

A Catcher's Knees
2008 Award Winner

So damn tired. Hate nursing homes. Up all night. Truly "the circle of life." Two births, one death (unfortunately the death better received by the family than one of the births). So hard to stay awake now in my twenty-ninth hour on duty. Driving downtown reminds me that this town is dead. I remember an old English teacher discussing metaphor and foreshadowing. It's funny that I actively recognize it on my drive to the nursing home. Sad to say, but luckily only two of my four patients can verbally communicate, which means this shouldn't take too long. The other two: one pleasant, enjoyable; the other usually pleasant, but completely demented and has no memory of my previous six visits. She won't remember this one either. God-awful knees, too. In the past two years I have injected these knees more than once and appreciate the opportunity to sharpen this skill. If I can navigate this bony cystic maze, a young healthy knee will be easy. I hope it helps her. It seems to. Amazing how, when I'm sleep-deprived, things often seem more clear, straight. I notice stores that I've never seen on this road. I'm struck by the location of the nursing home. Across the street is the county library. Knowledge staring down dementia. Too often, in my world, dementia wins.

There is never a parking space near the door. It's a hundred-yard walk, fourteen degrees. At least I'm a little more awake. The nursing-home aura envelops me. Standard-issue carpet. Standard-issue smell. Standard-issue unhappy receptionist. Standard-issue slowest elevator in the world. Contrast here, though a child-care center is in this building. Kids are bundled up, playing in the courtyard visible from the glass elevator. Pretty cool. I always laugh when I see the balls on top of the lower roof. They say, "Shoot for the stars." If you do that here, you may never get your ball back.

I arrive on the third floor, amazed at the walkway. It's fenced in, overlooking a beautiful reception hall on the first floor of this building. I don't think they let the residents here during a reception or party. The demented, screaming elderly might put a damper on celebrations.

First two, done. They're still breathing. No obvious change. Blank stares, closed mouths, one complacent, one combative. Jessie is next. Great stories. I love to talk to her. She's one of the younger patients here. MS sucks.

Finally, Gladys. She won't remember a damn thing we talk about, and I am so tired. I walk into her room. Her bed is on the left. I usually stay on the right side of her bed to examine her with my back to the door of her bathroom. I'm so tired. I notice the chair on the other side of her bed. I don't think I've ever walked around to that side. I'm going to walk today, because I'm not sure I can stand up anymore.

Thump. The chair embraces me. "How are you today, Gladys?"

"It's good to have a visitor. Do I know you?"

"Yes, Gladys. I see you every month. If you remember, I gave you a shot in your knee last month."

"That sounds like it might hurt. But my knees hurt all the time anyway, so I guess it doesn't matter....Do I know you?"

"Yes, Gladys. I see you every month. My name is Dr. Sutton."

I close my eyes for a moment. When I open them I see something that I've never noticed before. Her bathroom door is standing open. On the inside are taped news stories of a life that I have not been able to explore. Her medical history was gleaned from the charts. Her memory didn't yield much information when I had asked before. One picture captures my attention immediately. It is a yellow newspaper clipping, a photo and article, covering the entire page above the fold. I see long hair, skirts and baseball cleats. I recall *A League of Their Own* and remember how much I enjoyed that movie. Gladys probably won't remember, but I'll ask her anyway.

"Gladys, tell me about that picture over there."

I have never seen a human face change so abruptly and completely. It happens now. A pleasant, lost, frail woman suddenly exudes strength, focus, and clarity that, pardon the phrase, comes entirely out of left field.

"That picture was taken in 1944. I was a catcher for our local team. You may not realize this, but women played baseball in those days. We were good, too. The men had gone to war. Baseball was too important to give up, so we played. I wasn't the best on the team, but I worked hard. Nobody wanted to catch during those brutal days in the heat. I would don my gear and lead my team. I could call a game like nobody's business. We had three pitchers. Two of them could barely play catch, but one had stuff you couldn't imagine. She was a lefty, had a curve ball that rivaled Sandy Koufax and a changeup that made you look like a fool. I haven't thought of those days often, but when I do, it lifts my spirits. One summer I hit three-oh-six and threw out six baserunners. I also dislocated my shoulder in one of the worst collisions at home plate you've ever seen."

Geena Davis she wasn't. She was a little over five feet tall and weighed no more than 105 pounds, twenty of which seemed to be in each misshapen knee. Her arms had lost the muscularity that had made her a force to be reckoned with behind the plate. As quick as it came, the mental clarity was gone as well. I was astounded by the details she recalled and reminded that we don't really understand the workings of the human brain.

She turned away from the wall and looked at me. "Do I know you?"

She died six months later. Although I asked frequently, I was never again able to stimulate the correct sequence of neuronal firings that connected me to those memories. There were brief periods of lucidity in our conversations, nuggets of recall discussing various aspects of her life such as her previous employment and her relationship with her husband (dead now twenty years). They were mere glimpses into the lady that I had been fortunate enough to travel back with that day. I am saddened that I might have missed that had I not been so damned tired. I

injected her knees that day and one more time after that, but I took a little more care. After all, she had earned every bony crook, spur, and cyst in those knees. These knees had been to war, had been an integral part of the definition of this woman. They were a testament to her drive, voice, and focus. They were her badges of honor.

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