

## Sunny Hills



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I used to have a job where I was a caregiver at a place called Sunny Hill Care Center, which is like a nursing home except that not everyone is elderly. They hired me first for housekeeping, but since I was willing to do overnights, my managers let me do a lot of nurse aid stuff. I guess the place wasn't making any money, so no one really cared about the staffing or upkeep. They let me work sixty, seventy hour weeks and I'd get time and a half at nurse aid pay, even though I wasn't one. You had to be careful, though, doing that much work, because if they caught you sleeping during the overnights they'd still fire you. You had to be awake to watch the residents if they got up in the middle of the night or clean it if they went on themselves. All of the residents took sleeping pills with their bedtime meds, but they'd still wake up. Some of the caregivers would use the bed restraints on residents who were really bad about getting up. I didn't think that was right. We were only supposed to use those if we thought they would try to hurt themselves or their roommates. If I found someone walking around the facility I would follow them around and ask them stuff like, 'Where are you going?' and 'Why don't you want to sleep?' Sometimes I would take them outside and show them that it was night. We would stand in the parking lot and hold hands. I would point out the stars and the moon, and we'd would listen to the crickets. I would say, 'See. It's night time.'

I remember there was guy who would sneak out of his room at night and get into bed with the lady residents. His name was Mr. Deming. Most of the time the ladies would scream and wake everyone up, and Mr. Deming would run back to his room. Some of them wouldn't do anything. They would let him stay, and we'd find them together the next morning.

The new owners came six months after I had been hired and started changing everything. They fixed things and hired new people. My managers wanted me to take nurse aid classes at the Community College because I'd been doing samples and meds without any certification. I told them I couldn't because I didn't have a high school diploma. They said I could take a test for the G.E.D and then start the classes after. I was pretty sure I wouldn't be able to pass that test either. They didn't know because I had lied about my age when they hired me, but at the time I was only sixteen. I didn't really feel like studying for anything or going to school again, but they threatened to fire me, so I had to say yes. I probably should have just quit, but I was afraid about not having any money and not being able to pay for anything. I'd left home earlier that year and was subletting with this guy who was kind of my boyfriend. It's stupid when I think of it now because he wasn't like a real boyfriend, but back then I thought he was. I hadn't had a real one before. So that's what I was the most afraid of then: that I wouldn't be able to pay rent or the cable, and he'd make me leave and stop seeing him. Also, I borrowed money from my dad when I left home and I wanted to pay it back so that I wouldn't have to talk to him anymore.

They changed all my shifts, except for the overnights, to housekeeping. I remember saying thank you when they showed me. I don't know why I did that. I really hated housekeeping. You have to do all the bad parts of the nurse aid job like moving the residents around and wiping their butts when they went. It's not that I thought touching and cleaning them was gross; it's just that the residents didn't always know what was going on. They would think that you were violating them. Like, you'd go to move Mr. Donnelly out of his bed so that you could change his sheets, and he'd spit and try to punch you. Mrs. Lawton, I remember, would always cry when you wiped her. She'd moan and whisper, "Please, stop. Please don't do that." She had Alzheimer's or something and didn't recognize anyone. Every time I had to wipe her it was like I was a stranger doing it to her for the first time. They tell you about how important it is to keep the residents' anus and genitalia clean, but with her I always felt like what I was doing was wrong and like I was hurting her.

The thing I absolutely hated the most about housekeeping was the cleaning, which is funny because that's mostly what housekeeping is. We were always, always cleaning: even stuff that was already clean. We had to wash everything in bleach. And even though we wore gloves, water would get in over the tops so at the end of the day your hands would get all tingly and you'd look at them and little bits of skin would be peeling off. I hated it so much. I'd go in the restroom during break and cry in the stall. Or I would just sit on the edge of the toilet and smoke cigarettes.

One afternoon Susan came in to use bathroom and heard me crying. Susan was the daytime coordinator for Bridge House, which is where the active and semi-active residents live. I was lucky I wasn't smoking, because I probably would have gotten yelled at or fired. Instead, she bought me a coke at the cafeteria and sat with me. I told her about how housekeeping was depressing me and about how I was going to fail my G.E.D. and probably get fired. I wanted to tell her other things too, but I only talked about work. She said that she was looking for someone to chaperoning Bridge House's group outings. She asked if I'd be happier doing that. Bridge House goes on field trips every Tuesday and Thursday. Having to work housekeeping in the day and then doing overnights was completely messing up my sleeping. The job sounded easy and I figured I could maybe sleep in the van going to and coming back from stuff, so I agreed.

The Bridge House residents weren't sedated that much so they were actually kind of fun to talk to. There was this one guy in Bridge named Walter who I knew pretty well. He was one of the first residents I met and got to know. Back when I was doing nurse aid for the acute unit he would stay up nights with me and we'd watch dumb infomercials together. Walter lived in acute then because he had early dementia, but he had this amazing brain. I guess he had a PhD and used to design airplanes for the government. That's what he said he did. He was allowed to go to Bridge House because his brain was so big that even after the dementia had eaten a bunch of it away, he still had a lot of his wits about him and could feed and clothe himself. His only problem was that sometimes he would grab at you sexually. None of us said anything because it would have meant he'd have to go back to the acute

unit, which he didn't like; and it wasn't really right for him. When I showed up my first day to chaperon he remembered me and said hi. We talked in the van. He told me about a book he was planning to write about spies in the Cold War. We shared the armrest and I put my hand on top of his. The secret to Walter is that if you keep your hand on him and keep touching him in a friendly way, he won't do anything lewd. He just needs that. I think he pretends that you're someone else when you're doing it, like his wife or his girlfriend. He calls you things like "dear" and "sweetie"—not in the insulting way that some of the residents use, like they're talking to a waitress. His voice is tender, and it cracks. He sounds like a child.

That first outing I chaperoned we went to one of the big churches downtown. It was for a concert. The church was all stairs in front, so we had to take everyone in through the loading dock in back, then around through all these hallways before we got to the main part. They postponed the concert because it took so long. As soon as we got the last person back from the bathroom and sat, the choir came out. It was a boys' choir concert. I think they sang hymns, but I couldn't hear the words. The residents enjoyed it a lot. They did a really pretty lullaby song second to last that put a few people to sleep, but for the most part they all stayed awake and interested. It was a good idea for Susan to have planned it. The residents love kids. They like us to put the Disney Channel on in the day, just to look at the kids.

Me and Walter sat together in the back. I rested my head on his shoulder and could hear him sort of humming along to the music through that ear. When the conductor announced the last song, that meant that me and Susan had to go and get the wheelchairs ready. Walter got angry and thought I was walking out. He said that I was being rude. I tried to explain what I was doing. He said, "Well to hell with you. You can just fuck off is what you can do." I know he was confused and didn't know what he was saying, but it still hurts to have someone say that to you. I told him that I didn't like to be talked to that way. I maybe kicked his feet a little when I stepped over him to get to the aisle. They tell you that it doesn't do anything to yell at people with dementia. They can't help what they're doing, and they don't know

why you're upset. But I was mad at him. We were having such a nice time until he had to go and say that.

I finally got some time off after sixteen straight days of working. Normally I spend my days off watching TV and doing chores, but I had the G.E.D. to study for. I went to the public library to check out practice books for the test. All the newer ones were checked out, so I had to get these two books that were from the 90s and had all the answers already filled in. I also got some math and science textbooks that looked close to the kind they have at school. When I got home, I started out with an algebra textbook. The beginning was easy but then it got into stuff like polynomials and logarithms. I couldn't figure out how to use them right. I did the assignments at the end of the chapters and kept messing them up. I got my boyfriend to help me. He went into his old school stuff and brought out this really thick calculator that had a bunch of extra buttons. It wouldn't turn on because the batteries were old, so I drove to the pharmacy to buy new ones. That turned out to be a waste because when he finally got it working all he could remember how to do on it was play video games. He said that he had taken algebra a long time ago and had forgotten everything. He then said he was sorry that he was so stupid, which I thought was kind of sweet, but I still didn't think he tried very hard. He was in the middle of watching a basketball game. I guess I was being boring, trying to make him do math with me.

I tried skipping ahead to the next chapter in the book, but you sort of needed the stuff from section two to do the stuff in section three. It started to get late and I needed to get dinner ready for us. I put the book away and told myself that I'd look at it again over the weekend. That didn't happen because I was really busy with errands and working. Then the next week went by and it just sat on the kitchen table beneath a bunch of stuff. Then I had to take it back because it had gotten to be a week overdue.

I thought about asking people I was friends with at Sunny Hill to tutor me, but everyone's so busy and tired all the time. I'm sure people would have helped if I asked, but I didn't want them to feel like they had to. So I got this idea to get help without having to ask for it. There was this guy named Roger who came to the acute unit almost everyday to work with people who had had strokes. He taught them how to walk again and how to speak. Once they get all of their functioning back I guess they also have to relearn all the other things they used to know, like how to read and do math. I asked Roger if I could sit in on some of his classes, to help out. He was really excited that I asked him. He said he needed a lot of help and that none of the nurse aids in acute ever offered to help with anything. I asked if he was teaching anyone algebra. He laughed and said there was a guy he was teaching numbers to. He also did a lot of word games with people. Roger said he needed someone to hold people who he was trying to get to walk. I was kind of hoping what he did was more like school lessons. I had this image in my mind of a bunch of the acute residents sitting in rows in one of the conference rooms, with Roger up at the front teaching school subjects like math and science. I actually thought that when someone has a stroke, they have to do something like go to school all over again, grade by grade. In reality, they have to start at where a baby would be, learning to walk and talk and chew food and how to go to the bathroom. I wanted to get out of helping, but I already offered.

The one thing I can say about stroke patients is that a lot of them are angry about what happened to them. I've seen other residents get that way about getting old or sick, but then they'll have good days where they're happy. For the stroke people it's so much worse. They can't remember how to do anything, and yet they remember that they used to be able to do things. It's like they know they were a person who told jokes or who worked in the garden, but now they're not that anymore. It makes me think that it might be pointless learning stuff like GED tests and school subjects if it can just be wiped away like it was never even there.

The day I went to help out for Roger we started the day working with this lady named Cynthia. She wasn't very old at all, maybe 50 or 60. Still young enough

that she probably had a job and worked before all of this. Her face was kind of dead on one side and she couldn't really talk. I think it was hard for her to concentrate too. Roger was trying to get her to write her name with a pencil and paper. It wasn't really working out. She tried three or four times and then wanted to give up. Roger wouldn't let her. He kept putting the pencil back in her hand and telling her to start from the *t* since she was having trouble writing out the *y*, but then she'd mess up doing the *h* and get angry at herself. Roger kept telling her to start over, and finally she threw the pencil on the ground and turned her head away like she was going to sleep. I asked if maybe she wrote with her other hand and we were making her use the wrong one. Roger said the other side of her body was inoperable and that it didn't really matter anyway because the dominant hand can change after a stroke. "People who were right-handed their entire lives can become left-handed," Roger said.

I looked at the markings Cynthia left on the paper. This really distant memory came to me of when I was like three or four; I think that's when it was because my mother was still alive. She was teaching me how to write my name. I was going to go to school for the first time and she was trying to teach me how to write my name so that I could put it on my assignments. I remembered sitting in her lap, and she was moving my hand to show me how to make the letters. I was getting caught up on the *g*. I tried and tried but I couldn't make it right. I think I started crying. I told her that I didn't want to be Angela and asked if she could give me a different name that had letters I could write. I wish I can remember what she said. I barely remember anything about her anymore.

I watched Roger bend down to pick up the pencil. He put it back in Cynthia's hand and asked her to spend another ten minutes trying. He said, "You have a small window of time to relearn these things. If we don't do this now, it will never come back." Later on that day I asked Roger if he has patients who give up on the exercises and stop doing them. I wanted to know about the people who don't try to fix what's happened to them. Where do you go from there? He said that people get depressed about having the stroke and losing everything that was in their brains.



“It’s really hard to get depressed people to do the recovery work,” he said. “But usually they’ll have a breakthrough; something comes back that really matters to them, like certain memories will resurface, or they’ll be able to say certain words and that lets them communicate with their families.”

“Yeah, but what about the people who give up?” I asked.

“Most people want to go on having a life” is what Roger said to me. “Some don’t. They might be elderly and may not have long to live anyway. They don’t have family or friends anymore. I’ve seen people who are disappointed that they survived the stroke. Those are the people who just lie in bed and don’t cooperate with the treatment.”

“What happens to them?” I asked. “The people who don’t cooperate?”

Roger blinked a few times and said, “I don’t know. I stop coming to visit them.”

I don’t know why I kept asking Roger what happens or what it was I wanted him to say. I knew what happens. What happens is that their organs stop working because they aren’t using them to eat, and they get infections and the people die. I also knew that Roger has to tell them that that’s what’s going to happen to them. I guess I wanted him to talk about how he teaches people about dying and about their bodies start turning off. I used to have a lot of conversations with the residents about dying. You’re not supposed to talk about death and illness at Sunny Hill—it even says so in the training, but the residents would bring it up. It makes sense that they would. When you look at dying as this far away thing, you don’t have to think about it. You put it off. The residents thought about dying all the time. What you’d see is people would try to be brave and say that they were ready for it if it came. They would talk about how they wanted their funeral to be, and they’d make plans. Really, I think everyone was afraid. I think being scared is what keeps people alive. There would be people who just hung on, even if they were in pain and were sick. The people who aren’t afraid fade out fast because they don’t fight it. Who they are just disappears from their eyes and their face. The people whose minds start to go I think have it the easiest because they don’t know to fight anymore. They’ve already

lost most of what everyone stays alive to hold on to. They slip away, and it's gentle and calm.

Actually, now that I think about it, what I just said about people holding on or letting go isn't true a lot of the time. There are plenty of people who die without any warning. They go to sleep happy and healthy, and then the next day they don't wake up. I've also known people who have wanted to die, but then never do. You hear stories about residents asking for extra meds so that they can take them all at once and try to die from it. Nobody's ever asked me anything like that. The rules are that you're supposed to report it to your manager if someone does. I wouldn't do that though. I wouldn't rat them out.

I've worked in the hospice unit and I've seen people die. Lots of people. I wish I could tell you that you feel bad for the people who are there, and you have this bond with the people and you cry when they die. Honestly, there's so much work to do after someone goes. You have to move them and then change everything in the room. Most people when they die everything just comes out of them, and there you are having to clean it. Sometimes, if the person was on a lot of chemotherapy you had to wear this special nuclear waste suit because what comes out of them is radioactive. I know it's horrible that you just look at someone dying like it's a job and a lot of work, but it's a lot of people who die. And then there's someone new in the room right after them. I think when it's someone you know, that's different; but if you've never worked with them then you look at it like it's just something that people have to go through. It's like, the last thing you go through.

I went to take the GED at the new community college way out at the edge of town. My boyfriend was supposed to drive me to show support or whatever, but we had gotten in a fight the night before. He was mad that I had been out in the living room and kitchen too much when his friends were over. He had wanted me to stay back in the bedroom or something like that, and I told him he was an asshole for the way he treats me. He thought I meant that time, but I really meant all the time.

So I drove in the rain and parked in this huge parking lot which was empty because it was Saturday. When I went in I had to show them an id to take the test. But, the only id I had was this fake id that said I was 22. My boyfriend had gotten this guy he knew to change the numbers on it so that I could go out to bars with him. I was supposed to go get a new driver's license with the right information, but I never did and just went on using the fake one for everything. I figured it was good because if I had given them something that said I was sixteen they'd say I wasn't old enough to take the test. For some reason, I didn't think that they would try to check my records and whatnot using the driver's license number.

I'm pretty sure I did bad on the test. I never found out. That next week while I was at work, these two police officers came to Sunny Hill and asked to see me. They told my managers how old I really was and that I had been missing from my home. I was also truant, which is why the police came to get me. I was pretty much fired at that point. The police made me leave with them. I didn't even getting to say goodbye to anyone.

I wasn't taken to jail or anything. One of the police said they had contacted my father, and he told them I had run away and that I had stolen a bunch of money from him before I left. That was bullshit because my dad knew exactly where I was and he never asked me to come home ever. The only reason he was saying I ran away is because he was talking to the police and he didn't want to get in trouble for being a shitty parent and not caring about his kids. I asked the two policemen to drop me off at my apartment. They said that they had to take me to my dad's house because he was me legal guardian. I sat in the back seat behind the cage they have that separates the front and didn't say anything.

The police knocked on the front door, and my dad answered looking like he had just rolled out of bed. He gave me this stupid hug and pretended like he was worried and happy to have me home. He thanked the police for the work they did to find me. I just went inside while he kept laying it on. I looked in to see if my brother Jeremy was in his room. He wasn't. His bed was messy, but you could tell he hadn't slept in it in a long time. I got worried about him and where he might be. When the

policeman left I closed the door and locked it. I got into my brother's bed and laid there. My room was further down the hall, but I had promised myself a long time ago that I would never go in there. Later on my dad knocked on the door and told me he was going to order a pizza. I sat still and didn't say anything, even though I was really hungry.

For the rest of the night I listened to the TV playing in the living room and thought about my boyfriend and our apartment and about Sunny Hill. Once in a while I would hear my dad stumbling around the house and running into stuff, which meant that he was getting drunk. When it was late and I had already gone to sleep he started banging on the door to the room. It startled me when I woke up, but then I heard how drunk he was and that he wasn't even banging that hard. My dad got into an accident at work a while back where he fell and broke part of his back. He got disability money from the state and from his job so now he doesn't have to work. At any rate, he's all weak and in pain now, and there isn't any need to be afraid of him anymore. He just yelled and said that I better make sure I get to school the next morning because he wasn't going to get in trouble on account of me. He stumbled away to the living room and passed out on the couch. I went back to sleep in my brother's bed and dreamt that Jeremy was there with me, and we were playing in his room with his toys, like we used to do.

The next morning instead of going to Sunny Hill for work I went to school. The policeman told my dad that I had to visit with the guidance councilor early to talk about my classes. My car was still in the parking lot at Sunny Hill, so I got up early and waited for the school bus with all the elementary school kids. They played freeze tag out in the street while I sat on the curb, half asleep. Watching them made me feel bad about myself, like I had really messed things up with my life.

The bus stopped at the high school first. I was, like, the only high school student who got off. I stood at old entrance to the school and thought about maybe going back to Sunny Hill instead and seeing if I could get my job back. I thought

about calling my boyfriend and asking him to pick me up. I imagined having to tell him that I lost my job and having to listen to him get angry and say nasty things to me. Then I thought about just getting my car and driving away. Just driving as far as I could and trying to live in a new place. I thought about getting a new job and starting again. For a while, I decided that's what I would do. I started walking away from the school. The bell rang behind me and I just kept walking. But I got afraid and gave up on it. I turned around and started walking back.

The guidance councilor was pissy about me being late. I really couldn't deal with it. I started to cry, right there in her office. She rolled her eyes. I heard her mumble something to herself as she shut the door behind me.