

A Cap and Real Patients

It was the end of June and it definitely felt almost like summer. Robins scurried about the grass outside our classroom window, pulling up worms for their young. Exams were upon us with Pharmacology the most difficult and important of the tests. If I failed Pharmacology I would fail the whole probie block, and risk immediate dismissal. I devoted every spare minute to study.

While we studied, the number of empty desks grew, adding poignant pressure to our efforts. Four girls just couldn't take it any more -- the pressure of exams, the nuns, the difficult work in the hospital. Five students had been asked to withdraw, three because of their marks and two for no reason apparent to anyone except Sister. Now our class was reduced to 25.

As we doggedly memorized belladonna alkaloids, the seniors prepared for graduation. They rushed past us to the sewing room for last minute adjustments on their all- white grad uniforms, to appointments with Mr. Lane, the photographer downtown, to the York for a beer to savour the last drop of precious time they had left together, and -- the most painful to us probies -- the intermediate and grad students dashed this way and that preparing for their final dance.

Feeling like oppressed Cinderellas, we crammed for Pharmacology while enviously watching their preparations, their dresses, their excitement. Soon the lure of the dance, a date and a chance to mingle with the senior students and instructors became an obsession. And so it was that when Judy Tanner flew into the lounge, her blue eyes flashing with excitement and said, "I have an idea how we can go to the dance." We all perked up. "We can take benzedrine when we get back and then study all night. We'll be fresh as a rose for the exam."

"If Sister finds out we'll all be expelled," I said with authority.

"Aw, cut the crap, Yates," Niven said roughly. "Everyone takes Benzedrine, don't you know that? It's absolutely safe. For godsake, it used to be kept in the health office right next to the aspirin. They dished it out to students who wanted to study all night." Niven paused. "But I don't think Mrs. Cherry has it any more ... wonder why?"

And so it was quickly settled. We would go to the dance, take the little wonder pill, study all night and be in tip-top shape for the exam the next morning. What could be simpler?

We girls from Calgary called up the old boyfriends who had long ago stopped calling us. Lester Brennan, my high school boyfriend, had joined the RCMP ten months before, and was stationed in Regina. He would be in town that weekend on a pass and would scrounge up enough boys to make blind dates for the out-of-town girls. Presto! A flawless collaboration.

Lester and his friends were waiting at the reception desk when White, Niven and I stepped off the elevator at seven o'clock. Lester eyed me up and down with an approving smile, then bent down and whispered in my ear, "Like your dress." I had borrowed the jade crêpe de Chine dress Mom had made for herself for Christmas. The dress had airy, gold leaves and a mandarin collar that gave it an Oriental look. "Very chic," Mom had said. Whereas it hung loosely on my mother's tiny frame, the dress touched the curves of my body. I felt good in it.

The dance was held in the residence, we headed down the stairs -- boys were not allowed in the elevator. As we walked toward Waterloo Hall, our excitement rose when we heard ... Chantilly Lace, with the pretty face ...

But our spirits soured a few minutes later as we realized: This was not our dance, it was theirs.

Lester and his Mountie friends stuck out like sore thumbs in crew cuts while the other guys constantly preened their Brylcreemed ducktails. We listened to the boys' corny stories about life in the Mounties barracks. And as we sipped bland Cokes, the intermediates and seniors slid from bubbly to silly-high on their forbidden bottles concealed under the tables in brown paper bags.

"Why didn't someone tell us to bring a mickey of rum?" Niven complained. *Splish splash I was takin' a bath / Round about a Saturday night ...* "Hey, Donna, let's dance," Lester said, jumping up. Lester was a really good jiver and we danced a few. Bobby Darin was really hot ... *A-well-a, I forgot about the bath / I went and put*

my dancin' shoes on ... But the dance floor was terribly crowded, and I felt like I was getting in the way of the seniors, so we sat down again.

Our stark evening slowly dragged on ... and on ...

"And now for all you Donnas out there," the DJ shouted. "Here's your song!"

Everyone gasped. It was Ritchie Valens, the last song he'd recorded before the Iowa plane crash that killed him only a few weeks before. *I had a girl / Donna was her name / Since she left me / I've never been the same / 'Cause I love my girl / Donna, where can you be?...*

"So tragic, I can't bear to listen," Perry said. "They're all gone ... Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, 'The Big Bopper' ... I wish they would play 'Chantilly Lace' again ... I loved 'The Big Bopper.'"

I nervously checked my watch -- 11:15. The dance would end at 11:30. The test would begin in a little more than eight hours.

The home waltz began to play, The Platters ... *They asked me how I knew / Our true love was true-ooooo-ooo-ooo* ... Lester was tall and I lay my head against his chest -- I didn't quite reach his shoulder. His jacket smelled of warm wool, perspiration and Old Spice. I pressed my face to his lapel and breathed in deeply. Would we have time to go somewhere and park? After all, I had all night to study ... *I of course replied / When a lovely flame dies / Smoke gets in your eyes...* We all swayed to the music on the tiny square of dance floor -- steamy, moist bodies jammed together like a mass of dying sardines.

At 11:35 when the dance was over, Lester and Clifford, White's date, ran to get the car. White and I got swept up in the stampede of students galloping out the front door and leaping into cars that raced around the horseshoe drive and out into the night. Lester drove down to the Elbow River, The Holy's favourite parking place, and joined the pack of cars. He parked under a low hanging willow swaying in the soft night breeze.

Wow, Lester certainly was a good necker and his wool jacket heated quickly from his hot, sweaty body. Moist wool and Old Spice -- it set me on fire. I was getting ready to go up in flames when my eye caught the glow of my nurse's watch -- 11:57. I gasped. "Hey, White, we've got to go. It's almost midnight!"

"Oh, God, you nurses," Clifford groaned from the back seat.

The moment the car stopped in front of our residence, White and I jumped out. Rumour had it that Sister Superior sat in one of the dark hospital rooms with binoculars, counting the minutes. If we sat in a parked car for more than two minutes, she'd report us to Sister Leclerc.

By 12:15, I had thrown my yellow duster over my pajamas and skipped down the hall to join the other girls only to discover there would be no magic pill. Our supply person had discovered benzedrine was now a controlled substance.

"Holy shit," Perry said in a panic. "What do we do now?"

Stunned by the news, we sat in silence. White began pacing back and forth. Finally she said, "Well girls, put the kettle on -- it's going to be non-stop coffee tonight." Then she chuckled as if it was a big joke, and I tried to smile.

Throughout the long night, we drank coffee, double and triple spoons per cup -- and took turns asking each other questions.

"Okay, White," I said, "give me the name of a barbiturate."

"Pentobarbital," she said, sleepily.

"Cor-rect," I said, "Perry. What's the trade name?"

"Shit, Perry's asleep," Niven said. "Give her a poke, Porter. And cut the crap about sleeping pills, Yates. Ask some questions about stimulants like caffeine -- stuff like that."

At seven I took a bath and dressed in my class uniform. The caffeine had worn off and I felt like a zombie. But I stuck to our strategy and took a brisk walk down to the Elbow River with the other girls. The air was fresh, and in the early morning stillness, the soft gurgling of the water rushing over riverbed stones was soothing.

Suddenly a little terrier raced down the opposite bank, barking excitedly. His owner obliged and threw a twig into the river. A black and white blur plunged into the clear, mountain water and retrieved the stick.

As we walked back to the residence, the nauseous aroma of brewing coffee wafted from kitchen windows. But the fresh air had sent a trickle of energy through my weakened body and at eight o'clock I entered the classroom with my fingers crossed and a prayer on my lips.

The girls who had slept all night looked as frightfully efficient as the girls in Miss McNabb's grade three class had looked on test day. Miss McNabb would smile and sit them on the piano and talk sweetly to them. The only time Miss McNabb smiled at me was when she handed back test papers -- from best and first to last and worst. My face would feel hot and flushed, my hands sweaty and shaking, my heart throbbing in my throat, waiting for her to call my name. That's when she would smile and say, "And of course, Donna is last."

To a chorus of class snickers, I'd slide out of my desk and slink to the front of the room to get my paper from her outstretched hand. Oh, how I wished the floor would open wide and swallow me up.

As I slid into my desk next to White, she gasped. "Yates, my God, don't look so scared. You can do it." She winked. "Take a deep breath and relax. We know all this stuff." I took a deep breath and began.

While we waited for the results of our tests, we began two weeks of clinical exams. For two hours each day I would be on the ward to be tested on the procedures I had learned in class. Mrs. Chase had been returned to the storage cupboard. Now I would have real live patients. My heart skipped a beat, just thinking about it.

My hands trembled as I carried my tray of thermometers. They made a sort of Jingle Bells rhythm as I walked down the hall to my first patient's room.

"Under your tongue, Mrs. John," I said, trying to sound confident as my trembling hands slid a thermometer into her mouth. I reached for her arm to take her pulse -- but there was no pulse. I moved my fingers up and down and around her wrist. I could feel nothing. I quickly switched my focus to her face. She was smiling. She exhibited none of the routine symptoms of death, but maybe she was about to die. My upper lip broke into a sweat. I glanced up at Mrs. Whitford, hoping for a hint. Have you noticed that she's dying? I wanted to ask as I groped about Mrs. John's other wrist, praying for a pulse.

Finally Mrs. Whitford rescued me. "Let's see, Miss Yates." She put her hand on Mrs. John's wrist. "Sometimes it is hard to palpate. Ah, here it is."

I placed my finger on the spot, trying to steady my shaking hands. "I feel it."

My patient gave me a motherly grin ... and I tried to smile.

Monday afternoon at five o'clock we were sitting in the lounge having a cup of coffee. I was flipping through my nursing arts procedure book. Robbins and Riley had continued the bridge game they'd begun during lunch hour with Porter and White. Perry was reading out loud, her rulebook, "*... Open and close doors noiselessly and avoid loud chattering in corridors, utility rooms and Nurses' Unit.*"

As though on cue, Lucy Hawkins silently appeared and calmly said, "Well girls, the results are up for Pharmacology." She began to slowly pull out a paper from under her bib. "I have the results here."

An ominous pause filled the room. We stared blankly at her. My heart began to pound ... *And, of course, Donna is last ...*

"I borrowed the results sheet," Hawkins said.

Tanner shot out of her chair like an arrow. White grinned extravagantly and said, "Hawkins, you beautiful little snitch." We fell into a huddle around Hawkins.

Wedged among my classmates, my face flushed warm, my heart thumped wildly in my chest. My eyes

dropped to the last name on the list ... it wasn't me, thank God. I slowly moved up the column of names and marks. I was half way up; I must have missed my name. I began at the bottom again. By now the others had moved away, chattering loudly about their marks. Only I remained.

"For gosh sakes, Yates!" Hawkins said. "What's the hold-up? I've got to get this back on the board, pronto."

"Wait ... wait ... " I breathed. "Just one more minute." I began again at the bottom, slowly moving up the list, line by line ... up ... up ... up ... then, YATES. I suddenly felt faint. It might be a mistake....

"Way to go, Yates," White said, slapping me on the back. "Told you, you could do it."

I smiled at White and gave a weak shrug. It must be true. I turned abruptly and ran to the phone on the wall, to call my mother.

The others were jumping up and down, bumping into each other and screaming, "We passed! We passed!"

"Mom," I shouted over the pandemonium. "I'm third from the top in Pharmacology!"

"Oh, Donna, I always knew you could do it! I'm so proud...."

"Shut up, you damn probies. Shut up!" A senior stood at the door of the lounge. Her face was white with cold cream, her hair in bright orange rollers. Her words hit us like darts, and we stood pinned to the floor.

"Don't you have any consideration? I have a red tag on my door -- I'm working nights!" She wore a green shirt from the operating room, the trademark of a senior's wardrobe. By the third year, their pajamas had worn out.

We all stood perfectly still. "I'll call you back, Mom," I whispered into the phone, and quietly hung up.

"God damn it, you woke me up. I have to work tonight." Then the senior turned on her exasperation and paddled back to her room, muttering. "You spoiled rotten brats ... no consideration ... wait 'til you get on nights...."

We tiptoed back to our chairs, stifling the giggles that kept bubbling up. Niven raised her hand for silence.

"This calls for a celebration," she said, making a poor effort at trying to be quiet. "Let's hit the York!"

"Groovy," Tanner said, her lips curled, a cigarette clenched in her teeth.

"Settled," said Niven. "We'll meet here in five minutes." She turned and stephip- nudged back to her room.

I rushed down the hall to Kaufmann's room.

"Want to come to the York with us?" I asked.

She looked up from her New Testament and squinted at me through her thick, black-rimmed glasses. Then she shook her head.

"You don't have to drink beer, Kaufmann. Just come and celebrate with us." "Nooo," she said tucking her chin to her chest.

"Move it, Yates!" White shouted from the elevator. "We're leaving."

The York was a dingy old hotel on the east side of Calgary, the favourite watering hole for Holy Cross students. We sat in the smoke-filled tavern, pooled our money and ordered a round -- two frosty glasses of beer each and two glasses of tomato juice for me. I wouldn't be legal for another two years.

"Geez, Yates," Perry said, with a nervous laugh, "I hope we don't get caught, being under 21 and all."

"Oh, Perry, don't be silly." Tanner said, clenching an unlit cigarette between her teeth. "They're used to student nurses coming and going here. They won't ask you guys for ID. Anybody got a match?"

Perry gave her a light. Tanner took a puff, slowly letting the smoke out in a perfect ring. She curled her lips and clenched the cigarette in her teeth again.

"Well, what would you think if you couldn't get a pulse?" I asked the girls. "No pulse means dead, right?" Everyone nodded. "But there she was, breathing ... and smiling at me. I wondered how long it would take for her to keel over, because with no pulse, her heart must have stopped."

“But good ol’ Mrs. Whitford saved Yates’ day,” White said, slapping me on the back.

Perry raised her glass. “To our instructors.”

White stood up: “To all of us! We’re now *officially* nurses in training at Holy Cross. I sure as hell hope they’re ready for us.”

We giggled and drank up.