

THE KNIFE

Seventy-nine . . . there should be eighty. Louie silently cursed, emptied the knife drawer and counted them again. One short! And on a violent ward! Leaving the small kitchenette, he walked into the large dayroom and asked Johnny to check the count.

"Johnny, I've counted the knives twice and am one short. Have a crack at it, will you?"

The tall, thin figure dressed in white stirred from the pillar against which he had been leaning, "Sure. Keep your eye on Dufour over there and don't let him take Little Maxie's cigarette."

Following this, Johnny disappeared into the small kitchen, only to appear a minute later to confirm the original count.

"You were right. There's one missing. You better check in there once again while I take a look around out here", he advised.

The small ward kitchen, the half filled garbage pails, the drawers and the cupboards, even the tiny hotcart revealed nothing. Dave, another of the white uniformed attendants, came and helped Louie. Still no luck. The news had spread quickly, as news does in a hospital, and some of the patients were aiding in the search.

Not finding it in the kitchenette, they searched the entire ward from top to bottom, beneath the table tops, under the chairs, in cushions and couches, window casings, and, at the order of the charge nurse, every last patient was stripped, and each piece of clothing carefully examined. Still no knife.

At 2:30, Linda, the ward nurse, phoned the Nursing Office and told the "super" what had happened, and that a search of the entire ward had revealed nothing. She was told the shift could leave on time—according to the regulations they were supposed to remain on the ward until the sharp count was rendered correct—and that she was to mark the count sheet as short one knife.

While they waited for the p.m. shift to relieve them, stories of past instances of a similar nature went the rounds. Adam Graham told one which was verified by the others.

"I remember one time about three months ago," he began, "when we lost a spoon. We looked everywhere, just like we did for the knife, and couldn't find the damn thing. It got so it wasn't safe to turn your back for fear of getting stabbed. We had a Negro on the ward at the time, a dummy, used to do quite a bit of work for us. One day he came to the office and motioned me to follow him. We went to the washroom and he pointed to one of the toilets. Thinking it was broken, I started to leave to phone one of the maintenance crew, but, he kept me there, pointing again to the same toilet. That's where I found the spoon. Only trouble was, it wasn't a spoon any longer. Someone had spent a lot of time working on it and it was as sharp as a razor blade. Seems to me that one of the doctors took it and tried to shave with it. Who was it, Johnny? You remember?"

"Yeah", Johnny nodded his head. "It was Doc Grady. He's not here any longer, in Ontario somewhere. That thing was sharper than hell. If anyone took after you with it, you'd never feel a thing. a little sting, perhaps, and your throat would be slit from ear to ear".

Turning to Louie he said, "Don't fool yourself. We got characters here who'd cut your throat quick if they ever got the chance. Every time the count is wrong we walk real soft around here. You watch your step and your back all the time. It doesn't matter who you are, you wear a white uniform and that's always the first target."

Linda broke in suddenly from the desk at which she had been writing the shift report, "Don't scare him like that. He's only been here a little over a month. What the fellows are saying, Louie, is that we must be doubly careful now that this has happened. We don't know where it is or who took it and, above all, we don't want it to end up stuck in one of the patients or in one of us. It's happened before and could again if we're not careful."

He listened to all this and felt a very definite itch between his shoulder blades as he thought of a knife embedded there. It was a funny and disturbing sensation. He was a bit scared and it showed. Trying to cover the fear, he made some remark to the effect that he would always be sure to keep his back to a wall.

Linda came right back with, "That's a darn good idea. You'll be much safer if you do. Remember, and this is for all of you, the door to the office stays locked at all times. Some of you are getting into the habit of leaving it open when you go out for only a minute. From now on it stays locked all the time."

The p.m. shift eventually relieved them and he went home. He never said anything to his parents because he knew they would only worry, and he returned to work the next day to find that the night shift had searched every nook and cranny of the ward while the patients slept and had found nothing.

They went about their duties as usual, but the slightest act on the part of a patient which they considered as out of the ordinary was enough to make him a suspect. He noticed two or three and made a mental note of them, deciding to tell the others the first chance he had of what he had seen and thought about certain individuals.

"Johnny, look at Dufour. He's nervous as the devil, walking back and forth like a caged lion. He usually sits in that corner chain-smoking. There's LaBonte, too. He's not in his rocker this morning. Keeps staring out that window over there and hasn't moved in the last fifteen minutes."

"Yeah, I've seen them. Young Gordon is down in the wash-room sitting on a sink brooding away over something. He hasn't done that for months. Watch Bill and the way he's swinging that

mop around this morning. No even strokes and water's flying all over the place. There's two or three more, too. We'll make a list and give it to Linda after treatment."

The daily routine remained the same all that week, the only difference being that they kept peeled a much sharper eye for trouble than was usual. At the end of Saturday's shift, the knife had still not been found and, although the tension had decreased somewhat as they slowly adjusted to the cold hard fact that they were in constant danger from some unknown quarter, fear was still present and Louie was still afraid, even though not as much as he had been. When he passed the bulletin board on his way home, the list of postings there said he was to work nights, beginning Monday, for a two week period. The change of duty was appreciated. A month of straight days had grown monotonous, but the facts that he would be on the violent ward with only one other attendant to help him and that a knife was loose did not let sleep come any easier that night.

Monday, at 10:30 p.m., he picked up his partner, Bruce, another college student like himself, hired as summer relief, in the dining room, and the two walked to the ward, Bruce locking the heavy corridor doors behind them as they entered. They checked the sharp count and the attendance records together, and the notation, ONE SHORT, below the knife column reminded him once again of the hidden threat. Bruce had heard that there was a knife missing on Ward A but had not paid too much attention to the story as he had been on Ward B at the time. Now that he was in the danger zone he wanted all the facts and Louie told him the story when the two were alone after the p.m. boys had gone.

Left to themselves, they passed the time talking and drinking coffee, stopping every twenty minutes to make the bed check the regulations so strictly required. They had to make certain every patient was breathing. This meant they had to bend over a patient on occasion and both confessed it was a strange and frightening experience to be among seventy sleeping mental patients. They tried not to think of the missing knife and concentrated on the stories they would tell when they returned to university in the fall.

When the 3:30 check was due, Bruce was in the small kitchenette making some sandwiches for lunch, so Louie took the flashlight and set out to make the round himself. Nothing out of the ordinary had happened so far anyway, and nothing likely would.

Halfway through the check, he finished examining one particular patient who was ordered special care while he slept, and stepped into the main corridor, swept his light over the sleeping forms once more and stood there thinking, wondering if Bruce would have the lunch ready by the time he was through down here.

The walls, clothed in their pale pastel colors of pink and white portrayed the weird images created by the clouds slithering before the face of the full moon, the shadows made by the trees swaying

gently in the slight breeze outside the heavily screened windows, and the darting shafts of moonlight which managed to creep past the half closed window curtains. The dim night lights in the ceiling added to the eerie atmosphere, and a teller of ghost stories could not ask for a better setting in which to relate his most terrifying tale. Standing there with his thoughts wandering, he was suddenly struck by the realization that he was not alone on the corridor.

There was someone there with him! Who was it? Where did he come from? Wasn't everyone supposed to be in bed? asleep? Louie was scared. Just like that . . . he was scared, more afraid than he had even been in his entire life. A cold clammy feeling, like when you put your hand on an old log that has been under water for a long time, began to slowly rise from the depths of his stomach, sweeping his supper in its wake. His head swam in circles, wider and wider, until rationality all but left him . . . oh, God . . . what'll I do? . . .

A hand tugged at his shoulder. It tapped the second time and the second wave of sickness began. This was a different sensation, a searing pain, like the time he had stepped on the hot poker his father had used to stir the fire in the huge stone fireplace at home . . . Home, would he ever see it again? What of Mom and Dad? What would they do? The fire in his head was growing hotter and hotter, the perspiration wet on his forehead, his feet feeling very warm and sticky. They wouldn't move for him. He refused to move them . . . he didn't want to. The floor had disappeared and he stood there, suspended in space, free from all the dimensions of time, for that split second before plummeting into nothingness . . . eternal damnation . . . Bless me, Father . . . Petrified, he remained motionless, thinking everything and nothing, unable to do anything.

Instinct, the driving force of the animal, took hold and began to turn him around, slowly, ever so slowly, in the direction of the tap, to the left. More and more of the dark void he entered came into his vision. What vision? The fog clouding his brain had robbed him of clear sight. Everything was black . . . nothing visible . . . except the darkness. Wait, what was that over there? . . . an extra black spot . . . a man, one of the patients. Which one? Who was it? He couldn't make out the features, everything was still lost in the slowly clearing fog. Was it Dufour? Bill? or LaBonte? Not Bruce. The figure wasn't dressed in white. But, that was a flash of white. What was it? Piercing the thinning mist, eyes straining, he noticed the man's face for the first time. White teeth were revealed as the patient grinned, a sick sort of grin that began at one corner of his mouth and emphasized the heavy lips, slabby and thick.

Herman, the one who worked in the kitchenette and washed the dishes. The knife . . . my God, he's the one who took the knife! What was that I saw on his chart the other day . . . "Violent on occasion, dangerous if armed, exercise caution". That's it. He took the knife. He had every opportunity. Of course, he's the one

we've been looking for the past week. The face came into sharper focus, the grin ever widening. The dark flannel pajamas he wore blended with the black background, leaving only the white of skin showing, a bare two feet away and, yet so far, and so stifling close.

A sudden movement of Herman's hand attracted his attention from the haunting grin. Only one hand . . . where was the other . . . behind his back. He's got the knife hidden behind him. The right, there's the left at his side. He's right handed, I've seen him working on the ward. The hand began to emerge from its hiding place. Why did he move so slowly? He wants me to see what's going to happen. The chart said he was a sadist. More and more of the hand was becoming visible. Something, a sharper white than flesh was there. Polished steel, small and deadly. Mother of God, he's going to kill me.

Reason returned, suddenly, unexpectedly . . . hit him with the flashlight. Quick, hit him before he . . .

"Match . . ."

What was that? Herman spoke but his words were lost among racing thoughts, thoughts centered around self-preservation. Should I yell for Bruce? No, he'll never hear me way down here. Even if he does, he'll be too late. Hit him now and ask questions later . . . if you're able. Hit him.

The hand was still being extended, nearer and nearer to him.

"Match . . ."

Match, he wanted a match, only a match. That white thing in his hand wasn't a knife, only a cigarette. All he wants is a light. He hasn't got the knife. I'm safe. Breaking the silence, Louie spoke for the first time.

"What the hell are you doing running around this time of night?"

Relief flooded over him like a tidal wave, and he laughed at himself for being so foolish, a hard, harsh laugh, devoid of real mirth. Reaching into his pocket, he produced a match and lit Herman's cigarette, telling him to smoke it in the washroom. Not waiting to finish the check, he turned to the office to find Bruce laying out the coffee cups beside a huge pile of fried egg sandwiches.

Bruce turned quickly, startled by his sudden appearance.

"What's wrong with you? You're white as a ghost. Not scared to go down there alone, are you?" and he laughed softly.

"You'd be scared, too, if you had to go through what just happened to me. You'll never catch me down there alone as long as I'm working in this place. They say it takes a good scare to smarten some people up and, brother, believe me, I've had mine."

He told Bruce about Herman, the tap on the shoulder, and the cigarette.

"It must be true. You're shaking like a leaf. Better take a couple from the drug cabinet. Nobody'll ever know. Here, a cup of good coffee will do you good."

They sat there for a long time, saying nothing, staring at one another, thinking. Bruce finally spoke, hesitantly, almost fearfully, "You want me to finish the check?"

"We both better go. It might do me good to go back there right away."

The two went down the corridor. Herman was sitting on one of the toilets finishing his cigarette. He gave them a half smile and Bruce eyed his companion curiously, saying nothing. They finished quickly and returned to the lunch, cold by this time. Whenever another trip to the dorm was necessary, Bruce carried a stout window stick and Louie kept a tight grip on the flashlight. He had been badly scared, still was, and did not care who knew. Bruce was not taking any chances either. The thought of what could have happened if Herman had had the knife in his hand was enough to sober them both.

In the morning, Louie told Linda when she reported for duty what had happened that night. Never had he ever received a reprimand like the one she so ably gave him. He said nothing. What could he say, knowing as he did that such a mistake as he had made could have very well cost him his life.

Finally, running out of words, she calmed down and added softly, "The knife has been found."

He stared at her in stunned disbelief.

"Yes. We found it yesterday after dinner . . . In Herman's mattress . . ."

—GERARD TINGLEY, '60

HOMECOMING

Peter Randal stood in the high wind of the large June day. The sky was cloudless, and only on the edges of the hills of the bay below, could be seen that summer haze which gave name to the wind, a smokey Sou-western. The short, clipped grass at his feet shook viciously in the gusts. His long gaunt face was worn and pale; long untidy wisps of hair, blond and wavy fluttered like sails in the breeze. Peter Randal was tall and thin, his shirt flagged about his body, giving evidence that he had once been a much heavier man. The hands that were held loose behind his back were heavily veined, furrowed like the clay in the late fall, clay that awaited the seeds of spring.