roll her to the stretcher; a male nurse, slim, mustachioed—Bill, he's quite the smart ass—stoops to catch…

But then the woman behind me is walloping to the linoleum, her beige dress hiking to the thigh. She shows not a smidge of distress; deftly rearranges her legs, still soothing, still sweet-talking—for her child, at least, let her unclench the tenderness she's kept tight for her husband, whose eyes no longer fix on her. "Sweetheart, you mustn't worry yourself so much. Not right now. Anyway, he's perfectly comfortable." She strokes the white lie like a dove, which as it flies will lighten some of the weight in her; some of the dark in her.

For Fran Glenning from housekeeping, there's a quieter pratfall, though she'll never learn of it. If she did, would it amuse or mortify her? As she's rolled from the table to the stretcher, her bare breast paddles the nurse's nose, jarring skew his surgical cap. Her nipple catches it for a moment at the brim, slowing its tumble. It hits the floor; the room erupts into chortles.

Mrs. Gregory rehooks the receiver. The unit secretary helps her to her feet.

Nurse Bill spreads a clean sheet to his patient's throat. He tucks it under her.

Here, where there's such leveling of it, dignity pushes like a wildflower through the cracks of joists; gentleness trails awkwardness, tidying its trash. What you might think of as funny, or terrible, is much more than both.

Soon, before lunch, I'll carry an amputated leg to the morgue lab. The plastic bag will rap and swish against the backs of my knees. What if I should trip, and I let this limb go hopping? If you were my witness, would you laugh, would you wince? Would I laugh or wince with you? When we meet, in the cafeteria, and recount it, what tone will we tell it in?

2.

Fred, in 13-A, has leukemia, and tells his stories deadpan. I was good, man. I ran the mile in four five, the hundred in nine seven. Won twelve scholarships, and I declared for one, even had the scores, man. Then I get busted for waitin on those guys. Man, jail's no place to be. One friend I had down in Florida, raped a girl against a motherfuckin tombstone, judge gave the dude one hundred somethin motherfuckin years. In prison, one hundred somethin years? I rather be dead.

More rapes per head in Jacksonville than anywhere in the USA. They crackin down, Tom. Man, ain't no shit stinks like prison.

Hard eyes, lean frame, a graveyard voice. A full mustache. Jet-black, five foot seven, just 26 years old; born exactly one day after me. Two weeks ago, he shaved himself bald, before the hair could fall out on its own. There's a shine to his pate now!

One thing I don't mess with is pythons. I caught one once, but I let it go, man, you don't mess with them things. All kinds of animals in Florida. And you can live cheap in Florida. When I get outa here, first thing I do, gonna pay my mama back every cent I owe her. There's this place a ways south on 29. 19,000 bucks this one time, ridin on one table. Know what? I won it, man. Yeah. Came outa there, this guy comes right out after me totin a gun, I fire a couple shots, over his head, like, just warnin shots, you know, let him see I'm carrying too, and I run like hell. Yeah, man, when I get out, I'm gonna live life in the fast lane. Ride right through to Florida. Another animal I caught me one time in Florida, what you call them things, yeah, porcupines, yeah, I *thought* I caught me a porcupine. Till it shot them quill things it got at me. Them dart things? Yeah, a whole bunch of them, man! Them darts it got? I had to run like hell.

Something is coming for his veins. He scratches his leg. He leans back and goes quiet for a while, seeing somewhere not here. Knowing Fred, it's probably in Florida.

So Fred, I say to him, eventually, having made his bed, jotted down his vitals, what's this story Skip was telling me, about some guy who outran a Corvette? Shit, man, he says, I didn't say no 'vette. I said Jeep. Yeah, see, there was this African, dude who told me this he says his Jeep was doin forty, maybe fifty, at least forty-five, he reckons, when this African goes sprintin past him. Right there on the side of the roadway, man! Has to be doin at least fifty. Man, those dudes, now, they can run. See, that's how they catch their food. By runnin. I used to run my own self. Not like an African, but real good, man. But I can't no more. On account I got this illness.

If they keep me here much longer, man? I'm gonna throw myself through that window. That window right there, man? I'm gonna throw myself through that window.

He goes quiet, turned full face to its view. But seeing somewhere not here.

Fred is bored and 26 and dying. About all he can find to do these days is settle his bony self into a chair, like a pile of dry wood settling, and spin his tales, to any one of us will do; to see if he can still con someone. His dreams, a crackle of sparks, turn south to swampland. I do wonder, sometimes, how he sees me. So gullible he'd like a card table all of me? *Tom, bring your whole bank balance, man.* Or humoring him because I'm paid to listen? Though I come by and listen more than the job requires. There's some reflection of myself in him I can't quite catch: watching us dive through his window together and take flight; into the blue foothills, a road and sky, a film left running nowhere, faster, a life unimaginable to me, that is going to end fairly soon and not too far from here, unraveling like smoke.

Suddenly his poker face turns my way again. He fixes me in the eye. You know, Tom, he says, you can't be believin all you hear, now. I mean, shit man, what I said was Jeep. Corvettes, though, I did used to ride one once. A little red one some guy said I stole. I borrowed it is all. It didn't run too good nohow, too much damn oil and smoke. Some days, I mean, it stank. I left it idlin at a stoplight. One pain in the ass too many, man. I swung the car door and I walked away. Key still in it, if you want it. Squad car parked right there by me, though. Never saw him. But oh shit, he saw me.

Ask me the way to nowhere fast, I been there.

3.

Dear fat Mary—that's what we call her when we talk about her. She's been transferred up to the nursing home now, which is in this same tower block but a completely different business, not associated with the university at all. We worry for her. She was on our floor for seven weeks, and she became a kind of mascot. She's so pink and round, from her toothless squinched face to her roly-poly four foot ten doll's body. Just a child-sized doll woman. Debbie and Teri, two of the nurses, say no, no, a koala bear; a cuddly animal. I have this vivid memory of her, about a week into her stay, pushing a walker in front of her to the bathroom. I see her mouth working, her head thrust shakily forward—her sureness of shape and stride visibly eroding. She is about, I fear, to subside into a flab-puddle: she moves as if braving gravity. Short, squat limbs, white hair, and inch-thick lenses—round granny glasses, afloat at the tip of her nose. She's emitting a sour-faced wail, *Oh me, oh me, oh me*—not sure if she's going to make it to the toilet seat in time, not sure if it isn't too late already—and even as I rush to help her I'm smiling to myself. She is just so grim in her resolve; so comically morose.

Yet when she laughs—as in the first couple of weeks she does not often do, glum and taciturn in this world of brisk strangers; when, as we become a part of each other's lives, she giggles and guffaws, as nurses whisper who knows what in her ear (*Just sweet nothings,* Debbie assures me; *Dirty jokes,* says Teri); or when she launches into memory—tossing the downsized crumple for us to catch and do what we want with, because she's done with it—it's as if a false face peels away. The spirit rises slim and shimmering.

Some things we accept, some not. Old age is a costume she's been sewn into. It wouldn't matter much (though it's shabby and doesn't fit) except it has scattered her children like crows. She cries to us (who are nurses, professionally inured, professionally tender, neither scared nor scarred), *You're my best friends!* We hug her; she bursts into tears. Dear fat Mary, when we speak of you now, why is it you are mostly laughing (some truths we accept, some we deflect) or else we are, cajoling you to the brink of it? Feathering the slow, dark fall.

4.

"So listen," says Violet, and pauses a beat. She lifts her tambourine up to her ear, as if hearing it whisper. "I was the only one not invited to the party. Big deal, I never know what to say to those people anyway, so what did I care? But my mother thought I did, so she sent me out to buy eggs. She had in mind to bake me cookies, though she likes it if I pretend I haven't guessed. She thinks her cookies cheer me up, which they do, so she says to me, Violet, with her eyes all twinkly, Violet, honey, why don't you go out and buy me some eggs? And honey, don't take too long, because I need those eggs. I need them, oh, like maybe some time this *week,* for once? She's a sweetie, my mom. But she can also get just a bit, you know, sarcastic?"

This, I trust you can tell, is a performance. I've been pulled to pediatrics for the day. After three years here, in the hospital, I'm comfortable being pulled—so if our floor is underpopulated and somewhere else has folks out sick, I *get* pulled. On pediatrics there's a common room, where, at designated times, the kids who are cleared to mingle can make friends and play board games. There's even a share time, for them to sing, do magic tricks, mangle a few guitar chords. Violet's act is to shake a tambourine and tell stories. She's been my patient before. She's wonderful but exhausting.

She's tall for thirteen, a skinny ugly duckling of a girl, with sad straggles of chemotherapy hair. When she's in the mood, she's giddy and garrulous, but I wouldn't call her outgoing—she's as likely to say, *Go away, Tom,* as *Tom, come sit*. She does, however, like to put on a show. There are only three of us in the common room today, and the younger kid is baffled by her, so her audience is just me. Which fazes her not one bit.

"So I figured," she continues, after a punctuating clatter and shimmer of the tambourine, "if she's in a hurry, it'll be okay if I cut through the woods. Since for once she forgot to tell me I couldn't. So I did. It was dark in there!" The tambourine clatters and shimmers. "Except, here and about, some dapples of sunlight and shadow streamed through." The tambourine clatters and shimmers. "And then who did I see but our old pastor, the one whose sermons I always fall asleep during, and he was coming my way and whistling something thin and tuneless, and I never know what to say to him. (I never know what to say to the younger one either, but at least he's cute.) So, like anyone would, I ducked off the path and scurried away from him, just to hide, until he was by. And it was then I saw the squirrels."

"Is it my turn yet, Violet?" says the other kid.

"Oh for Christ's sake," says Violet.

The boy tells us his knock knock jokes. After the first couple, Violet shakes free of her sour mood and plays along. Another kid wanders in and share time seems over.

"The squirrels lead me to a mysterious clearing," she confides. "There's a golden tambourine hanging from an enormous hollow tree. I wiggle up inside the trunk till I can just about reach it."

"Okay," I say.

"It tells me secrets," she says. The tambourine clatters and shimmers. "I'll tell you the rest if you like. When you have time." I do have other patients. And when I get back to her, in her room, not long before my shift ends, her doctor is with her. She's crying. The doctor shuts the door.

5.

The next day, we are short staffed on my own floor, 4 North. I am given five ambulatories, plus a 35 year old stroke patient, plus an old man with cachexia. The ambulatories, fortunately, aren't a problem: beds, vital signs, drop by, check in; not much else. Mr. Hines, though, the old man with cachexia, needs lots of TLC. He came to us with a nasty decubitus—a bedsore—at the base of his spine. He is timid, undemanding, and scared—a skeletal and tumbledown old slum of a man, round-eyed and toothless, with a grin like a smashed window. He's due for a barium enema; I call on him first, to give him a quick sponge bath and make sure he's ready: that he's comfortable and feels calm; that he's clear as to what will be done and what will be expected of him. I assure him that I'll be back as soon as I can be. He nods uncertainly, accepting whatever I am willing to offer, and I hurry next door to Frank Billingsley, my stroke patient.

Frank used to be a Baptist minister. He may yet manage to be again—he works fiercely at his rehabilitation—but right now he's wooden-tongued and rag-limbed, a marionette whose strings are caught in knots. How doggedly he wriggles from supine to sitting, our own Houdini—his spine struggling to stay unbent, one wrist swinging free. I bathe him, dress him, and pull straight his shirt. Locking his knees against my own, I work him into place at the bed's edge—hunching against me as the mattress twists a little skew; I steady him, and with a firm tug, hoist him into his chair. Half puppet, half animate, he sits jigging; he stammers some jabber at me, which I am used to and can decipher. Give him this day his daily ventriloquist.

His one good leg trembles; his one decent hand spoons up and in some bits of breakfast. He intends to master the essentials of his own care—as I wish him to do also, bustling around to get my tidying chores done; less sympatico with him, for some reason, than with most patients. I've just turned back the fresh top sheet on his newly remade bed when his wife, an answer to my prayer—it would be so easy to get trapped in here with this man—hails us jauntily from the door. She is waving a copy of their hometown newspaper: she likes to read to him from it, and he smiles a little, now and then, to listen. Slowly, without expression, Frank swivels to gaze at her. His heart has quit three times. His mind, we've been told, is fine in there, his senses are intact, but he can't quite come at them, trapped as he is in this half-assed body. How bitter he almost is, but how he battles not to be; so patient, so persistent—crying like a child for his way and for his woe, but apologizing beforehand, especially to new visitors. It's a strain to make his wood tongue talk, but he must; so he does. Just enough, anyway. He's two people, Frank, the real one bundled somehow into the straitjacket that is the other one, but still there—making himself visible, now and then, when he can. Peekaboo, it's still me, or almost. His body isn't all he can't control. He accepts this, for now, with fortitude. His wife understands, and does so also. His ten year old daughter, who follows her mother everywhere, waits equally patiently, but with less belief. Perched on the bed's edge, she is detached and mildly bored.

Mr. Hines, once I've made it back to him, is pitifully relieved to see me. He doesn't appear to want anything, only my presence; the terrified, bewildered look he wears relaxes slightly. I decide that I have the time. I go with him, down the winding halls to the procedure table, where the doctors wait with their cameras and potions. They roll and poke him; but the bag bursts; they must start over. Oh Jesus, he moans, oh Jesus. I turn him on his side for them; he clutches my sleeve and says, Don't leave me. I *will,* of course, leave him, in a few hours, when my shift is done. But not yet. Careful of the decubitus, I hold him gently in place, not my child, not my brother, perhaps, but mine, nonetheless. My charge, for now. Today's bagful of fleshy bones.

He worries out loud for me. Did I get lunch? He'll sleep soon, on his side; I'll arrange extra pillows to keep him propped, and I'll trust evening shift to turn him. He'll make no more demands on me, understanding who we are to each other; that there are so many like him!

He smiles, to let me know he accepts this; that it is the way of it. He nods, and I am dismissed.

6.

And yet when the next day Debbie asks who'll come with, upstairs, to visit dear fat Mary, I say, "I will." *Not me,* says Teri. She has traveled this road before.

On Mary's nursing home floor, perhaps two nurses are assigned to over a hundred patients.

That is the way of it.

Mary weeps to see us, and says, "Don't leave me here." We hold her, and foolishly, we say we love her. We leave her there.

7.

Branches shift around the sun, and thunder whispers from the distance. Shadows shift around a theme until the storm clouds cancel them. I shelter, studying a patch of ground. The sun resurfaces. The shadows shift around their theme. If not the wind, a squirrel shakes it loose, or the hop of a bird; it dances on the drying grass, minute and precise.

As I walk home today from work my shirt clings closer in a damp embrace; a patient has died, and in the August sun I am draining away. But there's an emptiness that tiny motions fill, such as the tick of trees, or a dapple of shadows, or an ant that sorts through green stems, until the white rising of the August moon.

8.

I am pulled once again to pediatrics; Violet is not there. I could ask, of course; chances are good she's been making the right kind of progress and has gone home, for now. Probably, of course, by no means enough progress, and she'll be back.

I choose not to ask.

The kids I'm assigned are delightful, if demanding. But it's a good day.

9.

I ride the bus home with a girl I trained with, five years ago. Like most of that class of N.A.'s she is bright, articulate, and college educated. She attended, in fact, this university, and is ready to do so again. Like several of our classmates, she'll be making a more serious career in medicine; by this time next year, she expects to be in medical school.

She tells me about a patient she's been working with this week, who has a glass eye that keeps popping out, a hostile mistrust of nurses, and a propensity to bite. As she talks, her hands shift about a large needlepoint sampler that she's been working on for months, almost entirely on the bus. Bright and colorful, it's looking more and more like a fall landscape. "Is it?" I ask. "I think so," she answers, "though I didn't realize it was till recently." She's improvising; it may yet turn into something else. But anyway, this patient of hers. He lost his eye again today, in the folds of his hospital gown. She had him strapped in his chair, he'd been getting so belligerent with her. So he couldn't slap or punch her, but he still kept swooping and craning his head to snap his teeth at her. With his chin whistling by: chin music! "And the dude's chin is *hard*, Tommy!" So there she was trying to rescue his eye, which meant groping where his gown barely covered his crotch—thank God his *dick*'s not hard, at least—and as she find it, and lifts her head, he headbutts her!

*Yes,* she dropped it!

But she found where it rolled, and took care of the thing before she took care of the lump on her head. (She shows me; it's not huge, just very discolored.) She cleaned the eye off, absolutely meticulously, and she unstrapped one of his arms so he could pop it back in himself.

He chuckled, she tells me; he actually chuckled as he thanked her!

The bus window reflection of the woman in the seat in front of us is smirking; I too, though I am also touched, am chuckling. It's such a typical hospital story. Slapstick and gentleness.

At least, she says, he thanked me.

Before my brother Jamie died, of testicular cancer, at the age of 25, he was in and out of this hospital—once a month, until the end anyway, for almost two years. He had a series of what he termed colorful roommates; he was a storyteller too, and I heard all about them. The courteous, befuddled redneck who mistook Jamie's shoe for a urinal jar and pissed in it; Nat Large, the large, jovial narcoleptic; the fundamentalist who read from Revelations to convert him; the hulking construction worker who had fainted five times on the morning of his wedding—and so, pursued by his bride to his hospital bed, was married in Jamie's room, wearing only cotton pajama bottoms, a blue bathrobe, and a cornered smile. Towards the end, Jamie began to request single rooms, and stopped telling me much at all. Besides, he would explain, all hospital stories are pretty much the same.

The last but one time, he was on the fifth floor. From his private room he could see the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the sun splintering down the treetops, the trunks and branches etched like scars on the pale skin of the sky. Only at night did they vanish. A lamp threw back his ghost reflection; the shadows of the room. Like Fred, he sometimes turned inward. Even, at times, as he stared out into a day's distances, where the sky filled with light and emptied.

Soon after his last discharge, Jamie drove up into the farthest cluster of hills, through twists and turns of narrowing roads, until the leaves hemmed him in, fluttering low overhead. He parked. He wandered off into the heart of the woods. Chasing off the flies, with the ants and beetles bustling at his feet, he smelt their world pulse with fragrance; he startled to the flap and caw of the birds. That night he reached a clearing on the peak, from which he saw below him the lights of the city, larger and softer than the stars. He pitched his tent; he spent a single night, then in the morning drove back to town. At our sister's house, he did his best to articulate a thought he'd had—about the quiet of things seen from a distance. When you got there, he said, it wasn't there; it was something else entirely. He wasn't saying it was less wonderful; it was just not the quiet he'd fallen in love with. That quiet was back in the distances he'd come from, back in the bustle of the town. Well, he laughed, there was probably only one way to get to that kind of quiet. Right?

This was the last real conversation I had with him. I'd like to say that here, in the hospital, I've found something of him again. It's true that there are many, in some way or another, who remind me of him: in that noise we carry with us, in that quiet that we chase, in the stories we tell and we retell. In the stories we don't tell; that we keep locked inside us. But come closer, come close enough to touch, and they turn out to be someone else entirely.