Taboo
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Care

My father lives in a nursing home. Over eighty, with pure white feathery hair, he sits curled up like a snail, except he has no shell to shape or protect him. Instead, from the inside, his spine, ever tightening, locks him in a twisted forward dive over his own lap. His recliner must be tilted far back so that he can look out at the world.

In so many ways his life has narrowed. For over a year he's been too weak to hold the large-print books that line his shelves. For a time he could grasp a magazine upright in his hands. He used to work his way through *Time* and the *New Yorker*, checking off articles he thought others would enjoy. But now even magazines seem too cumbersome. And TV doesn't interest him. His greatest remaining pleasure is music. Not surprising, considering he taught piano and harpsichord for nearly forty years. Though he needs powerful hearing aids for conversation, he takes them out to listen to cassettes through headphones.

As for movement, with the buttons attached to a cord resting on his lap, he can extend or drop the leg props of his electric recliner; raise or lower the seat; raise or lower the seat-back. Gripping a walker, bent double at the waist, his head looped almost to his knees, he can take several shaky steps—from recliner to wheelchair, wheelchair to bed.

Beyond visits by me and other family members at irregular intervals, including his birthday and Christmas, my father spends his
days listening to tapes, dozing, rousing for meals, and, for two hours, three times a week, conversing with the “friend” we’ve hired.

Two years ago he lived in a group home. Back then, bent merely at a right angle, he moved room to room with confidence using his walker. When I’d visit, we’d sit in his bedroom and talk about what we were reading; we’d talk about the past—he had several photo albums we’d flip through; he’d ask about my life on the outside: Was my partner, Gary, working on any new paintings? What was growing in our garden? Did I bring poems to show him? Then he’d tell me some new story concerning Mira, the large, whiskered woman in her fifties who managed the home. How she’d been kept up two nights nursing a resident through illness, how she’d found the time to make a rice pudding just for him.

During most of his eighteen months there, all five of the other residents were women, and all but one intensely senile. My father called them “dames,” a word that burst from his lips with a snarl. Arranged in a semicircle in the common room, they sat in recliners every day watching Oprah, their favorite, and the other talk shows before and after. My father, his recliner at the semicircle’s center, would read, hearing aids turned all the way down. He said he couldn’t bear these women, but as far as I know, he never chose anywhere to read but among them.

Mira, who tended them all, cooking meals, helping them to chairs, the bathroom, the dining table, helping each to bathe on a rotation posted in the hallway to the bedrooms—Mira was, in my father’s words, “a marvelous gal, and a saint.” “I don’t see how she puts up with those dames,” he’d snap. Then, his eyes moist, voice softening, “She deserves better.”

One day my father offered her the gift of a black opal pendant and matching ring. No matter they belonged to his second wife, to whom he’d given them twenty-five years earlier. A woman
who remained his most devoted friend following their divorce, visiting the group home several times each week.

Yesterday I met my father's new favorite at the nursing home, a woman of remarkable heft, fine brown hair pinned loosely atop a head too small for such a massive body. Though my mother and my father's second ex are slender, as wiry and upright in bearing as he is compressed, staff at a nursing home must be substantial enough to lift, many times each day, the often enfeebled men and women who live there—from beds, wheelchairs, toilet seats, baths. The staff all wear black lifter's belts, like exterior corsets, over their matching pale blue nylon shirts and trousers.

Strolling the halls, I hear the cries and groans, the calls for help, the rhythmic humming, counting, nonsense-syllable repetitions. All commonplace, expected, in such places. I also hear grunts, the sounds of straining, as staff lift the bodies of their living charges. It took me several visits to locate the source of these sounds.

Blanche and my father call each other "Sweetie," "Honey," "Dear." He asks for a kiss; she pecks him dryly on the forehead or cheek. Her smile reveals a wild disorder—just a scattering of teeth, though she can't be over forty, each tooth of an independent bent, literally. Blanche leans so that my father can return the favor, his face so bright, his cheeks raised so high, his eyes are slits.

Blanche gives my father commands without sounding mechanical or uninterested: "Stand on the count of three," lifting from under an arm; "Now turn," steadying him with a grip on the waistband of his pants. When he settles, finally, into the recliner with a grimace—virtually no move he makes goes unrewarded by a jolt of pain—she expertly tucks the pillows, each rolled or folded or bunched in a particular fashion, and positions the blankets and Kleenex in the ways he requires, a routine developed over the past
several years. One piece out of place and he'll fidget until somebody rights the error. “Only Blanche,” he assures me, “gets everything right.” The job complete, he is encased in softness.

Yesterday I also learned that their relationship has been formalized by the state. The tilt of his head, the slightly lofty, mocking tone of his voice, warned me the tale would reveal some irony. To avoid even the slightest appearance of improper conduct, Blanche and my father were required to sign sworn statements declaring their affection is mutual, uncoerced, nonsexual. He took obvious delight in recreating the scene: arrayed behind the recliner, the three blue-clad, corseted nursing home attendants who served as witnesses; ensconced in pillows and blankets at the center, my father, Blanche standing at his side; the two, gazing into one another's eyes, reciting, like bride and groom, their solemn vows, before signing the papers.