

AVERSION

Written by Diane M. Dresback (© 5/22/14)

(Tuesday) The hospital room was stark white decorated with one lithograph of yellow daisies and a board with the name Denny Mann written on the top. Dressed in blue scrubs, Nadine pushed buttons on bedside monitors and attached a new bag of clear fluid to the drip line. She looked up at the clock that read 3:00 and scurried out of the room.

In the bed, thirty-five year old Denny, lay sleeping. Gauze bandages were wrapped around his head and his right shoulder. Purple bruises were forming on the side of his pale face and there were several scrapes along his jaw.

Soon, the door pushed open and in walked Rich Santara. He was a black man close to eighty wearing a distinctive bright green jacket. The little hair remaining on his head was grey and his dull eyes had long lost their youthful luster. Although once an intimidating six foot three, his hunched back now brought him down to barely five foot ten.

Rich looked at Denny, then sat down in the blue plastic visitor chair to wait. Twenty minutes later, Rich's head was cocked to one side, his mouth wide open. He had dozed off. He awoke to the rhythmic beeping of one of the monitors. After glancing up to the clock and seeing it read 3:35, he quickly got to his feet and left the room.

(Wednesday) Wearing his green jacket, Rich sat waiting at Denny's bedside. He twiddled his thumbs and whistled an old tune. Then, he looked up to the clock that displayed 3:24. With a sigh, he took one last glance at the sleeping patient, and walked out of the room.

(Thursday) Denny was finally awake and frowning about his whereabouts.

"Remember, call if you need something and NO getting out of bed," said Nadine firmly as she unwrapped a blood pressure cuff from his arm.

"When do I get out of here?" He asked. "I hate hospitals."

"I don't know yet. So you'd better get used to your new home for a while."

He grimaced and responded sarcastically, "Great."

Nadine pushed a few more buttons and headed towards the door. "Just don't get out of bed and we'll get along fine. Francine is the evening nurse, she'll be in soon."

Denny closed his eyes as Nadine left him alone. He was just starting to doze off, when he heard a noise and slowly opened his eyes. There standing by his bedside staring at him was the old black man.

"You're Francine?" Denny asked in a mocking tone.

Rich chuckled. "No, my name is Rich Santara. It's good to see you're awake."

"What's with the green jacket?"

"It's the volunteer team color."

Denny snickered. "Volunteers for what? Springing me from this joint?"

"I like you already," Rich smiled. "Volunteers visit the hospital patients."

Turning his head towards the window, Denny frowned. "I don't need any visitors."

"Nonsense," replied Rich. "Everybody deserves visitors. You have family?"

“What’s it to you?” Denny growled. He didn’t feel good.

Rich sighed. “Just wondering if I can expect the Missus or some unruly kids.”

Denny shook his head, then groaned as he moved his arm. “I don’t wanna talk, I wanna sleep.” He closed his eyes.

“Right. I’ll be back tomorrow, then.”

With eyes closed, Denny replied, “Don’t bother.”

“Oh no, I’ll be here.”

“I’ll hold my breath,” Denny said as Rich grinned and exited.

(Friday) The bruise on Denny’s cheekbone was in full color that afternoon. He opened his eyes and the first thing he saw was Rich’s feet in well worn flip flops. His old wrinkly toes dry and his overgrown toe nails brittle. “Dude, they let you wear sandals?”

“How you feeling, today, Denny?”

“Sore.” He shifted cautiously and looked up at Rich’s oversized green jacket.

“What was your name, again?”

“Rich Santara,” he smiled and extended his hand. “So, what happened to you?”

Too uncomfortable for a full handshake, Denny extended his little finger and Rich gently shook it. “Last thing I remember was riding my Harley north on Springdale Road.”

“Helmet?”

“Never.”

Rich shook his head like a protective parent. “You’re lucky. You should wear—”

“Look, I don’t need a lecture by some volunteer wearing a Kermit coat and flip flops.” Rich raised his hands showing he was backing down. Denny shifted. “Can you get the nurse? I need something to cut this pain.”

“Uh...the fastest way to get help here is to push this red call button,” instructed Rich as he handed it to him and then made his way out of the room.

(Saturday) The time was 3:00. Denny watched Rich open the door and walk in. His green jacket was too tight and couldn’t be buttoned up. “Santara, who dresses you, man? Those jackets have got to go.”

The old man smiled as he slowly sat down in the chair next to Denny. “It’s one of those committee things. Kinda like an H.O.A. Always there telling you what shade of yellow you can’t paint your house.” Denny chuckled. “So, no wife or kids, huh? You have brothers, sisters, parents?”

Denny raised his eyebrows and pushed himself up in bed. He was finally beginning to feel a little better and the bandages on his head had been replaced with smaller ones. “Had one brother, two years younger. And, I don’t care where my old man is. That’s it for me. What about you?”

Rich just stared for a few moments. “Hang on. What happened to your brother?”

Taking in a long breath, Denny raised his eyebrows and spoke matter-of-factly. “When I was fifteen, my brother and I ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some punk kids were passing through our neighborhood looking for trouble. We were the ones who found it. My little brother ended up in a place just like this,” he motioned around the room. “He was there for a long time. He never woke up.”

“That’s tragic,” said Rich leaning forward in the plastic chair.

“My parents blamed me, of course. As the ‘older’ brother, I should have known better. As if my own guilt wasn’t bad enough, my father made my life miserable until I finally had enough and took off at seventeen. Haven’t been back since.”

“What about your mother?”

“She fell apart. Got messed up on prescription drugs. One day she took off and didn’t come back. Rumor had it, she moved to Canada.” Denny swallowed a sip of water from the cup on the bed tray and Rich watched his brow furrow. “I’ve spent the last fifteen years trying to track down that guy who killed my brother. I was working on a good lead, until I ended up here.”

Rich pushed his hand through his thinning hair. “So, why no wife?”

Denny shrugged. “Guess I’m not very good company.”

Leaning back in his chair, Rich rubbed his neck. He caught a glimpse of the clock which displayed 3:25 and quickly stood up. “I gotta go.”

“That’s your response to my story?”

“Sorry, my times up.” As he walked towards the door, he spotted a pad of paper and a pen on the counter. “Can I borrow those?”

“Be my guest,” replied Denny. The old man took the items and walked rapidly out the door as Denny called after him. “You’re one weird old guy, Santara.” But, Rich didn’t stop to respond.

Denny picked up the television remote and switched on a ballgame. Francine, the evening nurse pushed open the door and buzzed in. “Hello, Denny. You look like you’re feeling better.”

(Sunday) The door to a small hospital office opened. An old black hand reached in and took the nearest volunteer jacket from the coat rack. The door then closed.

A few moments later, Rich entered Denny’s room. He found him sitting on the edge of his bed reviewing a tattered spiral bound notebook. Denny heard Rich enter, but did not look up. “Santara, you’re late,” he commented.

Rich looked to the clock that read 3:15. He walked directly up to Denny and stood there. “I’m sorry.”

“I won’t report you, this time” Denny joked.

But, Rich remained somber. “No, I’m sorry for all the pain you’ve had with your family. And, for not properly finishing our conversation, yesterday.”

“Figured, I scared you off,” said Denny as he finally looked up. “Dude, you look terrible.” Indeed, Rich looked physically exhausted with large black circles under both eyes.

“Yeah, I’m a little tired today.”

“Maybe you caught something. Hospitals are the worst place to be. I can’t wait to get out of here before I catch some exotic infection,” commented Denny.

“I’ll be fine,” dismissed Rich.

“Well, that’s good, *Betty*, otherwise I might be worried about you.”

Confused, Rich frowned. Denny nodded his head at the name badge on the green coat which read, BETTY.

Rich let out a groan as he sat down on the plastic chair. “What’s that?” He pointed at Denny’s notebook.

"They're all my leads to find the guy who killed my brother," he said as he flipped several worn pages. "I'll eventually find him, you know. I won't stop until I do." Rich began to shake his head. "What?" His head kept shaking more vehemently. "What, Santara? You don't think I can find him?"

"Let it go," said Rich quietly.

Surprised, Denny snapped his notebook shut. "Let it go?" Rich nodded. "This guy robbed my brother of his life. The only decent family I ever had. And he's out there a free man. What kind of justice is that?"

"He's apparently taken your life, too." The two men stared at each other.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Denny said angrily.

"Actually, Denny, I do." Denny folded his arms and motioned with his head that he was waiting for an explanation. Rich looked up at the clock which read 3:23.

"I don't have enough time."

Frustrated, Denny said, "Forget the time. Tell me."

"I never knew who my father was. I spent years searching for him." Rich looked back at the clock and stood up.

Denny shrugged his shoulders. "That's it? You think that's the same? You didn't know your father, who cares! Lots of people don't know who their father's are. I'm talking about a punk murdering my brother in cold blood." Rich gaped at the clock, 3:25. "Forget the clock, Santara!"

Now breathing heavily, Rich waved his index finger at Denny. "Stop looking. Find a wife. Have kids." Then, he rushed from the room.

"Yeah, go on," Denny yelled after him. "You're always leaving. Is that how you live life, running away from everything? Well, I'm not running!"

A couple moments later, Francine entered the room with a smile on her face. "Got good news. The doctor liked your test results so you're going home tomorrow afternoon."

(Monday) Denny stared at the clock in his room. It read 3:30. Francine entered and held out some papers with home care instructions. "The wheelchair is on its way," she said pleasantly. Her patient continued to stare at the clock. "Are you waiting for something?"

"Guess I ticked off, Santara," Denny said regretfully as he finally accepted the papers.

"Who?"

"Rich Santara, the volunteer guy assigned to visit me. He's the old black dude." A broad smile appeared on her face. "What?" inquired Denny.

"Rich was in here, huh?"

"Yeah, everyday, right at three o'clock."

Francine nodded her head knowingly and chuckled. "During the nurse shift change."

"Who *is* he?"

"Denny, Rich passed in his sleep early this morning," said Francine sadly. "He battled cancer for many years. He spent his last few weeks here with us...and apparently with you. He was *supposed* to be on bed rest."

Surprised, Denny asked, "Did he have any family?" The nurse shook her head.

“Let’s get you ready to go.” She went to his closet to retrieve his clothes.

Meanwhile, in Rich’s room, a nurse’s aid striped the bed and gathered soiled towels. She smiled at his old flip flops pushed under the bed and picked up a pad of paper that had writing on it. She quickly carried it out of the room.

Just as Francine finished helping Denny into the wheelchair, Nadine entered with the pad and held it out to him. “Glad I caught you. We found this in Rich’s room and it had your name on it.” Denny accepted it as Francine wheeled him out. Denny’s name was written on the front page.

Denny limped to his couch and plunked down with a sigh. It felt good to finally be home. He propped his leg up on the coffee table and from his pocket he removed the pad Rich had borrowed from his hospital room. Opening it to the second page, it read, MY LIFE. Following, there was an entry written in barely legible handwriting.

1934 - My life began as a result of an act of violence.

Denny looked up and pondered for a moment. So, Santara *did* have more to his story, he thought, then he continued reading.

My Mama was raped by a man, then left for dead. But, she survived and found room in her heart to still love me. But, we didn’t fit in places—my Mama was white.

1940 - When I was six, I fell very ill so Mama took me to a doctor. I remember sitting in the waiting room watching the nurse take back all the other white children, most of them perfectly healthy. Mama called out, “Excuse me, I’ve been waiting longer than anyone here. My son is very sick.” That lady treated us like we were dirt and said we were free to leave. But, Mama stayed, for me.

1950 - We were always ostracized. I didn’t understand at first, but Mama explained why people treated us differently, even though it made no sense to me. Life was difficult at times and I certainly wasn’t the most well behaved child. She didn’t want me to go to the regular school. But every night she faithfully taught me my school lessons. She was gentle but firm. When I was sixteen, she finally told me about my father. I remembered swearing that I would find him and bring him to justice. But, Mama just called me a fool.

1980 - At forty-six, I was still searching for my father. It was hard to hold down a job. “Your life has become an obsession,” I remember my wife saying to me.” But, I didn’t believe her. How could she possibly understand? Six months later she was gone, with my own ten year old son, and they never returned. I kept searching.

Denny turned to the last entry on the pad. The rest of the pages were completely blank. All eighty years of Rich’s life in seven pages. He read the last entry.

2014 - I met a young man a couple of days ago. I think I know why.

Denny slowly closed the pad of paper. He drew in a long breath, imagining the life Rich Santara must have experienced—or missed out on.

The house phone rang and Denny was jolted back from his thoughts. His leg hurt and it was too much trouble to get up and walk to the phone. He didn't really feel like talking to whoever might be calling.

The answering machine picked up and he listened to a familiar voice leave a message. "Mann, where are you? I think we've found him. Call me."

THE END

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