

NOT-HENRY

At 96, her legs require a walker to get her across a room, her fingerprints have disappeared, and her broken shoulder, most traitorous of all, has imprisoned her in this dreadful rehab facility when she longs to be at home in her own bed. At least her vision and her mind function as they should. And so she can see that a wheelchair is inching backward from the hallway through the open door of the room she languishes in.

“Hello,” she calls out across the long space between her bed and the door. “You there. You have the wrong room.”

No response, probably hard of hearing like everyone else in this place, like she herself. Useless, absolutely, to press the call light at the side of her bed, although she presses it nonetheless. It’s an understaffed facility she’s in, with nurses that fail to respond to her urgent miseries, untrustworthy meds, and godawful meals, including bowls of soup topped with mysterious floating detritus that remind her of college dining hall fare, which in turn, reminds her of her late beloved husband whom she met as a sophomore at Yale, and with whom she spent the following 65 years, and with whom she is still deeply in love in spite of his death having sentenced her to more than a decade of loneliness and yearning

for his touch. Of all the losses old age delivers, by far the worst loss is her husband's embrace.

She is nearly alone in the world since her son—her only child—is on the opposite coast, and although retired, he is terribly busy, as terribly busy as only sons with inconvenient mothers can be. No matter. These days, she prefers her own company to anyone else's, certainly to the demented individual who has backed his wheelchair across the threshold and traveled a foot inside her room.

“Hello,” she shouts again. “Turn around. Back out!”

She presses the call light once more. Futile, of course. It's always so in these dreary places. This she knows from personal experience—broken hip two years ago that left her this quivering gait—and from friends who emerged from these torture chambers with stories to tell. These friends, to be clear, are no longer in conversation with her, not that they necessarily conversed with her when they could. She wasn't the easiest person to befriend—but even those who stuck by her had the nerve, as they say in coffin-speak, to predecease. Who lives to 96? It's simply ridiculous.

She'd like to think of her pals up there in the great wherever checking on her husband, nudging him to eat his divine vegetables and work out at the celestial gym so when she joins him, he'll have muscular arms to wrap her in. She'd like to believe in an afterlife—Who wouldn't?—but when it comes to an afterlife, she locates herself firmly in the raised eyebrow school.

The wheelchair has stopped, the individual's head has flopped forward. Dead? Probably not. Most likely, a pause for a nap. She's done that herself mid

journey from a lounge chair in her living room to the kitchen fridge, dropped her head and closed her eyes, overcome with the desire to sleep.

She'd sculpt this person's drooping head if she could. She used to be a sculptor, well-known if not quite renowned in her day. Occasionally, she still sees her name in the New York Times, buttressing her self-image and throwing scraps at whatever ego she has left. She hasn't been able to sculpt in years. Unfortunate because creative work would comfort her. But here she is again, back to the dubious notion that comfort exists, back to the afterlife. Her friends who did believe were Theosophists—an artist's trend back in the day--and in touch with past lives. And who was she to tell them they were fools? Who would deny the bereaved or the fearful their solace? Who would deny it to her? No one but her rational self.

And probably the denial of an afterlife is its own consolation, for it disheartens her to imagine her husband's shock at her transformation. When he died, she was lovely in his eyes and in reality as well. Photographic evidence of this exists. Tall, slim, luxurious golden hair, clothing immaculate, sparkling jewelry matched by sparkling vitality. A tower of elegance. God, the crone he'd see now—wisps of white hair, a thickened waistline, the missing four inches of height having migrated south and settled in rolls around her middle.

Perhaps she should think more conventionally, hope that somewhere beyond, not bodies meeting, but souls. Yet, what good is an afterlife if flesh can't press flesh? It is flesh she craves, a powerful ring of arms encircling her as she stands at the sink peeling carrots or rinsing watercress.

The wheelchair is on the move again, resuming its slow creep backwards toward her bed. “You have the wrong room,” she shouts. “Wrong room!” She can see now by the shape of the head that the chair’s occupant is male. She pushes the hopeless call light again.

She isn’t taking old age valiantly, not half-trying. She knows this, and often says aloud that she longs for death. But she doesn’t quite mean it. There is that occasional hummingbird outside the window, the first bite into the chocolate she allows herself every day (because good god why not?), the aroma of coffee rising from her morning cup—events that, for one or two joyful moments each day, engender a forgetfulness of the decrepit self. The remaining 23 hours and 58 minutes are an endless cycle of CNN-watching, dozing, waking to Wolf Blitzer or Anderson Cooper repeating, in solemn tones, their monotonous opinions.

With all her complaining, she is terrible company. Thank heavens she has no roommate. When the discharge social worker came to her hospital room to announce a transfer to a rehab facility, she stated that she required a private room or she wasn’t going anywhere. Out of the question to inflict herself on anyone else, and more to the point, to suffer the infliction of anyone else on her. An exceedingly private person all her life, a woman—an artist—who needs her own space, a space devoid of another human’s germs, dandruff, wheezes, coughs, and swallows.

The wheelchair has advanced a few feet into her room, but it still has some distance to travel before it reaches her bed because she is, in fact, in a double room. On the day they discharged her from the hospital, there wasn’t an available

private room in all of San Diego, or so the social worker claimed, forcing her to buy the second bed in this room to ensure it remained empty. Of the two beds, she chose to occupy the one nearest the back window, so she could look out, perhaps catch sight of a winged creature. She sculpted birds—a trademark of her work, carving away the bits of marble, hiding a small bird or two in a fold or behind a leg. Those in the know could find them—an open secret, like Hirschfeld’s Nina’s in the Times. “Yoo-hoo. You there in the wheelchair. Turn around. Head in the other direction!”

Her phone rings. They placed it next to her bed on her non-broken arm side and she picks it up, unsurprised to hear her sister on the wire, calling from the opposite coast. Her younger sister, her only sibling, a mere 93. Sensible life spans elude the women in their family. An aunt lived to 92, their mother to 90, spectacular ages for their generation. Their mother ended her days in a nursing home, lingering there for a miserable fourteen months of Bingo, shortness of breath, and mediocre pianists who played on Sunday afternoons in an ill-considered attempt to dispel the gloom.

She didn’t visit her mother in the nursing home nearly enough. She was at the height of her career and busy with commissions then, and her neglect is a source of considerable remorse now that she knows old age firsthand. It’s the particulars that bring her to her knees—the realization that her mother, like she herself at this juncture, harbored a vital younger self within the decaying shell, a youthful heart inside the failing one, and remnants of lust and attraction to young handsome men that made their disregard of her pathetic attempts to flirt a source

of painful embarrassment. Perhaps her own too-long life and these broken bones are punishment for her inattention to a parent who loved her so well. She and her sister adored their mother, a woman both beautiful and kind, although she and her sister haven't managed to adore each other. An old storyline. Ordinary sibling rivalry exacerbated, when they moved their mother to the nursing home, by who would take what from her house. The candelabra that Nora absconded with still rankles, and the piano—well, that was outright theft. “Hello, Nora,” she says.

“Just calling to see how the arm is doing.”

“Plenty of pain. I can tell you that.” Strictly speaking this is not the case. She has pain pills, and even without medication, the arm only hurts if she moves it against its grain. “And how are you?”

“Exhausted. Went to the matinee today. Lunch with Fran before the show. She got us tickets to *Hamilton*. That girl has connections. I'll be in bed all day tomorrow. Worth it, though. Outstanding play.”

Nora is reminding her that she remains mobile enough to go to lunch and the theater and that she has a loving daughter nearby willing to take her places. Nora visited their mother in the nursing home more often than she did. Much more often. A widow by the time their mother was incarcerated and never an artist, Nora lacked the conflict of loyalties she faced. She doesn't intend to ask Nora details about the play or where she and Fran had lunch or what they ate. She will not encourage the who's-in-better-shape contest, just as Nora is not encouraging discussion of her aches and pains with any expression of sympathy

or requests for specifics. The games they play, at their age. Laughable. “You know, there’s a man backing his wheelchair into my room.”

“How delightful!”

“Not when I’m paying an extra three hundred dollars a day to have this room to myself.”

“Well, tell him you don’t feel like company.”

“I can’t get his attention. I think he’s deaf.”

“What’s his name?”

“How should I know?”

“Let’s give him one.”

“What good will that do?”

“When you call out a name, he’ll probably hear you.”

“Right. Brilliant. Shall we call him Henry?”

“Perfect, the very name I was going to suggest. I’ll hold the line while you try it.”

“Henry. Henry! Please leave right now. This is not your room.”

“Sounded great. Did it work? What’s happening?”

“Nothing.”

“Maybe we have the wrong name.”

“Your turn.”

“Alexander. Try that.”

Just like Nora to bring the conversation around to *Hamilton* again. “I don’t like that name. I’ll try Henry again. Louder this time.”

“Nothing wrong with Alexander. But go ahead, he’s your guest, ignore my advice.”

“Henry, listen to me. Roll the chair out of this room. This room is not yours, Henry. Do you understand?”

“Well. What’s happening?”

“He’s jumped out of the wheelchair and he’s dancing the fox trot.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Of course I’m kidding.”

“You’ve obviously got the wrong name. You should have tried Alexander.”

“I’m hanging up. My shoulder aches and my arm hurts. It’s three shades of purple outlined in green. I’m going to take a Tylenol because they refuse to give me Scotch. Call me tomorrow and I’ll let you know how far into the room Not-Henry has got.

When Nora is 96 and can’t get out anymore and her daughter is bored with her, then Nora will see what it feels like when younger people call to brag they’ve been to a Tony-Award winning extravaganza. Almost worth staying alive for.

She presses the call button for help again. It must be a good ten minutes since she first pressed, and it appears that Not-Henry is picking up speed. At this rate he’ll reach her hospital bed before she turns 97. Maybe if she throws something at him, hits him in the head, she’ll get his attention. Her arms were always stronger than her legs, even her left arm, a result of lifting huge hunks of

marble, turning the pieces as she worked. Chipping the non-essential away, seeing the essence emerge. There's philosophy in that.

She tosses a small notepad, Frisbee-style, in Not-Henry's direction. It misses by many feet and lands with a soft thud which Not-Henry, unsurprisingly, does not perceive.

In physical and occupational therapy, the nurses concentrated on walking and getting in and out of bed from a wheelchair. What would have been useful, what they skipped, was how to use her left arm—her non-dominant arm—as a throwing arm, how to aim a missile at an intruder in her space. She channels her inner Joe DiMaggio, winds up, and hurls a small plastic box of breath mints at the white head of hair. The box opens as it soars, rattling the mints down onto the floor. Not-Henry fails to react. He is busy rolling backwards over the little green mint blobs, making a sticky mess and sending up aromas of her mother's herb garden, her father's aftershave. He was a lovely man, her father. Aside from his wife and his daughters, his great love was music—it filled the house, and after her father died, her mother couldn't bear to hear music anymore. She should have visited on Sunday afternoons and wheeled her mother outside where the sound of the piano was faint. She and Nora could have coordinated that, had they been speaking then.

Not-Henry is a couple of feet from her bed. She knows from her own physical therapy sessions that he'll be backing up to the bed and transferring himself into it without turning toward it. She wonders who Not-Henry voted for.

If different from her vote, and if she can reach him with her cane as he nears, she will beat him to death.

She has grandchildren somewhere out there, so in theory at least, she cares about the country's fate. Two granddaughters from her son's first marriage that she hasn't seen in years. She even has a great grandchild on the way or maybe it's already entered the world and no one has bothered to inform her yet. That she has been a careless grandmother is beyond dispute. When she should have been braiding the girls' pigtails and reading them *Pippi Longstocking*, she was busy working. Commissions, galleries requesting pieces. She aspired to museums, aspired—this is the truth—to fame.

She wonders if Not-Henry, whose wheelchair is close to its destination, has lived a life of different priorities. Wonders if he has attentive children and grandchildren or perhaps an alive wife who visits him.

Speaking of the interloper, he has managed with a final shove to roll within inches of her bed. She knows what comes next, and sure enough, he positions the wheelchair sideways alongside the mattress. If he turns his head, he will see her, but as the transfer technique requires, his head is lowered while he reaches down to lock the wheels of the chair so it won't skid when he hoists himself off its seat.

She could tap his shoulder to get his attention, but instead she moves in the bed as far as she can from the side he is trying to ascend and watches him. With his arms pressing down on the wheelchair's seat for leverage, he makes one, two, three attempts to hoist himself—she appreciates what this is like, the

tremendous effort before liftoff—until finally he manages to rise and fling his butt on the edge of her bed, his back to her.

His butt on the edge of her bed. Astounding. He is breathing heavily, as she always is after that Cape Canaveral maneuver. She can hear his slippers drop, one after the other, and can imagine his toes pushing at the heel of the opposite foot's slipper to pry it off. He rests then, rests for what comes next, and she feels a tenderness inside her chest as he works his butt backwards, swings his legs up, and lands with his full length on the mattress next to her, exhausted, eyes closed in the aftermath of the long exertion. It's a fine angle his nose makes as it juts from his thin face, a Greek nose, a nose she would have been pleased to sculpt. And those hands on his chest, resting there, the bones and blood vessels standing out through the papery mottled skin, a saint's hands.

When his breathing quiets, he turns onto his side facing her, and his arms move outward, reaching. Perhaps he is searching for an extra pillow or the extra blankets the CNAs pile onto the beds. His upper arm finds her, an arm stronger than she would have expected, and as if propelled by ancient muscle memory, that arm knows how to enfold a woman in bed. He moves closer, his top arm encircling her waist, his lower arm working its way under her shoulders. He must realize by now that there is a woman in the bed. Perhaps he finds nothing odd about that; perhaps he has dementia or that sun-downing syndrome she's heard about. His eyes open, pale blue, watery and unastonished. She moves forward, and as her own arm lifts around him, she hears him say, "Sweetheart."

"Not-Henry," she whispers in return.

“Pauline,” he says. “Pauline, darling.”

Not-Pauline, she thinks as she strokes his back with the flat of an artist’s hand. *Not-Pauline, Not-Henry*, but what difference does that make.