

Finalist, Fiction

Nurse Jane and Nurse Allegra

By Jim Fischer

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In the mid-1950s, there were fifteen Shrine hospitals in the United States, dedicated to orthopaedic care, necessitated mainly by polio epidemics.

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The boy couldn't believe in a nurse named Allegra, so he lay there with his leg on fire. The recovery room was nearly dark. The hall lights were low, and the nurse's station at the end of the hall gave off a visible glow; but you couldn't see the night nurse herself. She'd been in the room earlier, when she brought in a pain pill and a glass of water with one of those straws you can bend so you can drink without sitting up.

"It's nice to see you awake, hon. I know that leg must really hurt, but one of these will take care of it right away." It was the second time he'd had one of the pain pills, so he believed what she said.

The nurses were all really nice, but sometimes they stretched the truth a little—like when they said that shots wouldn't hurt. But you knew the pain pills worked. As soon as he remembered where he was, alone in the dark, the leg felt like it was on fire. Nurse Jane had been with him earlier when he first woke up. He knew her from the Ward, and she was probably the nicest person he'd ever known. She was also beautiful, and smart, and thought he was being really brave and calm. She called him "Pal."

"Well, Pal, the doctors said you were great, and they said the operation went very smoothly. That leg's going to be a lot straighter now." She said he'd done a good job of counting backwards after they put in the hypo.

"They told me to count back from a hundred, but I don't remember much past eighty-five." Ninety-four was really the last number he could recall, but it was important for Nurse Jane to think well of him. She was very special. Larry Spautzer said she was probably married and all; but she didn't have a ring or anything. Spots said some other things about Nurse Jane, but he was mostly blow; you could only believe about half what he said.

Spots had left the hospital a couple of days before the boy's operation. They had done something to his ankle, before the boy got there. He had a half-cast on his left leg, and was always hopping all over the Ward on his right foot. When the guys didn't call him Spots, they called him "Hopalong," but he didn't like that much.

Spots said his father told him the Shriners had probably spent more than a thousand bucks on his operation. "But, I told the old man they'd save a lot more than that, when they didn't

have to pay any more for that damned brace, and those shitty shoes." Spots cussed a lot, and he taught some of the guys some things about sex, probably. But you could only believe about half of it.

It was neat, first waking up from the operation, seeing Nurse Jane's name tag first thing. He noticed her name tag even before recognizing her face or her really beautiful blonde hair or anything, and that was weird. But it was good to see someone he knew, and cared for. His parents were coming up in a couple more days. The doctors told them not to make the trip for the operation, to wait until the boy was rested or something. He believed the hospital was something like five hundred miles from his home town.

The thing about the name tag was what was confusing about the night nurse. Each of the nurses wore a tag with her first name on it, so it was never hard to talk to them. You just put "Nurse" in front of the name, and you could ask them anything. They were all really nice, but most of them were pretty old.

The night nurse was pretty old, and had very dark, curly hair, nearly kinky. He'd never seen her before, and guessed she just worked around the operating rooms. Nurse Jane had apparently left after seeing he was all right and asleep and everything, and the new nurse took over while he had been asleep. When she brought the pain pill and water, he looked at her name tag. It looked like it said "Allegra," but he figured he must've read it wrong, what with being sleepy and the leg really hurting.

Waking up now, in the night, with the fire right below the knee, he knew he should have talked to her about her name. He kept trying to see the name tag in his mind, thinking that just remembering what she looked like, and what she said and did, maybe a picture in the mind would come up, of what the name tag really said.

He wanted to call out to her, to ask her if he could have a pain pill. He couldn't move at all without making the leg feel even worse. The nursing station was not far down the hall; you could see the light. He thought if he moved around a little, she'd surely hear, and come to check; but even moving his head made the fire in the leg flare up. The doctors said that they were going to use something like a hammer and chisel to break the bone below the knee, then straighten it and re-set it. The cast went from toes to hip, and would have to be on for eight weeks. They said he'd have to re-learn how to walk, but that it would help a lot, especially when he got older.

He knew the night nurse would hear, if he cried; but he didn't want to do that. When one of the guys in the Ward cried, it was really hard on everyone. The worst was a guy in a full cast, both legs up to his waist, with a bar between his knees. One day he got a terrible itch on what was probably the inside of his thigh, and there wasn't anything to do for it. They'd heard stories of guys using rulers and clothes hangers to scratch with; and getting infected and tearing stitches and causing all kinds of problems, but this guy couldn't even do that. He cried a lot, and everybody felt really sorry for him, and they tried to imagine how terrible it was; but they all really just wanted him to stop.

He didn't want to cry, wanted desperately to call the nurse, to ask if it had been six hours since the last pain pill. Either she or Nurse Jane (he couldn't remember which) said that the

pills had to be at least six hours apart. Surely it had been at least that long—and if it hadn't, maybe there was something else that would help. Maybe even just talking to someone would help. He knew that talking to Nurse Jane would take his mind off the leg and the fire burning and the not being able to move at all

He knew that if Larry Spautzer had been there, he'd have said, "Jesus, you jerkoff, just holler 'NURSE' as loud as you can, and the old bat'll come running!" But this short cut did not occur to him in the recovery room bed.

They all called all the nurses by name. This was the first hospital he could remember being in, and he'd had paid attention to how the guys did things, and how the rules worked, and knew if you didn't eat the stuff they gave you, you got no dessert. The nurses had name tags, and that's how you knew how to talk to them.

He didn't know the night nurse's name, couldn't believe in a nurse named Allegra, and so he lay there refusing to cry, silently cursing Larry Spautzer, and the doctors, and the guy in the full-body cast, and everyone he'd met in the hospital, every single one of them. He tried to remember prayers, tried to make some up, tried to think of good things that'd happened, good friends he'd known, but not a damn one of them could help him out of this shitty mess and he couldn't help himself and eventually a fitful sleep overwhelmed him.

"Well, hon! They must have done some super job on that leg of yours. You slept right through the night!" He asked her what her name was, and she said it was Allegra, which meant joy in Latin or something, and he could call her Allie because that's what her friends called her and the boy said, "Nurse, can I have a pain pill?" She said she had one ready, and he told her he wasn't hungry for breakfast, and she said the IV should hold him for a while anyway, and he didn't ask her what that meant.

When he woke up later, he was hungry and had lunch and got ice cream for dessert. Nurse Jane came by, and said he'd been "a brave little boy," sleeping through the night and all. She really said that—"a brave little boy." She said her son had been eight months old before he could sleep through the night, and the boy just said, "Ma'am, I hope he never forgets how to."

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