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# Skin Tight

by Richard Schmitt

Dad drove. I was out cold in the passenger seat. He must have carried me to the car and buckled me in. Possibly some panic there, some sense of things gone wacko when your kid won't wake up on an otherwise typical weekday morning—as heavy as the dead when he tried to raise me for school. *Not Again!* I saw what he went through when Mom died six months ago. Now me too Dad must have thought, his son, the same feeling of helplessness and panic. Maybe it wasn't as bad, I had a pulse, a heartbeat, I was breathing. So he rushed me to the car and drove. I surfaced briefly on the way to the hospital, my head rubbernecking on my shoulders, chin on chest, drooling mouth. I saw Dad way over on the other side of the car, about a mile away, the space between us watery as if I was looking through old Coke bottles. Dad's mouth was moving but I couldn't hear anything. He was dressed for the office. I felt like giggling. *What am I doing in the car in my pajamas?* It was a school day, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, 1967.

Each night before bed I checked to see what I'd wear the next day. I'd spent the previous eight years buttoned down with nuns in a parochial school. Starched white shirts, maroon neckties, sensible trousers, a sharp blazer. The public school's free form dress policy was a blessing like the nuns never offered. Without a mom to oversee my wardrobe, I wore what I wanted. I created a new version of myself, a hip 1967 image religiously upheld.

The night before this morning my closet was compromised. My flowered shirts and wide belts were there but no pants, at least no pants I'd be seen in. Mod-era pants were tight and short—think James Brown. This was before the raggedly patched-up blue jean look that finished off the sixties. Bell bottoms were a year away. The point is, I had nothing to wear. My two pairs of prized black pants, so tight I had to lie down on the bed to pull them on, which I wore with a pair of pointy-toed "Beatle Boots," were in the wash. I must not have staggered them into the laundry basket. I was usually careful because we had to care for ourselves now. I couldn't yell, "MOM! Where's my black pants?" And have June Cleaver appear saying, "Why here they are honey, I was just pressing them for you."

Nothing like that could happen in this house because there was no June Cleaver, there was no Mom anymore. There was only Mrs. Bent, a woman Dad hired to clean and do laundry, not that we could afford a maid, or afford to be picky about pants. Dad was an accountant who wore *Father Knows Best* suits with wingtips and a fedora. He would not be sympathetic to my plight. If I started griping about tight black pants I could end up forcibly delivered to school in a pair of baggy beige corduroys with cuffs. *Cuffs!* "Perfectly good pants young man—you'll wear them." *Them* is what was hanging in my closet—always hanging in my closet because I never wore them and I never would wear them. I'd rather die than be seen in baggy beige corduroys with cuffs.

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Or sick maybe. Really sick. Sicker than I could fake. I'd faked sick too often and Dad wouldn't fall for it. He recently caught me putting the thermometer on the radiator—stupid thing popped its top and spit tiny mercury balls all over the floor. Dad thought I bit down on it. *Did you cut your mouth? Let me see!* He had anxious mornings because it was solely him trying to get four boys up, fed, dressed and off to school while preparing himself for a day at the office. I'd fake sick, my brothers wouldn't get up, no one would eat breakfast. Dad farted up and down the stairs in a white shirt and shaving lotion shouting *Damn you boys! Damn these mornings!* What relief he must have felt arriving at work in his suit, hat and briefcase in hand, huge wingtips squeaking on the polished floor, passing orderly rows of desks in the secretary pool, nodding to the admiring glances—they knew he was a widower now—the cubicles lined up true, his adding machine, slide rule, ledger books full of numbers that only added up one way. Work must have been a refuge from the pain and chaos at home. But that wasn't something I considered, I considered myself, and the need to convince Dad I was legitimately sick so I could lie in bed all day while my black pants were laundered and returned to my closet. The question was how to look truly sick.

The answer was medicine. Pills, capsules, tablets, vials of them in our downstairs bedroom. Mom was in and out of the hospital but she died at home. She was quiet then, too weak to climb stairs, always in bed, next to which, on the night table, and more on the bureau: Drugs. Reds, blues, greens, half yellow-half speckled, and shiny little blacks, plus some potent smelling syrups and pastilles. I wasn't drug smart. I didn't know Vicodin from Vapo Rub. They didn't even have Vicodin then. Whatever they did have I figured a few pills down the hatch might induce some puking, some pasty pallor or feverish tackiness might be raised by ingesting a haphazard concoction. I'd look flushed, pale, even peaked. *Pea-kid*. A word Mom used. I had no idea what it meant. All I knew was if I nodded yes to it and hung my head like I was dying she used to let me stay home from school. So that was my goal: pale, peaked, and puking.

I overshot the goal a bit. I wasn't a doctor. I saw baggy corduroys in my closet, my social life on the line, salvation in preparations. I'd rig the morning wake-up call, the pills a way out—not all the way out, I wasn't trying suicide, although I came close. I fiddled with the vials: popped a few greens, hopped a couple reds, the remedy in the combinations. A random handful, an arbitrary headfull. I downed them helter-skelter and went to bed and was soon well beyond dreams, beyond expectations, well into a well, a pit, a hole, down and down and down and well-well-well—What's this? Waking up in the car in my PJs? Coke bottles affixed to my eyeballs? I'd never taken drugs, not even beer or wine, pot was a year or two off. The sensation wasn't unpleasant. That was the strange thing, I never did get sick, I was whacked out, half dead even—I never knew how close I came to not coming back—but I was not sick. I recall the car, Dad driving, his mouth moving, then nothing until someone stuck a knife in my back—one of those bone-handled Jim Bowie jobs that pioneers threw into trees. That's how it felt anyway, extreme pain in a white and chrome room, gone was the coke-bottle effect, more like star bursts and lightning bolts, amazing how a knife in the back promotes acuity, everything vivid and true. Nurses and orderlies said "Don't move." Of course I moved. Someone was Roto Rootering my spine with a spear. I squirmed like a stuck slug. At hospitals they tell you what to do without saying why. "Don't move, it will hurt." It hurt already and I wanted to know what "it" was. But I couldn't talk. I was pinned down on my

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side while they applied acute abuse to my lower back while all went black.

I surfaced again sitting up with wires attached to my head. *The electric chair!* Red, green, blue—a wire for every pill—the wires hooked to a machine, a white-coat guy studied my face and twisted knobs with glee. Gauged needles flickered, machines whirled and moaned, something was burning. Give me my bedroom in the well of vacuity without proper pants, give me my closet, give me beige corduroys with cuffs, I'll wear the pants I would have told them if they had communicated with me instead of stabbing my vital parts with knives and electric wires. I didn't want to die. I just wanted to get sick enough to not have to go to school looking like a chump. So I'm an idiot. So I'm dangerously dumb. But I was cool at school by God. There were no baggy-ass corduroys on this guy's ass.

At some point I knew I would live if they didn't kill me trying to figure out what was wrong. I could have saved everyone time, money, and trouble, but they didn't ask, and I couldn't talk, and they continued to test, and I surfaced and sunk and finally woke in a regular hospital bed flat on my back unable to move with a big fat nurse standing over me, my head and lower back married to intense pain. The fat nurse said "Well, Rip Van Winkle. How are we?"

"Headache," I said. "Back pain. I'm paralyzed."

"Spinal tap will do that," she said. "You weren't supposed to move."

I found sticky gauze patches and snippets of cloth tape stuck to my head.

"Brain wave test," she said, "leaves a mess."

Spinal tap. Brain waves. Serious stuff. And painful. For three days I couldn't move because of the spinal tap gone wrong. My fault they said. "We told you not to move." The lower back pain wouldn't have been so bad but severe headaches were alleviated only by elevating my head which I couldn't do because of the back. I couldn't sleep or eat and they wanted me to sit up, walk around even. I whined and cried until the fat nurse shoved her finger up my ass. That's how it felt anyway. I didn't understand the first few times what was happening. I wore standard uncool hospital garb split open up the back. She rolled me onto my side and applied firm rubber-glove pressure to my anus and instantly vibrant euphoric warmth swept through my body. I heard birds chirping, violins playing, I heard the word *suppository* and knew it wasn't her finger rushing me to anal bliss. She was shoving something up there and it was good. She wouldn't do it more than once a day. "You'll get hooked," she said.

The fat one was Day Shift, busy battleaxe RNs, white stockings with a seam up the back, the cocky folded cap pinned to their heads, a nun-like uniform in virginal white—effective and authoritative. They roused me early for breakfast, changed my sheets like magicians. Said *Yes Doctor* to mumbling men in suits who shined lights in my eyes, listened to my heart, all the stereotypical stethoscope stuff.

The doctors had hairy knuckles and wore cufflinks and stayed about a minute.

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“How do you feel?”

“Headache,” I said, “backache.”

“That’s normal.”

Interns and student docs in surgical scrubs and sneakers were about all day. They seemed to have nothing but time, reading my chart and engaging me in conversation as if we were pals, like big brothers, trying out their compassion to see if they actually had any, testing their theories about my case. “So,” they’d say, rubbing their chins, “severe headaches, hmmm. Could be mental.”

The fat nurse shooed them away. “Let’s go Rip Van Winkle—Bath time.”

“I’m in bed all day,” I said, “how dirty can I be?”

Bath time sucked. The bathroom was cold and echoey with tile floor and stainless steel tubs and water way too hot and soap smelling like rat poison. “Strip,” the fat one said. “Come on, come on. I’ve seen it all.”

And there was always screaming from the burn kid.

He was 5 or 6 with sandy hair cut soup-bowl style and he was all over the ward visiting we who were too lazy to get out of bed. He was precocious and personable this kid, the high spot of the ward. Most of his skin was missing. His body was burnt to raw meat and wrapped in gauze like The Mummy.

“How’d you get burned?” I asked him.

“Hot water on a jiggly chair.”

Sometimes he was “in barrier”, confined to his room because infection drove his fever up. But if he wasn’t he’d show up in my room after breakfast. “Hello,” he’d say. “Would you like to play dominos?” We dumped the dominoes out on the table. Inside the box were directions for Pip and Chickenfoot, but mostly the kid liked a game he made up called Train, which was more story than game. We connected the dominoes where the dots matched up and invented the trips we would take if we weren’t stuck in the hospital. Always places like Texas and China.

At bath time the nurses snuck in to get him and the screaming would start. He was horrified of baths. His burn dressing had to be changed daily and the only way to remove the gauze where it dried crusty to his oozing burns was to soak it off in hot water. The kid wanted nothing to do with hot water. He’d see them coming and the dominoes flew. The fat one would trap him in a corner or under a bed and drag him screaming to the bathroom. His skin was gone from his lower chest down his stomach to his thighs and onto the tops of his feet. His penis was a pointed charcoal briquette. The tip had slipped off with the outer skin leaving a beet-colored stub. Listening to him scream in the steel bathroom was worse than the spinal tap. I was afraid the fat nurse would lose patience one day, forget her Florence Nightingale oath and hold him under to stifle his screams, letting the hot water fill his nose and mouth.

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Afterward, wrapped in fresh gauze, his face red and swollen from crying, he looked hurt. He didn't know why they did it to him. "Infection" they said, but he didn't understand.

His parents came in the evenings, the mother chewing gum and the husband in a janitor uniform. They had an infant at home, these people, the mother, who'd left boiling water on a jiggly chair in the vicinity of a five-year-old, my friend, the domino kid.

My dad came too after work, his suit wrinkled from eight hours at the office and the rush-hour drive across town. He'd stay a while looking worried, drained, tired, then drive 40 minutes home to retrieve my brothers from the babysitter.

The rhythm of the ward was chaos early, then a long boring calm when the doctors and day nurses went home. I had a private room with a window looking out on the corridor. Student nurses showed up and stayed all night. Like the young interns, they were animated and happy to be fussing over us. Unlike the RNs in their institutional whites, the night nurses wore uniforms of pink and yellow or simply lab coats thrown over street clothes. They were girls. I was 15. One wore a red checkered outfit that snapped up the front. She had blonde bangs to her eyebrows and breasts like bob apples that pushed peeking gaps between the snaps. The hospital beds were high and at night a steel rail was raised on both sides. To raise it the bob-apple girl bent low over the bed, there was the hint of cleavage, and after the railing was up she'd fold her arms on top of it and rest her boobs atop her arms and talk to me as if she had all the time in the world. Sometimes a few night nurses would congregate in my room, surely hiding from their supervisor. I'd be King Shit then--*Thank You God!*--wondering how I'd gotten so lucky. One evening during visiting hours I was sitting up eating a cheeseburger and surrounded by a bevy of beautiful nurses when in walked my civics teacher Mr. Carolli. He eyeballed the nurses, looked at me munching the burger and said: "You don't look like you're hurtin."

"Oh, I am," I said, "I'm in constant pain and agony."

He chuckled, "Yeah, I see that." At school he reported my circumstances to my cronies and I gained instant celebrity status. Among 9<sup>th</sup> grade boys nothing was cooler than seductive nurses, skipping school, and cheeseburgers. I'd have stayed in the hospital for the rest of my life; anyone would—waited on hand and foot, attention at the touch of a call button, the touch of beautiful nurses. But the truth is, I was often hurting. At night the headaches were so bad I couldn't sleep. One night, as a last resort, I pressed the call button. I didn't want to, because I knew what I wanted, and I knew who would come, and she did, the bob-apple girl, her breasts rested on the bed rail.

"Problem?"

"My head," I said. I was in tears. "It hurts. Can't sleep."

She studied my chart. "Too soon," she said, "you just had something."

"The pills don't work."

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"You have to wait," she said.

I couldn't say what I wanted, not to this nurse. "Please." I asked with agonizing looks. "Something that works, like the day nurse gives, the big one." I tried to indicate by mental telepathy, by teary-eyed longing, but the beautiful nurse looked perplexed.

"What?" She said. "What do you want?" Pointing was out of the question. She grew impatient. "I don't know what you want." I might have murmured the word *behind*. I must have said something. I didn't know any medical lingo. I was 15. A goddess stood before me. I needed her to shove something up my ass. Somehow, she got the idea. I think I annoyed her to the point where she was going to make me say it. She looked me straight in the eye, her breasts pressing the rail. "Suppository? Is that what you want?" Horrified. I couldn't I even nod. She shook her head and left. When she came back I already was on my side, my face buried in the pillow. I never looked at her again. The incident made me want to leave the hospital and return to school.

They were done with me anyway. After a week they discharged me without understanding what happened. They never asked. I never said a word. At home I was allowed to move downstairs to the convalescent room. Dad decided it was time to use that room again. It was crowded upstairs with my brothers and I was the oldest. My first night home Dad was in the room clearing the night table and bureau of Mom's leftover pill vials—sweeping them with his hand into a trash bag. It had been six months but he hadn't previously had the time or courage to address this room. He glanced over at me sitting on the bed, paused, and said, as if the thought just occurred to him. "You never touched any of Mom's medicine?"

"Of course not," I said, as if that were the craziest notion in the world.

I'd given Dad a few gray hairs, a bunch of his dollars and hours of his life were spent, exhausted, used up, driving to and from the hospital, missing work, worrying and wondering what had happened to me, and if it would happen again, if his son would die as his wife had. Well, I don't know what he thought. I'd survived by sheer ignorant luck, endured some enjoyable, some humiliating, and some painful hospital experiences. I'd skipped a bunch of school. Now I was home free.

Sort of.

For years, in spite of Mom's death, I'd embraced the idea that one might live without paying dues. The nuns said God sees all, and the devil gets his due, but I thought I might sneak by. And often I felt like I did. But sometimes not. It's amazing what you can keep to yourself and learn to accept. I knew there was a God then, one that had let me out of the pants problem, but at a price.

The next day was school. In the closet hung my two pairs of skintight black pants, freshly pressed, accomplices it seemed. That morning when I stretched out on the bed to pull on my pants, as I dragged them up my legs, I felt the little burn kid's skin sloughing off under the boiling water. I felt the dried-on gauze torn by the fat nurse while he was held down screaming in the bath. I saw his swollen red face, and the burnt-black stub of his penis.

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And me, with my baggy pants.

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**Richard Schmitt** is the author of a novel, *The Aerialist* (Harcourt 2001), and another, as yet, unpublished novel. He won the 1999 *Mississippi Review* short story contest and have stories in various journals and reviews including *New Stories from the South: the Year's Best 1999*. He's also the recipient of a Nation Endowment Grant. MFA from Warren Wilson Program for Writers. He lives in Florida and West Virginia and his pets have no bios.

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