

*Literary**Lit.**Page*

## “It’s a good day for the race. . .”

The smell of alcohol and urine was prevelant as Jarod wheeled down the corridor of the west wing in Trimble Hospital. The odor made him crinkle his nose and he gunned the wheelchair to his left. The doorway opened into a small (‘too small’, he mused) double room which, Jarod felt, was much brighter than the other rooms in the hospital. His wheelchair glided to a stop at the base of the first bed. Jarod sat quietly, listening. The bed was enshrouded by a thin blue curtain and his eight year old sense of curiosity was starting to replace his easily forgotten sense of manners. He leaned forward and gingerly pulled the curtain aside. Empty. Having conquered this bed, and feeling more brash because of it, Jarod slipped over to the next one, which was also behind a thin curtain.

He paused, taking in his breath and listened for the tell-tale signs of life. From behind the curtain came a labored, gasping sort of snort and Jarod froze. The room became quiet once again and seemed to grow yet another degree brighter. From within the curtain emanated a long sigh and suddenly Jarod was overcome with sorrow. The sigh was not a mere exhalation of a breath, but rather a statement of affairs. Jarod detected hopelessness and for the life of him, didn’t know why. Seconds passed and the labored breathing continued as Jarod summed up all his courage and finally forced his hand forward.

It occurred to him, as his hand attempted to cross the immense abyss between himself and the stiff curtain, that the light which made the room assume its eerie radiance was being cast out from behind this curtain that he couldn’t quite reach. Suddenly the breathing stopped. Pressure build up in Jarod’s loins and again, emotion shifted...this time from boldness to fear. The desire to wet himself was the strongest it had been since he was small. He quickly retracted his left hand and clumsily tried to back out of the small space he had maneuvered into. The right rear wheel had jammed up against the frame of the opposite bed, but Jarod took no notice because his eyes never left the blue curtain.

A rustling noise now permeated the curtain and fear, in turn, was replaced by sheer panic. Jarod continued to frantically battle with the chair, but his eyes remained fixed on the curtain. It shook now from the unsettling movements within, and images of ghastly creatures bombarded his young, impressionistic mind. His heart raced and the dryness in his throat resembled that of desert air. That was when he heard the voice from behind him.

“Need any help, young man?”

A shriek filled the room as Jarod started and, finally, his bladder let go. He craned his neck around to face the tall black man and realised the fear that must have been painted on his face as the man’s polite grin slipped away.

“What’s the matter little man? You look like you seen a ghost!”

The smile flashed back onto the orderly’s face momentarily, showing a row of intensely white teeth. The wetness between Jarod’s legs began to cool and he flushed with embarrassment. Another spine-tingling screech echoed down the white halls of the hospital, but this one came from the depths of whatever was behind the thin, blue curtain.

Jarod whimpered at the sound of the scream and his eyes searched those of the orderly, desperately seeking protection

from the monster that must lie behind the curtain. The orderly flashed Jarod a reassuring glance and slipped past him to the edge of the bed. His nametag read “Thomas Jenkins” and Jarod wondered if this Thomas Jenkins really knew exactly what he was doing. Jenkin’s right hand grasped the curtain and somewhere inside Jarod’s head, someone pleaded “No! No, please don’t free it!” In the same second the curtain had been jerked aside, revealing a wizened – up old man. The muscles in Jarod’s shoulders and back relaxed from their painful clench and a long sigh escaped his lips.

“Ahhhl!” The man spat out. “Jenkins you back – water country shit! Stop screwing off! You want to keep your job? What the hell is that damn kid doing in here?” The man’s eyes were sparking in anger, but amazingly Jenkins was smiling comfortably.

“He was just curious Mr. Bridgewater, relax.” Jenkins was obviously not intimidated by this man.

“I don’t care if he’s with the FBI, get him the hell out of my room!” Jarod remained an observer, watching intently as Mr. Bridgewater continued to insult Jenkins and Jenkins continued to fiddle with the control on the bed.

“...and put that wretched control down!” Mr. Bridgewater finished off. Then Bridgewater’s eyes found Jarod’s.

“Watcha’ doing snooping in my room?”

“I wasn’t snoop –”

“You paralyzed?”

“No, I –”

“You got a room?”

Jarod paused. “Yes, it’s up –”

“How come you ain’t in it?”

“Take it easy, Mr. Bridgewater,” Jenkins interrupted, “he’s only a boy. Look you scared the piss outa’ him.”

Jarod’s eyes dropped and he burned with shame as he saw the wide, dark circle on the crotch of his PJ’s.

“Good maybe he won’t come back!” Bridgewater’s eyes left Jarod and turned to the sky outside his window. In the midst of all the disruption, the fear had melted away. Mr. Bridgewater had kind, reassuring features. The lines around his eyes were deep and plentiful. His nose was small and had and had a slight bump on the bridge. He worked his mouth in a slow chewing motion and seemed to be contemplating some fantastic occurrence outside his window.

“I thought I’d get some privacy when that other bum kicked the shitter.” Mr. Bridgewater raised his arm and stabbed a crooked finger in the direction of the empty bed, but his eyes still gazed out the window. Jarod watched him closely and noticed his eyes were darting over every detail of the scene just beyond the pane of glass. He seemed to be taking in everything...processing it...categorizing it...

Bridgewater’s eyes hardened again and he turned to face Jarod.

“You still here? I ain’t got much left you little shit, the least you can allow me is my own peace and quiet.” They stayed locked in this gaze for what seemed like hours, but in reality were a couple of fleeting seconds. Bridgewater sat defiantly, chewing incessantly and didn’t turn away. Jarod sat solemnly, taken over by a combination of fear and intense interest in the man before him with the bottled – up frustration and foul language, but he too did not look away.

“Come on little man. I’ll take ya’ back to ya’ rhum.”

So this was Jarod’s first encounter with Milton Bridgewater, but everyone in that room that day knew it wouldn’t end there. As Jenkins wheeled him back out into the hall, Jarod threw a glance over his shoulder and through the gap between Jenkins’ forearm and hip, he could see Bridgewater gripping the rail on the side of his bed. His knuckles were white and his face had once again turned to the window. His mouth was working in its constant fervor. His chest raised and fell heavily. Bridgewater was obviously in great pain.