

THE NAKED TRUTH

by B. Pshaw* (February 1987)

The door opened into the little room and a white-coated orderly came in. George greeted me in his usual friendly way. We got on well. Although I was only sixteen he always talked to me as an equal and his manner seemed to ease the puzzled vulnerability I felt as a teenager in hospital. He was carrying a bowl of warm water, towel and soap. 'Your great day', he smiled. I grimaced in mock indifference, but in my heart I was anxious. Today, was my first attendance at the assessment clinic when the 'Great Doctor' would conduct his examination in the presence of his 'Rehabilitation Team'. HE would examine and THEY would discuss, I was told, and then ALL would decide MY future. I had no idea about my future, but I had picked up bits and pieces of information from seeing people on the ward. Some had had operations to correct bladder, limb or spinal defects before starting on the regular physiotherapy programme of exercises for walking (!) with callipers and crutches. I had both a bladder infection and a pressure sore, from my time in the local hospital. I cringed at the idea of people cutting into my body, operating on my innards. I was very anxious.

George talked away as he washed me. Maybe he was trying to keep my mind off the ordeal? I was stripped naked, cleaned and dried and rolled flat on my back. I was so nervous I did not even notice that he forgot to return the urinal bottle to its place between my legs. Completely paralysed from the armpits down, incontinent and still very unfamiliar with the techniques of shifting immobile flesh around, I lay still, feeling helpless and very dependent. A single sheet was pulled up to my chin, straightened and tucked around the edge of the bed. George emptied the basin into the sink and tidied up. He left the room and all went quiet. I felt the weight of my body sinking into the bed. I lay very still with my arms at my sides, staring up at the cracks in the ceiling that I already knew so well. The central heating was running full blast and I was warm under the cotton cover. The white sheet settled around the outline of my thin body. 'Not much left to imagination', I thought, looking down the length of my body. I felt exposed, and I retreated into the hiding places of my mind.

The door clattered and swung open as George re-entered the room. He unbolted the second door and pushed it back. Then he bent down at the foot of the bed and it began to rock to the squeaking of the handle as he wound down the wheels. The bed shifted on the floor and I was moving. George smiled at me from the end of the bed as he swung it round and eased it through the door. Then he was behind me pushing the bed and I was moving down the long corridor. A wheel wobbled making the bed shudder in rhythmic pulses, gadoong. gadoong, gadoong, as we picked up speed. I watched the corridor lights passing by overhead, one two, three... Then we turned into a side corridor and slowed down. The walls and doors were painted a different colour here with fresher paint. George disappeared and I was alone. I tried to look round but could hardly move. I could see nothing, just the ceiling, again. I felt a little colder in the corridor.

Suddenly a sliding door, with the light glinting on its glossy blue surface, rumbled open and a grey-haired lady in a white coat with metal badge of authority at her neck caught hold of the bed and pulled it, and me, into the examination room. I was moved into the centre of a crowded roomful of people, mainly women. I caught my breath in stunned embarrassment, and shuddered deep in my soul. Frightened, I flicked my eyes over them. All were dressed in pure hospital white, prominently labelled with the various metal insignia of different professions. They glanced in my direction as I entered, but otherwise continued talking softly

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amongst themselves, or stood silently against the wall. I did not recognise anyone. No, I make a mistake, there was the physiotherapist I met the other day, but she was murmuring to the person next to her. I sought relief in the shadows and shapes in the ceiling. No one said anything to me and I felt helpless in the palpable expectation of something about to happen... to me!

As time passed the murmuring rose and fell in waves of muted impatience and there was some shuffling of uncomfortable bodies in the overheated room. I could feel the body warmth radiating from people all around me. In the corner of my raised eyes I saw the tops of moving heads, brown hair, grey hair, one or two nurses caps. A faint waft of perfume mingled with the smell of sweat. My thin sheet seemed to wilt and cling in hurtful provocation. I glanced down... God... the shape between my legs was clearly outlined... and I quickly raised my eyes again ceiling-wards. Only a punishing God could have got me into this situation, but what had I done to deserve this? Suddenly it was very still.

Then there was a bustle, people moved aside, and the 'Great Doctor' came into sight. He nodded in my direction and turned to his attentive audience. They edged forward, tightening the circle around me. I felt completely trapped. The 'Great Doctor' began talking but I was frozen with anxiety and heard very little. After a while the odd word and phrase, 'tetraplegic', 'cervical', 'upper motor neurone lesion', 'lower motor neurone lesion', fluttered through my dulled consciousness. Then HE was bending over me and smiling. I looked up his nose. A clutch of long black hairs peeked out at me. 'Und how are you feeling today, mine boy?' he asked. I hardly had time to answer before he straightened up, rocked back on his heels, tucked his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets and continued his address to the admiring audience.

He turned towards me again, 'Und now ve vill exhamin de patient'. The dozen women and one or two men moved forward. Now they were pressing against all sides of the bed, only leaving a little space around the 'Great Doctor'. He lent over me, took a corner of the sheet and flicked it back. Oh shit... what was happening... I died a little then and there. The sheet ballooned up and then rolled over my toes before sliding down the end of the bed onto the floor. Hundreds, no thousands, of eyes stared at my body. It was the worst of dreams - losing all my clothes in the middle of the day in a public place with people mocking and poking fun at me. The 'Great Doctor' removed a hypodermic needle from the lapel of his white coat and began sticking it into my legs, demanding to be told when I could feel it. But where could I hide the misery in my eyes? The 'Great Doctor's' head and shoulders blocked the comforting view of the ceiling and lowering my eyes only brought them into contact with hundreds of women watching my naked body! I looked wildly about in unseeing panic...

Then slowly, in defiance, of its own accord, I had an erection. I've never been the same since then.