

Dime A Dozen

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"I will not eat pureed green peas!" Frances declared, her frail body posed to the Geri-chair, unable to hide the fact that this was a woman unaccustomed to being told what to do. But on St. Johns Nursing Home's Seven-East Skilled Care Unit, such independence had its consequences. As a young woman she stood a tall five-foot even, but standing is something Frances hadn't done in a good many years. At eighty-nine years of age her legs no longer could hold her sixty-two pounds, her arthritic hands could no longer hold a fork and her arms could no longer hold off a persistent feeder at lunch time.

And it was lunch time. Frances was seated next to the punch drunk ex-boxer Frank. Ethel the Jehovah's Witness, whose mind was imprisoned in hell, sat on his other side, Jean the one-hundred-and-one-year-old sex maniac next to her, and Arnold the fifty-four-year-old infant who had swallowed a balloon at age three, damaging his brain, filled out the row of those seated at the squared off semi-circled feeder table. They had to eat. And they were unable to feed themselves. So the caretakers of human beings, both those who care and those who don't, gathered to do the feeding.

"You most certainly will eat these peas!" Kathy, the nursing assistant working table number one, insisted. This is not the first time the two have locked horns over peas, or sweet potatoes, or beef, all of which, pureed, look like brightly colored mud. "You need to eat and we aren't leaving this table until you do!"

"Never in my life have I eaten peas, and I'll not start now!" Frances protested. She was a delicate woman who loved fine art, theater, jewelry, and antique dolls, like the one she kept on her dresser drawer perched between pictures of the children who no longer came to see her. The doll with golden curls, a flowery bonnet, and a pink dress with a rose print, and a matching parasol was all she was allowed from her past life. In that room she would tell me about the house she lived in all her life, the one her father grew up in, the one her grandfather built. How she had hundreds of dolls preserved in glass cabinets, collected all her life, and how as a young girl she dreamed of owning such treasures. She reminisced about entertaining guests in her formal dining room, complete with good family china, or dressing up in an evening gown, prim and proper.

"You must create just the right illusion in order to keep all the men looking. After all, who wants only a husband's eyes on her?"

She would tell me of going to the best restaurants, thanking the chef personally, and seeing all the great plays, musicals, dramas, comedies, and concerts. Every memory of every evening still alive in her mind. In her room with its hospital bed with side rails, she found happiness that no longer existed for her any place else. Particular about what she ate and wore, she could not hide with makeup and pearls the dress she had on that velcroed in the back. A dress that was designed to make dressing her easier for others. Nor could she convince herself that at the feeder tables, where few had faculties as lucid as hers, was a gourmet meal.

"You say that about everything," Kathy replied, "And if I let you have your way, you wouldn't eat anything."

Frances locked her lips, defending her taste buds from the slime green muck some called peas. Kathy tried to force her

spoon past those determined lips as Frances weaved and bobbed her head, smearing the peas from the bridge of her nose, across her cheeks, and down her chin.

"Don't let her manipulate you," Ruth, a co-worker, encourages as Arnold let out one of his screams. Every so often, Arnold would raise his torso as well as his feet, tighten every muscle he had, and let out one of those screams I never got used to. Frances stiffened her body, glanced down the table in disgust, then closed her eyes.

"She's acting like a child!" Kathy informed us. Jean began to pat Arnold's arm and Ethel started to chant "Evil, evil, evil," while Frances spit the peas from her lips, her eyes defiant.

"Then treat her like one," Ruth said. "You have to when they act like that."

Frank choked on the pills Nurse Jenny put in his apple sauce, coughed a bit, and dropped his thick large-knuckled hands into his food. "Well, Frances, you just can't have anything to drink until you eat," Kathy told her as she began to clean up Frank's fingers and plate.

Frances' face turned red and she began to yell, "Help! Help me! I won't be treated this way."

"Yell all you want Frances, but you will sit here and get nothing to drink until you eat your peas!"

I sat quietly at feeder table number three. Frances kept yelling for help and the nurse and the assistants kept talking of manipulation, child-like behavior, and what was best for Frances and others, some believing all they told themselves. Arnold continued to yell, Ethel wouldn't stop chanting, and Jean made a pass at me. And that's when it happened.

That's when I couldn't contain myself anymore. That's when I got up, walked over to table number one, grabbed a glass of milk, Frances, her Geri-chair and took her to her room. I sat with her for a time, sharing stories and milk, while the other St. John's employees discussed where I might be working next.