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Hugo Nominee

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I TEST the temperature. It is 83 degrees, warm but not hot. Just right.

I spend the next hour puttering around, checking medications, adjusting the humidity, cleaning one of the life stations. Then Superintendent Bailey stops by on his way out to dinner.

“How are your charges doing?” he asks. “Any problems today?”

“No, sir, evrything's fine,” I answer.

“Good,” he says. “We wouldn't want any problems, especially not with the celebration coming up.”

The celebration is the turn of the century, although there is some debate about that, because we are all preparing to celebrate the instant the clock hits midnight and 2200 A.D. begins, but some spoilsport scientists (or maybe they're mathematicians) have told the press that the new century *really* begins a year

later, when we enter 2201.

Not that my charges know the difference, but I'm glad we're celebrating it this year, because it means that we'll decorate the place with bright colors—and if we like it, why, we'll do it again in 2201.

\* \* \* \*

I have been married to Felicia for 17 years, and I hardly ever regret it. She was a little bit pudgy when we met, and she has gotten pudgier over the years so that now she is honest-to-goodness fat and there is simply no other word for it. Her hair, which used to be brown, is streaked with gray now, and she's lost whatever physical grace she once had. But she is a good life partner. Her taste in holos is similar to mine, so we almost never fight about what to watch after dinner, and of course we both love our work.

As we eat dinner, the topic turns to our gardens, as always.

“I'm worried about Rex,” she confides.

Rex is *Begonia rex*, her hanging basket.

“Oh?” I say. “What's wrong with him?”

She shakes her head in puzzlement. “I don't know. Perhaps I've been letting him get *too* much sun. His leaves are yellowing, and his roots could be in better shape.”

“Have you spoken to one of the botonists?”

“No. They're totally absorbed in cloning that new species of *Aglaonema crispum*.”

“Still?”

She shrugs. “They say it's important.”

“The damned plant's been around for centuries,” I say. “I can't see what's so important about it.”

“I told you: they engineered an exciting mutation. It actually glows in the dark, as if it's been dusted with phosphorescent silver paint.”

“It's not going to put the energy company out of business.”

“I know. But it's important to *them*.”

“It seems unfair,” I say for the hundredth, or maybe the thousandth, time. “They get all the fame and money for creating a new species, and you get paid the same old salary for keeping it alive.”

“I don't mind,” she replies. “I love my work. I don't know what I'd do without my greenhouse.”

“I know,” I say soothingly. “I feel the same way.”

“So how is *your* Rex today?” she asks.

It's my turn to shrug. “About the same as usual.” Suddenly I laugh.

“What's so funny?” asks Felicia.

“You think your Rex is getting too much sun. I decided *my* Rex wasn't getting enough, so this afternoon I moved him closer to a window.”

“Will it make a difference, do you think?” she asks.

I sigh deeply. “Does it ever?”

\* \* \* \*

I walk up to the Major and smile at him. “How are we today?” I ask.

The Major looks at me through unfocused eyes. There is a little drool running out the side of his mouth, and I wipe it off.

“It's a lovely morning,” I say. “It's a pity you can't be outside to enjoy it.” I pause, waiting for the reaction that never comes. “Still,” I continue, “you've seen more than your share of them, so missing a few won't hurt.” I check the screen at his life station, find his birthdate, and dope it out. “Well, I'll be damned! You've actually seen 60,573 mornings!”

Of course, he's been here for almost half of them: 29,882 to be exact. If he ever did count them, he stopped a long time ago.

I clean and sterilize his feeding tubes and his medication tubes and his breathing tubes, examine him for bedsores, wash him, take his temperature and blood pressure, and check to make sure his cholesterol hasn't gone above the 350 level. (They want it lower, of course, but he can't exercise and they've been feeding him intravenously for more than half a century, so they won't do anything about changing his diet. After all, it hasn't killed him so far, and altering it just might do so.)

I elevate his withered body just long enough to change the bedding, then gently lower him back down. (That used to take ten minutes, and at least one helper, before they developed the anti-grav beam. Now it's just a matter of a few seconds, and I like to think it causes less discomfort, though of course the Major is in no condition to tell me.)

Then it's on to Rex. Felicia has problems with her Rex, and I have problems with mine.

“Good morning, Rex,” I say.

He mumbles something incomprehensible at me.

I look down at him. His right eye is bloodshot and tearing heavily.

“Rex, what am I going to do with you?” I say. “You know you're not supposed to stare at the sun.”

He doesn't really know it. I doubt that he even knows his name is Rex. But cleansing his eye and medicating it is going to put me behind schedule, and I have to blame *someone*. Rex doesn't mind being blamed. He doesn't mind burning out his retina. He doesn't even mind lying motionless for decades. If there is anything he *does* mind, nobody's found it yet.

I spill some medication on him while fixing his eye, so I decide that rather than just change his diaper I might as well go all the way and give him a DryChem bath. I marvel, as always, at the sheer number of

surgical scars that criss-cross his torso: the first new heart, the second, the new kidneys, the new spleen, the new left lung. There's a tiny, ancient scar on his lower belly which I think was from the removal of a burst appendix, but I can't find any record of it on the computer and he's been past talking about it for almost a century.

Then I move on to Mr. Spinoza. He's laying there, mouth agape, eyes open, head at an awkward angle. I can tell even before I reach him that he's not breathing. My first inclination is to call Emergency, but I realize that his life station will have reported his condition already, and sure enough, just seconds later the Resurrection Team arrives and sets up a curtain around him (as if any of his roommates could see or care), and within ten minutes they've got the old gentleman going again.

This is the fifth time Mr. Spinoza has died this year. All this dying has to be hard on his system, and I worry that one of these days it's going to be permanent.

\* \* \* \*

"So how was your Major today?" asks Felicia at dinner.

"Same as usual," I say. "How's yours?"

Her Major is the *Browallia speciosa majorus*. "Ditto," she says. "Old, but hanging on." She frowns. "We may not get any blossoms this year, though. The roots are a little ropey."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"It happens." She pauses. "How was the rest of your day?"

"We had some excitement," I reply.

"Oh?"

"Mr. Spinoza died again."

"That's the fourth time, isn't it?" she asks.

"The fifth," I correct her. "The Resurrection Team revived him."

"The Resuscitation Team," she corrects me.

"You have your word for them, I have mine," I say. "Mine's better. Resurrection is what they do."

"So you've only lost one this week," says Felicia, if not changing the subject at least moving on a tangent away from it.

"Right. Mr. Lazlo. He was 193 years old."

"193," she muses, and then shrugs. "I guess he was entitled."

"You mentioned that you lost one too," I note.

"My *cymbidium*."

“That's an orchid, right?” I say. “The one they nicknamed Peter Pan?”

She nods.

“Silly name for an orchid,” I remark.

“It stayed young forever, or so it seemed,” she replies. “It had the most exquisite blooms. I'm really going to miss it. I'd had it for almost 20 years.” She smiles sadly, and a single tear begins to roll down her cheek. “I worked so hard over it, sometimes I felt like its mother.” She looks at me. “That sounds ludicrous, doesn't it?”

“Not at all,” I say, sincerely touched by her grief.

“It's all right,” she says. Then she stares at my face. “Don't be so concerned. It was just a flower.”

“It's called empathy,” I answer, and she lets it drop...but I *am* troubled, and by the oddest thought: *Shouldn't I feel worse about losing a person than she feels about losing an orchid?*

But I don't.

\* \* \* \*

I don't know when it began. Probably with the first caveman who made a sling for a broken arm, or forced water out of a drowned companion's lungs. But somewhere back in the dim and distant past man invented medicine. It had its good centuries and its bad centuries, but by the end of the last millennium it was curing so many diseases and extending so many lives that things got out of hand.

More than half the people who were alive in 2050 were still alive in 2150. And almost 90% of the people who were alive in 2100 will be alive in 2200. Medical science had doubled and then trebled man's life span. Immortality was within our grasp. Life everlasting beckoned.

We were so busy increasing the length of life that no one gave much thought to the *quality* of those extended lives.

And then we woke up one day to find that there were a lot more of them than there were of us.

\* \* \* \*

His name is Bernard Goldmeier. They carry him in on an airsled, then transfer him to Mr. Lazlo's old life station.

After I clean the Major's tubes and change his bedding and medicate Rex's eye, I call up Mr. Goldmeier's medical history on the holoscreen at his life station.

“This place stinks!” rasps a dry voice.

I jump, startled, then turn to see who spoke. There is no one in the room except me and my charges.

“Who said that?” I demand.

“I did,” replies Mr. Goldmeier.

I look closely at him. The skin hangs loose and brown-spotted on his bald head. His cheeks are covered

by miscolored flesh and his nose has oxygen tubes inserted into it—but his eyes, sunken deep in his head, are clear and he is staring at me.

“You really spoke!” I exclaim.

“You never heard an inmate speak before?”

“Not that I remember.”

Which is another unhappy truth. By age 100, one out of every two people has some form of senile dementia. By 125, it's four out of five. By 150, it's 99 out of 100. Mr. Goldmeier is 153 years old; the odds against his retaining anything close to normal mental capacities are better than 100 to one.

“I should add,” I say, “that the proper term is ‘charge’, not ‘patient’ and certainly not ‘inmate!’”

“A zombie by any other name...”

I decide there is no sense arguing with him. “How do you feel?” I ask.

“Look at me,” he says disgustedly. “How would *you* feel?”

“If you're in any discomfort...” I begin.

“I told you: this place stinks. It reeks of shit and urine.”

“Some of our charges are incontinent,” I explain. “We have to show them understanding and compassion.”

“Why?” he rasps. “What do they show us in exchange?”

“Try to be a little more tolerant,” I say.

“*You*try!” he snaps. “I'm busy!”

I can't help but ask: “Busy doing what?”

“Hanging on to reality!”

I smile. “Is that so difficult?”

“Why don't you ask some of your other inmates?” He sniffs the air and makes a face. “Goddamnit! Another one's crapping all over himself! What the hell am I doing here anyway? I'm not a fucking vegetable yet!”

I check all the notations on the screen.

“You're here, Mr. Goldmeier,” I say, not without some satisfaction at what I'm about to tell him, “because no other ward will have you. You've offended every attendant and orderly in the entire complex.”

“Where do I go when I offend you?”

“This is your last stop. You're here for better or worse.”

*Lucky me.* I turn back to the holoscreen and begin punching in the standard questions.

“What are you doing now?” he demands. He tries to boost himself up on a scrawny, miscolored elbow to watch me, but he's too weak.

“Checking to see if I'm to medicate you for any diseases,” I reply.

“I haven't been out of bed in 40 years,” he rasps. “If I have a disease, I got it from one of you goons.”

I ignore his answer and continue staring at the screen. “You have a history of cancer.”

“Big deal,” he says. “As quick as I get it, you bastards cure it.” He pauses. “Seventeen cancers. You cut five out, burned three out, and drowned the other nine in your chemicals.”

I keep reading the screen. “I see you still have your original heart,” I note with some surprise. Most hearts are replaced by the time the patient is 120 years old, the lungs and kidneys even sooner.

“Are you offering me yours?” he says sarcastically.

Okay, so he's an arrogant, hostile bastard—but he's also my only charge who's capable of speech, so I force a smile and try again.

“You're a lucky man,” I begin.

He glares at me. “You want to explain that?”

“You've retained your mental acuity. Very few manage that at your advanced age.”

“And you think that's lucky, do you?”

“Certainly.”

“Then you're a fool,” said Mr. Goldmeier.

I sigh. “I'm trying very hard to be your friend. You're not making it easy.”

His emaciated face contracts in a look of disgust. “Why in hell should you want to be my friend?”

“I want to be friends with all my charges.”

“*Them?*” he says contemptuously, scanning the room. “You'd probably get more action from a bunch of potted plants.” It's not dissimilar from what Felicia says on occasion.

“Look,” I say. “You're going to be here for a very long time. So am I. Why don't we at least try to cultivate the illusion of civility?”

“That's a disgusting thought.”

“Being civil?” I ask, wondering what kind of creature they have delivered to my ward.

“That too,” he says. “But I meant being here for a very long time.” He exhales deeply, and I hear a rattling in his chest and make a mental note to tell the doctors about his congestion. Then he adds: “Being *anywhere* for a very long time.”

“What makes you so bitter?” I ask.

“I’ve seen terrible things, things no man should ever have to see.”

“We’ve had our share,” I agree. “The war with Brazil. The meteor that hit Mozambique. The revolution in Canada.”

“Fool!” he snaps. “Those were *diversions*. ”

“Diversions?” I repeat incredulously. “Just what hellholes have you been to?”

“The worst,” he answers. “I’ve been to places where men begged for death, and slowly went mad when it didn’t come.”

“I don’t remember reading or hearing about anything like that,” I say. “Where was this?”

He stares unblinking at me for a long moment before he answers. “Right here, in the wards.”

\* \* \* \*

Felicia looks up from her plate. “His name’s Bernard Goldmeier?” she says.

“That’s right.”

“I don’t have any Bernards,” she says. “It’s not the kind of name they give to flowers.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Suddenly her face brightens. “I do have a gold flower, though—a *Mesembryanthemum criniflorum*. I can call it Goldie, or even Goldmeier.”

“It’s not important.”

“But it is,” she insists. “For years it’s been how we compare our days.” She smiles. “It makes me feel closer to you, caring for flowers with the same names.”

“Fine,” I say. “Call it whatever you want.”

“You seem”—she searches for the word—“upset.”

“He troubles me.”

“Oh? Why?”

“I love my work,” I begin.



“I know you do.”

“And it's meaningful work,” I continue, trying to keep the resentment from my voice. “Maybe I'm not a doctor, but I stand guard over them and hold Death at bay. That's important, isn't it?”

“Of course it is,” she says soothingly.

“He belittles it.”

“That doesn't mean a thing,” says Felicia, reaching across the table and taking my hand. “You know how they get when they're that old.”

*Yes, I know how they get. But he's not like them. He sounds—I don't know—normal, like me; that's the upsetting part.*

“He doesn't seem irrational,” I say aloud. “Just bitter.”

“Enough bitterness will make anyone irrational.”

“I know,” I say. “But...”

“But what?”

“Well, it's going to sound juvenile and selfish...”

“You're the least selfish man I know,” says Felicia. “Tell me what's bothering you.”

“It's just that...well, I always thought that if my charges could speak to me, they'd tell me how grateful they were, how much my efforts meant to them.” I pause and think about it. “Does that make me selfish?”

“Certainly not,” she replies. “I think they *ought* to be grateful.” She pats my hand. “A lot of people in that place are just earning salaries; you're there because you care.”

“Anyway, here I've finally got someone who *could* thank me, could tell me that I'm appreciated, and instead he's furious because I'm going to do everything within my power to keep him alive.”

She coos and purrs and making soothing noises, but she doesn't actually *say* anything, and finally I change the subject and ask her about her garden. A moment later she is rapturously describing the new buds on the *Aphelandra squarrosa*, and telling me that she thinks she will have to divide the *Scilla sibirica*, and I listen gratefully and do not think about Mr. Goldmeier, lying motionless in his bed and cursing the darkness, until I arrive at work in the morning.

\* \* \* \*

“Are you feeling any better today?” I ask as I approach Mr. Goldmeier's life station.

“No, I'm not feeling better today,” he says nastily. “God's fresh out of miracles.”

“Are you at least adjusting to your new surroundings?”

“Hell, no.”

“You will.”

“I damned well better not!”

I stare at him. “You’re not leaving here.”

“I know.”

“Then you might as well get used to the place.”

“Never!”

“I don’t understand you at all,” I say.

“That’s because you’re a fool!” he snaps. “Look at me! I have no money and no family. I can’t feed myself or even sit up.”

“That’s no reason to be so hostile,” I say placatingly. I am about to tell him that his condition is no different from most of my charges, but he speaks first.

“All I have left is my rage. I won’t let you take it away; it’s all that separates me from the vegetables here.”

I look at him and shake my head sadly. “I don’t know what made you like this.”

“153 years made me like this,” he says.

I continue staring at him, at the atrophied legs that will never walk again, at the shriveled arms and skeletal fingers, at the deathmask skull with its burning, sunken eyes, and I think: *Maybe—just maybe—senility is Nature’s way of making life in such a body tolerable. Maybe you’re not as lucky as I thought.*

The Major’s chin is wet with drool, and I walk over to him and wipe it off.

“There,” I say. “Clean as a whistle.”

*Okay, I think, staring down at him. You’re not grateful, but at least you don’t hate me for doing what you can no longer do for yourself. Why can’t they all be like you?*

\* \* \* \*

“Why don’t you ask for a transfer to another ward if he’s bothering you that much?” asks Felicia.

“What would I say?” I reply. “That this old man who can’t even roll over without help is driving me away?”

“Just tell them you want a change.”

I shake my head. “My work is important to me. My *charges* are important to me. I can’t turn my back on them just because he makes my life miserable.”

“Maybe you should sit down and figure out *why* he upsets you.”

“He makes me think uncomfortable thoughts.”

“What kind of uncomfortable thoughts?”

“I don't want to talk about it,” I reply. But what I really mean is: *I don't want to think about it.*

I just wish I could get my brain to listen to me.

\* \* \* \*

Superintendent Bailey enters the ward and approaches me.

“I'm going to need you to work a little overtime today,” he informs me.

“Oh?” I reply. “What's the problem?”

“There must be some virus going around,” he says. “A third of the staff has called in sick.”

“All right. I'll just have to let Felicia know I'll be late for dinner. Where do you want me to go when I'm through here?”

“Ward 87.”

“Isn't that a woman's ward?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“I'd rather have a different assignment, sir.”

“And I'd rather have a full staff!” he snaps. “We're both doomed to be disappointed today.”

He turns and leaves the ward.

“What have you got against women?” croaks Mr. Goldmeier. I had thought he was asleep, but he's been lying there, motionless, with his eyes (and his ears) wide open.

“Nothing,” I answer. “I just don't think I should bathe them.”

“Why the hell not?”

“It's a matter of respecting their dignity.”

“Their dignity?” he snorts derisively.

“Their modesty, if you prefer.”

“Dignity? Modesty? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“They're human beings,” I answer with dignity of my own.

“Not any more,” he replies contemptuously. “They’re a bunch of vegetables that don’t give a damn who bathes them.” He closes his eyes. “You’re a blind, sentimental fool.”

I hate it when he says things like that, because I want to explain that I am *not* a blind, sentimental fool. But that requires me to prove he is wrong, and I can’t—I’ve tried.

All human beings have modesty and dignity. If they haven’t any, then they’re not human beings any more—and if they’re not human beings, why are we keeping them alive? Therefore, they *must* have modesty and dignity.

Then I think of those shriveled bodies and atrophied limbs and uncomprehending eyes, and I start getting another migraine.

\* \* \* \*

Two days have passed, and I am not eating or sleeping any better than Mr. Goldmeier.

“What did he say this time?” says Felicia wearily, staring across the dining room table at me.

“I’m not sure,” I answer. “He kept talking about youth in Asia, so finally I looked them up in the encyclopedia. All it says is that there are a lot of them and they’re starving.” I pause, frowning. “But as far as I can tell, he’s never been to Asia. I don’t know why he kept talking about them.”

“Who knows?” says Felicia with a shrug. “He’s an old man. They don’t always make sense.”

“He makes *too* goddamned much sense,” I mutter bitterly.

“Could you have misunderstood the words?” she asks. “Old men mumble a lot.”

“I doubt it. I understand everything else he says, so why not this?”

“Let’s find out for sure,” she says, activating the dining room computer. It glows with life. “Computer, find synonyms for the term ‘youth in Asia.’”

The computer begins rattling them off. “Young people in Asia. Adolescents in Asia. Children in Asia. Teenagers in—”

“Stop!” commands Felicia. “Synonym was the wrong term. Computer, are there any homonyms for the term youth in Asia?”

“A homonym is an exact match,” answers the computer, “and there is no exact match.”

“Are there any close approximations?”

“One. The word euthanasia.”

“Ah,” says Felicia triumphantly. “And what does it mean?”

“It is an archaic word, no longer in use. I can find no definition of it in my memory bank.”

\* \* \* \*

“Eu-tha-na-sia,” says Mr. Goldmeier, articulating each syllable. “How the hell can the dictionaries and

encyclopedias not list it any longer?"

"They list it," I explain. "They just don't define it."

"Figures," he says disgustedly. As I wait patiently for him to tell me what the word means, he changes the subject. "How long have you worked here?"

"Almost fourteen years."

"Seen a lot of patients come and go?"

"Of course I have."

"Where do they go when they leave here?"

"They don't, except when they're transferred to another ward."

"So they come to this place, and then they die?"

"You make it sound like it happens overnight," I reply. "We've kept some of them alive for more than a century," I add proudly. "A *lot* of them, in fact."

He stares at me. I recognize that particular stare; it means I'm not going to like what he says next.

"You could save a lot of time and effort by killing them right away."

"That would be contrary to civil and moral law!" I reply angrily. "It's our job to keep every patient alive."

"Have you ever asked them if they *want* to be kept alive?"

"No one wants to die."

"Right. It's against all civil and moral law." He coughs and tries to clear his lungs. "Well, that's why you won't find it in the dictionary."

"Find what?" I ask, confused.

"*Euthanasia*," he says.

"I don't understand you."

"That's what we were talking about, isn't it?" he says. "It means mercy killing."

"Mercy killing?"

"You've heard both words before. Figure it out."

I am still wondering why anyone would think it was merciful to kill another human being when my shift ends and I go home.

\* \* \* \*

“Why would someone want to die?” I ask Felicia.

She rolls her eyes. “Goldmeier again?”

“Yes.”

“Somehow I'm not surprised,” she says in annoyed tones. She shakes her head sadly. “I don't know where that man gets his ideas. No one wants to die.” She paused. “Look at it logically. If someone's in pain, he can go on medication. If he's lost a limb, he can get a prosthesis. If he's too feeble even to feed himself—well, that's what trained people like you are there for.”

“What if he's just tired of living?”

“You know better than that,” replied Felicia with unshakeable certainty. “Every living organism fights to stay alive. That's the first law of Nature.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” I agree.

“He's a nasty old man. Did he say anything else?”

“No, not really.” I toy with my food. Somehow my appetite has vanished. “How were things at the greenhouse?”

“They finally got exactly the shade of phosphorescent silver they want for the *Aglaonema crispum*,” she says. “I think they're going to call it the ‘Silver Charm.’”

“Cute name.”

“Yes, I rather like it. They tell me there was once a famous racehorse, centuries ago, with that name.” She pauses. “Of course, it means some extra work for me.”

“Potting them?”

“They're all potted. No, the problem is making room for them. I think we'll have to get rid of the *Browallia speciosa majorus*.”

“But those are your Majors!” I protest. “I know how you love them!”

“I do,” she admits. “They have exquisite blossoms. But they've got some kind of exotic root rot disease.” She sighs deeply. “I saw some discoloration, some slimy residue...but I didn't identify it in time. It's my fault they're dying.”

“Why not bring them home?” I suggest.

“If you want Majors, I'll bring some young, healthy ones that will flower in the spring. But I'm just going to dump the old ones in the garbage. The disease won.”

I'm grasping for something, but I'm not quite sure what. “Didn't you just tell me that every living thing fights to stay alive?”

“The Majors don't want to die,” said Felicia. “They're infected, so I'm taking that decision out of their hands before the disease can spread to other plants.”

“But if—”

“Don't go getting philosophical with me,” she says. “They're only flowers. It's not as if they feel any pain.”

Later that night I find myself wondering when was the last time Rex or the Major or Mr. Spinoza or any of the others felt any pain.

50 years? 75? 100? More?

Then I realize that that's what Mr. Goldmeier *wants* me to think. He sees the weak and he wants them dead.

But they're not his targets at all. They never were.

I finally know who he is trying to infect.

\* \* \* \*

I show up early for work and enter my ward. Everyone is sleeping.

I look at my charges, and a warm glow comes over me. *We are a team, you and I. I give you life and you give me satisfaction and a sense of purpose. I pledge to you that I will never let anyone destroy the bond between us.*

When I think about it, there is really very little difference between Felicia's job and my own. She has to protect her flowers; I have to protect mine.

I fill a syringe and walk silently over to Mr. Goldmeier's life station.

It is time to start weeding my garden.

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