Possessed Probies

And so my life as a student nurse began with five intensive months of classes -- seven hour-long blocks per day, five and a half days per week.

8 a.m. Anatomy and Physiology. Mrs. Meeres. Jasper lived in the narrow closet at the front of the classroom. In the evening I would go down to study his wired bones, always with White or Perry or Niven for courage and company. He hung there, grinning -- no tongue, wide-open mouth full of teeth. And he would stare right through me from two dark sockets that once held his eyes.

Who had this man been in real life? We knew he was a man, because his pelvis was narrow and funnel-shaped, not broad and deep like a female. One night during our study, Niven stuck her arm through the pelvic basin and said, "Hey, Big Daddy you gotta be a guy, 'cause you got no room there for babies."

"*Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones*," we sang as we studied Jasper upside down and backwards. "*The foot bone connected to the leg bone*." There were long bones and short bones, "*The knee bone connected to the thigh bone*," carpals and tarsals, "*The thigh bone connected to the back bone*," the frontal bone and flat bones, "T*he back bone connected to the neck bone*," the cranium's parietal bone and irregular bones of the vertebrae, "*The neck bone connected to the head bone*" -- clavicle, femur, tibia, fibula, carpus, metacarpus, and six auditory ossicles. "*Oh, hear the word of the Lord.*" Two hundred and six bones in the human body. I memorized them all. "*Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk aroun*'," we sang as we jived in front of Jasper, holding his metacarpal phalanx, twirling under his ulna, which articulated with his humerus and radius. "*Ohhhhh, yeaahhh*."

9 a.m. Nursing Arts. Mrs. Whitford. It was here in nursing arts that I felt like a real nurse and Mrs. Chase, named from the Chase Company that manufactured her, was the true, perfect patient. I spent many enjoyable hours nursing this voiceless, life-size doll. I sat her up, laid her down, turned her over and lifted her on and off the bedpan. I made an occupied bed with her in it and pulled the bottom sheets so tight I could bounce a dime off them -- there could be no wormy wrinkles to cause bedsores.

In Nursing Arts lab we practiced many of the patient care procedures on each other in the classroom -- a mockup with all the equipment we would find on the hospital ward. Working in pairs, our class took turns giving each other bed baths and heavenly back rubs with alcohol and powder.

We took each other's temperature. And every day we'd climb into bed to be rolled up and down, gently turned and positioned with pillows. One day Perry fell sound asleep nestled in fluffy pillows.

And each night after classes, we continued to study.

"Okay, Perry," I said. "What's the purpose of a bed bath?"

"Purpose: To make the patient clean and comfortable," Perry read from the rulebook.

White continued: "To enable the nurse to observe the patient. And don't forget to chart your observations."

"Don't forget to immerse your hands and feet in basin if possible," said Porter. She shrugged, puzzled.

"Porter, that's the patient's hands and feet, not yours," White said.

"Oh, is that what that means." Porter squinted down at her book again and continued, "*Clean nails. Clean glasses. Brush hair. That's the patient again, right?*"

"And what if he's bald?" Niven asked, her hand on her hip.

"Come on, Niv," White said. "Get serious. And don't forget: *A bed bath is a good time for health teaching*."

First it was oranges, then our partner's arm and finally, "the other place." My partner, Marlene Brown, had a

wonderfully large buttock for me to pop my needle into. But I can't say the same for poor Brown.

"Gosh, I hate this," she muttered as she slowly ground the needle into my flesh. Then after she yanked it out, asked, "Did it hurt?"

"Naw," I said stoically, trying to hide the pain. Though I thought she'd come very close to the vital sciatic nerve we had been warned to stay away from.

After class I rushed up to my room to look in the mirror. Sure enough, I had a big bruise the size of a silver dollar on my left buttock.

Two days later, I was shocked when Mrs. Whitford assigned me a new partner. Brown had quit. She was the fourth to go -- we were down to 32.

The pink-tangerine sun was bursting forth splendidly over the dark peaks of the Rockies one morning when Mrs. Whitford said, "Turn to procedure number 24." Perry who sat in front of me, turned around with flushed cheeks.

"Holy shit," she breathed. "Preparing the body for the morgue!"

"First we give the body a complete bed bath," Mrs. Whitford continued. "Then we pack all the orifices with gauze, using the long forceps provided in the morgue pack."

"I'll be goddamned," shot Niven, the tall, tomboy. "No one is going to pack my orifices."

The class snickered, and Kaufmann lowered her chin to her chest and daintily cupped her hand over her mouth.

Mrs. Whitford ignored the commotion. "There will be no lab for this procedure." Thank goodness for that, I thought. "The nurse has an important role in the care of a dying patient. You must keep your finger at the wrist and monitor the pulse until it stops. You must chart the exact time that the pulse and respiration cease. The chart is a legal document and can be used in a court of law.

"Now be sure to put the teeth into the mouth before sending the body to the morgue," Mrs. Witford said. "Otherwise you must go down to the morgue, by yourself, and unwrap the body and put the teeth in. By then rigor mortis will have set in and you'll have a frightful time to get the mouth open."

How would I ever touch a dead body? I ran my father's words over and over in my head. "Why are you afraid of the dead? They're the only people in the world who can't harm you."

Maybe he was right, but I wouldn't trust a morgue full of them.

The buzzer buzzed, class was over. I quickly made a large note in my exercise book -- mouth -- morgue -- rigor mortis -- and crossed my fingers.

Each day, Mrs. Whitford inspired a desire in us to nurse the whole patient, mentally and spiritually, as well as physically. "These are indivisible!" she would stress over and over again. She explained the golden rule of Holy Cross: "You must answer the call bells immediately. A Holy nurse never walks by a patient's room with a call bell light on -- no matter how busy you are -- whether it's your patient or not!"

Answer the patients' calls quickly, cheerfully and quietly.

"Nothing can substitute for good nursing care," Mrs. Witford continued, "not even drugs. If the patient can't sleep at night, you must first give a back rub and a cup of hot milk before resorting to a sleeping pill. Your obligation to the patient is to comfort and alleviate fear, not to knock them out with a pill." She paused for a moment, then smiled and said. "I remember a student nurse who sat down and had a quiet talk with her elderly, belligerent patient who wasn't responding to treatment for her pneumonia. The woman finally admitted that she was worried about her cat that had been left alone in her house. The student told the Head Nurse who arranged for the patient's neighbour to care for the cat. Lo and behold, the patient suddenly made a remarkable recovery.

"You must think of it as though you were the patient. To lie in bed month after month is a terrible thing. A little goldfish in a bowl is fascinating to watch and can do wonders to perk up a lonely patient." Then Mrs.

Whitford smiled and I thought she was the kindest nurse ever.

These were the values instilled in us each day. “A Holy nurse must be one cut above nurses from the other hospitals.”

10 a.m. Professional Adjustments. Mrs. Croft taught this class. She was not a model of what we were supposed to be. Her cap perched precariously atop her carrotred bun and her pink-rimmed glasses sat just below her black eyebrows. She wore bright red lipstick and her uniform hem usually hung in a bit of a wave.

Always late, she would fly into the classroom in high plumage. “Splendid, splendid, girls,” she’d say, reaching to push her crooked cap back up on its bun.

“You are Holy girls, and you must never bring discredit to your hospital -- on or off duty.” She paced back and forth in front of the class fingering a piece of chalk. “Remember, do not sit in parked cars. That’s only for racy girls.” Niven turned around and rolled her walnut-coloured eyes at White and me as Mrs. Croft continued. “Our late leaves are midnight in your first two years and 1:00 a.m. in your third year, more than enough time for a movie and a Coke afterwards. What could one possibly do after 1:00 a.m.? Everything is closed!”

White jabbed her elbow into my ribs, leaned over and whispered, “Think she ever heard of back seat bingo?”

Mrs. Croft’s cap had slid to the side again, one wing pointed to the ground. She stared blankly at us, then returned the cap to its perch. It was still crooked.

Another jab from White. “God, what a goofball.”

“I’ll tell you what will happen,” Mrs. Croft continued, “You sit in a parked car, one thing leads to another, and first thing you know your career is over.”

Niven covered her mouth and said in a coarse whisper, “Oh, for godsake, she’s worse than my mother.”

The electronic buzzer sounded.

“Splendid. Splendid.” In a fluid motion Mrs. Croft gathered her books and swept out of the room.

White closed her books and said, “There’s something wrong with that woman, Yates. Definitely, something wrong.”

11 a.m. Sociology. My last class of the morning -- a fun class given by Father Malo. Dressed in the traditional black suit and white priest’s collar, he would bounce into class, a thin, black spiral notebook under one arm. We all sprang to our feet, as we did whenever a lecturer or instructor entered the room -- but we did it with a little more oomph for a priest.

“How are we all this morning?” He would say, rubbing his hands together. “Scintillating and salubrious? Yes? Good!”

Father talked about the norms of society and wrote notes on the board.

“To be or not to be, that is congestion. Can something be done about it? Of corpse, of corpse!” We laughed.

“Wouldn’t that just jar your mother’s preserves.”

We laughed again, then the buzzer buzzed.

“This has been absolutely scintillating and salubrious. My sufficiency has been suffoncified. More would be obnoxious to my consumption,” he said with a straight face, but always with a prankish glint in his eye.

“And be sure you know how to spell scintillating and salubrious,” he added. “It will be on the exam.” Then he picked up his black book and walked to the door, turned and waved, “Ciao.”

We waved back and watched his bouncy walk disappear down the hall.

Sure enough, scintillating and salubrious were on the exam. I was surprised to find priests so human.

Ethel Robbins taught us how to play bridge. We spent our 10-minute class breaks pouring over our bridge cards. As we changed partners, we began to form friendships.

Robbins was a tall, voluptuous, platinum blond from Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. Half her face was concealed by her long, Veronica Lake hairdo and she walked with more swing to her hips than any of us would dare to show. Robbins loved bridge. She was not only the most serious player on our floor but a sore loser. When she went down because of Perry's ill bidding, her eyes would narrow to slits, she'd flick ash from her cigarette, and then she'd explode.

Perry's cheeks would turn cherry-red and she'd say in a manner that led one to believe she was about to break into a laugh about the whole situation, "Oh, for gosh sakes, Robbins, don't take it so seriously. It's only a game." But the day finally arrived when Robbins refused to play with Perry or anyone else who wanted to play bridge just for fun, which pared her partners down to one -- Riley.

Lilly Riley was a tailor-made partner for Robbins. She was pleasantly pudgy with jet black hair and a strawberry birthmark that covered a good part of the right side of her face. Polio had left Riley's right leg shorter than her left and she had to wear a wicked-looking heavy elevated boot that did not completely correct her limp. Yet with all this, she had developed a vivacious personality that overpowered her physical defects. Riley came from Cranbrook, British Columbia, but had lived most of her life in a children's hospital.

Even though it had been more than four years since Jonas Salk had discovered the vaccine to prevent polio, children's hospitals were still crowded with children who had contracted the disease before the vaccine was invented, and the children of parents who had refused to allow their children to be vaccinated.

That opposites attract may be why Robbins and Riley became constant companions -- and permanent bridge partners.

12:00 Noon Lunch. Cafeteria. Last in line. The rule of bumping probies prevailed not only at breakfast, but lunch and supper as well. Now the steaming stainless steel was filled with overcooked brownish-green beans, sloppy mashed potatoes and very dried up roast beef. Dessert was yellow pudding with a thick scum on top and a dollop of the red, red strawberry jam in the center.

1:00 p.m. Etiquette. Mrs. Bass's class exceeded any form of education we had previously received from our mothers. She was no more than 4' 10" tall, even in her spiked heels, but what she lacked in inches she made up for in volubility.

"Panties changed every day, bras every two days, slips every three days," Mrs. Bass would expound, standing on her little box behind the podium. "And, girls, we must take a bath every day."

Mrs. Bass was our expert on femininity. Dressed in a baby-pink suit with purple trim, she smiled and said in her perky voice, "If you ever have a problem, girls, don't suffer, come and tell me. Why, one day a little student came to me in tears because she had hair on her legs. Well, Dearie, I said, that's not a problem at all. We have razors now. You can have silky, feminine legs like all the other girls."

She often held up her marriage to a doctor at Holy Cross as an example of a perfect marriage. "One little tip, girls. Never let your husband see you dressed sloppily. Now, when Dr. Bass leaves the house every morning at six o'clock, I've been up for an hour." She paused to finger the roses spilling over the wide brim of her mauve hat. "I've taken the curlers out of my hair, I'm dressed, my makeup is on, and I kiss Dr. Bass good bye at the door. Every morning. I wouldn't dare send him off to the hospital with the image of me in my curlers, only to greet you girls who are cheery, starched and wide-awake at 7:30, would I?

“One last thing, girls,” she chirped. “Be sure to shave under your arms and wear deodorant. There is nothing worse for sick patients than to have a smelly nurse reach across their face.”

There was no exam for this course.

2:00 p.m. Physiology, the function of cells, tissue and organs. Dem bones again. Mrs. Meers gave us each two beef bones -- one sawed in half longitudinally, one horizontally -- and a beef knuckle sawed in half, which we used in the lab to study the skeletal system. Next we had to dissect a beef eye to identify the cornea, lens, iris, conjunctiva, vitreous, vitreous chamber, sclera, optic disk and nerve, retina, and all the other specificities of the eye.

Then the fascinating sheep brain, which I had to handle very carefully, as it could be easily torn or broken. It was mind-boggling that this small mass of grey matter with just 16 structures which I identified on cross-section, could perform such vital and complicated functions. My brain defined who I was -- and thankfully it was safely housed in my thick skull.

Finally, because pig’s organs are similar in design and function to ours, we had to dissect fetal pigs. At first I was a little uneasy, but I soon became absorbed in the tiny pink, kidney bean-shaped unborn piglet. The mystery of my own body unfolded as I traced the minute blue veins that trickled through paper-thin, peritoneal tissue as delicate as a butterfly wing. And it had a perfect little pink snout.

It was Friday, the beginning of May and I had the weekend off. I sat in the lounge after work, glancing through the Calgary Herald: The Hudson Bay was having a sale of crinolines, Shop-Easy had bread, two loaves for 37 cents. “Hey, does anyone want to go to a movie?” I asked. “Gigi is playing at the Tivoli Theatre, not far from the Lotus Cafe.”

Nobody took any notice of me, but White looked up from her coffee and said, “Got something to ask you, Yates. Want to hitch home with me?”

“Hitchhike? Are you crazy? My mother would kill me.”

“Come on, Yates,” pleaded White. “I haven’t seen my father since he’s been home from the hospital.”

“What will I tell my parents?”

“Gad, you’re such a chicken liver, Yates,” snapped Niven. “Tell them White’s uncle is going to drive you there and back. It’s no sin to tell a little fib.”

White was intently filing her nails but she looked anxious. For the out-of-town girls, hitchhiking was the only way to get a visit home. Her father had Raynaud’s disease, which caused poor circulation in his hands and feet, and his right leg had just been amputated.

“Okay, okay,” I said. I got up and reluctantly telephoned my mother. As I spoke my lie about White’s uncle, I felt as though I had swallowed a rock.

I walked down to White’s room. She’d begun to pack. “Okay, I’m going,” I said, “but I want you to know I felt like a real grunge.”

White’s face relaxed. “Gee thanks, Yates … really.” She stuffed her babydolls into her suitcase, then looked me in the eye and gave a broad smile. “Aw, don’t look so worried, you’ll be okay. I’m very selective about the cars I get into.”

The spring sun finally felt warm. White and I had our jackets tied around our waists by the time we opened the wooden door of her meagre home. The cozy aroma of freshly baked bread greeted us. Little squeaking noises

came from a box on the floor beside the wooden stove where several newborn piglets were struggling to survive. The skinned carcass of a freshly killed deer lay on newspaper on the floor beside the table waiting to be cut up.

I followed White through a small dining area; she pulled back a blanket that hung for a door and we stepped down into the warm living room. Her father sat on the couch, crutches propped beside him, mourning his loss, his leg gone below the knee. He was a tall, ruggedly handsome man , cowboy handsome, actually, with strong features and a set jaw. Years of toil had etched deep furrows into his leathery face. He was a dominant difficult man, weakened by intemperance and adversity, barely able to eke a living from his small farm.

"Hi, Dad," said White. "Who got the deer?"

"I did. Same as always … on ol' Blackie."

"Dad, you shouldn't be riding that horse. How did you balance?"

Just then there was a bang from the front door.

"Go help your mother. The sow's farrowing."

I followed White back to the kitchen. Her mother rushed in carrying a piglet wrapped in a towel. She held its breathless body over the stove and began to blow down its throat with short quick puffs, desperate to kindle the small spark of life that might still be there. There was a gasp from the tiny snout. Mrs. White jiggled the little mass of pink skin in her palm and blew down its throat again. It sputtered, gave several laboured breaths and began to whimper in weak wheezy grunts. Then she gently placed the piglet in the box with the rest of the litter.

She could not afford to lose one. By the fall they would be mature enough to send to the auction to be slaughtered. That would bring extra money so the family could live a little easier during the cold winter months. They would keep one sow for their freezer. Still, it would not be enough. Mr. White would have to ride up into the back hills to hunt.

White's mother turned, her thin face drawn and pinched from the cold, her long blond hair hanging in limp curls. Though still young, the strain of her life was beginning to show. She pushed her hair from her face with her forearm, wiped her hands on her jeans, and embraced White in a tearful reunion.

It was late when White and I sat at the kitchen table eating the fresh hot- cross buns her mother had made before retiring.

"I remember how, after the pigs were auctioned, all the women would line up at the door of the Farm Board hoping to collect their cheques while their husbands were crowded in the beer parlour drinking with my father." White licked the icing from the bun. "But the Farm Board refused to give the cheques to the wives. They gave them only to the men. Isn't that ridiculous?" I nodded.

"From the time I was three," White continued, "my poor mother used to send me into the bar to beg my father to come home … he would drink away all the money we made from the pigs." White poured herself another glass of milk. "My mother's such a strong woman," she said in a whisper. "I hope I can pay her back one day for all she's done for us kids."

After we got back to the residence that Sunday evening, I called my mother and told her about my weekend, about White's parents, whose very existence depended on whether the piglets lived or died, about White's father with one leg, forced to ride his horse and hunt wild animals all year to feed his family, and how the RCMP would look the other way when they saw him hunting out of season.

I didn't tell my mother about standing on a cold highway and climbing in and out of strangers' cars. That night I tossed and turned but I couldn't sleep. This was the first time I had ever seen such poverty. I finally fell asleep thinking of how grateful I was for my bourgeois upbringing, and for my parents who equally shared the ups and downs of married life.

3:00 p.m. Pharmacology: Drugs and Solutions. Miss Lynch, a dark-haired nurse with a bright, broad smile, taught pharmacology, the last class of the day. Many drugs didn't come in pills or vials, they came in packets of powder, which we had to dilute in sterile water. By using a formula of *desired* over *available,* we would work out the correct dosage for each patient.

Dr. Dory, an anaesthetist, came twice a week to recite in a monotone hypnotic voice the generic name of every drug, the trade name chosen by the manufacturer, the drug action, adverse reactions and the antidote, and I took notes.

The room was warm and the sweet smell of lilacs drifted in through the open windows. With my chin resting heavily in my palm and my eyes half open, I tried to concentrate on Dr. Dory. "Chlorpromazine -- promachlor: uses schizophrenia, mania, dementia; side effects nausea … Percodan -- narcotic analgesic: oxycodone … an opiate. Adverse effects when combined with anticholinergics … Phenobarbital -- belladona alkaloids, atropine, hyoscyamine, scopolamine …" His da-da-da-dah monotone anaesthetized me. I'd watch Perry's pen leave a line on her page at the exact place that she slipped into dreamland.