

Free Man

I hated it there. The food was bland and mushy, served at room temperature, and every meal was indistinguishable from the one before it and the one after. There was never any privacy. Nurses, aides, doctors, and even cleaning staff announced themselves before pulling back the curtain, but they didn't wait for permission – or even for acknowledgement – before entering. Fluorescent lights in the hallways glowed day and night, accompanied by the incessant rambling babble of my fellow “residents” whose minds had long ago abandoned their bodies.

Sure, my kids came by for their obligatory weekly visits. The conversations were always strained and lifeless; what was there to talk about, anyway? The food? Awful. What's new? Nothing. Still breathing -- same stuff, different day. Nobody even tried to engage me in a real conversation. They'd convinced themselves that I was too old to have anything relevant to contribute, or too far gone mentally to even understand what they were saying. You could tell they'd rather be somewhere else. Lucky them -- at least they could leave after fulfilling their “duty.” I was stuck there.

And then there was the staff. For them, being there is just a job, and you're the worst part of it. They'd rather be staring at their phones.

Don't even get me started on what passed for activities. I tell you, Hank Thompson isn't the kind of guy who wants to play bingo while sipping on a cup of juice.

But that's all behind me now. I'm not there anymore. I escaped yesterday. Right after lunch, I just walked out when no one was looking. Fortunately, because I can still get around pretty well and I wasn't considered a flight risk, I got out unnoticed. It probably took a couple of hours before they even figured out I was gone.

Maybe they're out looking for me, but I doubt they'll find me. I blend in well. I don't call attention to myself. I'm good at making conversation with strangers. Sure, I look old, but folks probably think I'm a carefree senior citizen out for a stroll. Just part of the scenery. They won't find me, and with any luck, after a while they'll give up looking. “Silver alert” be damned.

So today, I am a man again.

No one makes me take my pills, tells me when and what I can eat, or what I should do with my long waking hours. I am free. I live by my wits and guile. I go where I want to, and I eat and drink whatever and whenever I choose. That's how it was before I got put in that damned place, and how it should be.

I don't mind being alone, and I'm back to that again. I've always been able to take care of myself. I found a place to stay where they don't ask a lot of questions. I got up early this morning (when I wanted to, not when somebody else said so), made myself some eggs and toast, and set out for the day.

I met up for lunch with my good friend Dave. I hadn't seen him in a couple of years – probably since I went into that damned nursing home – and I was looking forward to catching up on things.

“Hank Thompson, look at you!” he said when he spotted me from across the room. “How the hell are you? You look good.”

“I’m feeling better than I have in years,” I answered. “Things have been good ever since....” I stopped short of telling him what I’d done, in case he’d try to talk me into going back. “Anyway, it’s good to see you too. It’s been a while.”

“It’s been too long,” he agreed. “Can’t remember if I’ve seen you since my wife passed. June of last year. For a while it looked like the chemo and radiation might beat the cancer again, but then it came roaring back and spread like wildfire. She was in hospice for only two weeks.”

I resisted the temptation to tell him she was lucky to go swiftly. My wife died years earlier after years of battling with heart disease; her last months were excruciating. And Lord knows how my life has gone since I got put in the nursing home.

Five decades of friendship gave Dave and I plenty to talk about over a leisurely visit that even included a pint of my favorite beverage, Great Lakes Porter. We parted ways in mid-afternoon, happy in the thought that we’d be getting together again on a regular basis now that I was free.

Bill Caffrey sat down at the desk and swiftly reviewed the shift report from the previous night. The usual stuff, mostly: patients who called out for help from bad dreams or waking delusions, two incontinence-related bed changes, a problem with the copy machine (Help Desk has been notified). But then something in the report caught his eye.

“Hank Thompson died?” he asked.

“Yeah, sometime between midnight and 4 a.m.,” his co-worker Sarah Phillips replied. “Died in his sleep. Peacefully by the looks of it. We notified the family as soon as it was discovered. They came right away. Body was removed right after they left, before the end of the shift.”

“So nothing that could cause us any problems?” Bill asked hopefully. Deaths at the nursing home weren’t uncommon, but each one carried the risk that a patient’s family might blame it on the facility and demand an investigation, which took time and resources.

“Don’t think so,” Sarah replied. “Since the stroke he had last week, we all knew it was coming soon. I guess for his sake, it’s probably for the best.”

“Yeah,” said Bill. “He was a real pain at times, but I think overall he was a decent guy. Let’s hope wherever he is now, there’s a cold beer waiting for him. Or wait – it was stout that he always talked about, right?”