

Waiting for Mr. Howard

Poor Mr. Howard. He lies in the hospital close to taking his last breath. Enter Ross who says he has come to “wait” for Mr. Howard. To the surprise of the staff, Ross claims to be Satan, just waiting to take his next soul. But not if Nurse Julie and Mabel have anything to say about it!

With a couple of zany characters and so much mischief, this play is just “Devilish Fun”.

3M, 3F

Great Stage Publishing

Waiting for Mr. Howard

A Comedy in Three Acts

by
Kathy Campshure

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Great Stage Publishing
11702-B Grant Rd. #602
Cypress, TX 77429
www.greatstagepublishing.com
greatstage@comcast.net

“Waiting for Mr. Howard”

A Comedy in Three Acts

By Kathy Campshure, a.k.a. K.C. Berg

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Synopsis

If, as the singing group Alabama claims, there are “Angels Among Us”, could the devil not also be lurking nearby? In this three-act comedy set in a hospital waiting room, we discover the comical answer to that very question. Mr. Howard has been a very bad man. As he lies dying in a hospital bed somewhere offstage, the devil takes up residency near the nurses’ station and begins ‘Waiting for Mr. Howard’.

Who will ultimately foil the devil’s attempt to claim this poor man’s soul? Will it be the naïve, young nurse who’s determined Mr. Howard will not go to hell? Or perhaps the devil will be stopped by one of the two priests who are keeping a watchful eye on the terminal patient. If that’s not enough adversity, maybe the devil will meet his match in Mabel, the elderly cleaning lady who has formulated a special ‘floor polish’ that can knock your socks off!

Chaos suddenly abounds in an otherwise quiet, sterile setting. There is nonstop action as the devil playfully passes the time by revealing his identity to Julie, or anyone else who cares to listen. The devil’s eternal arrogance is premature, though, and all does not go according to his well-laid plan. By the end of the second act, he is unconscious on the floor, a victim of Mabel’s ‘floor polish’ and an uncooperative elevator; Nurse Meg is gallantly trying to deal with both a ‘tipsy’ priest *and* a nearly hysterical Nurse Julie, who alone believes the devil’s true identity. And Mr. Howard? He’s still hanging on.

By the final act, the devil’s patience is wearing thin and he is more determined than ever to collect Mr. Howard’s soul and be on his way. As Julie and Father Gustoff do their best to foil his plans, poor Nurse Meg is still not convinced that the devil is among them. Mabel, unaware of his true identity, simply finds him quite desirable—especially with a pint of ‘polish’ under her belt. It is the classic struggle of good versus evil, and in the end it is love—however twisted—that foils the devil’s plans and saves Mr. Howard’s soul.

Cast

- Nurse Meg: 35 to 55 years of age; practical
- Nurse Julie: 22 to 30 years of age, sweet and naïve
- Rob/Ross: Rob—25-40 years of age; he wears a delivery Uniform and is a typical nerd.
Ross—25-40 years of age; dressed all in black and bedecked in jewelry. Cool and sophisticated. *Portrayed by the same actor.*
- Miss Mabel: 55-65 years of age; gruff and well-seasoned.
- Father Clarence: 50-65 years of age
- Father Gustoff: 45-55 years of age

Set

This play requires one set. The stage is set up as a hospital waiting area with a nurses' station at UC. Directly behind the nurses' station is a door into the nurses' lounge. In the wall at CR is a set of elevator doors with an "Out of Order" sign. At DR is a set of stairs leading offstage with a door at the bottom. **In lieu of stairs, an additional door could be placed onstage at DR and marked as 'Stairway'.*

The stage is set with a pair of upholstered chairs at RC (without arms), and a magazine table between them. There is a potted tree in the corner at UR, and another upstage from the door at CL that leads into Mr. Howard's room. The nurses' station is set with various charts, and the wall behind the station has chart racks. There is also a chart rack on the wall downstage of Mr. Howard's door. The nurses' station contains the following items: a small flower arrangement, a telephone, and a box of tissues.

Props

- A pair of specimen cups
- A laundry cart (large enough to be tipped on end and conceal two people)
- A pail filled with various cleaning supplies
- A bottle of 'cleaning polish'
- An ice pack
- A pair of Bibles (one of which is hollowed one and contains a small flask)
- A bottle of smelling salts
- A glass of water
- A small bottle of pills
- A cigarette and lighter
- A crucifix
- A clip board
- Two small, brown packages.

Sound Effects

- Elevator bell

Length

This play is set in the present, and is approximately ninety minutes in length without intermission.

Act 1

Lights up on Nurse Meg and Nurse Julie standing behind the nurses' station. They are reviewing patient charts at the start of their shift. The time is approximately 4 P.M.

Meg. . . . Mr. Lawson should be going home today. Dr. Meyer will be checking in on him during his rounds, probably some time before 6 o'clock. He'll most likely be signing the patient's release papers at that time. *(Switching to the next chart.)* I believe Mrs. Steward is going to be here for a while. They've got some more tests to run on her in the cardiac unit tomorrow. By the time those results come back—and they get done evaluating them—well, let's just say we'd better get her settled in for a long haul. *(Switching to the next chart.)* Ah, Mr. Howard. Such a sweet, old man. Just do your best to keep him comfortable. I'm afraid it's just a matter of time now. Check his vitals every half hour. Medication dosages are listed on his chart. *(During the last two lines, Mabel (the elderly cleaning lady) has been making her way up the steps at DR. She is carrying a pail overflowing with cleaning supplies and she is using a dust mop as a walking stick. She crosses to stop at CS. There, she dumps the contents of the pail out, inverts the now-empty pail, and sits on it. She fans herself with a dustpan. The two nurses notice her and leave their station to offer assistance. Mabel appears near collapse.)* Mabel, are you alright?

MABEL. 'Miss' Mabel, if you please, and Lordy no, I'm not alright! It's bad enough I don't get no pension from this lousy, stinkin' job, but they ain't got no right to try and kill me!

MEG. Now Mabel—

MABEL. 'Miss' Mabel.

MEG. I don't think anyone is trying to kill you.

MABEL. Oh ya don't, don't cha? Three weeks—three lousy weeks that damn elevator's been broke. Don't bother no one but me.

JULIE. Well of course it bothers us. We all have to use the stairs. I just try to make the best of a bad situation. Just think of all the wonderful exercise we're benefiting from, not to mention—

MABEL. Exercise? Exercise!? Is that what you call it? Well, it might be exercise to you and your young tootsie-toes, but it ain't no exercise for a woman of *my* age. I've been counting; I've hauled that cart up 67 flights of stairs in these last three weeks. And do I get any sympathy? That damn cart's big enough to kill an ox, let alone a little old lady!

JULIE. Miss Mable?

MABEL. *(Annoyed.)* What do you want, child?!

JULIE. Where *is* your cart?

All three look around.

MABEL. Oh, Lord.

MEG. Miss Mabel?

MABEL. Well, I had it on the second floor . . .

MEG. Did you have it on the third?

MABEL. I don't rightly remember. (*Mabel rises off the pail and demonstrates her actions during the following lines.*) I was pulling it up the stairwell between the second and third floor, and I stopped on the landing to rest. Thank God for landings!

JULIE. Then you must have left it on the landing.

MABEL. No, I don't think so. (*Beat.*) Oh, I remember now; it disappeared.

MEG. Disappeared? Cleaning carts don't just disappear, Miss Mabel.

MABEL. Well, this one did! I remember it all now. I looked down and I noticed that my shoe was untied. So, I bent over to tie it—(*Mabel bends over and bumps Julie with her posterior, sending her stumbling backwards and onto the chair. Mabel then straightens up and turns in Julie's direction.*) And when I turned around, it was gone. Come to think of it, whoever took it must have been pretty proud of himself.

MEG. What makes you say that?

MABEL. Why, I heard him yelling all the way back down the stairwell!

MEG. I'll call maintenance and see if they've found the cart. In the meantime, we'd better get back on duty here. Julie, please help Miss Mabel clean up this mess. I'm going to go look in on Mr. Howard.

Meg exits into Mr. Howard's room. Julie and Mabel pick up the cleaning supplies and put them back in the bucket.

MABEL. Thank you, child.

JULIE. Don't worry, Miss Mabel. I'm sure the elevator will be fixed real soon.

Mabel sets to work cleaning and Julie returns to the nurses' station and begins reviewing the charts. Rob enters through the door at the bottom of the stairs at DR. He trudges up the stairs and approaches the nurses' station very much out of breath. He is carrying a small, brown package, which he sets on the top of the nurses' station.

ROB. (*Gasp.*) Package for Nurse Reinhardt; sign here, please.

JULIE. Are you alright?

ROB. Yeah. (*Gasp*) Fine. (*Gasp*). How are you?

JULIE. Maybe you'd better sit down for a minute.

Julie points to one of the chairs at CS, but Rob resists.

ROB. No, I'm fine. Really.

JULIE. Mabel here was just telling me how awful those stairs are.

ROB. Actually, the stairs weren't so bad, but somewhere between the second and third floor I was run down by a homicidal cleaning cart.

MABEL. Oops.

ROB. Yours?

MABEL. Yup.

ROB. When you want it back, they've got it locked up in the maintenance room on the second floor. They're waiting for its owner to step forward and claim it so they can prosecute.

MABEL. Prosecute? Me? No one gets prosecuted for running down a delivery boy. Ha!

ROB. No, but the hospital administrator was coming up the stairs right behind me. It was real kind of him to break my fall like that.

MABEL. Uh-oh.

She returns to her cleaning with renewed earnest. Rob turns his attention back to Julie, but only after fixing his collar and smoothing back his hair.

ROB. I know you really don't know me too well, but I've been coming up here at least once a week for quite some time. I was wondering if you'd consider going out with me some night . . . like maybe this Friday?

JULIE. Well, I—

ROB. We could catch a movie, unless there's something else you'd rather do. I'm unbelievably flexible.

JULIE. This is really sweet of you, but I just can't—*(seeing his hurt look) this Friday. I, ah, have a prior commitment. (She signs for the package.)*

ROB. Maybe next week then?

JULIE. *(Hesitantly.)* Maybe.

ROB. Great! I mean, thanks . . . I mean, I'll talk to you then.

He picks up his clipboard and fairly skips offstage, exiting down the stairs at DR.

MABEL. Nice guy?

JULIE. He's alright.

MABEL. Ya gonna' go out with him?

JULIE. Oh, I don't know. Probably not.

MABEL. Ya know, he isn't gonna' quit asking until ya do.

JULIE. That's what I'm afraid of.

MABEL. Ya want me to hit him with my cart again?

JULIE. No, Miss Mabel. That won't be necessary.

MABEL. I could just wing him—nothin' permanent.

JULIE. No, that's not a good idea.

MABEL. But we're at the hospital already. There's hardly any risk at all.

JULIE. Mabel—

MABEL. Suit yourself.

Mabel goes back to cleaning. Meg re-enters from Mr. Howard's room. She is carrying a clipboard and writing rapidly. She crosses to the nurses' station and checks the clock, then writes again. She appears anxious.

JULIE. How is Mr. Howard doing?

MEG. Not too well, I'm afraid. (*She writes again.*) I'm going down to the lounge to see if Dr. Meyer has come in for his rounds yet.

JULIE. Why don't you call down and save yourself the walk.

MEG. That's not a bad idea, but I'm going to stop at the chapel on the way down to make sure the good father doesn't wander too far away from his post today. We'll probably be needing him before our shift is out.

JULIE. Is Mr. Howard really that bad?

MEG. I'm afraid so, Julie. Hold down the fort; I'll be back shortly. *She exits DR.*

MABEL. So, you're losing another one, eh?

JULIE. That's not a very nice way to put it.

MABEL. Ain't nothing 'nice' about it. Poof—you're dead. Over. Done. Finished. Kaput. Stiff as a board.

JULIE. Miss Mabel!

MABEL. Well, it's true, ain't it? Ya can believe whatever ya want. Ya can dress the stiff up in his nicest duds, gather the family around, have a beautiful service with fine music and lovely flowers . . . but the dude's still dead, plain and simple. Ain't no one or nothing gonna change that.

JULIE. Well, maybe not. But I have to believe there's more.

MABEL. More than dead? Like what, child?

JULIE. I don't know. Sometimes I think about heaven. Do you believe in heaven, Miss Mabel?

MABEL. Well of course I believe in heaven. And I'm going to go there someday, too—just as soon as I save up enough money.

JULIE. What in the world do you need money for? It doesn't cost anything to get into heaven.

MABEL. Maybe not *your* heaven, child, but *my* heaven is one of those condos down south.

JULIE. A condo, Miss Mabel?

MABEL. I can see me now, child. Sittin' alongside one of those big pools, the sun on my face, one of those funny little drinks with an umbrella in it restin' in my hand. (*She closes her eyes and smiles.*) If that ain't heave, girl, I don't want to go.

JULIE. That's not what I meant by 'heaven', Miss Mabel.

MABEL. And why on earth not, child?

JULIE. Because you don't have to be *dead* to get there.

MABEL. Well, forgive me, Miss Julie. But I ain't going to go and get all excited about some place I got to be dead to get to! (*She resumes tidying up. Beat.*) Do ya ever think about reconstitution?

JULIE. Reconstitution?

MABEL. Ya know, when ya get to come back and do it all over again.

JULIE. Oh, you mean 'reincarnation'.

MABEL. That's what I said, didn't I? Do ya believe in it or don't ya?

JULIE. I never really gave it much thought. It would be kinda scary, living over and over again.

MABEL. Wow! Just think of all the 'Robs' you'd have to go out with then!

JULIE. Mabel, I think it's silly. As a matter of fact, I've decided that I definitely *don't* believe in reincarnation. But I do believe that, if you live a good life and do the best you can, then death isn't final. It's not an end. It's more like a—a doorway to someplace better.

MABEL. To your so-called 'heaven'?

JULIE. Well yes, that's what *I* believe.

MABEL. Child, there ain't no heaven up there in them clouds—there's only clouds. Period. Heaven, if it even exists, is whatever good ya get out of your life on this earth, and nothing more.

JULIE. I'm sorry, Miss Mabel, but I disagree.

MABEL. Suit yourself, child. But if I were you, I'd try to have a little more fun while I still had the time—and the figure—cause you'll lose both quick enough. Maybe ya ought to go out with that nice, young man. Ya never can tell; a nice young man like that could be full of surprises.

Before Julie can answer, Ross enters up the stairs at DR. His physical appearance is identical to Rob, but his mannerisms and his attire are the exact opposite of the delivery man's. Julie stares at him, confused.

JULIE. Excuse me, don't I know you? I mean—

ROSS. (*Looking her up and down slowly.*) Well, hello baby!

JULIE. Excuse me?

ROSS. Excuse you? I can't imagine anything a pretty, young thing like you could do that would ever need excusing.

MABEL. (*On the side, to Julie.*) Now, that dude's smooth!

JULIE. Can I help you—

ROSS. Ross. The name's Ross.

JULIE. (*Still staring at him.*) I'm sorry, it's just that—you look an awful lot like someone I know.

ROSS. With all due respect, I find it hard to believe that you could possibly know anyone like me.

He smiles at her self-assuredly.

MABEL. I'll buy that one!

Ross and Julie throw her a look and she returns to cleaning.

JULIE. Are you here to see someone?

ROSS. Oh no, I'm just waiting.

JULIE. Waiting?

ROSS. Yes, waiting. That's all.

JULIE. *(Heading back to the nurses' station; after a beat.)* Waiting for what?

ROSS. Not for 'what'; for whom—waiting for *whom*. I'm waiting for Mr. Howard.

JULIE. *(Placing a chart in the rack by Mr. Howard's door.)* I'm sorry. I don't know what you've been told, but Mr. Howard is not being released today.

ROSS. Now, now, now, now, now my dear, of course he isn't. I didn't mean to imply he was.

JULIE. But you're 'waiting' for him.

ROSS. That's right.

MABEL. *(Interrupting.)* Well, I'm done in here for now. I'll be back later—if I don't kill myself on those damn stairs.

ROSS. Oh, I'm sure you will . . . *(Mabel is taken aback.)* Be back, that is. A sprite, young thing like you—I'll bet you could tackle a hundred stairs.

MABEL. Well, time will tell. Here comes number sixty-eight. *(She exits DR.)*

ROSS. What a charming lady.

JULIE. Miss Mabel?

ROSS. Yes, wouldn't you agree?

JULIE. *(Hesitantly.)* I suppose so. Now see here, Mr. Ross—

ROSS. No 'Mr.', just 'Ross'. Plain and simple, and sorta catchy, if I must say so myself. And you must be Julie.

JULIE. Well, yes—I am. But how did you know that?

ROSS. Other-worldly powers, E.S.P., a strong link to the psychic. Besides, it's written on your name tag.

JULIE. *(Sheepishly.)* Oh, yes—it is.

ROSS. So, how do you like your job here, Julie?

JULIE. I like it just fine, but—

ROSS. It's a different world here than in Nappanee. Indiana, isn't it?

JULIE. Excuse me?

ROSS. I know how hard it can be, a country girl relocating to the big city. By the way, how did your Aunt Cecelia's cataract surgery come out? Now, there's a sweet, old lady.

JULIE. (*Growing alarmed.*) That's about enough. Either you state your business here or I'm calling hospital security!

ROSS. (*Calmly.*) I've already stated my business, Julie. I'm waiting for Mr. Howard.

Father Clarence enters from stairs at DR, out of breath.

CLARENCE. Excuse me (*gasp*), I'm looking (*gasp*), for a Mr. Howard (*gasp*). Nurse Meg asked me (*gasp*), to look in on him. (*Noticing Ross.*) Oh, pardon me. Where are my manners? I'm Father Clarence, the hospital chaplain, and you are?

ROSS. Ross. No 'Mr.'; just 'Ross'.

CLARENCE. Well, Ross, are you here to see Mr. Howard?

ROSS. You might say that.

CLARENCE. That's wonderful. The soul needs family members gathered around when the time draws near. Mr. Howard is a good, God-fearing man. I'm sure the actions of his life will not go unrewarded.

ROSS. Oh, I'm sure they won't.

CLARENCE. Now, if you'll excuse me . . . which way, Miss Julie?

JULIE. Right in here, Father. (*She motions him toward Mr. Howard's door.*)

CLARENCE. (*Exiting to Mr. Howard's room.*) Bless you, child.

ROSS. God-fearing? If Mr. Howard was 'God-fearing', Hitler was a saint! What is this world coming to when you can't even believe a chaplain?

JULIE. I think that's quite enough, 'Mr.' Ross! I will not tolerate you insulting the patients. Especially one so close to—

ROSS. Death? Go ahead, say it, Julie. Death. It's not a dirty word.

JULIE. I want you to leave—now!

ROSS. Look, I'm sorry that you think I'm insulting the poor, old man. But I don't believe the truth can insult anyone. And the truth is, Mr. Howard's life has been anything *but* God-fearing. In fact, Miss Julie (*leaning in close to her*), Mr. Howard has been downright naughty!

JULIE. (*Pulling away.*) Ross, I—

ROSS. He has! He's ignored the standards of society, avoided anything that even remotely resembled morals, and broken every law known to man—except the law of gravity. He's cursed his mother, disgraced his father, beaten his brothers, and abandoned his sister with an over-sexed, under-disciplined date at the tender age of thirteen. He's played the horses, the casinos, and around. He's been married four times, and slept with nine different women while in the 'sacred bonds' of those marriages. The only thing that Mr. Howard has ever feared in his life is alimony—not God.

JULIE. How do you know so much about Mr. Howard?

ROSS. Simple, it's my job.

JULIE. Your 'job'? What are you, some sort of private investigator? That must be it! That's how you know where I grew up, too.

ROSS. No, Julie. I'm *not* a private investigator. I know so much about Mr. Howard for the same reason that I know so much about Father Clarence, and Miss Mable, and Nurse Meg—and even you, Julie. You see. It's my business to know these things—to sort of 'keep a tally sheet'. Otherwise, when the game's over—as it will soon be in Mr. Howard's case—who would ever know what the final score was?

JULIE. The *final* score? Who do you think you are, God's score-keeper?

ROSS. (*He stares at her for a beat, then laughs heartily.*) Oh, that's good; that's *real* good. I've been called a great many things, but never 'God's score-keeper.' You see, I'm more like the flip-side of the coin. Oh, what the heck; no sense being modest. I am, my dear child, Lucifer, Satan, Beelzebub, Mammon, Diabolus, and Mesisopheles—aren't I a popular dude? I am (*leaning in close to her again*), the devil.

JULIE. (*Shocked.*) The devil?!

ROSS. Knowledge through enlightenment can be so much fun, don't you agree?

JULIE. (*Still in shock.*) The devil?!

ROSS. You just aren't buying it, are you? Would this be easier for you to grasp if my horns were showing? (*He steps away from her, hunches down as though to prepare himself for some metamorphosis, then only changes his mind.*)

ROSS. (cont.) No, I couldn't do that to a sweet, young thing like you. Now, if you had killed somebody at one time or another that would be a whole new scenario. I'd probably even let you peek at my forked tail. (*Chuckles.*) But, I'd better not.

JULIE. Mr. Ross—

ROSS. No, no, no, just call me the un-angel (*breaking into song*) of the morning, Baby.

JULIE. (*Interrupting.*) Whoever the hell you are—

ROSS. Uh, uh, uh—let's not get personal.

JULIE. I want you to leave, now!

ROSS. And I'd love to oblige you, really. But you see I'm—

JULIE. (*Exasperated.*) Waiting for Mr. Howard; I know.

ROSS. I do hope he doesn't take all night to get this over with.

JULIE. I can't believe you'd be so cold!

ROSS. (*Laughing again.*) That's a good one, Julie. Someone in my line of work, what with all the brimstone and flames—well, we just don't get called 'cold' too darn often.

Julie starts to respond, but Father Clarence enters from Mr. Howard's room.

CLARENCE. Nurse, I'm afraid Mr. Howard is not doing so well at the moment. Perhaps it would be best if you were to look in on him.

JULIE. *(Exiting to Mr. Howard's room.)* Certainly, Father.

ROSS. So, it won't be long now, eh Father?

CLARENCE. It doesn't appear as though it will be, but there are always miracles, my son. *(He reaches out to place a hand on Ross's shoulder. Ross tenses, but doesn't pull away.)* My goodness, child, you feel cold.

ROSS. *(Pulling away.)* There's that word again. Don't worry, Father. Where I'm going, I'll thaw out in a hurry.

CLARENCE. And where might that be, my son?

ROSS. To hell, of course.

CLARENCE. You shouldn't judge yourself so harshly. In fact, we don't even talk about hell in the context of fire and eternal damnation anymore. We choose to view hell as being more like a state of limbo.

ROSS. A state of limbo? I guess you could call it that. A giant state of limbo, where you do the tango across red-hot coals in your bare tootsies—forever.

CLARENCE. I don't know what school of thought you've been studying, but—

ROSS. The school of reality and experience, my dear man. *(Growing menacing.)* There is fire down there, Father. *(Drawing in closer.)* And brimstone, and ashes, and glorious smoke. And there's lots of people, too. The little boy who used to sneak snakes into your third-grade class just to hear the girls scream—he's down there. And your uncle Raymond, he's down there, too. Poor Aunt Millie just couldn't get through to him. *(He stops talking and stares at Clarence; his smile slowly fades.)* You're wondering how I know all these things, aren't you, Father? *(He spits out the last word with disgust.)* Well, I'll tell you. I brought them there. I collected their souls, I counted their sins, and I brought them all down to my glorious fire. *(Very theatrically.)* My wonderfully, glorious fire! *(Becoming stern.)* So save your last rights, and your polished words of comfort. Mr. Howard's mine, Father. That's right, you've met your competition, and this one's going with me. *(Ross has backed Father Clarence into one of the chairs at RC, and is towering over him threateningly. Clarence is clutching the cross that hangs from his neck. Just as a confrontation seems all but inevitable, Julie re-enters. Ross sees her and, smiling once again, slowly straightens up and away from Clarence. He pulls a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and carefully places it in Clarence's mouth.)* So, tell me, Father—would you care for a light?

Ross pulls a lighter out of his pants' pocket and leans in over Clarence again. The priest cowers down further in the chair as Ross holds the flame up in front of Clarence's face. Ross laughs heartily at the sight of him, and continues laughing through lights down.

Act 2

A Short Time Later

Lights up on Father Clarence alone on the set, still seated on the chair. He appears to be in a state of shock. He is staring straight ahead, mumbling.

CLARENCE. It can't be; it just can't be. *(After a beat, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small Bible. He opens it, then quickly states,)* That's not the right one. *(He tosses the Bible onto the magazine table, and pulls a second small Bible from another pocket. He opens it and retrieves a small, silver flask from a hollowed out pocket inside the book. With trembling hands, he lifts the flask to his mouth and takes a long swig. Seeing Julie entering through the nurses' lounge door, he hurriedly re-caps the flask and returns it to its pocket. He then closes the Bible and rests it on his lap.)*

JULIE. *(Approaching Father with a small bottle of pills and a glass of water.)* Here, father. These should help calm your nerves.

CLARENCE. Bless you, child, but I won't be needing those. Faith is my tranquilizer, and the Good Book contains my strength. *(Patting the Bible in his lap gently.)*

JULIE. *(Pacing.)* What are we going to do, Father?

CLARENCE. We need a plan of action, child, and quick—before he comes back. How much time do we have?

JULIE. I don't know. He said that he had some business to attend to in another part of the hospital, then he left. Heaven only knows where he is.

CLARENCE. You can bet on that. *(Beat.)* You don't suppose that devils have to use the bathroom, do you?

JULIE. *(Staring at Father Clarence in disbelief.)* Aren't you supposed to be the expert in these religious matters?

CLARENCE. Well yes, but I'm not entirely sure that this is a religious matter. After all, they don't teach satanic hygiene in the seminary.

JULIE. What *do* they teach? Surely all of your years of schooling must have taught you something. There should be detailed, step-by-step instructions for dealing with this type of situation. *(Brightening.)* Why of course; we could exorcise him!

CLARENCE. *(Rising.)* Are you crazy? I don't need him any stronger than he already is!

JULIE. Not 'exercise', 'exorcize'!

CLARENCE. Oh yes, of course. I suppose I could try that. *(Beat.)* But I'd have to write to my superiors for permission first. One just can't go about performing exorcisms any time they feel like it.

JULIE. You'd have to write to your superiors?! I don't believe it! Mr. Howard doesn't have that kind of time; we have to act now!

CLARENCE. You know, Julie, it has occurred to me, maybe we shouldn't act at all.

JULIE. What?! Are you crazy? We can't just sit back and do nothing. Think of poor Mr. Howard!

CLARENCE. Look at it this way, Julie. If you believe that our religious system is based on punishment and reward, hell or heaven, then we really ought not to intervene. Maybe the devil has a good reason for being here, waiting for Mr. Howard. After all, I don't see any quarterback from the pearly gates hovering about, trying to stake a claim. I'm just afraid that maybe we're out of our league on this one. The score appears to be, the devil 7—Christianity zip. (*Clarence sits in chair RC.*)

JULIE. Well, they haven't blown the final whistle yet! And if Ross *does* leave here with Mr. Howard, it won't be without a fight! (*She sits in chair next to Clarence.*)

CLARENCE. Maybe we could move Mr. Howard into the chapel, bed and all. Ross shouldn't be able to touch him there.

JULIE. No, we'd never get a move like that cleared with the hospital administration.

CLARENCE. Is there *any* place in the hospital that we could take him?

JULIE. Nowhere that Ross wouldn't find him. I even considered loading him on the elevator and stalling it between floors—

CLARENCE. But the elevator's still broke.

JULIE. Exactly.

CLARENCE. What about transferring him to another hospital—like somewhere in Toledo?

JULIE. He's too critical for that kind of a move. Even if Mr. Howard *could* survive the trip, don't you think that Ross would just follow?

CLARENCE. Yes, I suppose you're right. (*Beat.*) Maybe we could—

JULIE. No, that would never work. (*Beat.*) How about—

CLARENCE. Absolutely not; way too risky.

Deep in concentration, they are unaware of the elevator doors opening behind them. Ross steps out, spies them sitting with their backs to him, smiles, and starts to sneak up on them.

JULIE. (*Reaching for the Bible on Father Clarence's lap.*) There must be something in your 'good book' that could help us out.

CLARENCE. (*Quickly pulling it out of her reach.*) Not in *this* good book. But, if it will make you feel any better, I can go and call a friend of mine who is quite an expert on satanic matters. Maybe he could help us.

ROSS. (*Standing directly behind them.*) Say 'Hi' to Jimmy for me, won't you?

Clarence and Julie startle out of their chairs.

JULIE. Where did you come from?

ROSS. (*Sitting in the chair vacated by Father Clarence.*) The elevator, of course.

JULIE. But that thing hasn't worked in weeks!

ROSS. Sister, if Madonna can sing 'Like a Virgin', someone such as myself can certainly run an elevator.

CLARENCE. The Madonna sang? *(Still struggling to regain his composure.)* Well, if you'll excuse me, I've got—ah—something to do.

He moves to the elevator and pushes the buttons. When nothing happens, he gives up and heads for the stairs.

ROSS. Jimmy is visiting his mother this week. And you'd better hurry if you're planning on calling him there; they're going out for supper at seven.

CLARENCE. Ah, why yes, of course. I'll do that.

He exits down the stairs DR and almost bowls over Mabel who is coming up the stairs.

MABEL. Oh Father, why the rush? Have we lost Mr. Howard?

CLARENCE. Why, isn't he in his room? *(Understanding what she meant.)* Oh, 'lost' him. No, not yet, that is. *(He hurries off, glancing back over his shoulder at Ross, who waves to him.)*

MABEL. *(To Julie.)* I'm tellin' ya, they're workin' that man too hard. *(Noticing Ross.)* Well, Mr. Ross—are you still here, too?

ROSS. *(Smiling sweetly.)* What can I say; there's no rest for the wicked.

MEG. *(Reappearing from the nurses' lounge.)* Julie, I need you to run these charts down to Dr. Logan in pediatrics right away. I'll be in by Mr. Howard until you get back.

JULIE. *(Hesitantly.)* Yes, of course. Right away.

She starts to leave, glances back at Mabel and Ross, then exits DR. Meg exits into Mr. Howard's room. Noticing that there is no one around to supervise her, Mabel sits next to Ross and strikes up a conversation.

MABEL. So, Mr. Ross, do you spend a lot of time hangin' around hospitals?

ROSS. *(Thumbing through a magazine he picked up off of the table.)* You might say that. They're almost like a second home to me.

MABEL. No wonder you're so skinny. Hospital foods been known to rot out the best of guts.

ROSS. I assure you, Miss Mabel, I didn't come here to eat.

MABEL. And I don't blame you. To be honest, I don't think anyone does. I suppose you got a sweet, little Mrs. Somewhere that feeds ya, right?

ROSS. No, I'm afraid not. You might say I'm married to my work.

MABEL. *(Perking up to learn he's single.)* Ya? Me, too! Oh, it might not be a glamorous marriage, but it's damn near got me committed! *(Beat.)* Ya travel much, Mr. Ross?

ROSS. Oh yes, all the time. I've seen places that, well, people are dying to get into.

MABEL. Really? What do ya do, fly around in one of those big jets, from hospital to hospital, so ya can sit around and chat with cleaning ladies?

ROSS. Not quite, Miss Mabel. Although it is a charming thought. All except the part about flying. I don't fly—ever. There's something about being up that close to the clouds that, well, dampens my fiery spirit you might say.

MABEL. *(Looking around to confirm they're still alone.)* Well, Mr. Ross, I've got just the thing for a 'damp spirit', yes indeed. *(Leaning in closer to Ross.)* Ya know what I hate, Mr. Ross? It's those damn black marks that some shoes make on a clean, tile floor. *(Ross pulls back a little and she grabs him by the arm and pulls him in closer.)* I couldn't find anything that got them off on the first try—until this. *(She looks around again before pulling a bottle out of her cleaning bucket. She takes the top off the bottle, sniffs it, and makes a ghastly face. Then, without hesitation, she raises the bottle to her lips and takes a long drink. She then makes an even more ghastly face, shakes her head, and smiles.)* Yup, that's the stuff all right! If this doesn't dry your spirit, nothing will. *(She hands the bottle to Ross, who pushes it away.)*

ROSS. I'm sorry, Miss Mabel. Although the consumption of alcohol has been blamed for many a dastardly deed, I could never personally use it as an excuse. *(Firmly.)* You see, I don't drink.

MABEL. *(Staring at him, after a beat.)* Who'd have thought. Well *(Putting the cap back on the bottle),* if'n ya can't handle your liquor, I'd be the last person to try'n tempt ya.

ROSS. I never said I couldn't handle it; I said I don't drink. There's a difference.

MABEL. Yeah right, in a pig's eye. Ya don't have to explain it to me, Mr. Ross. Lot's of men can't stomach the stuff. No need to make excuses 'bout it.

ROSS. *(Growing perturbed.)* I'm not trying to explain anything, and I'm certainly not making any excuses.

MABEL. Well, no harm done. Right? *(She pats the bottle fondly and places it back into her cleaning bucket.)* That just leaves all the more for those of us who *can* stomach it.

ROSS. Oh, give me the damn thing!

Ross snatches the bottle from the bucket, removes the top, and quickly begins to chug. He immediately begins to gag violently and Mabel grabs the bottle from him as his arms begin to flail.

MABEL. Careful there; you're gonna break it! Ya can't get this stuff at any corner liquor store, ya know. It's my own special concoction—it took me *years* to perfect this! *(She holds the bottle to her bosom and pats it. Ross is still struggling to catch his breath. Noticing him.)* Well, lands sake. Ya gonna live? It's a waste of good liquor, that's what it is! And don't go blamin' me, neither. This stuff is obviously out of yer league. *(She pats the bottle again, takes another pull, and re-caps it. Stamping one foot.)* Yup, warms ya clear to yer toes! *(She rises, takes a deep cleansing breath, and tosses her arms out to either side. The bottle, still in her right hand, strikes Ross in the forehead as he is trying to regain his composure. He drops to the floor and is motionless. Mabel spies him and bends down for a closer look.)* Ross? Mr. Ross? Are ya alright? Hey, Mr. Ross! Well, I told ya that ya couldn't handle yer liquor.

Mabel takes a final pull from the bottle before closing it and returning it to the pail. As she stands staring down at Ross, Nurse Meg—having heard the commotion—emerges from Mr. Howard's room.

MEG. What in the world is going on out here? (*Spying Ross on the floor.*) Miss Mabel, what happened to Ross?

MABEL. I think the cleaning polish got to him.

MEG. What? Oh, never mind. Let's get him off the floor.

They push the chairs together with the magazine table between, forming a make-shift cot. They then struggle to raise Ross from the floor. They begin at his legs, which they rest on one chair. They then move to his upper body and try to position it on the other chair. His legs fall back to the floor. They begin again, each taking hold under Ross's arms and hoisting his upper body onto the second chair. Mabel leans against it to keep him from falling while Nurse Meg struggles to get his legs back onto the first chair. As they step back to survey their patient, Ross rolls slightly and threatens to fall. They position him squarely on the chairs and table. Nurse Meg moves around behind the chairs and reaches over to check Ross's pupils. Still out of breath from their struggle, she checks his pulse before pausing to check her own.

MEG. (cont.) I'm going to get some smelling salts, Mable. Make sure he doesn't roll off, okay?

MABEL. Ya, sure. (*Nurse Meg quickly exits to the nurses' lounge while Mable surveys Ross. He starts to roll again and she forces him back firmly, then sits down on him to hold him in place. His arm drops to the floor and she gets up, retrieves it, and rests it across his chest before sitting on him again. His arm falls a second time. She gets up again, grabs his arm, considers her options, then stuffs his hand firmly down his pants front before sitting on him a final time. Beat.*) Smellin' salts? Ha, I know what you really need! *She gets up and fetches the cleaning polish bottle from her pail. Moving to Ross's head.*) They call this 'the hair of the dog that bit ya'. (*Leaning down, she plugs Ross's nose with one hand and holds the bottle in his mouth with the other. After a beat, Ross begins struggling. Mabel administers her 'medicine' a moment longer before releasing his nose and removing the bottle. Ross bolts upright, choking, and remains seated on the right-hand chair.*) There, see? All better. Smelling salts, ha! (*Mabel places the bottle back in the pail as Nurse Meg re-enters with smelling salts.*)

MEG. (*Seeing Ross upright.*) Thank heavens! Mr. Ross, what happened? Are you alright?

Still struggling to catch his breath, Ross cannot speak.

MABEL. All this fuss; he's fine! Just got the wind knocked out of 'em, that's all.

Ross has quit choking and is beginning to show signs of intoxication. He has slumped down in the chair, and is grinning and staring straight ahead.

MEG. Mabel, this sort of behavior and commotion in a hospital is totally unacceptable, do you understand? I have half a mind to report this to the hospital administrator, but seeing he's still recovering from his little fall, I won't bother him—this time. (*More firmly.*) Do you understand?

MABEL. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I got it. (*Indicating Ross.*) But if I were you, I'd keep my eye on this one. He don't look too good. (*Ross aims a little 'finger wave' at the pair.*)

MEG. (*Checking Ross again, frowning.*) If I didn't know better, I'd say this man is intoxicated.

MABEL. (*Fetching her pail.*) Well, I'd best be goin'.

MEG. What have the two of you been doing out here, Mabel?

MABEL. I resent yer tone; I most certainly do. I'm a busy, busy lady. I ain't got time to watch over every Tom, Dick and Harry that decides to park his carcass (*she struggles with the pronunciation of this word, and finally spits it out, emphasizing the "ass"*) in yer waiting room!

MEG. Well of course you're not expected to watch over the visitors, but—

MABEL. Good, then if'n ya don't mind, I'll go on about my business. (*Starts to exit, talking to herself.*) Intoxicated, ha! Don't know why people drink if'n they can't hold their liquor. (*Taking a quick peek in her pail. More quietly.*) I'd better get some more floor polish; I seem to be running a little low. (*She exits DR, humming.*)

MEG. (*Turning back to Ross.*) Well, this is just great. I don't have time to be watching you, Mr. Ross. I don't know what's been going on out here, but I'd like to remind you that this *is* a hospital. (*Studying him closely for a beat.*) Was Miss Mabel a part of this? Has she been bothering you?

ROSS. (*Slurring his words.*) Miss Mabel? Miss Mabel who?

MEG. You know, Miss Mabel—you were just talking to her. Elderly woman in a hospital cleaning uniform? Oh, never mind. I've got to go check on Mr. Hoard.

ROSS. (*Confused.*) Mr. Howard?

MEG. Yes, Mr. Howard. Your friend. Remember? Forget it! Just stay right there and I'll be back in a moment. (*She exits to Mr. Howard's room.*)

ROSS. (*Still confused and definitely intoxicated.*) Mr. Howard . . . (*beat.*) Mr. Howard? Oh, yeah, Mr. Howard! (*Struggling to sit up straight; in a sing-song voice.*) Oh, Mr. Hooowwwaaarrrrddd! Yoo hoo, Mr. Hooowwwaaarrrrddd. I'm waiting for you. You've been a bad, bad boy. (*He starts to get up, almost falls over, stands successfully on the next try.*) Well, no reason why I can't have a little fun while I'm waiting. I think I'll go visit with Father Clarence for a while.

He stumbles over to the elevator and pushes the button. Nothing happens. He pushes it again. Nothing. Perturbed, he pushes it several times in quick succession, finally leaning on the button for several seconds. Nothing. He stumbles back a step and takes a kick at the doors, almost losing his balance. Giving up, he heads toward the stairs.

When he is halfway there, the elevator doors open. He returns, but the doors close before he reaches them. He stares at the doors for a beat before stumbling back towards the stairs. Again, the elevator doors open when he is halfway to the stairs. He makes a clumsy dash for the doors, but again they close. Assuming a nonchalant pose, with hands in pockets and attempting to whistle, he saunters away from the elevator and toward the stairs. Again, the doors open behind him. This time he lunges at the opening at full speed. The doors close just as he reaches them. Unable to stop, he runs headlong into them and falls back on the floor, motionless.

Julie enters DR. Seeing Ross, she begins to approach him, then stops. Instead, she crosses to Mr. Howard's room. At the door.

JULIE. Meg? Meg!?

MEG. (*Exiting Mr. Howard's room; still exasperated.*) What is it, Julie?

JULIE. There's something you should know about Ross.

MEG. Not now, Julie. I'm far too busy to be troubling myself over that man.

JULIE. But that's just it; he's not a man. (*Meg places her hands on hips and gives Julie a look of skepticism.*) He's not; he told me so!

MEG. Oh Lord, don't tell me we're starting to do *those* operations here! Like I don't already have enough to deal with. Mr. Howard is simply trying to die in peace!

JULIE. No Meg, you don't understand. Ross told me—

MEG. I don't care *what* Ross told you! (*Looking over Julie's shoulder to the chair where Ross had been seated.*) Speaking of the little devil, where is he?

JULIE. You mean you know?!

MEG. Know what? (*Spying Ross on the floor.*) Oh Lord, what is going on out here!

JULIE. Don't look at me; he was already lying there when I got here.

MEG. (*Crossing to Ross, followed by Julie.*) And you call yourself a nurse? Why didn't you help him up?

Meg bends down to assist Ross, but Julie pulls her back.

JULIE. No, don't. You can't!

MEG. What?

JULIE. There's something you don't know about him. He's here to get Mr. Howard.

MEG. Well, Mr. Howard isn't going anywhere. This man, on the other hand (*pointing to Ross*), has got to be helped up off of this floor!

Julie stops her again.

JULIE. No, you don't understand. This man, Ross, *knows* that Mr. Howard is going to die tonight. That's why he's here. (*Beat.*) He's come for his soul.

MEG. (*Studying Julie skeptically.*) You've been reading too many Stephen King books, girl. Now give me a hand with this man this instant!

JULIE. No, he told me that he's the devil.

MEG. Well, I'm Mother Theresa! Now let's get this man off this floor . . . now! (*Nurse Meg stoops to assist Ross and Julie stops her a final time. Under her breath.*) You're really starting to irritate me, girl.

Father Clarence comes through the door at DR and starts up the stairs. Julie rushes to meet him.

JULIE. Oh, thank heavens! Father, you've got to help me convince Meg about Ross. (*She takes him by the arm and pulls him over to Meg.*) Father knows everything; he was here when Ross confessed!

Both nurses stare at Father Clarence, waiting for an explanation. Father stumbles over and looks down at Ross.

CLARENCE. *(Voice slurred.)* Should he be sleeping on the floor like that? Someone could twip—I mean ‘trip’—over him or something.

MEG. *(Throwing her hands in the air and crossing to CS.)* This is great, just great! I’ve got a patient in the next room who is trying to die in peace, and out here I’ve got a comatose visitor—whose been accused of being the devil, a nearly hysterical young nurse—who is also the accuser, and a pickled priest! What’s next?

At that instant, the elevator doors slide open and a large cleaning cart rolls out. There are feet hanging over the edge of the cart, and an arm out either side. When the cart stops rolling, Mabel pulls in her feet and arms and sits up, smiling.

MABEL. Wow, what a ride!

Still smiling, Mabel topples back over. Lights down.

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