

'Student nurse' from Adolescing. Copyright © Hilary Leland 2014.

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Student nurse

Lifting patients up the bed so they can sit up for their tea. Mr Page grinned at us with half his mouth, he can't use the other half. I slid my hands underneath him. Sandra, the third year, met my hands half way. We gripped each other's wrists hard to make a cradle. Do you know how nurses lift? It's one knee bent and we both lean against Jimmy, really close and rest the other knee sideways on the bed to push up with. Then it's head up and stick your bottom out (to get a really straight back,) brace yourself hard because it's not going to be easy, 'One, two, three, LIFT!' Honestly I think the nurse's uniform should be trousers, I mean girls too. When they're doing a lift the dress always rides high up on their thighs and bottoms, especially big girls like Sandra. Sandra pulled her dress down again and looked sideways at me a moment. We were both panting a bit. We settled Jimmy on the backrest with lots of pillows and Sandra flirted with him. He can't talk but he grinned again with half his mouth. Two more patients, then Sandra went for her ten minute break.

When it was my turn for a tea break I tried to spin it out but what is the point? No one I knew in the canteen. I was back in the ward in ten minutes sharp and, where have they got to? I seemed to be the only member of staff there. I puzzled for five minutes about what I ought to be doing. It

was only my fourth shift ever, someone tell me what to do! Then suddenly Marietta the F grade poked her head from behind a curtain, Mrs Blake's bed.

'Come and check this blood please, Colin.'

She went back behind the curtain and I went with her. Blood. All over the bed clothes and some on Marietta's uniform and Sandra's. A clean bed sheet from the trolley was spread untidily over the floor and was soaking up blood. Paula the houseman was there too and another doctor or the other one was a surgeon I suppose, in trainers and green pyjamas. There was a blood transfusion and Sandra was standing on tiptoe by the drip stand, squeezing the bag hard with both hands, surely she shouldn't be doing that. Marietta had another bag of blood ready.

'A-negative.'

'A-negative.'

'Cross matched for Laura Blake.'

'Laura Blake.'

'Hospital number—'

Laura Blake was terrified, wearing an oxygen mask, the oxygen hissing. Then she retched suddenly and the mask filled up with bubbling blood, out of her mouth and her nose, squelching out through the side of the mask. The porters came. They were slipping on the floor and we had to lie her down and roll her over to get her on the canvas. Her mask came off again when we rolled her. They had to draw back

the curtains to get her on the trolley so then we had an audience. Sandra went to theatre with her, trotting along with the trolley, both hands squeezing the new bag of blood.

'Clean this up please Colin.' I started to strip the bed. The other patients in G bay were looking at me, looking at the bed and the blood but I couldn't face them. Sandra came back and five minutes later came a call from theatre, Laura Blake had died, bled to death. We had a bit of an extra break in the office then. Marietta made the phone call to her daughter. Then Marietta and Sandra talked it over like old campaigners. I didn't know what to think. We found five Terry Pratchett novels in her locker and three cans of Guinness. She had hidden them under her clothes like a schoolgirl.

After that we took it in turns to have a supper break and then it was obs, washing bottoms and two hourly turns, twenty nine helpless people and one died. Marietta called me over to Bridget McMahon's room, too heavy for just her and Sandra. Sandra was pumping the bed up higher with the foot pump. I nudged my way in along side of her. Marietta on the other side was taking off her wristwatch. Then she slid her hand underneath Bridget, inch by inch. A nurse's dress has short, wide sleeves. If I leaned sideways, I could see Marietta's thin arm all the way up, even her armpit and the bra strap coming down from her shoulder. I slid my hand in from the other side. Our fingertips touched in the middle.

She felt her way along my hand and curled her long fingers around to grab my wrist; I grabbed hers; our arms were held tight together. Now her other arm. Marietta is a thin, serious woman and so much energy in her, like a coiled spring. She moved very quickly, twisting herself round and lifting one thin leg up sideways so her knee was lying on the bed ready to push up, her body all tensed up ready to go. I tried to do the same but Sandra was squashed up against me. We moved this way and that until we fitted tight together. We were all a bit nervous of lifting such a big weight. Sandra once told me that it was mainly water under her skin, not fat, Brigit's skin I mean. Sandra seemed to be taking charge.

'We'll lift her back this way about six inches then roll her onto her right side.'

I looked along the bed and my eyes followed Marietta's thigh, thin and knotty in black tights, up into her dress, oh but they're waiting for me. Heads up high, really straight back! Suddenly we were all looking in each other's eyes. Two amazing, strong, clever, healthy women, inches away, and me. I could smell Sandra's breath, tobacco and peppermint. One—two—three—HEAVE! Oh Marietta, what a heave she gave. A long sinew sprung up on the inside of her thigh then slowly sank down again. Bridget always used to yell out at that moment but she will never wake up now. We should live while we can!

Done. We extracted our hands. Now her shoulders and

her hips, we rolled her like a log. Then we made her comfortable, a pillow between her knees, other pillows in other places, clean sheets and blankets on top of all that. I saw Marietta staring at me. Did she see me looking? I emptied the urine bag. We left the room together and Bridget's relatives came back in. Her son had been crying.

I'm in the wrong job! When the night shift arrived at nine thirty I was longing to get away but not to the staff flats, not all alone, noises through the walls and the smell of damp washing. At ten o'clock at last we could go and, to my surprise, Sandra said,

'I'm going to the Duck. Coming?'

The Duck and Dog, that's our local pub. Is she asking me out? We were both on earlies next day but okay, why not? I got changed and waited for Sandra outside the girls' changing room (women's, Marietta's not a girl.) They came out together and looked me up and down in my home clothes. Marietta went home.

There were lots of nurses in the Duck but I didn't know any of them. I felt out of place. They were all talking at once, especially Sandra, but not talking to me. I ended up going to the Gents. Well, you know what I went there for? I'm not going to pretend it was bowel problems! but I didn't dare do it about Marietta. How about Penny? No we're not allowed to do it about patients. Sandra? I thought of Sandra rocking about laughing in there (I closed my eyes) thighs bulging out

of her jeans. Except in the middle where her thighs slope away and leave a gap. There's NO BULGE there! (Yes, surprise surprise, she's a girl, of course there isn't a bulge there, sorry) but her head tossed back laughing and her knees swinging. Open, shut, open, shut. I thought, What about her pissing in the street like a bloke? It's true! She told us. She hates having to wait in the queue, she said, so she looks around to check nobody's there but if some creep stares at me, she said, I stare him out! She pushes her jeans and pants right down to her ankles, no hurry, and squats down, her bottom gets cold, she said, her big. Cunt. Pissing!

My dad once talked to me about this. He caught me looking up at the top shelf at the newsagent's. He said we shouldn't think about women in that way. We should show respect for our mothers and our sisters. I never could face a shop assistant with one of those magazines. Now I remembered my dad and that made me feel so bad about Sandra that I had to stop what I was doing but Sandra? I imagined her reading my mind and smirking. Then I was in love with Sandra, really in love. My hand had stopped moving but I shivered and came for ages because Sandra is so brilliant! Only when the feeling wore off I wasn't so sure. Perhaps she would mind. Girls know! The way they look at you sometimes, and me now, ugh! Suppose they are talking about me, 'What is he doing in there? He has been a long

time.' I went back to that crowd of nurses feeling two foot tall.