

THE CAPTAIN

a novel by
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1.

Even the police, when they were to come there for the first time, were surprised it was an attractive place. From what some of them had seen at other nursing homes and from the scandals that occasionally broke in the newspapers, they expected something closer to a urinal than a hospital. But it looked like a hospital, and even more: the lobby was plushly carpeted, with handsome furnishings and hangings; and the dining room had something of the hotel look, too, though it was uncarpeted, of course, because the patients—or residents, as the management preferred—often spilled their food.

It was a vaguely Colonial-looking one story brick building, with a long, pillared veranda, and four wings that couldn't be seen from the front. Back there, off the lobby, past the swinging doors, it looked exactly like a bright modern hospital, each of the wings with its own curved nursing station. And back there you would occasionally get a whiff of urine because it was hard to keep up with these people, no matter how much you scrubbed or the air-purifying system toiled. So the police, like most people who weren't exposed to this every day, would suddenly find themselves up against a wall of urine-smell they had to walk through. After the first pleasant

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feeling about the place, the reality of just what it was came through in the form of lolling figures in their wheelchairs, the gaunt faces, the repeated gestures, the stares. And, like just about every other visitor, most would think or mumble to each other something like, “Kill me if I ever get like that, don’t put me away.”

The night shift, eleven-to-seven, was generally the easiest for the staff. You would hear an occasional cry or someone would die; of course you had your wanderers, though if someone wandered once you would usually put up the bedrails. But it was generally fairly quiet, like this night on Wing B, so when the nurse came out of the bathroom and back to the station she was startled to see a hulking fully dressed figure down the hall. She quickly put on the glasses she’d been cleaning, and the figure formed into the Captain, bald with his round puttylike face and glob of a nose and horn-rimmed glasses. She groaned softly. Jaysus, he hadn’t flipped out, too. But she’d seen it happen just like that.

In a way it was worse than being fully dressed, because that had some kind of logic to it; but he had a topcoat over his pajamas, and his ankles were bare and very white above his black oxfords. He stared at her as she approached him. Though he was massive, there was a touch of frailty about him. After all, he was in his seventies.

“And where are you going, Captain?” she asked lightly.

It was several moments before any words came out. “Nowhere. I can’t sleep.”

“Does anything hurt you?”

“No.”

“Are you chilly?”

It wasn’t any surprise to her when he nodded. Most of them were cold, even now in July. “Well, why don’t you wear your nice

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robe and slippers?” But she didn’t wait for an answer; she had things to do and he appeared pretty clear, not just absently wandering. “I’ve got an idea. Why don’t you just go back to bed and think pleasant thoughts?”

She stood watching as he shuffled off, then went back to her station.

Once he was in his room the shuffle became long strides as he went to the window and peered through the blinds. But he couldn’t see to the parking lot. If that fucken jig albino didn’t show up or didn’t wait he’d put his fist down his throat. He broke away from the window, heart rocketing, and stepped close to the door. But he was afraid to glance out. He looked back at his bed, with the mound under the covers; the most he’d ever seen them do at night was look in from the doorway. In the next bed Elephant Ears looked like a skull that would take off in a breeze; he slept with his tongue hanging out. Now the Captain steadied himself against the doorway, about to risk another peek.

You had to be so goddamn patient. That was the trick. Make your move too fast, forget it. A half a million dollars worth of horse, street value, would have been down the toilet that time, and they’d have broken down the door into a roomful of smiles; but he’d said to the boys clustered around the street corner, “Hold it, just hold it, I don’t like that car.” It was maybe an hour before the car finally moved and he’d motioned them on after him. And later when they’d made the collars and found the horse and picked up the car, they saw it had a telephone.

It was that case, wasn’t it?

He thought hard, as though trying to think his way through a brick. Yeah. Sure.

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For a few seconds that had caught him up so thoroughly he'd even stopped thinking about the nurse. But the anxiety was back and he eased his head out ever so slightly. He snapped back. All he had to do was get across the hall to the alcove where the soda machines were, but she was sitting there at the station in profile, a pencil to her chin.

Every so often he glanced out. Now, about five minutes later, she was walking away from him down the hall. He drew in a quick breath and stepped out and strode over to the alcove without looking to either side. He stood there, his breath coming in painful gasps. Slowly he opened the door to the storeroom, then reached into his pocket for the key to the outside door. If that fucken albino got him a bum copy. . . . But the lock turned.

Outside, with the door closed behind him, he felt as though caught in a prison yard spotlight. But it was just the lights around the place. It was a hot night, but he felt cold as he hugged the wall around to the parking lot.

Which car? Which, if any?

He stepped into the middle of the lot, and as he did headlights flashed on. The car came toward him, the door swung open and he got in. It wasn't until they got out to the street that the driver spoke.

"You're gettin' me in trouble, Captain."

He didn't say anything. Instead he took a slip of paper from his pocket and handed it over. He couldn't always trust his memory, so he'd written down the address. In fact, he'd written it down three times because he wanted to make sure it was clear. The albino studied it against the dashboard lights. The Captain looked at his puffy face: it was a sickly yellow-cream color, with a touch of freckles; there was also a hint of red in the white wool of his hair.

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Some of the best boys on his squad were jigs, he thought. But they weren't this crazy color, and they didn't take it up the ass.

Not that fruits bothered him. As long as they didn't go after kids or him or anyone who didn't want it. And if you let them have their little wrong they made good stoolies. But that was the secret with all stoolies. You can have your little wrong as long as it ain't violent or dope or any real felony, and you kept your wires open. Christ, who'd had more wires than him?

"Captain, I ain't sure where this is. I got an idea, but I ain't sure. You know where it is?"

If he got close he'd know. Fast: "C'mon, c'mon, get the hell outta here!"

"What you want to go there for this late?" he said, driving. When he didn't get an answer, "You gonna be there long, Captain?"

"No."

They drove in silence. After a while the albino said, "Captain, you really got me wrong."

"Bullshit."

"I'd have driven you anyway. You didn't have to say what you did. I never touched one of them old folks. Ain't I good to them? Don't I clean up their shit? Why were you gonna say I did?"

"Don't you ever touch 'em, you hear? You and that bimbo in the kitchen can fuck yourselves dry but don't you touch no one else."

"Christ, Captain."

He'd sensed the weak one right away. The bimbo cook looked like he wouldn't bend, but the albino had that certain weakness about him. And after waiting for him to finish taking some of the people to the shower, he took him aside and told him. He didn't tell him he'd

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seen him with his hand on the bimbo's ass. Just that he was going to the office because he'd caught him with No Voice, that poor bastard

"I think we're here, Captain."

For the past few moments the Captain had been sitting there in a panic. Nothing looked familiar. In fact, he forgot which daughter's house he was going to. Or maybe it was Mark's. No, not Mark. He'd been with Ellen or Rosemarie the last time. God, which had it been, Ellen or Rosemarie?

"Okay, we're there now," the albino said.

And it was coming back to the Captain also. Rosemarie.

"Park here."

He got out, trying to orient himself. For a couple of moments he felt some vertigo and grabbed hold of the car. But he was all right now. Only the night light was on in the house, the one they kept on in the living room. He made his way cautiously down the alley to the rear yard, stopping every few moments to try to adjust to the darkness. He touched a fence and knew that the doghouse was to the left. He followed the fence and then saw the outline of the doghouse.

What if it was gone?

He was on his knees, reaching into the doghouse. He had to reach in far. Then his fingers touched heavy plastic. He drew it out and unfolded it. He took out the revolver and the small box of cartridges. He held the revolver in his hand. He pointed it at the house, rage pulsing in his temples. Then he lowered it and wrapped it up again and put it in his pocket for the ride back.

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Dr. Bennett pulled his two-door Mercedes into one of the four parking spaces reserved for physicians; it was the only physician's car there. He eased himself out, gave a lengthy stretch, then reached in for his sport jacket and bag. He put on the jacket as he walked toward the steps of the home.

"Hello, Dr. Bennett."

"How's it going?" But didn't wait for the young woman at the front desk to reply. Instead he peered around her at the darkened offices just to make sure no one was there. No one was: it was going on six and administration generally left at five-thirty. Just as well. He'd stopped in on his way home and he couldn't wait to be there, to get out of these clothes and into a shower.

He walked back to Wing B, greeted Mrs. Latimore, the RN at the station, and asked for the Finklestein and Manning charts. As he studied them, a couple of the kitchen help were guiding a tray-filled cart through the hall for residents who couldn't eat in the dining room. Someone tugged at his sleeve, a bony plaster-white toothless woman loosely restrained in a wheelchair. "I'm a good girl, Uncle Josh. I'm a good girl."

"I know you are, honey."

He turned back to the charts as an aide guided the wheelchair along the hall. From somewhere came a wail.

He'd gotten a call that afternoon that they believed Mrs. Finklestein had come up with a hernia and that Mr. Manning had some gross hematuria. He had twenty-eight—or was it twenty-nine now?—patients assigned to him, whom he would see routinely once or twice a month. Whenever possible he would give the nurses

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standing orders. But he was always on call, of course, though generally he could either handle it on the phone or, if it seemed to be an emergency or beyond nursing home care, would have them send the patient to one of the nearby hospitals.

“Mrs. Finklestein, you look so pretty today.”

She stared at him from the chair near her window. Mrs. Latimore had followed him in.

“Does anything hurt you?”

“They give me dreck to eat.”

“I’m not going to hurt you, I just want to examine you.”

It was easy to see the swelling in the labium as he examined her in a standing position. He was able to reduce it gently with his fingers and to see that it was above the inguinal ligament, that it wasn’t femoral. She couldn’t answer if it hurt, but apparently it didn’t for she showed no signs of tenderness. Back at the station he wrote “indirect inguinal hernia” on her chart, and the decision would be whether an operation or a truss. In an old person you often had to do a herniorrhaphy, had to strengthen the posterior wall of the canal, in addition to the herniotomy. He couldn’t see putting someone in her late seventies through that, though obviously there was always the danger of strangulation. He would try a truss first, although now that he saw it on her chart he recalled that she had extremely sensitive skin. . . . Well, a truss first.

Mr. Manning, though, would have to go to the hospital. From the call, he’d felt they had botched the catheterization again. But among other things he didn’t like the feel of the prostate.

Handing back the chart he was tempted to call it quits, but his conscience bit at him and he asked for the nurses’ progress notes on all of his patients in the wing. He hadn’t been in for nearly a week

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and he wasn't about to go through all of them, since he would have been called if there was anything serious, so he leafed through the pages for the past couple days and nights. Galtman . . . appetite better; Shoner . . . back in restraints because, oh Christ, peed on his dinner; Jones . . . swelling of ankles went down; the Captain . . . 12:16 A.M. yesterday, in hall in coat, pajamas, shoes, but went right back to bed on request, was sleeping when looked in.

Again he was about to leave, but that was so unusual for the Captain that he said to Mrs. Latimore, "How's the Captain been today?"

She squinted and curled her lips as though in a rage. "Like this. Oh, I'm exaggerating."

"Is he acting up in any way?"

"Hasn't complained today if that's what you mean."

"Let's see his chart." He knew what the Captain was taking but wanted to be sure. Could be he was reacting to medication.

"Hughes, Walter, seventy-six," he said in a kind of singsong way as he flipped from the front pages to the back, then looked at the front again. Hydrochlorothiazide, 50 mg in the morning, for hypertension. He'd been taken off Thorazine for severe anxiety but was still on Elavil, 10 mg t.i.d. and 20 mg at bedtime, for depression. Four weeks ago Lomotil for diarrhea, two and a half weeks ago tetracycline for five days for a bug of some kind, dum, dum, dee dum . . . Well, it was hydrochlorothiazide and Elavil now, and though any drug could give a reaction he doubted if there was any connection after all this time. See how it went the next few nights.

Actually, the Captain was much improved since he first came here three months ago following gallbladder surgery. The children said they couldn't handle him anymore because he was depressed,

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would get confused, but who the hell wouldn't if you were bounced from one kid's home to another every three or four months? This wasn't to say there mightn't be some cerebral arteriosclerosis, but he couldn't see any clear features of it. In fact, the medication had eased his depression within a few weeks, and with it his confusion seemed to have lifted. It made him wonder about a lot of doctors; with all that was in the literature they still didn't seem to catch on that it could take weeks for antidepressants to work, that you had to give them time.

But, as often happened to these people when their depression thinned out and they really became aware for the first time of their environment, they became quick-tempered, hostile. Not that the Captain was violent; nothing like that. But as one of his daughters said, she had never heard him say anything worse than hell or damn in her life—happened after he got here.

He glanced into the Captain's room on his way out. He was lying in bed fully clothed, his big hands locked beneath his head.

"Captain, just wanted to say hello. How you doing?"

The Captain stared over at him, chin near his shoulder.

"Not talking today? Take it easy, Captain," and now he was gone.

"Time for dinner, Captain," the albino said.

"I'm staying here."

"You ain't feelin' well?"

"I'm okay."

"They ain't gonna like that."

Another orderly came in shortly. "Mack says you're not going to the dining room."

"So?"

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Mrs. Latimore and a nurse's aide followed soon after, but he wasn't leaving. They finally ordered him a tray.

He just drank some tea, lying in bed. He'd had breakfast and lunch in the dining room and they'd made him go to that fucken room where you drew pictures, but he'd worried all the time and wasn't about to leave now.

He kept his eyes on his closet. Without looking at the next bed, "You want anything?"

"No." Elephant Ears had one leg.

He wasn't worried about the staff looking in there, but he was always finding some oatmeal head wandering around with his slippers or underwear. You couldn't put anything down. He'd have to come up with some other hiding place for the future, but right now just let someone try to get in there. Just let them try.

At ten minutes to eleven he was crouched by her car. The doors weren't locked, as he had feared. He slid into the back, closing the door as noiselessly as he could, and stayed low against the floor.

He was trembling violently. For some reason, he thought of the first time he'd watched someone go to the chair. He was nervous then, too, especially when he had heard the approaching screams, but a kind of calm had come over him as he thought of that young girl, her stomach slashed open. And after that he'd watched every bum go he put in the chair. Eight of them. Seven? Not that he liked seeing it. Hell no. But if you're gonna put someone in the chair, be there.

Remembering that calmed him, too, and like something filling a vacuum the full flood of his rage was back. Now he could hear some crinkly sounds around him, footsteps on the pebbly asphalt, then here and there the sound of a motor as the three-to-eleven shift was leaving. Then the door on the driver's side opened and finally

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closed.

“See you tomorrow, Joannie,” the driver called out.

“See you. Big doings tonight?”

“Yeah,” followed by fake snoring and a laugh. Now the motor roared. He got a whiff of cigarette smoke and made a face and had to fight against coughing. They were starting to move.

He didn't wait long, just for about a block. He rose up and sat on the back seat and as he did he said, “Just keep driving, do what I say.”

There was a gasp and she turned, saw the gun, that round face, the glasses. “Oh, my God.”

“In that driveway. Over there. There!”

“Oh, my God.”

She turned in. The driveway led to an abandoned warehouse in the middle of a couple acres of broken paving and a scattering of brush and trees.

“Stop the car.”

She did. She turned again. “Please. Pl—”

He shot her squarely in the face.

He got out quickly, afraid blood would spurt on him. She was thrashing from side to side, silently, her face gushing blood, then crumbled over, twisted, against the back of the seat, part of her face toward him. He was trembling again as he watched her. She'd stopped moving. He reached in gingerly and touched her head with the revolver, then drew back a little, and even though she hadn't stirred he fired again, this time at the top of her head, and fought the urge to reach the full satisfaction of just emptying the whole goddamn barrel in her.

He started to leave but then remembered, and with his coat he

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wiped off the handles of the door he used. He trudged up the drive, but instead of going directly out to the street he paralleled it along the warehouse grounds. Now he would have to go out to the street for a block, then cross another street to go up the driveway to the home. He stepped out to the sidewalk and walked as casually as he could. Tonight, unlike last night, he was wearing street clothes under his coat.

The houses, as he remembered from the bus ride they'd taken to that fucken orchard, were set far apart here. An occasional car was parked for the night along the curb. It was a quiet street, but the street fronting the grounds of the home was usually fairly busy, at least during the day, and as he came close to it he felt as though his calves had turned to rocks. It had become painful to walk.

He saw an occasional car go past the intersection ahead. Now, at the corner, he had to stop for a while because of the pain. A flash of memory made him connect it with fear. He'd had his moments of fear, sometimes drawing him at the groin and a sensation going down his legs, though he'd never told Josie that, God rest her soul, nor anyone else for that matter. Somehow the memory loosened his calves a little; and seeing headlights in the distance, little dots, he walked across the street and then straight on past the entrance.

When the car passed he turned back and walked up the drive, then cut across the lawn, which was nice and dark, to where it was a relatively short walk across to the side of the building. At the door he had a frightening few moments trying to unlock it, but it gave. He locked it from the inside, pocketed the key, then sagged fullweight against a wall, breathing heavily. A peek from the storeroom found the alcove to be clear, but another one from there took in a nurse standing in the hall. He slipped back into the storeroom. He waited a

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few minutes, then stepped into the alcove again. She was putting something away in a closet, her back to him. He stepped quickly across the hall to his room, stood there in the dark, not knowing if she heard or saw, if she was coming. A glance to the side told him Elephant Ears was still asleep.

He walked to his bed, got undressed as quickly as he could; his coat fell from the hook in the closet but he was in too much of a hurry to pick it up, just closed the door on it. He took out the pillow and extra blanket he'd bunched under the cover, and slipped in and lay there, gasping, lungs burning. Soon he felt himself slowing down, then fully at peace. He'd forgotten how it felt to be free of rage.

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