Blue Faille Purse

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THE CROSSTOWN bus stopped at Hudson Avenue and Fourteenth Street, two blocks short of the regular stop. Mr. Pollaski always let her off on Fourteenth, it saved her a two block walk.

"Thanks," she said as she lifted her black leather nursing bag from the seat. She was a young woman. She wore the traditional dark blue uniform of the visiting nurse; tailored coat, felt hat and heavy black walking shoes. The standard dress was unconditionally guaranteed to protect any woman's virtue.

"Mrs. Thomas, be sure and tell Anna I said hello. Wish her well," he said as he opened the door.

"I will, Mr. Pollaski. Thanks again."

She waited a moment, crossed Hudson Avenue and walked into the Polish district. For the past three years she had worked the Crosstown district from Hudson to Joseph Ave.: Polish, Italian, Jewish and Negro ghettos. She knew the newborn, the problem children, the aged and the dying. The young children in the district knew where babies came from—her bag! They always teased her for a peek.
The Polish district was neat and clean like the Polish people. On half-size city lots, the small houses were tidy. There were no broken pickets, unmowed lawns nor unpainted houses. Red geraniums in green window boxes had loving care.

"Hello, Mrs. Thomas, how is Anna doing?" the postman greeted her.

"Not very well, Mr. Ryan, not well at all."

"It's a shame. Good woman like that. Always had hot coffee ready on a cold morning. Never failed! Give her my regards."

"I will, Mr. Ryan." God, when will it end? Give me strength to change that dressing! That stench! Her steady pace slowed when she saw the white picket fence that shut in Anna's front yard.

Anna's daughter, Maria, opened the kitchen door.

"I'm so glad you're here," Maria said as she paced the floor with quick jerky movements. Maria's blood-shot eyes showed the effect of tears and drink.

"Mother's worse, Mrs. Thomas. What'll I do?"

"Maria, you're doing everything that can be done. You are here, that is a great comfort." She watched as the tears welled in Maria's eyes and streamed down her cheeks. She's beginning to break. The strain is too much for her. She worships her mother.

"She had a bad night. She called for him. He isn't back. I hate him! I hate him!" she sobbed.

"Maria, go sit in the back yard for a little while. Please Maria, she thinks he's fishing. Don't let her hear you sobbing. She doesn't know. Please go out," Mrs. Thomas said as she guided her out the back door. She watched Maria slump into a lawn chair then she picked up her bag and went upstairs.

Anna's ashen skin stretched taut and dry over her large-boned frame. A salmon pink, scrolled bedspread covered her emaciated body. The cluttered room contained a chest of drawers, bedside table, brown enameled bedstead and two straight chairs. Cabbage rose wallpaper covered the walls and
ceiling. Two little islands of light, curtained with white priscilla tie-backs, created a cross breeze. The nurse walked through the heavy, dank odor to Anna's side.

"Come on, Anna, stop playing possum. You heard me come up the stairs." They smiled at each other and Anna extended her long thin hand to Mrs. Thomas.

"What'll it be, Mrs. Thomas, worse things first?"
"Always Anna, dressing, bath and backrub."
"The backrub sounds wonderful. Call Maria."
"Anna, I don't need help," she said opening her bag.
"You do too. I'm a big woman, I'm five-eleven! You're little."
"For goodness sake, Anna, what do you think I am, an invalid?" she slipped her arm under Anna's back and lifted Anna's dead weight.

"I just don't see what that husband of yours ever saw in you, Mrs. Thomas. You're so skinny! Now, you take a Polish woman, well built, firm bust and good strong hips; now that's a woman... but you!"

"Anna, he just married me for my money. Now be quiet while I change your dressing." The constant chatter helped them both, they dreaded the dressing change, each in her own way.

She quickly pulled the adhesive tape from the skin, hesitated a second, and lifted the soiled gauze dressing from the coccyx. The suffocating stench of putrid flesh rose from the wound. She blanched. It's worse! The decayed, cancerous flesh extended from the lower spine through the vaginal wall. Her liver must be full of it. It's hopeless! Damn it all!

"Oh, Mrs. Thomas, I'm so sorry."
"What, Anna, sorry, sorry for what?"
"The smell, I smell so. How can you stand it?"

"Why, Anna, it doesn't bother me! All dressings have an odor. Don't you think about it again. I'll be through the irrigation in a minute." She finished the dressing, bathed Anna, and was rubbing her back when she felt the muscles tense.
Anna drew her knees up, her hands gripped the side of the mattress and her lips pressed tight to smother a scream. The spasm of pain slowly passed, and Anna sank back spent.

“How long has it been since your last injection?”

“Just three hours, Mrs. Thomas. Shouldn’t hurt like that so soon. How’s Mrs. Goralski? Is she any better? Did her daughter come yet?”

“No, she hasn’t come.”

“That poor lonely woman. I’m lucky! Give her my love.”

“Mr. Ryan and Mr. Polaski sent their regards. I met them on my way here. Honest, in this district, all I do is carry messages back and forth. You use me like a Western Union boy. I’ll tell her, Anna. See you tomorrow.”

She walked to the back yard. “Maria, she needs her injections more frequently. I’ll call Dr. Farlow for the order. You’re doing a wonderful job.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Thomas. I try. Why doesn’t he come home?”

“Don’t worry, he’ll show up. He doesn’t know she’s worse.” No man would let his wife die alone. “Maria, call the Priest, make sure he comes tomorrow or Saturday.”

Maria met her at the gate. Her body shook and she sobbed, “He came back last night, Mrs. Thomas, he came back!”

“I’m glad he came in time. Your mother will be happy now.”

“But you don’t understand. He came back with her! He brought her home!”

“You mean . . . to this house!” Her startled eyes flashed with anger.

“Yes, Mrs. Thomas, right into Mother’s kitchen.”

Mrs. Thomas put her arm around the sobbing woman, “Maria, what happened? Does Anna know? Did she hear them?”

“They came about nine. They had been drinking. I don’t think she heard them. We had a big fight, but I had given her another injection.”
“You didn’t tell her this morning, did you?”
“No.”
“Maria, she will not live much longer. She must never know what happened. You must pretend to love him. The truth would break her heart.”
“I’ll try, Mrs. Thomas, I’ll try.”
“Good morning, Anna. You look more rested.” The injections have helped.
“I slept better. Joe’s back!”
“Yes, I know. Maria told me.”
“It’s such a comfort having Joe home. He loves to fish. He’s a good fisherman. No luck this time, though. He’ll be able to help Maria now that he’s back.”
“Mr. Karpenka must be like all fisherman, the big ones get away.” Help Maria? The slob! I could kill him!
They small talked while Mrs. Thomas changed the dressing, bathed Anna and rubbed her back. Their intimate contact for the past six months created a bond between them despite the thirty years difference in their ages. As she worked, Mrs. Thomas thought of the first nursing lecture she had heard.
Keep this thought in mind! Remain detached! Never become emotionally involved! How? Your courage, Anna! I don’t think I’ll ever forget.
“What day does your husband graduate?” Anna asked, as Mrs. Thomas put her equipment into her bag.
“June 26th. It’s been a long time.”
“It’s good to build together. Did you buy a new dress? What color is it?”
“Yes, I did. Don’t laugh. It’s navy blue.”
Anna chuckled; Mrs. Thomas knew she didn’t like her blue cotton uniform with the white starched collar.
“Why didn’t you buy a red one? Men like red.”
“I needed something practical.”
“When the children come, you’ll have to be practical.”
“I’ll remember, Anna. See you tomorrow.”
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Maria was drinking a cup of coffee when Mrs. Thomas arrived early Saturday morning. "Father Michaels just left," Maria said. "He administered the last rites."

"Dr. Farlow called. I'll go right up."

Anna's face was colorless, her pale blue eyes had a vacant stare; she lay motionless on the bed with one long thin arm on the pink bedspread. Mrs. Thomas felt her pulse, it was rapid and thready, her respiration irregular, and her skin cold and clammy.

"I'm glad you're here, Mrs. Thomas."

"You'll feel better after your bath. I won't change the dressing today."

"That's good. Before you start, open the top drawer and bring me the small box that has Sibley's name on it." Mrs. Thomas brought the box to her. "Open it. It's for you." A little blue faille purse with a gold-chain handle lay in the tissue paper.

"It's lovely, Anna! Thank you very much. I'll use it for years."

"Carry it on his graduation day."

"I will. My husband will be pleased. You are a thoughtful woman." She put the gift beside her bag, then started the bath.

"Did Maria tell you Mrs. Griska had a baby girl."

"Wonderful! How much did she weigh? What's her name?"

"Her name is Theresa and she weighed 8 lbs. 4 oz."

"A good size baby! Every woman should have a daughter. Father Michaels just left," Anna went on. "He told me Joe had been to Mass every morning since he came back. Joe lit three candles for me."

"That's nice, Anna." A dozen wouldn't help his soul! Anna noticed the flash of anger in her eyes.

"Mrs. Thomas, he's been a good man, a good provider all these years. Thirty years, Mrs. Thomas. He's been a good father."

The silence between them was awkward. Anna reached for the nurse's hand.
"I was awake! I know!—I know about her! A man needs a woman, Mrs. Thomas. A whole woman! I haven't been whole for two years. You understand, now?"
"Yes, Anna. You have a great love!"
She smiled and dozed. The nurse quietly packed her leather bag and walked to the door.
"Mrs. Thomas," Anna called to her, "God go with you."
"Thank you, Anna. . . . Goodbye, Anna."

The Sick Bay Bee

by Bill Vint

Journalism, Sr.

A very tiny sigh ripped the still air.
There, in the middle of the sidewalk, lay an extra small, awfully skinny bee. I rushed to his side, kneeling in hope of helping him. I like bees.
"Are you all right?" I asked.
"Food, food. . . ." he murmured.
"Food? Why there's a million flowers all around here. You're lying next to the botany building, you know."
"Oh, oh . . . OH," he moaned sickly.
I scurried to my feet, and flew like the veritable wind to the nearest flower bed where I plucked a prime Goldenrod stem. I hurried back, tenderly laying it beside him.
His slightly opened eyes suddenly flew wide open as he entered a state of maximum hysteria. Then he sneezed and blew his brains out.

MORAL: If you have hay fever, don't be a bee.