Summer Nights At A Nursing Home: excerpts from a journal, 1974

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Lillian is ninety years old. She talks with her tongue rolling in and out of her lips, muffled but plaintive. The nights are awful long. The days are awful long. Are they for you?"

"The nights are."
Lillian is ninety years old. She talks with her tongue rolling in and out of her lips, muffled but plaintive. “The nights are awful long. The days are awful long. Are they for you?”

“The nights are.”

Everybody dragged into the stuffy lunchroom for coffee before work tonight. Heat and lack of sleep makes us dread the long hours ahead. Sue was told that she had bedpan-washing duty tonight instead of patient care. I mumbled, “Too bad” and sipped some more bitter coffee left from the day shift.

Sue startled me. “Well, at least I know what I’ll be doing tonight. If I was working the floor and it was slow, I’d fall asleep, and if it was too busy, I couldn’t make it.” I thought of Sisyphus rolling his rock up the mountain. Sue knew her fate, and she felt good.

Nurse Z. is worn thin. She is the mother of six, divorced and working nights. She has bedpan-washing duty tonight instead of patient care. I mumbled, “Too bad” and sipped some more bitter coffee left from the day shift.

Sue said, “Just a few hours.”

“Don’t you ever get sick?”

“No. The body gets used to it.”

Mersault in Camus’ The Stranger was right: On s’habitude à tout. I don’t know how she stays alive.

From Albert Camus’ Notebooks: “One must love life before loving its meaning,” says Dostoevsky... Yes, and when the love of life disappears, no meaning can console us.” When we are young, life seems to have no limits. The fate of old people and little children in Vietnam is too remote. But I have come to see how short life is. I want life so badly, all of it. A year ago I was suffocating. I didn’t see how I could continue the endless waiting from one moment to the next.

Death’s presence hangs close every night. The spirit of life has gone out of some patients. Soon their bodies will be still. In a few days we will be wrapping her stiff, ice cold body; it is hard to watch someone die, but Rose wants to die. Before the heart attack, she was fading away from us. She refused to take her medications. Today, after one week in the hospital, she looks twenty years older, no teeth, a pale, deeply lined face, heavy arms and legs, and a distant fading voice. I have wanted to ask Rose how it is to be so close to leaving. I wonder how she views us scurrying around as she sinks back, back. Does her life pass before her, or do thoughts turn only to the painful beating of a dying heart?

Camus’ mention of sin in “Summer in Algiers” struck me: “For if there is sin against life, it consists perhaps not so much in despairing of life as in hoping for another life and in eluding the impenetrable grandeur of this life.” I smile inside because, like Camus, I do not hope for another life. I want greater consciousness of this life on earth and the delicate awareness of each daily experience, even when the days are brutal and disappointing. I used to live tentatively, upon a faith that things would “work out”. Today I want my whole being to more consciously through each moment, full of a burning desire to live. When this desire leaves me, never want to lie day after day in a nursing home, to be unable to command these strong and tender arms or my firm, healthy legs. Now humiliating to have your mind and body deteriorate in front of strangers, to be taken care of by people who spend as little time as possible meeting your needs. Yes, dying slowly and consciously would be too agonizing. Will I die as these ancient women do or will Death come early for me?

Daytime people get to see sunsets in summer, but only those who have endured the long nights watch this immense sun creeping over the treetops. The sun came up, bright and red! Another day begins, another long night has
ended. I watch the moon sliver rise high in the sky, a single star next to it leaping over its white edge and disappearing in the morning light.

Is it safe to assume that, if people are not talking about "philosophy," they are not thinking about it either? At work, we rarely have a conversation on religion or politics, or anything that goes beyond the incidents of the day. Are we capable of plugging on through life without questioning? Martha is an example. Earning less than $15 a day for eight hours work, she took another job. She is five months pregnant and pays $100 a month for a fancy car. I think she is crazy. She sleeps propped up in a chair most of the night on the job; I sit and read. She thinks I'm crazy, too.

I hate MacDonalds for one reason only—it is depersonalizing. I don't object to the idea of a hamburger stand, but the over-processed food delivered across the counter with efficiency intended only for robots. People are not robots. Yet we move farther and farther away from each other in this society. A smile or personal comment is the exception at a place like MacDonalds. You remain anonymous, passing other Americans stuffing themselves with nourishing Big Macs and Coca-Cola. I love these people because I am one of them, also anonymous. It hurts me so much not to know them because it means they don't know me.

Before I went through a period of depression, I felt like an outsider in the world. Things that were important in other people's lives, such as children or a love for plants and gardens, didn't matter to me. Now I know and accept our destiny as lone individuals, but know also the joy of concern for others and the precious moments of sharing with the people I love.

I looked at my hands last night. They are soft and brown, but the knuckles are starting to wrinkle and look like the knots in pine trees. Estella's hands are soft, too, but they are ninety-four years old.

The joy of babies, the loneliness of growing old. I knew of neither before. Yet I am haunted by the vision of dead children lying in the smoldering ruins of the Casbah in the movie, Battle of Algiers. Can the intense longing for liberation be measured against the anguish and grief of each mother and father who has lost a child?

Camus says in his Notebooks (VI): "The only way I can know my capacity for love is from my capacity for anguish." Remember last summer.

Swimming today in the cool waters under the hot sun I was immersed in blue-sky liquid. The sensation of touching the water with every part of my body
delighted me. My cheeks and mouth kissed the water between each smooth, slow stroke of my arms.

I catch my breath after reading Camus' short story “The Adulterous Woman”. I am drawn back to the cool mountain nights, sitting on the edge of the dock at Catamount Pond. The moon and the wandering clouds are reflected in the pond's still waters. Only an occasional ripple against the shore breaks this silence. I whisper to the mountain before me, the stars above, and the pines around me before tiptoeing along the soft path leading to my tent and a deep sleep.

After dinner we continued sharing the bottle of wine. The conversation was slow, deliberate, maybe distant. I could clearly see we were friends, “old” ones, but that we are growing steadily apart. He is happy being more “political”, I am happy to “settle down”. He speaks of weekly meetings, comrades, political education classes, a hoped-for trip to Cuba. I think of the people at work, the books I read, the man I love, my family. The months of wanting to believe in Marxism like religion have passed. I do not want to use people for an abstract end that someone else has dictated. I do not think the bitterness will return. I believe too much in dialogue and that no one person or group has the “truth”.

I do not know what my friend will end up doing. He often chastises me for being “straight”, but my defense is strong against his rhetoric—I have found that I can live amid the haste with some tranquility and a sufficient number of happy moments. My friend said as he was leaving, “You are everything I want to be, but cannot”.

At four in the morning I walked Lillian back to her bed after she hobbled to the pot. She calls herself at these times a “drunken sailor”—not far from an accurate description. As I tucked her into bed, she looked up at me innocently through the little gold-wire glasses she always wears: “Did you watch the Lawrence Welk show tonight?”

“No, honey.”

“Was awful good.”

Lillian is ninety-years-old and doesn’t have any teeth.

My favorite music is J.S. Bach’s. I love the counterpoint and struggle, the passion and universality of his music. When I listen, it pulls me in, completely absorbs me. I plead with all my self that the music never end. I drink in more and more of the sounds... until they come no longer and there is only silence.

When I first met Mrs. Z., she used to pass my nursing station on the way to the breakroom at about three in the morning. The nursing home was divided into four stations and she would pass me by, because my station was the closest to the breakroom at the intersection of two corridors. We smiled at each other and I knew she liked me. Mrs. Z. was affectionate, her voice maternal and tender. She reminded me of a girl I once knew. She had the same kind of cheekbones too, rounded, with deep clefts where they swerved away from her nose. She told me she liked me, because I reminded her of what she was like when she was small.

She always wore a dark sweater. She was cold, even in the summer. I thought she had a nicer figure than I did, but it was like a girl's. She wore her nurse's uniform baggy, as if she'd lost some weight. Mrs. Z.'s hair was brown, fluffy and short enough so she didn’t have to wear it back. She would brush it away from her forehead, especially when she was tired.

Mrs. Z. asked why I read so many books and what good did they do me. It was hard to answer not because I didn’t know, but because what I was doing is outside of her world. Once she brought me a book she’d gotten from a library and never returned. She gave it to me as a gift, saying, “Here, I'll never read it anyway”. It was an edition of Plato's Republic. It saddened me that there should be such a chasm between us.

One night, after she had given me the Plato, she brought me something in a pink paper bag, something that was moldy, and falling apart, and smelly. She said her kids had found it in an old barn. It was an 1870 issue of Harper's and it still had the order slip to the original recipient in it. The magazine was addressed to someone in Honeoye Falls and didn’t cost much at all then. Times have changed.

Another night I was excited by a passage in Michael Novak's Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnic and I showed it to her. It was about Italians and I thought Mrs. Z. was an Italian so she'd be interested. She tried to read it all that night, but she kept falling asleep in her chair. She was just too tired. She told me she wasn't Italian, only married to one, but that Novak was right: Italians were like that and Italians were all alike.

Mrs. Z. was down on herself. She had been an orphan. She told me she was very lonely as a child. Maybe that’s why she had so many children when she got married. She had gotten married right out of high school. A few years ago she and her husband divorced.

Mrs. Z. was very moody because she was so tired, and sometimes she would sleep on duty, propped up in her chair. She used to sit in a wheelchair when she slept and often she'd wheel herself around to watch the call lights from the patients in the two corridors. Nurses weren’t supposed to sleep on the job, and the supervisor started to get on her back. She was afraid she might be fired and got quite depressed about it.

Sometimes she was angry with me when she saw me reading, “Why are you going to school, if you don’t know what you want? It’s a waste of money.” I think she envied me a little because I had time and energy to study, to ask questions, and she didn’t.

That was the summer of ’74 and in the midst of the Nixon scandal. We’d talk about politics. She was altogether cynical and thought all politicians were crooks. She was so impressed by her own situations, she didn’t care about what happened to the world.

Mrs. Z. lived for her children. I think she had six, from about eight to eighteen. I couldn’t understand working nights and then going home to an active family. I got to sleep after work. She was very proud of her children, especially her eldest son. She showed me their pictures once. They were dark-skinned, dark-eyed, good-looking kids. At the beginning of our shift, she usually called them at home to make sure things were locked up and everyone was okay. I don’t know who owned the house. Perhaps her husband still owned it. But one night at the end of summer she was frightened because some people had been snooping around taking pictures of the house. She was afraid that her husband wanted to take it away from her. She kept asking all the other nurses who had the rights. Could anyone take the house away from her?

Usually we’d have a “lunch” break at two o'clock in the morning. Technically we were supposed to have a half-hour...
lunch and two fifteen-minute breaks during the night. We'd combine the breaks and sleep at the end of the shift. Mrs. Z. would choose to sleep on lunch break and not eat. I'd ask if she wanted to eat anything, then bring her jello, cake, or fresh coffee. She's eat it later when she woke up. She always slept at the nurse's station. I can't ever remember her going into the lounge. Her sense of duty was very strong. Some of the aides were lazy. I was lazy too, and I was conscious I wasn't doing altogether my share. When I was with Mrs. Z. she was the first one up to answer calls; some aides would sleep. Usually aides answered calls and nurses remained on the station.

She would do everything aidses would do. She would change the patient's sheets, change their clothes if they were wet and needed it, and talk to the patients if they wanted comfort. Mrs. Z. would do everything with us; she didn't act like a nurse. As a nurse at night in a nursing home, you don't have much duty beyond passing medications, but she shared the work, did more than her share.

Sarah was in her late eighties. She was one of my favorite patients. She had once been a high-school teacher and you could see she was intelligent. You could tell from the things she had in her room and by the way she talked about her relatives. Sarah knew she was old and couldn't do things for herself anymore. She would fall when she walked so we had to restrain her. But no matter what we did, no matter how we strapped her in, she always managed to get herself out. She'd climb out of the bed and be standing there in the hall, her nightgown hanging on her. Mrs. Z. was great with her, tender, and we'd get her back into bed. Most of the nurses would just laugh at Sarah.

I became permanent at East Two, another station, so I didn't get to see Mrs. Z. so much. She wasn't the nurse on East Two so we didn't have contact anymore. One of the other nurses' aides was my age; she was blonde and going to college. I used to talk with her a lot because we could talk about intellectual and fun things. I think I stopped talking to Mrs. Z. because when I was energetic and happy around her that made her feel worse. I felt I was wounding her whenever I talked to her. I don't know whether I cut off the relationship or whether it subsided naturally. She ignored me after that. Maybe she felt left out. At the end of the summer, she seemed more tired than at the beginning, as though the summer had worn her out.

One of my friends was with the union 1199. Her name was Lynn and she asked me to help organize the nurses' aides and the nurses. I talked to some of the aides about the union, but I learned about not wanting to make waves. I worried about my own job. Mrs. Z. felt vulnerable on the job much more than I did, and she didn't want to hear anything about the union. That might have been one of the things that separated us. I tried to see if any of the others wanted to have Lynn come and talk, and if they'd sign cards, but Mrs. Z. didn't want to have anything to do with it. Now, two years later, they are on strike. I wonder if she joined.

I went back once after the summer was over, to pick something up. It might have been a check, yes, it was a check. I went back to my nursing station and picked it up. It was in the afternoon. There was a note from another friend, Judy, who was a nurse's aide on days. She said goodbye to me and wished me good luck. She was glad to have known me. Judy had been one of the best aides and was given a promotion to work as the recreational director. Lucky Judy, not to have to change beds any more. She was about thirty-eight, but looked eighteen. She lived with her husband in an apartment and bought nice things. She always looked sharp in her uniforms, happy and energetic. I really like older women who look young.

I understood Judy quite well, but I never did understand Mrs. Z. that summer. Camus might have been right. On s'habitude à tout. We do get used to everything.