

## I: Welcome to the Industry

In the beginning of June, amid the choke of the muggy Missouri air and the growing pulse of the cicada's song, at early midmorning, a young woman arrived at her community college, sat in her vehicle to collect herself, and with a hesitant gait, made her way inside.

She was always early anywhere she drove, and with good reason. Her vehicle, an old and rusted white Chrysler, had partially functional brakes ensured that she drove in a gingerly fashion. It had been gifted down to her after her previous twenty-year-old beater ceased to function, and was even equipped with a stereo and unremovable compact disk that spoke some strange Slavic language when played. The community college that she was attending had already seen her fail three classes and one lab that last semester; so of course, they graciously enrolled her into an accelerated course for the summer. She had already accumulated enough shame in the halls of the classrooms and was forced out almost entirely for financial reasons, though through no fault of her own. She was evidently left with a tremendous amount of debt to her school after only two years, and was now falling back on her physical skills rather than mental ones, as she realized she would have never made enough to pay off her degree. And given the fact that, for the third time in five years, she had come back home and the allotted time from her mother had officially reached the eleventh hour.

She had not completely run out of options; she was well and all an almsgiver; but her health had taken a sudden turn in the previous semester, which led to a great absence in her own life, as well as a great deal of anxiety and disappointment in herself. At the height of her efforts, she held three different shift jobs simultaneously, went to school full time, lived with her sister and a family friend (which was already a death sentence in the making), and had such perfected vision for the future that she would have sacrificed every bit of her being achieve her goals. During the collapse of the communal living situation, she seemingly developed a sort of nervous disorder from all of the concentrated stress, with its first incident happening in the room of her psychology class, in which she was looking at a set of illusions for her

psychology class, immediately froze, and woke up in an ambulance, confessing, “my mom always told me to shave my legs before going out, and I didn’t today. I’m really sorry.” This spiraled further, as in one instance, while on a call with her boyfriend, she had a seizure while doing her homework, which made him turn a fifteen-minute drive into five and broke into her home to rescue her. She then participated in a neurological study in which she spent three nights in the hospital and gained nothing but debt that she would never be able to pay off and some pills to put her into a euphoric state if things were to go south for her again. After she had effectively stopped attending all her classes, and as if a comedically timed miracle, as soon as she had officially dropped out of the spring semester, her sudden bouts of seizures disappeared entirely. She then had to work up the nerve to ask her boyfriend to loan her money for her summer accelerated course and book, but that only exacerbated the need to do well in the course, and then in the field. All of it became a boulder that even Sisyphus would question if it were worth rolling further. But despite all of her previous hardships, she was doing well in the course, felt engaged, potentially even useful, and not overwhelmed. Most of all, she loved that she was able to learn the field from such a woman as Bernice.

However, on this particular day, she came into the class noticeably less enthusiastic and with a reservedness for interaction.

As she approached the classroom, an excited chatter could be made out. She could hear Bernice’s voice from down the hall, talking to some administrator with an indistinguishable voice. The classroom was exceedingly cold, with a drop ceiling and empty tables strewn about. The space was a buzzing mess, with the five other students of the class all huddled around a single desk in the front of the room, full of exclamations of infractions that leapt from the mouths of children in eager fashion. She knew full well what they were all discussing, as she had done it with herself since leaving her shift. They were all young, spry, green; she was only two years older than them, but felt so much their senior that she was embarrassed to even be there. It is difficult to understand how little someone knows until they are heard speaking, so she sat in the back corner of the classroom in her usual table, feet propped in an empty chair,

set her small pink pack on the floor, and listened, seeing if anyone had even come close to her previous day:

“No, you don’t understand, it was awful! This woman did not clean her hands properly at all! We went over that the very first class; remember? It was mental: she would pick up a patient, get them in bed, make sure they were comfortable, then grab a pump full of handful of sanitizer and leave the room. I don’t think—and now I don’t know, because I had to do my own job—that she even washed her hands normally the entire shift.”

“You think that’s bad?” Said the only boy in the class, “Oh my God, this lady was in my care: large, extremely large; maybe over three hundred pounds. Anyways, this would be a two-person lift, right? This nurse, God bless her, she took this woman by the band of her pants and picked her up as if it was nothing. Can you believe that? Why would they not just put the gait belt on to help lift her! And she didn’t even ask me for help, so like am I supposed to learn that too?”

In that moment, Bernice entered the room with a bright smile that concealed laughter, but begged to speak. She was at the ripe age of seventy. Her face was wrinkled, but youthful in expression. She was incredibly pale, with eternally blonde hair and icy blue eyes that could pierce a soul and wrangle it into submission. She was always dressed as if she had just finished a day's worth of shopping with her “girl friends”. She had retired long ago, and her years of service extended back decades. She had done everything that could be done in the field: labor and delivery, the emergency room, rehabilitation, long-term care; a tour de force of medical services, and there was not a single one that she could be accused of being incompetent in. By the end of her career, she had been the Director of Nursing at one of the largest skilled nursing facilities in the area. She would recount stories collected from nearly every source, for every occasion; for she had heard, seen, and lived it all.

“Oh, my, my: this is my favorite day of the program. You all sound like you have many tales to tell; all in due time. We do have to begin our lesson. But after lunch, I expect that each of you will have something to say.”

The rest of the class passed with a terrible slowness. There is a horrible anticipation that we subject ourselves to when truth is beckoned out of us. Mabel was sure that somehow Bernice knew the first day was always full of horror stories. When lunch had arrived slightly early, the air outside had turned into a cloudless and dismal state, which did little to help the young woman who was sitting in her car, alone, quietly eating her lunch. The air was stagnant around her as she watched distant trees blow in a breeze unexperienced. The blacktop beneath the car like an oven, slowly baking the participant inside. She could not afford to have her car running for the length of her lunch, so the windows were rolled down; not as if it made any difference; we often change our environments just to feel better. She took a few bites of the cheap microwaved food, the same lunch that she had brought then entirety of the first week. The simultaneous urge and restraint to peel apart her deteriorating steering wheel was therapeutic in some sense as she tried to map out which of the details she would and would not speak on before her classmates. The smell of Sani Cloth and urine still lingered in her nose, as if conjured by a wisp of a scent that was deposited from her scrubs into her car and now lingered in an uncontrollable fashion. She had been stewing over exactly how much detail to provide since leaving her facility. She knew what was to come if she said nothing, but far worse she feared more that, in saying nothing, she would be punished by her conscience eternally for her inaction. Even though she had convinced herself that she had did nothing wrong, she could not get over the sense that she was still at fault, for something, and that surely in telling her story, she would be reprimanded, swiftly, for she did not fulfill her duties as a care provider. She had decided to wait until the end of the lesson that day before saying anything.

By the time she came back the classroom, her instructor had not yet returned. Her classmates babbled on, now discussing their plans for after the program. All of her fellow students had grand plans, at least from what she had overheard, and had established their cohort in the first week. While they worked day shift

together in one facility, she was alone, in an entirely separate facility, working second shift. They all seemed to have such high aspirations. Many were simply in the accelerated course so that by the time their time in university started in the fall, they could count hours towards their eventual goal in becoming physician's assistant, or a registered nurse, or something beyond the scope of this course. Bernice came in shortly after and the stories began to flow. There was something utterly ridiculous about the comments that they were making. It was not as if they were wrong; most of their complaints were completely valid. However, they seemed to lack the understanding that the school setting and the work setting are fundamentally at odds with each other. There is something in the inherent and necessary imperfections of the school setting that can leave someone daft and immobile in the real world. There is always some authority to appeal to, some rule to look back towards; responsibility was discussed, but there is no punishment for wrongdoings in the classroom, only learning experiences. After forty-five minutes worth of what could be categorized as light hearted banter, Bernice peeked around the cluster of students in front of her.

“Well, Mabel, how was your first day?”

Mabel became wide eyed and flushed, half laughing, as she said, “Oh, I just followed people around and hated my life the whole time. Eh he, ah ha ha!”

Bernice returned a strange look, urging Mabel to continue. All of the faces of the classroom turned toward her as if she were in a hall of mirrors.

“I don't know how to tell you how my day was. I mean, I'm listening to y'all, and I wish that it was... I want to say it was not... 'normal'. I don't even know what normal would be considering it was my first, but it just didn't seem right. I don't quite know how to feel about it.”

“Go on. What happened?”

Mabel looked down, then back up, putting her pointer finger out. “Well, number one: they shaved somebody’s pubic hair.”

Bernice choked on the water as she had taken a sip from the mug on her desk. She shifted forward in her seat, leaning in for better reception. “You’re sure? And why would they do that?”

“I don’t know; but they did it. And I don’t think that’s right because it’s not in the book, but I’m not sure if it’s actually wrong.”

One of her classmates, a dainty, pale young woman spoke up. Her hair was pulled back so tightly back from her forehead that her eyebrows stood up involuntarily.

“Was she young? Was that her preference or something?”

“Oh, yeah, no; she was totally unconscious, so I don’t know why they did it. I think they, the two aids I was with, said it’s because they didn’t want to deal with the mess down there because she was incontinent. But all I’m worried about is the potential for a staph infection. And I already didn’t trust one of those aids anyways because she had strange drawn on eyebrows, and you can’t trust a person with strange eyebrows. Also, how is it that I had no idea that they would just use towels to clean *everything*? Maybe it is sanitary and I’m just overthinking things, but—oh! but that wasn’t even the worst part! The next person, literally in the same room on the other side of a curtain, had to be attended to because her husband had just been there and we had to clean up.”

The very breath of the room had been violently sucked out. Mabel later recalled just how shameful it all felt to recount her story. How, of course, she would be the one to go through such things, and how she could so swiftly and easily ruin everyone’s perception of their own constructed realities.

“Now, Mabel, could you—just bear with me here—could you elaborate on that first person again? What were they doing to her?”

“Well, we started rounds, as in right at the start of the shift, so this was our first room and residents. Oh God! How did I forget to mention it! The aids were just flopping her around, talking over her body, making jokes. And I just stood there because I didn’t know what to do or if there was even anything to do. And that poor woman just kept letting out these horrible sounds like she was trapped in herself but couldn’t fight back. They just talked and talked, and she would moan and cry and I just felt real sick in that moment and I... I can’t see how that’s normal.”

Bernice cleared her throat and got out a pad of paper. “No, no, it is not. What else happened?”

She went on to explain with each detail growing more absurd than the last; how they took them to dinner and, without hesitation, would take the food, mix it all together, regardless of the contents, making an unholy amalgam of military grade slop, just to shovel it in indiscriminately into every face with the same degree of care as the was put into the homogenized meal. There were a few quick comments made by her classmates, especially from the boy, the very one who could not for the life of him figure out how to properly wash his hands in the first week, but Mabel did not respond. As she spoke, she tried to study Bernice’s face. She was listening carefully, attentively, nodding along at every story beat. Not a single word seemed to phase her, as if she had heard every atrocity before in its ultimate form.

“And the shower! Obviously, we haven’t gone over that in class, but they carted that man down the hall completely naked, shower chair and all, and then they just leave me in there with him to ‘get some more soap’, and then after twenty minutes of waiting around, I felt awkward, so I ended up just adding water into the soap and shampoo to clean him—and he seemed like a nice person—but then I come out of the shower room for some towels, and they’re just talking to each other and laughing, saying ‘Oh girl, you’re so wrong for that! You know he’s whole registered offender!’ And I just...” Mabel paused for a moment, her lips closed and eyes crestfallen, willing her tears to remain silent. “Bernice, I don’t have a backup plan, and I’m sorry that all this happened, but I can’t do this. I feel like I signed up for this program thinking I’d be useful or something, but I can’t do that gain. I don’t know what you want me to do but I

can't go back there. I don't even want anybody fired or in trouble or anything. I ju- I don't know what makes a person get to that point, and I can't stay there to find out."

The heads processed from Mabel to Bernice and back in a deathly silence. After a long pause, occasionally interrupted by a cough, Bernice's pen finished its final strike on the paper as she stood up from behind the desk, gesturing to the class before stepping out.

"Would you all excuse me for a moment? I will be right back."

Mabel threw her hands up. "Great! Now they're just going to kick me out! To hell with it!" she thought to herself.

After a few short minutes, still completely in silence, she walked the proctor with Bernice. She requested that Mabel retell each and every detail, from beginning to end, her eyes involuntarily twitching with each added offense. She assured Mabel that everything would be taken care of, which only further entrenched Mabel's conviction that she would be disposed of for causing such an inconvenience to everyone's day. As quickly as she came in, the proctor left, thanking Mabel as she left the door. Bernice, who had been standing directly beside the proctor, then closed the door and addressed everyone:

"Well, everyone, this is why this is my favorite day. You truly do not know what will be said, so we all get to hear something that could make us think about what our greatest obligation is. And, yes, it is very likely that we will see awful things, horrible things in fact; that is the very nature of the work we do; we stand, flat footed in both life and death and we must not falter. It sounds odd, but think: if you do not do your job, there is suffering, directly. And we do not do our job, knowingly, when *we* cause suffering, that is where a threshold has been crossed. That, first and foremost, is what you must never do. And do not lie to yourself to avoid responsibility; you will become lesser for it. Now, Mabel, or any of you: if this were me, or I experienced something like it, then I would feel obligated to report this to the state. Do with that what you must."



With that, she went back on with teaching, addressing directly the comment that Mabel had made about feeding residents. She had a wonderful habit of tying things into stories. And without fail, she would remind them how so many times on the state exam and in the field, people forget small details; but the state does not forget. Everyone once and a while, she would keep her gaze transfixed on Mabel, making sure was still participating. By the end of the class, the proctor had returned and Mabel had already been assigned a new facility, the very one everyone else was assigned, only again to be on second shift, and again to be alone, in rehabilitation. Bernice made sure addressed Mabel one last time in private before she left.

“Now Mabel, dear, you’re going to see some things, you understand? You did right telling me all this.”

“Does it ever get better?” Mabel asked with a weary tone.

Her clinical instructor’s brows knit themselves tightly seeing an ardent heart that could not hold back.

“There’s a long road ahead for people like you. That isn’t necessarily a bad thing; just not easy.”

“I just thought,” Mabel began, “and maybe I’m actually foolish or naive, but I figured that people had some sense common decency or conscience. Just because it’s a job doesn’t give them any right to act like it’s just a job. I mean, it’s not like I don’t get it: the pay is probably awful, the job is surely awful (you really should have said something about the towels, Bernice). It’s tiresome and full of things most folks would want to touch. But did they not know what they were getting into? What did they think it was going to be like? Can they not just fake being nice? Because this is it for me, Bernice. All these other kids are going onto bigger and better things and I’m just going to be here. Nursing didn’t work out for me. They take this program because it’s accelerated, so that in the fall, they can walk into their college programs with a head start. I’m here because I failed and this is my career now. This is serious to me. And to watch them get to fool around, I don’t know; something doesn’t sit right with me.”

Mabel began to gather her items with a dejected expression. She stared quietly at sheet she had been given by the proctor.

"Mabel, you are barely older than them! How do you figure that this is the end for you? Don't speak of yourself in such ways. You've got to understand what you're going into. A lot of these people..." She took a long pause, unsure how to soothe her student and remind her of reality at the same time. "A lot of the patients will never be the problem. Some of them are going to get under your skin and do terrible things. But you expect that: they're broken; that's why they're in your care. And they're usually close to the end, in some sense. They get all scared because they're reminded of their own fragility, or how only ten years ago their last friend died in a place similar to where they are now. And some recover, and some don't, and some come back over and over; but you must be a constant. People want to know that the recovery is worth suffering for; that getting out is not a just a given, but a necessity. You have a good stubbornness in you. I've seen a lot of people come through these types of programs and through my facilities. Lots of those people will ignore their patient's dignities for their own convenience and not realize they're taking away all the personhood that's left. Most people treat this job they way they do because they know they can just get another job at another facility and act as if nothing ever happened; matter of fact, they can be awful in one place, leave, and go be awful in another because everywhere is so damn understaffed. They learn to be awful because no one says anything about it. And if someone does, somehow, you've spoken poorly of their character; and they'd be right if it's a pattern of behavior. Don't let those people deter you from doing this. Those patients will see you and know there's at least someone who cares."

Mabel shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. "That or they just lump me in with every other caretaker. I don't mean to leave so quick Bernice, but I have to go so that I can be prepared for tomorrow. Thank you though."

Bernice watched Mabel slowly walk out of classroom. By the time Mabel returned to her mother's home, the sun had not set. She could not fight the feeling of what was to be done. She grabbed the schedule out of her pink pack and went to the page number that she had written down during class. "If you ever need to hotline, call this number". There was a sudden sense of gratitude in her that she could not fully comprehend, for everything. Her hands shook as she got out her phone, and with fear and trembling in breast, she dialed the number and waited.

"This is the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services: do you need to make a report?"

"Yes please."