

PICTURES IN AN INSTITUTION

BY JOEL RAY

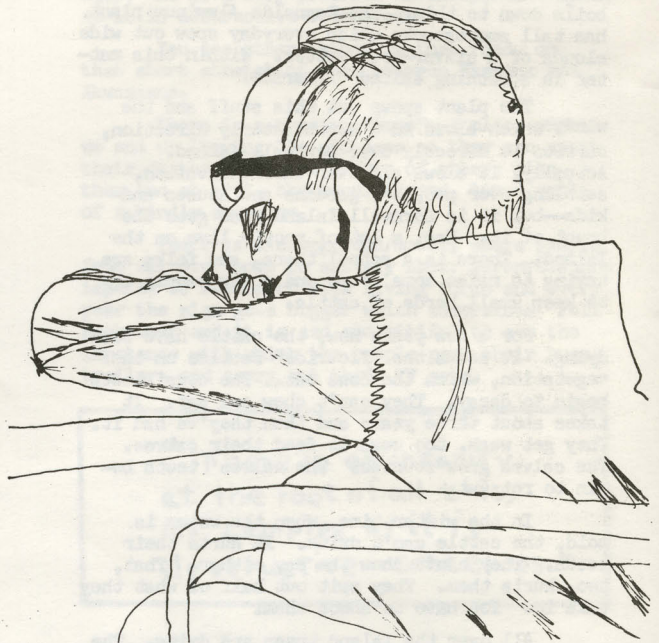
When the North Country Rescue Squad came to get me, the driver was from Brooklyn and his assistant was a strong, pretty young woman. Gingerly they shoveled me—rigid as a slab—off my bed onto the stretcher, slid me into the van, and took the two blocks to the hospital with lights flashing. Someone shot me up with Tolwin as soon as I arrived, and they got me headed for a room.

I wasn't so blinded by pain that I couldn't see they had taken me to the goddamn geriatrics ward. There were three old men, two watching me intently as I was shoveled off the stretcher and put in traction. Old men watched me suffering, and I was embarrassed.

The three of them were in various states of dis-ease. In the bed next to mine there was a birdlike, beaked face, sharp even in sleep. He was in a post-operative lapse, tubes running from him in every direction. Across the room was a man about the same age—mid-sixties?—who appeared normal enough, and next to him an older man sitting half-dressed on the side of his bed, waiting for the doctor's orders for release.

This man was 84, and had lived to this day in the house where he was born. A fierce old trouble from the look of his wife when she came to get him—she indulged his whims, yet would be censorious, you knew, to the very last. I heard later that he used to make his sons fight in front of him to settle their disagreements, and the son who came along to get him looked a bar-brawler, shielded and hostile, hair slicked like the fifties. Before they arrived to take him home, the old man rambled around the room doing favors for Arthur and me, elated to be mobile again and feeling, too, a bit superior.

When I first came, he and Arthur spoke to each other in what sounded to me like a code, as though they'd known each other all their lives (though they hadn't). It was an alien rhythm, spears of words, abbreviations, falls of phrases just beyond my reach. I wondered before the old man left whether Arthur and I would be able to speak with one another once we were alone. And though he may have been 17 years younger than the old man, he was 31 years older than me. We did speak, and at first it was awkward and infrequent; but soon that fell away because we were, after all, in the same fix. Never anything more serious than inquiring after each others' pain, though once he did ask me my opinion of the drug situation in the north country. Stoked up on either Tolwin or Demerol, I allowed it wasn't much different here than anywhere else.



Arthur and I had a common focus in the birdlike old fellow. He would occasionally emerge from his own fog to smoke a cigarette, or to eat, but most of the time we would shake our heads together at his desperate incoherence. Once or twice at the beginning I tried to respond to this wreckage, but Arthur made it clear there was no use. So we largely ignored him. Arthur would crack jokes he couldn't hear.

My second night, the old buzzard raised holy hell. He ripped his bandages loose, tore the tubes out, hollered "Myyyy.....God!", called for his son over and over, told the nurse he'd have to go back to the hospital. In turn the furious nurse cursed, cajoled and threatened him, tripped him up pretending, caught him, said "if you don't leave your bandages alone I'm gonna tie you down." He took it in the neck from her, and Arthur and I took it in the neck from them both. By morning I was in a semi-stupid lather. Get him out of here. My angry complaint resulted in my own removal. There would be no agency on earth to foot the bill for a private room for the old bird, even for a day.

As the nurse wheeled me across the hall to another room—"a nice window," she said—I almost asked her to forget it. I'd take the old man anytime to the chore of having to take possession of new space in someone else's territory. More old men watching my painful entry?

Arthur came over later to bring me some books—he had enjoyed telling his visitors that I was a bookstore owner—and to comfort me with the assurance that the old bird had been doing all the yelling and tipping just to get attention. He felt badly that I had been moved. A private, gentle man, he never complained about his own ailments—he was in for a variety of malfunctions from neck pain to hiatal hernia to eye problems, the whole system going bad after a strenuous outdoor life—and would never have objected to the furies of the previous night. They let him go the next day, and he came over to say goodbye.

The old bird had needed attention, more than just the shot he was always asking for (even 15 minutes after he had had one). In a rare moment of lucidity, before I was moved, he had talked briefly to no one in particular about his wife being alone, his sons in Syracuse, and no way for his wife to shop or visit him. He seemed pleased later when a friend called to say he would arrange for such transportation.

His wife came later that day. When the doctor arrived to examine the old man, she left—and she stayed away long after the doctor had gone. Soon after she returned, the old man awoke, found her there, and began badgering her, "where'd you go, what'd you leave me for?" Swore, "I'll whup you if you leave again!" A hard country woman with a woeful husband, and life pretty much a wreck? In the distance between them seemed terrible hurt, beyond any operation to cure.

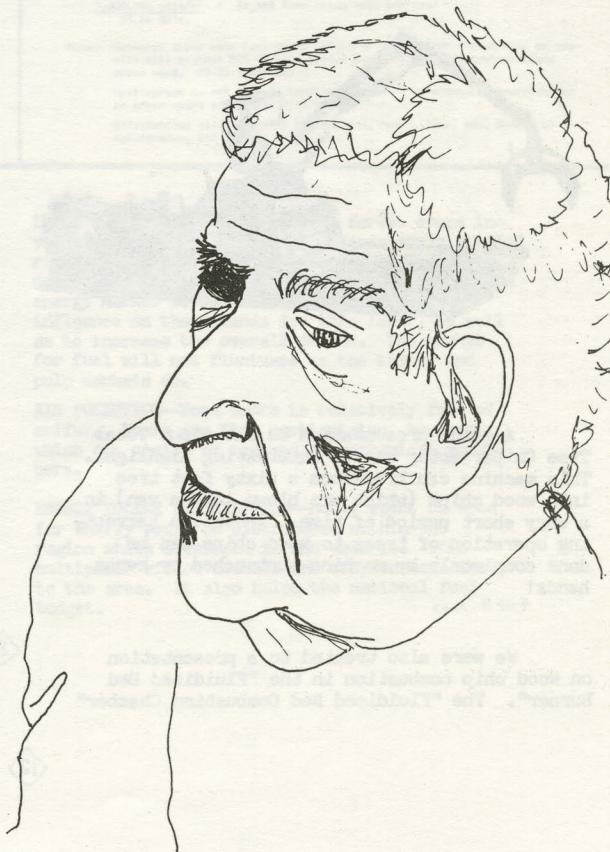
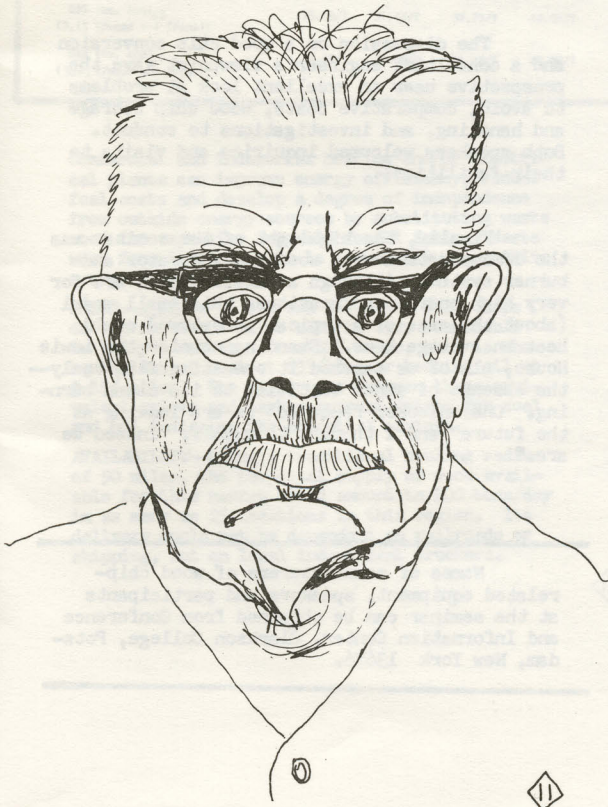
My new roommate, Hal, was 77. He had moved from Tompkins City up to the north country after retirement to live with his kids and grandkids (and great-grandkids—an eight-year-old was his favorite). He was a fine old man who did not lose his dignity even when he was regretting all his dead friends, his dead hunting friends. He slept little during the day, mostly stared out the window, and occasionally at me. He would turn his head quickly when I caught him watching me. Was I some memory he was working over? His resistance to time was almost, but not quite, gone. I was startled the day he was finally allowed out of bed to walk (he'd had a prostate operation), that he was a short man, probably about 5'7". I had been sure he was over six feet. And he was stooped as well.

Hal's son came often to visit, and seemed cut from the same cloth, a careful, caring man, unresistant. There was never a hint of impatience or irritation between the two of them.

In Hal and Arthur there was a vulnerability to hospital care very unlike the ripping and cursing of the old buzzard across the hall. They passively accepted that their bodies belonged to the doctors, nurses and attendants of various kinds. They had pared needs, and could live like cacti if need be.

But it was infuriating at times. Hal had to use a saline respirator four times a day to assure that he would not get pneumonia or something, and he did resent it. But he put up with

cont. p. 39 →



Pictures...

it even though he had never had a respiratory problem. For days after his operation he had no interest in food, then one day he ate his first tasty meal, and the pleasure he took in it was palpable. He had hardly had time to begin digestion when the attendant came with the infernal breathing machine. Could they not even let him savor his meal, such a small enjoyment? It would never have occurred to the attendant, apparently. Hal did not complain, though you could see he hated the young kid's indifference to him.

Some of the worst pain was this indifference or fear. One night around 3 AM I moved wrong and was gripped by a back spasm which would not let go for the next hour. I hollered, but couldn't move to reach a book on the table which I knew would raise my back the small distance necessary to stop the spasm. I knew this would work, and yet the female nurse who came to give me a shot (which had no effect) would not hand me the book. Why, goddammit? I can't, she said, because there is no such order from the doctor. Petrified I would hurt myself and sue her?

Two nights later the spasm came again, about the same time. This time a male nurse came, a Marine III type, commanding his assistant to roll me up immediately. I hollered through grinding teeth that IT WAS NOT THE RIGHT THING TO DO! and he rolled me back down and gave me the book. Then he got me a shot and a muscle relaxer and sat and talked for awhile. I was scared, the spasms were new and portended something much worse than I wanted to think about. The DI admitted how hardened to pain most nurses are. Like everyone else, he was relieved when the spasm had stopped. But he had acted, at least; for that I was grateful.

Hal had left by this time. Before he had left, though, we had been joined by a 57-year old Massena plant worker named Harry who was in for only a couple of days. Of the eleven people I shared space within those two weeks, he was the only one I felt at times a real antagonism towards, partly because of the slight contempt he directed at me. I hated to have that spasm with him there. He was very internalized, the tough male. He was also disaffected, and I had not enough appreciation of that to feel much compassion for him during his two-day stay. He loved the woods, and would talk about guns and hunting all day with Hal. When Hal left us together, he and I had little to talk about.

One night after my wife left he said, after a decent interval, "your wife sure can talk." A quacking gesture followed. It was an ambiguous remark and gesture, the way he said and did it, unless one was mindful of his own wife.

She was inane. The only thing she ever said with any conviction was that Hal should be careful not to inhale too fast on the saline respirator. Over and over she said this. She knew, she had had to use one once and had thrown up when she used it too fast. I suspect Harry had been both awed and repelled by my wife, who

was of an energetic intelligence and truly enjoyed talk.

Well, he left soon, as I said; glad to say au revoir.

Harry had come in to have a growth of some kind removed from his mouth. From not talking?

After he left I was alone for a few hours, for the first time in 10 days, and it was a wonderful relief. But in the middle of the night I awoke dismayed to hear the next bed being prepared for a new one. He was a kid, fifteen, in for an emergency appendectomy. The young night nurse was shaving him in preparation, and he was terrified of the razor (in the hand of a woman?). I could almost feel him trembling through the curtain. Julie comforted him very gently.

When I awoke the next morning the curtain was pulled back and there he was in his post-operative lapse, a beautiful blond farm boy struggling somewhere under the anaesthetic.

A middle-aged couple came to visit him, and from the way they entered and stood uncomfortably at the foot of his bed, speaking distantly to the boy, I assumed they were an aunt and uncle or perhaps neighbors. They were his parents.

The father, a round bald bespectacled man of about sixty, did not even say hello to his son, much less touch him. The mother did not touch him either, though she seemed more familiar; she was all sternness, though, and male self-sufficiency. American Gothic they were, and their beautiful son, a blond Adonis, was terrified over his manhood and otherwise nearly catatonic in his insecurity and fear of other people. He seemed, during his two or three days in the next bed, closed to the world. Only the familiarity of the ads and programs on TV made the ordeal bearable for him. He was a hockey player, and I wondered whether on the ice he got free of this terrible encasement.

As though to complete my experience at the hospital (I was on the mend and moving around now) with an instructive comparison—and a little lift—they put another young man in the farmboy's bed after he left. He was the same age, also a hockey player, dark-haired rather than blond. The contrast was startling. The kid was greatly curious and had no fear about the operation to mend the cartilage in his knee. He was alive, friendly, a country boy too, but of completely different stock. His father was hearty, gruff, large-bellied and slovenly, would sleep in the chair during visits—a joker of sorts. The mother was bright, a little cautious but friendly. They both seemed at ease with themselves. The boy trapped, he told me, and hunted a lot with his father—perhaps his curiousness came from that ongoing process of learning about the woods. Would he elude Harry's fate, the desperate love for the woods in the face of deprivation everywhere else? Perhaps in a more generous place he would, but who could say in the north country?

I was finally well enough to go home, but the day before I left a heavy melancholy settled on me, and I probably puzzled and embarrassed my newest roommate, a twenty-five year old vet, by briefly mentioning it and wondering where it came from. But I had been in that room long enough to feel it was my own, and I could say whatever I wanted in it. The melancholy may have been for my own privileged life, or for my mortality, or for Hal's or Arthur's, or for the damage done to the blond farmboy, or for the separations between us that one yeams, at one's best, to close. But the next day I left knowing that I probably would never see these people again, and might not recognize them if I did.

THE BUMPER STICKER

The fat cat stood ten feet behind his car
And eyed the sticker and he puffed on his cigar
Deep-atisfied, he smugly smiled.

He slipped into his leather-cushioned seat
And bade 200 horses pull him down the street.
Thus he the village folk beguiled.

What said this sticker he so neatly placed
On bumper of his shiny guzzler that he raced
About the country-side? The gist

of it (put on with supercilious smirk)
Was—but I quote! "Hungry? And out of work?
Eat an environmentalist."

John Van de Water
Environmentalist (and proud of it)

BYPRODUCTS—The combustion of wood leaves a proportionally small amount of residual ash. This usually amounts to 0.5 to 1 percent of the dry weight of the wood. This byproduct might also be used as a fertilizer as it is a source of potash, phosphorus and calcium.

RENEWABILITY—If harvested in the context of the utilization of annual growth, the supply of wood is renewable; a ton/acre/year could be harvested regularly as an agricultural crop.

OWNERSHIP—The ownership of the forest resource in New York State is in the hands of many small landowners who own most of the 2,600,000 acres of commercial forest land in the region.

ECOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS—The availability of this market would offer the practicing forester an opportunity to upgrade the quality of existing forests by thinning to stimulate growth of a healthy forest environment. This cutting would improve most wildlife populations by improving food and habitat.

[Information provided by Black River-St. Lawrence Resource Conservation & Development Project, Potsdam, New York 13676]





Roderick Turnbull
Owner —
DE KALB SKATELAND
De KALB JCT., N.Y.

Roller Skating *Enjoyment for All Ages*

OPEN: Wed., Fri. & Sat. —
7 P.M. - 11 P.M.
Sun. 1 P.M. - 5 P.M.

ADMISSION \$2.00
INCLUDING SKATES

For Private Parties and
Group Rate Call
355-9756 or 355-2500

ALL ROUND ENTERTAINMENT
SKATING — FOOSBALL — POOL

THE 'BIKE SHOP



Saranac Lake
8 Woodruff St.
891-3634
Bicycle equipment
B
Expert Repairs
Viscount, Gitane, Centurian

Corner
Subs *tacos,*
★ ★ ★ ★ *delicious subs,*
Main St. *soups & chile,*
Canton
386-8130 *We also deliver.*

CUSTOM BUILT FURNITURE

QUALITY
CARPENTRY
AND WOOD
DESIGNS

HARDWOOD
DISTRIBUTORS



**The
REDWOOD
FOREST**

48 BROADWAY
SARANAC LAKE, N.Y. 12983

REDWOOD
CLOCKS
AND TABLES

OUTLET FOR
ADIRONDACK
WOOD
CRAFTSMEN

Connie Barr's

FOOD & DRINK
Miner St. Canton