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A Bath, A Fire, and a Vanilla Shake

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A Bath, A Fire, and a Vanilla Shake

I used to be an 18 year old homemaker.

Procrastination and desperation led me, one summer, to Galesburg Managed Home Services, a business that aids elderly people in their homes. As a “homemaker,” I was supposed to do household chores, run errands, and make friendly conversation.

All the homemakers were trained for two hours. We learned things like how to dress, how to record mileage, and how to fill out our work logs. In addition, we were told what we were expected to do and what we were not qualified to do (i.e., administer medication, bathe people, or perform any sort of activity reserved for RNs or LPNs).

I also spent one morning observing an experienced homemaker, Carol. Her activities consisted of conversation and cigarettes, checking each client’s blue folder on top of the fridge, and performing the duties that were laid out in each folder.

After one morning with Carol, my supervisor told me that I was ready to homemaker.

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During my first week of work, I was assigned to a crumbling apartment building on Prairie Street. I knocked on the door of apartment 72 several times before I heard an angry grunt signaling me to come in. Whiffs of old urine hit me as I entered. A large man sat in a recliner wearing nothing but a pink robe, which was open. He was watching a diving competition on TV, his hand clutching a remote control that was pointed toward the screen.

I put my folder on the kitchen counter, made sure my nametag was in view, and began my required greeting. “Hi, Larry? I’m Amanda, from Galesburg Managed Home Services.”

The man said nothing. The pink robe remained open.

I retrieved my duty folder from the top of the fridge. Below the blue folder was a bright yellow one labeled “Confidential.” This meant that Larry was a special case, with a terminal illness. Homemakers were not allowed to read the yellow folders; nurses were also assigned to each of the clients, and it was only the nurse’s job to know what was wrong with the patients. I’m not sure why, but I never opened those bright yellow folders, just like I’ve never slipped a pack of gum in my coat pocket at Walgreens. According to the blue folder, I was supposed to make lunch, clean the bathroom, and tidy up.

But, first, friendly conversation. “So, who’s competing here?” My hand waved toward the TV.

Larry responded with, “Make the bed.” He still hadn’t looked at me. Apartment 72 was two rooms – the bathroom and the rest of it. I tucked in the yellow sheets and brown comforter, breathing fully again because I had gotten used to the urine smell.

I gave up trying to talk to an angry, mostly naked man. I did the dishes, swept the floor, and cleaned the worse-smelling bathroom.

Remote control still pointed, he kept staring at the screen. “Are you hungry, Larry?”

Larry looked down, exploding a sigh. “Get me that hamburger in the fridge. I don’t care. Whatever else is there.”

I warmed up a hamburger in the microwave, heated a can of green beans, and spooned out some applesauce. When I handed Larry the plate, he grunted. I left him alone, making up things to do. Things like putting all the pens lying around in an old coffee cup. Filling out my work log with slow deliberation. Dusting off the grate at the bottom of the refrigerator.

When Larry was finished, I washed the dishes again. As I was filling out the verification form for Larry to sign, he rose from the recliner. I could see the pink robe flapping out of the corner of my eye.

“You have to give me a bath now.”

He motioned toward the bathroom. “Uh, Larry. I don’t think I’m supposed

to do that.” I looked down at the pen scratches on the form that Larry still had to sign.

Angry grunt. “I need a bath.”

I tried to make a Larry-narrative in my head. Maybe he didn’t have family or friends. Maybe he knew about the urine smell. Maybe he was about to die, and all I needed to do to bring the man a little comfort was help him clean up.

Something made me do it, anyway. Perhaps it was fear of getting thrashed by Larry. Or fear of insulting the man whose apartment reeked of urine and who had the bright yellow folder on top of his fridge. I wondered whether his confidential illness could be spread. I wondered how much pain Larry was in. As the belt of his robe hung down loosely, I wondered why minimum wage and gas mileage were considered enough payment for this job.

I followed Larry’s flapping pink robe into the bathroom, clenching my stomach. He clambered onto a plastic chair that had been rigged in the bathtub, after placing his glasses and robe on the back of the toilet. Blue-grey tattoos stretched across his shoulders and arms like veins.

I took relieved note that his stomach was hanging out over his genitals before I focused my attention on the portable shower-head. I washed his hair, cleaned his back with a scrub brush, soaped him with a washcloth, and rinsed him. His eyes were closed the whole time. I turned off the water. “OK.”

He opened his eyes. “You’re not done yet.”

My face began to feel hot. “Yes, I am.”

“Aren’t you going to wash down there?” He pointed toward his penis, which I thankfully could not see.

“I’m not gonna do that.”

“What?”

“I’m not comfortable doing that.” I cautiously dried him with a towel, and then handed it to him.

Larry scrambled out of the tub as I went to the kitchen. He called my supervisor and said, “This girl here wouldn’t give me a bath.”

I didn't think logically until I'd left Larry's apartment and was driving back to the main office. The man could walk, help himself into the tub, get himself out, and dress himself. Why wouldn't he be able to wash himself with minimal help from me?

I went right to my supervisor's office and explained what had happened, concluding with, "I am not qualified to give people baths. I am not paid to do it. And I won't do it again." She agreed with me pleasantly. They were short of employees.

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Since I refused to go back to Larry's apartment, I was re-located to a tiny brick house on Brown Avenue. George and Ruthie, the tiniest couple I have ever met, lived there. They were both solid wrinkles as if they had made a pact to shrink and sag together. Notes in the blue folder revealed that Ruthie was developing Alzheimer's, and that George was too weak to care for her by himself.

Ruthie was so weak that it pained her to be touched. When I helped her to the bathroom, I was afraid I would break her. She sat on the toilet and moaned in pain. I tried to talk with her as she winced and sighed, but she kept familiarly referring to me with various names. She spoke in snatched phrases about how Ricky was coming to visit, but she couldn't tell me where he lived. When she was done, I handed her toilet paper. She couldn't reach back to wipe. I held my breath and wiped for her, lifted her from the seat, and pulled up her pants as she moaned "Ow" from my hands on her arms.

Ruthie toddled over to the sink and looked in the mirror, slowly lifting her hand to touch her frizzed hair. I found a brush in a drawer, and barely touched her hair with it as she leaned against the sink. She smiled and kept raising her hand to touch her hair, looking at her forehead in the mirror.

When I walked Ruthie back to her seat on the couch and lowered her to a comfortable position, George handed me a grocery list that he had painstakingly made while we were in the bathroom.

Bread, milk, oatmeal, grape jelly.

Then he gave me some food stamps. In Kroger's checkout lane, I handed the stamps to the cashier and asked, "Is this the right amount?" Looking around, I explained in a loud voice, "I'm getting groceries for some of my *clients*." I immediately felt like a big jerk. The pimply cashier handed me a receipt and greeted the next person in line.

George toddled into the kitchen when I returned and declared that he wanted oatmeal and toast for lunch. The stovetop was filled with grease. I decided I would feed George and Ruthie before cleaning up the mess in and around the burners.

I put a pan of water to boil on the stove, and sat down at the kitchen table to fill out my work log. George and Ruthie watched *People's Court* at a high volume in the living room.

I heard a whoosh behind me, and stood up. Flames shot past and above the pan of water a good two feet. I watched the fire for a few frozen seconds, then ran around the kitchen looking for an extinguisher. *Water won't work, water won't work*, I kept thinking. I reached my arm around the flames and turned off the burner. The flames kept burning. No extinguisher. Everything I knew about grease fires went cockamamie in my head. *Flour. Cover it. Baking soda. No water. What kind of extinguisher. Christ.* I threw open a few cupboards in a desperate search for any kind of white powder. Nothing. It kept burning.

Grabbing the phone, I dialed 911. "1347 Brown Avenue." I told George to get up, that there was a fire. He glanced at me and turned up the TV. "Come on, George." I nudged Ruthie awake and started to lift her up. She yelped in pain. "I'm sorry; I have to get you guys out of here. There's a fire in the kitchen." The word "fire" finally registered in George's head. He sat up. "What?!" I looked back. The flames were lowering. "Come on, I called the fire department, just to be safe. Let's just go outside for a few minutes, OK?" George stood up. "What'd you call the fire department for?" Ruthie was crying because I had touched her arms. "Just come on." We had almost made it to the front door when I glanced back and noticed that the fire had died. I heard sirens

outside. George kept shaking his head as I led Ruthie back to the couch.

Embarrassed, I went outside and stopped the firefighters, explaining what had happened. They insisted on examining the place. They tried to talk to George, but he kept saying that it was my fault and that he didn't even know why they were called. A firefighter discovered that there were no batteries in the smoke alarm, and told me that someone would be by later in the day to remedy that. I was also pointed to the obvious fact that the stovetop had accumulated so much grease and dirt that it was a fire hazard to use. I spent the rest of my time there scrubbing the stovetop after serving toast to an angry George and a not-hungry Ruthie.

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After becoming attached to George and Ruthie, I was assigned to Abingdon, a small town about 15 minutes outside Galesburg. I was told ahead of time that my "clients" were two women – Gloria, an 80 year old woman, and Gloria's 53 year old "developmentally disabled" daughter Katharine.

Gloria and Katharine's house became my favorite stop, once I got used to a few particulars. For instance, Katharine was a bit picky about her underwear, and during a two hour time span, she would want to change her underwear at least four times. She had a bladder the size of a pea, and after each visit to the bathroom, she made me take out a clean pair from her bureau. If things were not done immediately, she would wail, pushing her bottom lip out and flailing her fists.

The first time I visited Gloria and Katharine, my supervisor told me that Katharine took a pill every day at 3:30, and that it was OK for me to give it to her when Gloria said so. After I cleaned up the kitchen and ran the vacuum upstairs, Gloria gave me a few dollars and asked me to go to McDonald's to get Katharine a vanilla shake. She had one every afternoon after getting home from school.

When I came back, Gloria instructed me to get a plastic spoon. She hobbled into the kitchen after me, looking behind her to make sure Katharine was

occupied. Producing a pill out of her pocket, she said, “Now, put this pill on the spoon and cover it up with ice cream. She won’t take her medicine unless she doesn’t know she’s taking it.”

Katharine came into the kitchen as Gloria left me there. Her hands reached for the shake. “Um, let’s sit down at the table and eat this, OK?” I slipped the pill on the spoon as she turned around. The small round white pill was difficult to see, and I cleverly hid it with a bite of ice cream. As I sat beside her, Katharine smiled at me, and I began to get a nice warm feeling. “Here you go.” She grabbed the spoon. I watched to make sure the pill didn’t fall from it.

Katharine swallowed the ice cream and immediately spit out the pill, saying, “NO.” She wasn’t about to fall for any of my crap.

In a ten to fifteen minute span, Katharine shoved me, wailed, pushed out her lower lip, tried to bite my fingers, and yelled “NO NO NO” as she ran around the kitchen. Oblivious, Gloria sat in the next room with her feet propped on a chair, watching TV. I tried a different tactic. When Katharine opened her mouth to wail again, I tossed in a mouthful of ice cream and pill, pressing my finger to her lips. She swallowed fast, scratched my arm with her fingernails, and bit me.

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Before my job as a homemaker, carding kids who wanted cigarettes was about as ethically stimulated as I got in the work world. Toward the end of my two months of homemaking, maybe I developed some sense of fulfillment – that satisfaction that we’re all supposed to get when we service others.

At least I never had to go back to Larry’s apartment. And, once I had cleaned George and Ruthie’s stovetop and George had forgotten about the fire, I grew sadly fond of them, watching as Ruthie’s memory and George’s alertness both slipped. And Katharine began to hug me when I came, although at any moment she could decide that I was Lucifer, especially when the time came for her vanilla shake.

Perhaps working as a homemaker was indeed that wonderful enlightening learning experience that should always happen. Fulfilling. It was and it wasn’t.