

## *Foreword*

*I never imagined that I would have an eight-hundred-pound teacher. I never even knew such a person existed. As a farm kid, I thought I had seen plenty. But what I didn't know was a lot. I was raised in Maryland, but I grew up in West Virginia. Fourteen years in the mountains changed my life forever, and Lily was a big part of that.*

## **Prologue: She was a cow**

My God---Lily was enormous. I had never seen a person so huge. She was even bigger than I had imagined. She was a cow. Her massive body took up an entire queen-sized hospital bed. And just like Mike said, the flab from her flanks hung over both sides. The fat from her jowls hung down to meet the sheets rendering her neckless. Her long, brown hair, which would have reached her waist if she had one, was parted down the middle and braided into two pigtails tied with yellow ribbons at the ends. Her gargantuan body was draped in a sleeveless, yellow, flowered muumuu. She moved her arm when speaking to Ken and exposed a bird's nest of brown matted coarse hair in her armpit. I was determined to keep my eyes fixed on hers and not let her see my eyes wander over her mammoth body. Oh why did I ever think I could be a doctor? Why couldn't I have chosen something else? And anyway, this was a job for a veterinarian. Those first few seconds with her seemed an eternity. I still couldn't understand why I was here. A few days ago, I didn't know Lily existed. Now she was *my* responsibility.

## Chapter 1: The Short Straw

At last, it was five o'clock, quitting time. A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. I showered and changed out of my two day old hospital scrubs into a fresh cotton blouse and skirt. As I drove along the boulevard toward the clinic, I dreamed of my weekend off, the first in a month. It was a sweltering ninety-five degrees and as I passed the glitzy new burger joint, with its fifties diner chrome trim and glowing blue and green neon, I fantasized about their black cherry chocolate amaretto ice cream. I could eat two scoops, but no, I still had to sign off my weekly charts. My stomach growled. I promised myself when my paperwork was finished, I would stop at Monty's, a red brick restaurant with high ceilings and a massive antique oak bar on the edge of campus. There, I would reward myself with a Nitty Gritty Grinder: thinly sliced roast beef, sautéed onions and bell peppers dripping with melted butter cheese.

As I drifted off into food wonderland, I nearly missed my turn off. At the last second, without giving a signal, I whipped my car into the parking lot like Steve McQueen, threw it in park and jumped out in a single motion. As I slammed the car door shut, I was awakened from my dreamlike state by Wayne and Uncle Earl, two janitors who stood outside the clinic. Earl was an older man and nobody's uncle, but we called him that anyway. He was so flattered by his given nickname that he had it embroidered on his forest green work shirt. Like watchdogs these two kept an eye on me when I worked late to make sure I got to my car safely.

They snickered at me between drags on their Marlboros. "We seen your medical license on the wall, but can we see your *driver's* license?" asked Wayne.

While these two enjoyed a laugh at my expense, I studied Wayne's scraggly beard.

"It's right under your razor. When's the last time you saw that?"

“Ooooooweeeeee. Lord have mercy, son, she gotcha that time.”

When the laughter died, Uncle Earl decided to poke some fun.

“Hey little lady, when are you gonna get you a *real* doctor car?” He was referring to the fact that three of my fellow interns, although still making less than \$30,000 a year, had already purchased a Mercedes, a Porsche and a brand new 1992 Beemer on credit.

I looked over my shoulder at my maroon four-door K-car with the top coat peeling off in large white flakes. My faithful Dodge always started, even in a blizzard. Showy or not, she had never left me stranded.

“She might not be a *real* doctor car. But she’s paid for.”

Earl snuffed out his cigarette with a twist of his work boot and lunged forward to open the door for me still blowing smoke from his nostrils. “I hear ya, sister,” said Uncle Earl proudly. Wayne nodded in agreement.

I put a bounce in my step and some sway in my hips as I felt their eyes glued to my behind. I appreciated being reminded I was a woman from time to time and I was happy, no, *ecstatic*, because the last day of my internship was through. Neither my exhaustion nor teasing about my clunker could dampen my joy that the first year, the worst year, of my indentured servitude was finally over.

For months, I had crossed off the days, one by one, on the funeral home calendar that hung by a tack on the wall next to the stove. It was an eternity since I first wore my starched white coat with its green emblem and draped my Littman’s stethoscope proudly across my shoulder.

I remember the first day of internship, standing in front of my full length mirror. It was the first of July and I pulled my long, strawberry blond hair into a barrette. Because of my small frame, I had to roll up the sleeves of my white coat to my wrists; the hem fell down to my calves.

My olive eyes stared back at me, thrilled and terrified at once. I had worked hard to get to that day and I couldn't wait to begin the next leg of the journey. But my childhood dream of the "good life" as a doctor was soon shattered by the reality of thirty-six hour days, aching feet and missed meals. It was only sheer determination that got me through that miserable first year.

Today had actually begun yesterday when I rolled out of bed at 5:00 a.m. I was at the hospital by six and managed to check labs, x-rays and lay my stethoscope on the chests of seven patients by eight. We rounded with our attending until noon and I spent the next few hours changing blood and pus filled dressings and performing a bone marrow biopsy. Through the night I was on-call, a slave to every patient's whim and every nurse's desire. For twenty-four long hours I was at the mercy of that infernal pager.

Since there were no internal medicine or OB/Gyn residents in our teaching hospital, my night consisted of everything from delivering babies to pronouncing the dead. That final night I admitted a wheezer, a Tylenol overdose, a grandma with the dwindles and a drunk who passed out on a picnic table and was sunburned with blisters the size of pancakes. Between admissions, I got two hours sleep and at six the next morning, I rounded on seven old patients and wrote notes on the four I admitted the night before. I dragged from room to room as if each step would be my last. My stomach growled and there was a jackhammer between my eyes from hunger. Even the cold poached eggs and toast crusts left on my patient's breakfast tray started to look good. But that was all behind me now. As I packed up my things to go, I remembered the back breaking labor I endured on the farm as a child, toting water, firewood and concrete blocks. When I left there, I vowed I would never work that hard again. Maybe I spoke too soon. I never missed a meal when I worked for Pop and we always got eight hours. I tried not to feel sorry for

myself. In just a few minutes, as soon as my charts were finished, I could find blessed relief in food---and sleep.

As I entered the shabby clinic, I peeled off my white lab jacket that stuck to me like a second skin. It was only the last of June, but it already felt like August. Our department had outgrown the cramped space long ago. The building was originally the railroad hospital back when coal was king in West Virginia and the railroads flourished. After the mines closed and the use of the railroads declined, the hospital was converted to outpatient offices with the birth of the town's medical school. Twenty years later, the clinic still had the same mustard yellow paint, green sculptured carpet and threadbare drapes. The couch sagged in the middle and the cast-off recliner was broken. Two mismatched end tables rounded out the furniture. The lounge reeked of day-old coffee, sweat socks and burnt microwave popcorn. Once I thought, this place just needs a fresh coat of paint, new carpet and some modern furniture---or a gallon of kerosene and a match.

I heard laughter echo down the hall. I thought it strange for anyone besides me to be here after five on a Friday. I leaned into the lounge doorway to discover it was only Mike and Larry. I let out a small sigh. I was in no mood to deal with their seventh grade humor.

Mike Klein just finished his second year of residency. On Monday, he would be at the top of the heap serving as senior in the hospital. Medicine has a rigid caste system, like the military. Even if two residents are in the same year of training, if one is a few months ahead of the other, he has seniority. The pecking order is brutal.

The first time I met Mike, I was in awe at the ease with which he presented patients to the attending physician: "Mrs. Jones is a sixty-seven year-old white female admitted last night from the ER with chest pain. Her EKG was significant for ST changes in the inferior leads..."

Wow, I thought, this guy is a pro.

By the time I was able to make the same confident presentations, I knew the bitter truth. Mike was a con artist. He could spin a yarn about his patient or make up a false lab value without blinking. His tobacco habit was even worse. Because we remained in a state of perpetual fatigue, the attending allowed us to carry a cup of coffee on rounds. Mike carried a Styrofoam cup with him, but he wasn't drinking coffee. He had a Skoal bandit tucked into his cheek and used the cup as a spittoon. As we walked through the ICU, newborn nursery and post-op, Mike carried his bacteria filled cuspidor with him.

"It would take a forklift, no a winch, to move that much blubber," bragged Mike to Larry. Larry Limbal was about to start his first year of residency. He was like me, hardworking and eager to do things the right way. He revered Mike as I had a year prior. He'd learn soon enough. But today, these opposites were as thick as thieves. Larry laughed until tears poured down his cheeks.

"By now, she must be eight-hundred pounds. If she ever has to go to the hospital, the fire department will have to knock out a wall. Her dresses are made by Omar the tent-maker. Some man took her out to dinner in 1981 and they haven't seen him since," said Mike.

Larry could scarcely breathe.

I knew I'd regret it, but I couldn't stand it anymore, "Who are you talking about?"

Larry looked up at me with bleary eyes as he choked for air. Mike's brown, beady eyes met mine.

"Well, hey there, J.B.," Mike answered sarcastically. "I was just telling Larry, here, about Ken Kimball's homebound patients. You know it's his last day, and he's got to turn over his two patients to a second-year resident. One's about a hundred years old. She's got a tube going in one end and another coming out the other. She's as mean as a snake and she'll bite. But don't worry;

they keep her teeth in a jar where she can't reach them. I never heard of anybody getting gummed to death."

I turned to face Larry who had been trying to suppress his laughter since my arrival. Mike kept flapping his gums. "His other patient needs a blow-hole surgery. I believe she belongs to the Dick family; that would be the Moby Dicks. They're cousins of the Huts--- the Jabba the Huts and the Pizza Huts."

"What else is wrong with her?" I asked. "She's not homebound just because she's fat is she?"

"Oh, but that's where you're wrong. Dead wrong. When I tell you she's big, I mean real big. I mean Ed Sullivan big. I hear she's so fat she ain't been outta the bed in two years. She's got yeast and bedsores and so much fat it hangs over both sides of a queen-size bed. To hear Ken tell it, she smokes like a freight train and has a roommate that cooks her supper one minute and whoops on her the next. He says the house is a firetrap and run over with roaches. But don't worry about the roaches. I expect you could call an exterminator.

"Why would *I* worry about her roaches?"

"Well now, because ol' Ken has seen fit to will her over to you. You are the *fat lady's* new doctor," Mike beamed.

Larry gazed soberly to the floor.

My eyes met Mike's. He was grinning like a scarecrow; eyes glistening with delight. He slowly lifted his Styrofoam cup to his lips to expel the brown fluid that had been collecting in his cheek. I seethed. Mike had the spine of a jellyfish and the morals of a used car salesman, but he was not stupid. You couldn't get through medical school if you were stupid. He knew I could see

through his lack of ethics and I had spoken up against his lousy management of patients more than once. It was payback time and he was savoring the sweetness of revenge.

I stood there raging, trembling and unable to speak. My mind raced desperately searching for a way out. The room became tense and Larry looked for a chart to busy himself. Mike smiled wider and spit once more.

As Mike and I stared each other down, Ken sauntered in.

“Speak of the devil. Ken, old man, how have you been?” Mike sat his cup on a side table and shook Ken’s hand as if they hadn’t seen each other in years.

Ken gave a weak smile, not sure what all this was about. He was a strange duck—a tall, thin, pale fellow with watery, gray eyes and small round spectacles, a poor man’s John Lennon. His hair was long and oily and hung in his eyes. His broken front tooth was a trophy from a soccer game back home in South Africa where his parents were missionaries.

Life was different in Africa and Ken was different. He never wore a watch because he didn’t care what time it was. He never wore deodorant because I guess he didn’t care how he smelled either. In summer, he wore long-sleeved white cotton shirts to prevent burning and year round he wore sandals with no socks. He had been warned so many times by our residency director to wear closed-toe shoes and socks that a dress code had been posted in every exam room in the clinic.

Despite Ken’s natural fragrance, most of his female colleagues found him alluring. His British accent was exotic in West Virginia and he was well-traveled and charming. I was probably the only female in the department who had not flirted, dated or slept with him. Maybe that’s why I had drawn the short straw.

“Good afternoon, comrades,” he said with a tired smile as he flopped into the worn recliner. He couldn’t care less what Mike Klein was up to. It was his last day. He was eager to get back to South Africa where he could care for the truly sick and oppressed. We had often heard him say that he couldn’t understand why he had to spend his days in West Virginia phoning patients begging them to come to the clinic for their blood pressure or cholesterol, when the Africans waited for hours in the blazing sun to see a doctor for their broken bones, oozing ulcers or for vaccinations. He complained that the West Virginia welfare population had it too easy. They expected doctors from the medical school to make housecalls, bring them free medicine samples and pick up their mail on the way into the holler.

Ken had been shipped to America by his parents who insisted he receive a proper medical education. Now that he had his sheepskin, he was ready to return to his childhood home and could leave the pressures of shoes, socks and deodorant far behind. There were just a few loose ends that required tying up—like assigning his home-bound patients to a junior resident.

“Hey, Ken, why don’t you tell Joanie Baloney about your favorite *science project*? She’s dyin’ to meet her,” Mike said.

Ken’s eyes met mine. At that moment, I realized the one thing Ken and I had in common was our distaste for Mike Klein. I searched his face for a shred of hope. Maybe he had assigned the fat lady to someone else. Then Mike would have to eat crow.

Ken removed his glasses from his nose and rubbed his eyes. Could he see my dilemma, that Mike was torturing me with this assignment? I had worked hard for him, run a tight ship when he was my senior. He had remarked on that more than once. Surely, Ken was on my side. He would give that tub of lard to someone else.

“Lily is a lovely person. Joan, I’m sure you two will hit it off splendidly.”

I was doomed.

Mike's body began to shake as he tried to hold back his laughter in front of Ken. Larry sputtered as he pressed his lips together to suppress his own laughter. Ken spun around in his recliner and shot a look Larry's way. Then he posed the question to Mike, "What's wrong with him?" Mike shook his head as he reached for his Styrofoam cup.

Ten minutes earlier, I had been elated that my first year was over and was dreaming of the weekend. In a split second, with this rude, cruel twist of fate, my joy was gone. Despite my efforts to be brave, the despair showed on my face.

In a fatherly tone Ken said, "Monday afternoon, when you're finished with clinic, I'll take you there myself. Lily values her privacy and despises gawking. We'll break the ice with a proper introduction before I head back to the continent. I've watched you the past year, Joan. If anyone can help Lily, it's you, our little drill sergeant. You are going to make one hell of a senior. Sorry I'll miss seeing that."

Forget all the mush. The fact remained. He was dumping the fat lady on me. I had no idea how to care for an eight-hundred-pound woman. I could barely take care of normal patients. She sounded like a medical train wreck, a social recluse who had made her own bed and now couldn't get out of it. I couldn't fix her nor did I have any desire to. Eight-hundred pounds? She couldn't really be that big and still be alive. This was just more of Mike Klein's bullshit.

I gathered my mail and my white coat and turned for the door without a word.

"Joan?"

I turned to face Ken.

"Will I see you Monday?"

"Yeah---I mean, yes, I'll be there."

I walked out of the lounge with my head held high, chin up, tall and proud like it didn't bother me. Once I turned the corner out of their sight, I felt my shoulders sag. My unfinished charts would have to wait. I dragged myself out of the clinic. The stifling heat slapped me in the face as I swung open the heavy door. Why was this happening to me?

I fought to cheer myself up. I would get some food and retreat to air conditioning and a soft bed. But as I headed toward home, I drove straight past Monty's and then Burger King and a half a dozen other fast food joints. Then I thought: I'll stop at the Steak N' Ale and get a spinach salad, a cup of creamy lobster bisque, hot buttered yeast roll and--- ugh, *yeast*. My stomach turned. By now, I was too exhausted to eat or care. I fought to keep my eyes open. My mind imagined a woman so fat she hung over both sides of the bed. Then I had a sobering thought: How does an eight-hundred-pound woman go to the *bathroom*?