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## *The Naked Writer*

Editors

David Brooks and Elizabeth McMahon

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## NIKE SULWAY

*The Lost Man*

At some point, she had started to forget their names. At night, when Nurse Turner had the ward to herself, she would recite them beneath her breath. Sometimes, she would try to remember not just their names, but the causes of their deaths as well: this made her chant a little slower, as she paced through memories that parted and closed around her like clouds: this man's diabetes; this woman's cancer; this child's broken bones. When she got to the limit of her memory she would go back to the beginning and start again, picking up each name just as tenderly as she would lift a patient's wrist to take their pulse.

Her litany always begins with Mrs Bishop, who was the first person she pronounced dead. She had taken her time with Mrs Bishop; checking her heart rate with the heavy stethoscope she still carries with her, more out of habit than need. She had warmed her fingers, and pressed them gently against Mrs Bishop's neck, murmuring to the patient as she did so, almost crooning as she bent over the bed.

*I'm going to shine this light into your eye now*, she said. She had shone her small torch into first the left and then the right of Mrs Bishop's eyes, sliding the light away over her cheek onto the sheet. Grey, her eyes had been, the colour of water reflecting a stormy sky. She had warmed the stethoscope on her palm before she eased it beneath the neckline of Mrs Bishop's gown.

*I'm going to listen for your heartbeat now*, she said. And she did, bending forward and pressing the warmed stethoscope to Mrs Bishop's cooling white chest, listening to the nothing, nothing, nothing. She had had to bite back on something then; had to stop herself from falling to her knees. She had known that the supervising doctor was standing behind her, counting the seconds, wondering why she was taking so long to hear precisely nothing. Shifting his weight from foot to foot, careful not to display his impatience too overtly. Nurse Turner

had not expected to feel the things she did. She had seen plenty of dead bodies before in her work: had lifted them from bed to gurney, gurney to bed, and even, on occasion, from gurney to drawer.

*Mrs Bishop, 48 years old, died of breast cancer at 3:00 in the afternoon, on the 13th of December.*

After Mrs Bishop was Mr Snyder: heart disease. Then the boy, barely seventeen, whose parents had stood back and watched as she bent over their son, solicitous as a waitress, as if daring her to say that he was dead. She had felt as though she was wrestling with them as she moved around his bed: palpating him, shining her torch into his dark eyes, lifting and releasing his limbs, removing the tubes and turning off the machines that pushed air and blood and the semblance of life into and out of his dead-already body. Neither of his parents moved as she worked, neither of them spoke. It was as if, in not moving, they could refuse the passage of their son from this world into the next. Joel, his name had been.

She remembers the feeling of closing the door after she had finished pronouncing Joel; leaving his parents standing there so stiff and undefended, the fact of his death crashing over them like an enormous wave.

*Joel Moss, 17 years old, died of internal bleeding after a car accident. Time of death: 3:47am. 12th January.*

She had sworn she would remember him. Had been determined to remember each and every one, but a few months later, a few years, they had started to become as diffuse as a crowd. The individual faces blurred at the edges, softened, until they became a cloud of the undifferentiated dead accompanying her wherever she went.

After Joel was the asthmatic – a middle-aged man caught out bushwalking without his inhaler, hospitalised with a secondary pneumothorax: a collapsed lung. Next was the carpenter who had fallen from the roof. Bob? John? Then the woman, Eve, who fought for every last breath, who went out furious.

At least soon the list will be complete. She is retiring from nursing, after thirty years of caring for other people's bodies. In fact, this will be her last week of working at the hospital. If nobody dies in the next few days, the name at the end of her list will be that of Mrs Dawes, eighty-

nine years old, who died of a cerebral haemorrhage at 7:05 am on the 28th of May.

One of the patients presses the button in their room calling for some assistance. Nurse Turner flicks off the light in the nurses' station and goes out onto the ward. Night shift: there are only a handful of patients in her care and mostly they sleep through her shift. She tends them like a gardener, watering and weeding their mute bodies in the half-illuminated dark. Sometimes they cough or twitch, or snore, but mostly the sounds they make are mere punctuations – contrapuntal murmurings beneath the steady click and whirr of the machines.

Only the man in the last room is awake. Peter Harper: the man who has summoned her. She can see the light from his reading lamp spilling into the hall. He has been on ward for two weeks and seems unable – unwilling – to sleep. They give him sleeping pills, but he refuses to swallow them. He sits up in his bed, clean-shaven, dressed in a pressed shirt, as though expecting visitors. This is something of a concession for him: for the first week, he refused to get into the bed at all. He would sit in the visitor's chair by the bed, facing the door to his room. Whenever someone entered the room he would stand, as though welcoming them into his home.

When she came in, this is what he did: stood, one arm clutching the arm of the chair, his body leaning to the side but steering upwards, into urgent solicitude.

"What can I do for you, Mr Harper?"

Mr Harper nodded. "I have a little pain," he said.

Nurse Turner entered the room completely, picked up his chart, scanned the notes there: the scrawls and graphs that mapped his decline. Any other patient in his place would have, largely voluntarily, entered into the buffered, seamless half-sleep of intense pain relief by now. She sits on the edge of the bed he is not using and checks the drip, quietly discusses the dosage of morphine: what it is now, what she can raise it to. He nods and she makes notes in his chart, resets the machine, checks the line.

While she works, Mr Harper tells her about his home. A property up in the hills, about two hours drive north of the hospital. He describes for her the trees that grow on the northern slope, the creek

that trickles past its eastern border. He names them all, the trees, the natives and the interlopers, the weeds and grasses and vines. He tells her about the rocks he cleared to lay the foundations for his house, and the stones he let lie: the ones that were too big and old and heavy to remove.

He tells her about the history of the land: the man he bought it from, and that man's little girl - now grown and dead and gone, he supposed - who had shown him the graves of her pets, defiantly, daring him to buy the place even though it was a graveyard. They had been there ten years, living in a shed while they waited for the money to build a house. But the money never came and they had decided to move on.

Mr Harper told her about the way the property itself, if viewed from overhead, is shaped like a kite. He described the shape of the horizon he looked towards for more than forty years. The hills that framed the view: how they were so tangible, their profiles, so much a part of him now, that he had been unsurprised when he looked at the electrocardiogram printout and saw that the uppermost tracing exactly described the view from that window.

In the morning, when Nurse Turner arrives home, the light is only just starting to burn its way from the fields that slope up towards her home. She goes into her bedroom and turns on the lamp. As a child she always slept with a bedside lamp on. She wasn't afraid of the dark, though that was what her mother believed; she left the light on because she thought of her room as a haven, as a lighthouse, towards which the lost might direct themselves. All her life, she told her mother fiercely, she had been waiting for The Lost Man to arrive.

Her mother had smiled, and kissed her head, tucking her in for the night. After her sister died - when Nurse Turner was four and her sister only two years old - Nurse Turner had had few daylight friends. Instead she had intense, passionate attachments to geese, chickens, horses and trees. She named the spirits of each of the trees that grew near the house, brought them gifts, told them stories. When she was very small, she told her mother and her father what the trees had related. That the world was very old and tired. That she was their only human friend, and that though she was lonely now, one day her One True Friend

would come. He would arrive at night, and she had to keep a light on in her window, to show him the way.

Her parents had laughed, kindly, the way that parents do. As though she were being fanciful or sweet.

She stopped telling them what the trees told her. And when she was seven years old and, finally, her One True Friend arrived, she kept that a secret, too. The Lost Man was the last of her imaginary friends.

The next night, having completed his description of his home and the property, Mr Harper described for Nurse Turner the road into town: a town too small to be well known, though Nurse Turner knows it. It is the town where she was born, and where she lived until she was almost twelve years old.

"You ever been there?" he says, hopefully. "It isn't far from here."

Nurse Turner shakes her head as she concentrates on what she is doing: hanging a new bag on the IV trolley, priming the line. She has a sudden, warm memory of lying in her bed watching the stars.

Mr Harper tells her that the road from his house, downhill into town, had been dirt when he first bought the place: it wasn't paved until ten years later. During the first year and a half, while he was still building the house, the summer rains created deep gorges in the road and many of the tradies and delivery men who came out with supplies were turned back. The building proceeded at its own pace: a pace partly governed by the weather and the roads.

He began early on to walk into town every day, taking pleasure in familiarising himself with the shape of the road, the light that spilled down over it through the trees at different hours, the people he encountered. Two boys pushing their bikes uphill. A couple walking their dog. If he walked in the mornings he always saw Toby Hamilton riding his bike down to the train station, his school shoes slung by their laces from his bag as he roared past. In the early afternoons, close to town, he would see Elsa working in her garden: watering, pruning, weeding, while her husband wheelbarrowed dirt and mulch according to her directions.

It took several years, he said, before he understood the changes he saw on those walks, and began to feel the shift of the seasons bed down inside him. The way the light changed in winter, how the leaves

thinned out and allowed glimpses of the ocean many miles distant. In summer the light grew heavy and damp: the leaves thicker, washed clean. How the road was hard and flat almost all winter: the hard, dry earth easy to walk on, but changed in summer, became damp and needy, sucking at the soles of his boots. And there were larger changes, too. Toby Hamilton growing taller, taking days off, leaving school. Elsa's hat brims growing wider and softer, drooping around her face as she worked. The loads in her husband's barrow growing smaller and smaller as the years passed until, finally, he could only sit on the deck watching her work.

He described for her the small town, with its fire station, park, school and hall. The railroad bridge passing over the creek. The way, some mornings, he could see the reflection of the creekwater on the concrete pylon of the bridge, like an enormous, shimmering fingerprint. The post office with its deep, shaded verandah, on which he and his neighbours would accidentally meet as they checked their boxes for mail.

Every now and then, he said, the school or the CWA would have a stall outside the store, selling cakes or decorated soaps. Hand-knitted beanies and bedsocks. When his wife was pregnant, the first time, he bought four pairs of hand-knitted booties. Blue and white and creamy yellow. Pink, too, because he was certain it would be a girl. Because he could see himself with a daughter, the two of them tramping into town in the morning. Her nattering companionably about ribbons and cake and trees, stopping to peer at birds flitting through the shrubs, or to study the tracks of wallabies and bush turkeys.

But the child died shortly after birth. It was only a few hours old when it was bundled up and taken down into the morgue beneath this same hospital, more than fifty years ago now. When he came to meet her, there was only his wife in the room with the drawn curtains, lying curled up beneath the sheets.

"Oh," Nurse Turner says. "Oh, I'm so sorry."

Four times Nurse Turner has pronounced the death of a newborn child. And when it was over, each time, she has washed down its body with a warm cloth, wrapped it in a blanket – the softest she could find – and, when it was time, has carried those babies down to the morgue.

She has stayed calm through all of it, until the door closes behind her in the stairwell. The stairs are closed to patients and visitors. Only staff may use them, unless there is a fire. They occupy a tall concrete well at the southern end of the building. No attempt has ever been made to make the space warm or clean. It smells of stale cigarette smoke, of cold air and waste: all the smells that are drowned in antiseptic on the wards. The door closes and she pulls the baby closer to her chest, hugging it to her so that the cold won't touch its still-pink face. Here, every time, tears fill her eyes, brimming up through her. She has never been a mother, and never will be, but she grieves for these children as if they are her own. They are so small, so fragile. Their hold on life was so tentative, though no more so than the hold of everyone she has loved: her mother, her father, her sister. Each of them has been carried down into the morgue, wheeled through the corridors by some stranger, lifted into the refrigerator drawer and shut away in the dark.

Mr Harper looks up at Nurse Turner. "You're too young to have worked here then, I think," he says.

"Was it a girl, your child?"

"Oh yes," he says. "If she had lived, we would have called her Anne."

After the baby, his wife left him. Not straight away, but soon enough that they both knew what had broken them. It might have tethered them together, he said, if he had been a different kind of man. If he had been able... If he had tried *harder* to call her back, to walk through their grief beside her, but he found he could not share it. Not even with her.

He had taken to walking at night, and discovered an entirely new landscape. A place of deep shadows punctuated by the ghostly rush and heat of a car or a truck passing by. A sudden gust of light, and then the darkness again, settling slowly into quiet.

He found a house, about an hour's steady walk from his own, where a light was often on in one of the bedrooms. This became his destination. The house was small and old. The boards of the front verandah were slowly being replaced. Part of the roof was covered in plastic after the summer storms. There was a trestle table set up at one end of the verandah, on which a shifting array of tools and materials lay.

Each night he drew a little closer, until he found himself looking in the window at the child sleeping there. A little girl, about four, maybe five years old. She slept with a nightlight on: a bedside lamp whose shade was yellow with a spray of blue stars. She lay turned towards the light, and the window beyond, as though she had fallen asleep waiting for him.

The first night he saw her, it was enough. He looked in, and she lay there, and he felt some broken, fluttering connections inside him stutter together and catch. On the back of her bedroom door was a coat-rack – a set of hooks on which were hung a pink plastic raincoat, an umbrella, a purple feather boa, a backpack. Each hook hung below a letter: a pink A, a yellow N, a blue N, and finally a purple E. *Anne*.

Every night for a week he came, and peered in at the window. She had a white dresser with an old-fashioned crystal dressing table set on top: a ring tree, trinket box, perfume bottle and bud vase. The vase was crammed with wildflowers and pretty weeds. There was a bookshelf crammed with books. A child-sized table and chairs was sometimes laid with a tiny china tea set, and sometimes strewn with colouring-in books, crayons and pencils. A pair of fairy wings hung from the end of her bed, made of wire, glitter, feathers and pink stocking. There were blocks and soft toys: a giraffe, an elephant, a bear. She kept a small pile of books on her bedside table and often, when he arrived, there were a handful of books strewn across the bed, as though she had fallen asleep while reading.

On the tenth night, when he came, she was awake.

As soon as she saw him, she got out of bed and carried one of her chairs to the window. She put a finger to her lips and stood on the chair to reach the latch. When she pushed the window open, he felt the rush of warm, pink air on his face. It was winter. He can still recall, he says, the smell of her: the sense of heat that washed out over him.

"Hello," she said, "you must be The Lost Man."

She reached her little hand out through the window and shook his. Her face was very serious, very beautiful. Her hair was all ruffled up on the left side of her head, and the left side of her face was crushed and pink.

"Peter," he said.

After that, they were friends. Every night he came to the window. If she was awake, they would drink tea from her tiny china cups, and talk. Sometimes she would read to him. One night, when he came, he found that she had set one of chairs on the ground outside her window so that he could climb inside and sit with her.

The ward is hushed. Outside the window the moon is full. Nurse Turner's voice is low and quiet. "What then?" she says. "What did you do then?"

"I..." Mr Harper spreads his hands wide. He cannot look at her, filled as he is with the shame of forgetfulness. "We played together. I brought her things: flowers, leaves in the shapes of clouds, skeleton leaves, that kind of thing. Stones with holes in them. Things I found on my walks. She used to write labels for them, and put them on the shelf in front of her books. She drew pictures for me."

"Pictures?"

Mr Harper nods. His face is pale and has the pinched, waxy look of someone who is almost-already dead. For the first time since he was admitted, he has spent the evening in his bed. When she came in to see him, he was sitting up ready to greet her. The sheets were folded back neatly over his hips, and his hair – what is left of it – was washed and combed. But his lips are cracked and pale. His tongue moves in his mouth like a worm when he is not speaking. His voice shimmers over the words; the shape of that room, those nights, becoming part of the dream in which he is dying. His skin smells sweetly of apples and childhood. Like the hot, close air of Anne's childhood room. The welcoming cloud into which he leaned so long ago.

He asks her to open the top drawer of his bedside cabinet. There are only a handful of things in there: the Gideon Bible, his wedding ring in a blue velvet jewellery bag, his wallet and a set of house keys. She hands him his wallet. His fingers fumble as he unfolds it, opens wide its yawning mouth and takes out a folded piece of paper: the page so old it has worn away along the folds, and almost falls apart when opened out.

Nevertheless, he presses what is left of the page onto the milk-blue hospital blanket, pieces it together reverently.

Nurse Turner looks down at the long-forgotten image. Remembers – so vividly that she can smell the wax and paper – the night she drew

them standing there, outside her window. Peter, tall and strong as a tree. His hands wide and flat, his fingers as long as his arms. His eyes the brightest thing: large and round and blue as ink. He is wearing a fish on his head as a hat, and holding a tree in his left hand. She is standing beside him in her nightgown. The yellow one with the blue stripes. Her hair is drawn in thick brown scoops on either side of her head, turning up at the ends. Her over-sized fingers are tangled in his, and her smile – her smile is a wide, wild, magical thing.

Not long after that she stopped talking to the trees, and the geese, and to Peter. Her parents took her to see a counsellor, and she made daylight friends at school. In the early evening, at the kitchen table, her mother pressed her to deny that her imaginary friends had ever existed and she remembers saying they weren't real. Saying that she didn't believe in those things, not really. There was no Lost Man who came at night, who flew in at the window and brought her gifts. Who drank midnight tea and told her stories about the sea, who sang her to sleep and told her that she was beautiful. The story of that friendship – of Anne and The Lost Man – was like a story she had read, long ago. Fragments of it rose up in her at times: the smell of eucalypts at night, the fresh bite of winter air in her dreams, gently tearing apart the clouds. Just a story.

Mr Harper is still smiling down at the picture, smiling into it as though it is the face of his best and dearest friend, when he quietly, and easily, dies.

Nurse Turner waits in the room for a long time, sitting in the chair beside his bed, before she rises and turns off the machines. Gently – oh, so gently – she lowers the bed until he is lying flat. She warms her fingers with her breath before she presses them to his neck. "Peter," she says, "I'm just going to feel for your pulse." She takes the torch from her pocket and clicks it on. "Peter," she says, "I'm going to shine this light into your eyes – just for a moment." She works slowly, carefully, listening for a full minute, longer, with the stethoscope pressed against his chest and her eyes closed. Listening hard, and hearing nothing.

Until she finishes her work, until she pronounces him, he is not officially dead.

She goes out to the nurses' station and comes back with the paper bag she meant to give him this evening. Later, just a little later. It has taken her all week to find it, crushed almost flat in the bottom of an old box in the garage. She was so relieved to find them, to see that they were real, after all, and that – just as she remembered – they were small and soft and warm, almost alive. Four pairs of babies' booties, a gift from her imaginary friend, blue and yellow and pink and white.

She lays them on Peter's picture and folds the fragile paper closed over the booties, wrapping them together and tucking them into her pocket before she closes his eyes.