

The Way Station

There's an odor here...a cumulative combination of antiseptic, food, body odor, and God knows what else.

The people who work here dress in green or white. They smile, but it's phony smiling, perfunctory and patronizing. Their eyes are vacant when they look at you, mouthing words in monotonic cadence that have no substance or value...unless they're angry with you. If they're mad they glare at you, and sometimes they will squeeze a hand, an arm, a shoulder with extra force to bring you a moment of pain and to give vent to their sadism.

The dining room can fool you. You could almost say it has ambiance. There is an enticing food smell that makes greater the appetite for food. It is a large room with rich green carpeting, gold star inlays, and assorted sizes of potted plants. Some chandeliers hang here and there. There are paintings on the wall that nicely match the color schemes of the room. The dining tables are covered with recently pressed tablecloths and neatly folded cloth napkins. Soft elevator music comes from unseen speakers. It is, in fact, a lovely room and a pleasant place to be.

The food in the dining room is another matter. It is served in small portions on dull white plates by women of various ages, with one thing in common: somewhere, a mainframe button is pushed, and a smile is given, or a monosyllabic muttering is heard from the servers. At times a server loses cool and stomps away from a table, a 'victim' of some diner's description of her or the food. Basically, the food being dispensed is unseasoned, tasteless, cardboard slop.

One bite and the lovely decor of the room doesn't much matter anymore. It is understood that a great chef would not be willing to create sumptuous meals here, but, really! Could not the powers that be at least have a 'tasting committee?' The lack of flavor and seasoned taste must have something to do with a 'senior diet regimen' that is followed. The 'powers' would not want the old folks getting sick from eating palatable food! Just let them die of hunger. They are going to die anyway. Generally speaking, the people who work here at the 'way-station' are truly robotic and senseless people who have no lives of their own and wish to make yours as miserable as they possibly can. These people are referred to as, wait for it, caregivers!

Yes, I'm being tough on the caregivers, and it is unfair, surely. After all, they are here, constantly among the sick, the drooling, and the dying. That no doubt accounts for some of their actions and attitudes. It hardens them, perhaps, and all they want is to be somewhere else. But they need their jobs, so they stay. A few caregivers obviously do care. My thanks go out to those. Here, the attempt is to give a general perspective from personal observations, and, believe me, these descriptions are not very far off.

Most of the people who reside here are seemingly clueless and guileless, sweet folks who paid their insurance premiums for years so they could be here ... or, maybe they're wards of the state. They mutter *thanks* to the people in green and white who serve them, smile pitifully, trying to establish some sort of top-of-the-line pecking order for themselves. Some of them can still walk on their own, barely. Some are in wheelchairs, and others are pushing their walkers along the corridors. Some are bedridden most of the time, getting all the TLC (lol) the green and white zombies can dole out. You will not see too many smiles from the residents here, but, then, there is no reason for happy faces when you're hurting.

Add to the hurting the other dynamics in a place like this and you have the formula for despair and quiet desperation.

Occasionally you can hear some serious bell ringing sounds, and it isn't 'Clarence' the angel-man! It usually means someone is in a bad way or very close to buying the farm. The green and white drones are running around confused, exchanging wild glances, hoping the bells won't signal something bad they've done to someone.

It's a bit strange but when the bells go off, everything else here seems to be magnified: the smells get more odious; the despair and desperation is worn more starkly on the faces; the bodies in the wheelchairs, on walkers, sitting or lying down, all become more prominently rigid and wary.

Visitors come but they don't stay long, using time-worn excuses to get the hell out of there lest they be infected with whatever is causing those awful smells in the corridors. The visitors seem always trying to put on a cheery and sad face simultaneously, but they just don't make it. They likely don't know it but it is so easy to read beyond their props and see their real purpose in being here: fulfill a respectful obligation, bring a gift of some sort, keep the 'legacy thing' alive, give a hug and kiss, and get out of here as quickly as possible. Again, they're probably the right things to do...guess they do show some kind of love and warmth. But, somehow, it just seems to me somewhat shallow and tawdry. Then, again, this place with all its bland institutional walls and windows does not engender a desire to linger.

Many of the residents gather in the cherished communal area where there are card tables for those who can still see the numbers and the royalty on the cards; who can still remember the bridge bid given by the partner across the table; who can still with feeble and shaky hands pick up and lay down the thin and overused thin cardboard pieces.

The big gathering room is light and cheery enough. The furniture is cleaned constantly for stains left by the feeble masses. There are nice soft sofas and stuffed chairs for casual chatting about any 'him-her' relationships; about the men and women in green and white; about family and friends who are just too busy with jobs and children to be visiting them. There is a television for watching shows that remind you of the joy and sadness that had been your life until 'now.'

'Now' is a *Way Station* on the way to a final unknowable destination...maybe to a 'Soylent Green factory.' Maybe 'now' is purgatory. but, then, that is a process of purification or temporary punishment for those who have already died and whose souls are in a state of grace. That would seem close to the truth: some of these folks are already dead and they're waiting to be purified by these green and white zombie automatons.

Mostly, these are the people you read about, those who get bed sores and bruises and cry a lot. They're the people who don't want to be a burden on their children because they have their lives out there in front of them. These are the people who accept their fate because there's just not a whole lot they can do otherwise.

But here's a little secret you can store away somewhere: they can still see, hear, feel, and understand how this thing works. They see through the glass walls of the offices, the hushed sessions with the administrator, the head nurse, the white and green corps. They hear a comment that they're not supposed to hear. And they feel it all and understand it all...they're used up and they are not needed so much anymore. That's okay...the cycle perpetuates itself, that womb to tomb thing. Each generation goes through it. These people are the bent, broken, lost, forgotten and forsaken band of retired retirees, just looking for a crumb.

Hey, I know there are exceptions to all rules, but this place, as well planned and appointed as it is, well, it still really sucks. The place itself is not all bad. The buildings are set among beautiful palms, green lawns, bushes, and palo verde trees; all are maintained very nicely.

There are some agreeable spots of refuge, but there is still the unpleasant institutional aura that pervades the place. The tiled floors are kept polished and antiseptically clean. The owners, the investors, the builders, they tried to stay away from an 'institutional' look. They didn't quite make it, but they made an effort. Guess that's important.

So, what makes it suck? It's the whole bunch of items aforementioned. Walk down one of the long starkly-lit hallways and sneak a peek into the bare 'bed cells' where loneliness tries for sleep; see the weeping and the clutching of bibles; watch the tearful goodbyes when the visitors leave; look around at the impending sense of doom and gloom within the buildings.

One can say, accurately enough, "We've got to have these places for our senior citizens. What else can we do?" It's just, well, it's my first stay in one of these places, and it's an experience I'm not too crazy about.

Who was the wordsmith who wrote it? Was it John Keats, the English romantic poet? 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.' Well, that's a beautiful phrase. And there is a whole lot of beauty out there in the world! You're just not going to find a lot of it in places like this.

Hell, guess there have to be places like this for the sick and over-the-hill people. It does beat by a big margin that *Soylent Green Factory*. It's just, well, you're here for a few days and you just want to be somewhere, anywhere else. There's death nearby all the time. The 'walker' walking dead! The 'wheelchair' riding dead! The hobbling dead! All are moving at a snail's pace toward their spot in 'Golden Acres Cemetery' or the 'Silver Ashes Crematorium.' Being in here is not where any sane person would want to spend their 'golden years,' thinking about how they spent their lives, thinking how it was supposed to be so much more than this.

You know, I've known people in my life who checked the 'obituary column' in the local paper every single day. It was a daily habit. Wanting to see if anyone they knew had passed away. Then, they would have a topic for conversation: 'Hey, did you hear that Dapper Danny just died?' Well, in here, those obituary readers would be making a lot of 'did you hear' phone calls to whomever they know that likes that kind of news. My guess is that 'daily habit' would likely change in here. Death is always so close.

Prentice Paul Hiller is my name, and this is my home. At least, it is temporarily my home. Guess you might say I'm doing 'custodial time.' When you're my age, a hip replacement can mend fast, or, there can be a ridiculous amount of complications, which I won't get into. When you don't need around-the-clock care, the hospitals kick you out and you go home, or, you go to a custodial care center for rehabilitation. Since I've got the nursing home insurance and have been paying through the nose on it for years...well, might as well use it. Why burden anyone close to me? My doctor says my needs are sufficient to merit custodial care, so I'll hobble around here on my walker or cane until the doctor says the hip has healed completely, or, enough so to leave.

Here at the 'way-station' there are the three levels of care: 'custodial level care,' 'intermediate level care,' and 'skilled level care.' If you're not familiar with the levels, here's

the system, simply put: 'skilled level care' implies you need around the clock nursing attention; if you're in 'intermediate level care' you need some nursing care but can do a few things for yourself; in 'custodial level care' you just need some assistance from the 'robots,' a nudge when it's time for a pill or for rehab, help in dressing and grooming. All levels of care are contiguous here, so I'm privy to them all.

Not keeping track of time but my guess is I've been here about forty-two days, seven hours, and fifteen minutes. If you need to have a description, I'm still holding my six-foot body at about two hundred pounds. Well, sure, there's a paunch. And there's gray hair, wrinkles, sagging skin, and, with the daily consumption for years of blood pressure medicine, my sex drive is now in a permanent state of 'idle,' not that you needed to know that, but it was once a very big part of my physiology and is a very big part of my story here. Besides, at my age, it's harmless and perhaps amusing to hear me chatter about something as dynamic as a 'sex drive.' I'm even allowed rash and crude statements...hell, I make full use of it. Anyway, one supposedly could say that I was once a fairly good-looking fellow, in the Richard Chamberlain mold---the older folks will know the name and the younger ones couldn't care less.

I'm one of the lucky ones here, still able to ambulate and to delude my mind with the thoughts you're reading, and damned certain in the knowledge that I'm not going to be in this place too much longer. Bless them! So many of the others here will stay until the end of their lives.

At this moment, I'm watching Greta Fogel sleeping in her wheelchair, her head lolled over on her left shoulder, drool oozing down her chin and onto her clothing. She wouldn't like me seeing her like this. One of the green and white trolls just heavily medicated her a few minutes ago. Greta can walk, but, when she's in a bad way she uses the wheelchair. We've become good friends in this short period of time.

Greta normally lives in the retirement living complex next door, or, 'over the fence' from here. The retirement living is connected to the care center here and owned by the same large group of investors. That complex is beautiful, like a resort area---gift shops, pharmacies, restaurants, pools, spas, saunas, gym, the whole nine yards. It's not hard to see why Greta would be living there. It's a complex exclusively for seniors.

As beautiful as it is, it's not my kind of retirement community. Yes, I'm a senior, but, damn, I don't need to be reminded every day of my age and my diminishing abilities. Give me neighborhoods where there is a mix of all ages; children playing and yelling at each other; young couples in love or about to be in love; life forces pulsing around me, giving me just a bit more energy and a chance to share life experiences.

Greta has been floating between her more opulent retirement condo to the custodial and intermediate/skilled care facility. Hope she has good insurance coverage, but if she doesn't, the word is she's got more money than Warren Buffett or Bill Gates.

'The word' is just rumor, but it isn't difficult to imagine that Greta has some significant monies put away...she has a daughter who relies on her quite often for support, so it would fit. She has good days and bad days. They go in streaks. The doctors are still in a quandary over what exactly is wrong with her and how to treat her. At least, she doesn't have far to go when she's able to go home...just a short walk from here to a whole new world 'over the fence.'

Greta is a silver-haired lady, still svelte with her five feet seven height, and you can see that she was once a blonde Nordic beauty, her facial features reminding me of a Garbo

or Loren. Greta is one of my favorite people here at the *Way Station*. When she is in a coherent state of mind, she is fun and full of sass. She's a wise lady who was once a clinical psychologist, a fact which seems to show itself in her quick observations of people we talk about.

She can laugh at one of my silly jokes and she can become sad when I tell her about some of my love affairs...and some other aspects of my life. We watch some television shows together and we read together. Sometimes we just sit at the big plate glass window, talk about our lives, mine, for the most part, gaze at the sky, let the sun warm us, and doze a bit.

The other day I queried her: "You've mentioned your daughter, Greta, and some minor details about your life, but what about you? We talk mostly about me..."

We were lounging in chairs by the plate glass window. Greta was dressed in a cute pale blue top and bottom jogging outfit. Me? My usual Bermuda shorts, Tommy Bahama shirt, white socks, and tennis shoes.

"What and why do you need to know about my life?" she responded.

"Well, jeez, you know so much about mine."

"That's because you're more gregarious, more eager to talk about yourself and your experiences. I'm a more private person."

"Okay, I've got a big mouth."

"I'm not saying you've got a big mouth, Prentice. You're a very engaging person with lots of charm and a gift for gab. A very interesting man! You seem to have a need to talk more than I might. That's all."

"So, I get nothing! After all my razzmatazz, I get nothing?"

"I'd hardly call it razzmatazz, dear man! Very interesting and compelling, yes. Not, razzmatazz! You've found in me someone with whom it's easy to converse, someone you instinctively trust, and you share some of your life with me."

"Wait, dear woman! Answer my question. Do I get nothing at all?" The jibing was all in good fun.

"Oh, for Pete's sake! I'm..."

"Wait! Who's Pete?" Comedy Central, not!

"Shut-up, Prentice," a low key 'shut-up.' "I was born in the east, Boston; went to Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It's now called the 'Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.' The man I married was a Harvard professor of Humanities, Peter Fogel. We lived and worked in Boston and its suburbs. We had many happy years together. He died of cancer after we retired and came to Arizona. It's all pretty dull stuff compared to your life, Prentice."

"At least I know now who Pete is." another comic-less rejoinder.

"Shut-up, again, pest purveyor."

"You didn't mention Debra. See how you leave things out."

Greta sighed, pursed her lips, looked upward out the plate glass at the pale blue sky. For a moment, I had a feeling my 'comedy' had gone too far and that she was peeved.

Finally, she spoke. "Later, my friend! Let's just sit here for a moment." She touched me gently on the arm.

There had been a nerve touched in something that was said. Did it have to do with Debra? Time might tell. For now, we would just, sit.

A few minutes later, as the sun warmed us, Greta spoke again. "You really should put your thoughts down, Prentice. The things you've told me would make for interesting

reading, even your sex-capades! If you can write as well as you can talk, it could be good reading. You're a lovable Lothario, Prentice, or, were, to be more accurate! A mischievous and delightful scamp! You've obviously led a lusty life, mixed with many emotions and a lot of sadness. Write about it! You might slay some dragons in the process. Didn't you teach 'writing' at one time?"

"Yes, I did. Not for very long, but, yes. That was when schools needed teachers and they didn't get too picky in their selection process."

"You do that a lot, you know?"

"Do what?"

"Tear yourself down!"

"Okay, I'll stop," and, with just a slight hesitation, "but, really, they were not too picky!"

"You're gifted with charm and chatter. And, you know it! There's no reason why you shouldn't peck some of that charm and wit down on your laptop. Should be fun reading!" She seemed amused with herself for the suggestion.

"Guess it would pass some time. Don't know if the world would be ready for the results of my dredging. It 'ain't' so pretty, Greta."

"Don't fool with me, Prentice. You've shared a lot of your life with me so far, and we've only known each other for six weeks or so! You'd love for the world to know about you. It's somehow important for you, I believe. But, forget the world. It's the process. Do it for yourself. 'Share your life' with yourself! You could learn something. Your children might even understand you better. Then, again, with all the fiction you would add, it's doubtful." She ended with a teasing smirk.

"My whole life is fiction. But, seriously, you make it easy to share, Greta. You listen with care and interest. Me, my listening skills could be improved. About the world knowing about me, I suppose there's something to that. Guess there is a need to talk about, or, write about our lives, just to see if we have any validity or any legacy at all. You believe that we have that need, right?"

"Some of us, yes. But you might need it more than most. Underneath your bravado, your teasing, and your jokes, there is some sort of pain inside of you, Prentice. It might help you to get as much of it out as you can. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying you are an egotist. To the contrary, I believe you to be a very humble man, perhaps, even, a little shy. You seem to have that 'tortured artist' thing in you. All I'm saying is it might help to write it down...I know I would love to read what you have to say..."

"'Tortured artist!' You gotta get real, Greta. Still, that's quite an assessment. What can I say? Don't know about those labels you're putting on me, but, hell, who knows? You've studied people all your life. You're an amazing lady, a very special lady! And, I'm very fond of you..."

"Oh, put the charm back in your pocket, you naughty, naughty boy. Really, write a book! It'll do you good. Each of us has a story to tell, each with a different 'fingerprint.' That's what makes the old world go spinning around. You know, 'different strokes/different folks.' Really, Prentice, do it!" She nodded her head in a way that put surety to the idea.

"What did you mean by 'were?'" I playfully asked.

"What, 'were?'" She responded.

"You said that I 'were, to be more accurate' a lovable Lothario! Am I not still a lovable Lothario?"

“Shut-up, Prentice!”

Now that dear lady did give support to an idea that had been on my mind for awhile. Why not write down best I could the parts of my life that memory served up and see where it led me? There's not much of a legacy as it is, so maybe the kids that I don't see very much would have something to help them piece me together. That is, if they wanted to piece me together. It'll pass the time, give me something to do, and keep my mind off these green and white aliens and the poor people who have to put up with them. Hell, maybe I can finish it before it's time to leave this wonderful home for used-up seniors.

I've got a laptop that works, and it's got an 'OpenOffice.org Writer' website. There are many places here to be comfortable. I'm thinking about that small glassed-in solarium-type room off the all-purpose room. it's not used that much. it's sunny, and it has some views. If anyone comes in they're not going to stay that long if they see me typing away. They'll think I'm typing out their obituaries. But, hell, I can type anywhere, so I'm going to do this thing. Why not? Why not 'share my charm and wit' with the world?

God! What is possessing me!

Hey, I'm excited! This could be really illuminating, maybe even fun.

So, settle in for a spell. It could be an entertaining ride for you.

That's what I'm thinking.