

# The Dorm From Hell

What happens when a 46-year-old lands in a nursing home.



**By Samantha Drake** | As I emerged from yet another restless night, I made a vow to myself. If I didn't get some real sleep soon, I was going to kill someone. Then I turned over on my narrow hospital bed and was startled to see a woman I knew as Jean standing over me, smiling benevolently.

I looked back at her, wondering what she could possibly want so early in the morning. A nurse came in and shooed her out. It dawned on me that Jean didn't work at the nursing home. I later learned she was a fellow patient who happened to be a former nurse, and sometimes reverted to caregiver mode.

Ironically, many residents at this Bucks County nursing, convalescent, and rehab facility thought *I* was a staff member, because, at age 46, I was mobile and relatively young compared to the rest of the population. Some employees assumed I was a visitor, a misconception that served me well the night I escaped.

It wasn't my proudest moment, but my frustration with the place had peaked early. What would I do if I had to live there the rest of my life, returned to a state of dependency and set adrift in a new social order of octogenarians and their overlords?

It all started with what neurologists call a "thunderclap headache."

I had always been a fairly headache-y person. Stress, hunger, and changes in weather all brought various levels of discomfort. But this new pain struck so suddenly and intensely that I asked the contractor who happened to be doing work on my home that day to drive me to the local emergency room. The diagnosis was a ruptured cerebral aneurysm. I was shipped to Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia for emergency surgery the next day.

As brain traumas go, I was extremely fortunate. I experienced no lasting impairment and recovered rapidly from the operation. But in addition to a rather unfortunate haircut, I was left with holes in my short-term memory that you could drive a truck through.

This memory deficit, while protecting me from whatever unpleasantness I went through pre- and post-surgery, made me question why I was in a nursing home. I'm sure people explained it to me, but the four-lane highway route through my synapses muddled things.

To an outside observer the reason would have been quite clear. In the three weeks or so following aneurysm surgery, anything can happen. Seizures, a stroke, and other scary stuff were real possibilities at any given time. So I was out of the hospital but not out of the woods, not by a long shot. I still required 24-hour supervision, hence my transfer to this nursing/rehab home.

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And yet in terms of rehab there wasn't much for me to do. I quickly proved that the odds of my falling down or walking into a wall were pretty low. I also mastered sequencing exercises to show I wasn't going to burn the house down while scrambling an egg once I got home. After that, the rehab was more or less over. I spent a lot of time watching daytime TV and napping.

I also people-watched. There was one fellow resident who had a particular claim on my attention. Monkey Woman, as I came to think of her, had the rather disconcerting habit of throwing back her head and screaming like a chimpanzee. She did this to express displeasure, intimidate people, or just to show that she could. Even when she wasn't screeching, her mood was foul since her family had decreed she had to quit smoking. Watching other residents crowd into the outdoor common area every day to light up had to be maddening for her.

My 80-something roommate Julia was cordial enough, but wary of a new person in her space. I didn't see her that much because the staff whisked her away to activities all day, every day. At night, Julia went to bed early—but not before carrying on like a small child begging the nurses not to hurt her as they transferred her from her wheelchair to the bed.

A cadaverous man was routinely parked at the nurse's station just across from my room for hours on end. I never found out why he was left there, nor did I manage to decode what he kept shouting every 15 minutes or so.

One night Julia had enough of him.

"Joseph, you shut up!" she yelled from her bed. She began muttering loudly about Joseph's shortcomings.

Feeling mischievous, I couldn't help asking: "Julia, are you two dating?"

"No!" Julia snapped. "But he does owe me money!"

It all seemed vaguely familiar. I suddenly flashed back to dorm life. That was it! Except, I was stuck in the Dorm from Hell, forcibly returned by age and circumstance to the days of communal living— with the rules, the craziness, and the bingo, but none of the freedom and fun.

Unlike all but a handful of people there, at least I knew I was going home. But I couldn't get a straight answer about when that might be. So after nearly a week, I decided I couldn't just sit around waiting anymore.

One night, after listening to Julia plead with the staff as they settled her into bed, I slipped out of the room and down the hall to the security door for the main lobby. A code opened the door after business hours, which I obtained by asking a random person passing by. It was ridiculously easy. Looking like a visitor did have its advantages.

Elated, I crossed the lobby and went outside to the parking lot. Freedom! Now, what to do with it?

I looked around, picked a direction, and started walking along the highway in the warm night air until I came to a Shell gas station. Standing in the orange and yellow glow, I realized I had no plan whatsoever. So I called my sister.

She was not thrilled to hear that I had become a fugitive, and informed me that she was not going to abet my attempt at life on the lam. She ordered me to stay put until she came to pick me up.

Some time later she did—and, along with two nurse's aides who had been quietly following me, returned me to the nursing home. I was promptly fitted for an electronic monitoring bracelet that sounded an alarm if I got too near to an exit. Back in my room, my sister promised she would negotiate a few rule changes for me, like being able to take a shower every

day.

Partly as a show of good faith and partly to be a smart ass, I demonstrated that I could slide the bracelet off and on.

As I let a nurse secure the bracelet more snugly, it occurred to me that Monkey Woman and I were not so different. Sooner or later, I was going to get my life back, but for now she and I had very little say about what was best for us. Neither of us was happy about it.

I was allowed to go home not too long after my escape attempt. My progress since then has been steady; some say miraculous. My experiences in the nursing home and the people I met there had a profound effect on me, particularly my brushes with Monkey Woman.

I like to think that if she wasn't confined to a wheelchair, she might have hung out at the Shell station to smoke when she got the chance. I would have gladly given her the door code.

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