Connie and Paula

by K. Uwe Dunn

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They're not roommates but they sleep in the same bed, an unconscious protest. Sunrise doesn't disturb as they remain asleep clear through the morning, missing breakfast and lunch. They awake hungry. They're always hungry, looking for meals if it's daylight, a way out if it's night. Similar in size, both short and thin, they unintentionally swap clothing, unaware of whose closets are whose, putting shirts on backwards and jeans over pajama pants. They emerge in the early afternoon looking like children who had unsupervised access to their parents' wardrobe. Administrators, nursing staff, and their families have tried to separate them without success. Connie and Paula: memory care unit lovers.

Ignorant of the star's arc, oblivious to the clock's hands, time means nothing to them. Is it morning? Is it night? They get dressed. They get undressed. They get dressed again. They pace and bicker and question on loop. They hold hands. They try to occupy the same

space on the same chair. They start. They start again.

Although they're not aware, dusk does affect them. Their darkness of mind arrives before the darkness of night and with it comes a pressure, a squeeze, an urgency. They are not where they are supposed to be.

Paula, oh, Paula, four foot ten maybe, in her fancy pantsuit, carrying her empty change purse, says, "Sir! Sir!"

"Sir" is me, her nurse aide, K., and I know what she's going to ask because she asks it every day.

"Sir! Are you going to Genesee?"

Genesee exists but not in the way she thinks it does. Her house is probably still there, but it's not her home. Her children exist, but not in the way she thinks they do. They're not five and eight and home waiting for her in Genesee. They're fifty-seven and sixty with children and grandchildren and lives she has forgotten.

In her mind, she is a young mother with young children who have been abandoned.

She whistles, shouts, bangs the desk and pleads, pleads, pleads with every passerby.

"Please! My children!"

Connie, a few inches taller, wearing a purple sweatshirt backwards and carrying a huge purse full of unholy things like moldy food and used underwear, follows Paula every step of the way, echoing her pleas, trying doors.

Locked door. Locked door. Locked door.

Down the hall, locked. Around the corner, locked. In the dining room, locked.

I guide them to Paula's room where a black-and-white photo jars her a bit. It's one of those stylized, professional photos in which her mother and father are in stark relief against a black backdrop, ossified in space. Paula looks around and inspects her clothes, her shoes, her candy, her bible: familiar, unfamiliar, impossible things. This looks like where we stay, but it can't be. This looks like our stuff, but it can't be. It looks like we sleep here, but we don't.

This situation always reminds me of that film *Memento*, as Connie and Paula are daily detectives of their own lives: What is this place? How did I get here? Who brought my stuff? Who's paying for this? When do I get out?

The confusion gives me a chance.

Snacks? Coffee?

I lead them to the dining room and play the host and waiter, saying, "Find a seat, ladies, someone will be with you in a minute," then I reappear to take their orders.

They buy in.

For a moment they really seem like two friends out to dinner, chatting and talking about what they want to eat, flirting with the waitstaff.

"It's nice to have a big, strong man around," Connie says.

"Sure is," Paula says.

Coffee, tea, ice cream.

But as the boring view of the parking lot gets darker and darker, a restlessness creeps in, a nagging impatience, maybe a bit of lucidity: Night is falling and we should be going.

The children. My children. My young children. Are home without me.

Before Connie came, this *was* Paula, ceaselessly, without reprieve.

Connie arrived and took to Paula's flow like a tadpole following a knot.

Paula had been on a perpetual loop: bedroom to common area to nurse's station to dining room and back and Connie joined in like she knew the trail, as if they had always been treading that path together.

Connie with her big, revealing blue eyes, easy laugh, and assertiveness became a companion, a friend, a distraction, someone who pulls Paula out of her hellish mental prison, the endless cycle of failed escapes.

In ten years as a nurse aide, I've never seen two nursing home residents take to each other so quickly, so wholly. But I've received direct orders from the administrators to split them up.

It seems unthinkable. Maybe even impossible.

I'm expected to somehow take Paula's hand out of Connie's, to set them on different tracks, to train them not to follow each other like twins, to retune their internal compasses, to divorce the best dementia friends. How mean.

There is good reason, however, and it begins with the aforementioned clothes swapping. The act seems so harmless, so innocent, and frankly, so fun. My shirt for your pants, your sweater for my shoes, my scarf for your affection.

But Paula's family doesn't see it that way. Her daughter Amy in particular is tired of coming to visit and finding her mother's fancy pantsuits on some woman she doesn't even

know and whom she gradually comes to despise.

Amy arrives at the facility like she's holding her breath, ready to speed through and right the wrong, undo the mixing, and re-sort the closets.

Paula is not her mother as she remembers her. It's horrible to say, but it's true: Paula is like a living ghost of Amy's mom. My Paula is not her Paula. Paula is not even Paula to herself, it seems.

But back to the clothes.

When Amy enters her mother's bedroom a woman possessed, Connie gets angry. To her, a stranger has broken into her place and is stealing all her stuff. She responds accordingly by trying to take it back.

I hear a shout and run to find Amy and Connie in a physical struggle over a pair of jeans.

A good thing about having a rapport with these residents is that even though they don't know who I am, they know I'm familiar. They know they can trust me. And when Connie sees me, she relents.

"She's taking my stuff," she says. But she quits fighting. She quits and follows me out the door.

A few days later, the grand experiment begins: Fill the empty bed in Connie's room so Paula can't sleep there. Give Paula a spot on the other side of the unit and hope the distance breaks the bond.

It's 8 p.m. Most of the residents have gone to bed. The nurse turns the hall light off

to encourage the rest to do the same. It's so dark I have to use my cell phone light to see, a terrible system for fall risks. I open the shower room door to let some light in.

I walk Paula to her new room, Connie follows. There's a different woman in the second bed and Paula immediately objects.

"But where will she sleep?" Paula says, gesturing toward Connie.

"She has her own room."

"She can't sleep in here with me?"

"Not for now."

I walk Connie back to her room, Paula follows.

"I know where my room is," Connie says.

The situation repeats itself.

"Why isn't there a bed for Lisa?" Connie says, gesturing toward Paula.

These two don't even know each other's names but they're inseparable. Connie calls Paula "Lisa" and Paula refers to Connie as "my friend" or "the woman I came with."

I tell nightshift I did my best.

At 1 a.m., they find Connie and Paula asleep together in Connie's bed for the first time.

The facility tried to drive them apart and brought them closer together.

It's unbearably sweet.

But I am not prepared at all for what happens next.

"The room smelled of sex," the nurse says. "And they were both standing there with their pants down."

I don't believe her. It's only her third night on the unit. I've been taking care of Connie and Paula for a year and a half. Yes, I've seen them hold hands. Yes, I've seen them sit in the same chair, sleep on the same bed. But I've never even seen them kiss. Whoever this new employee is, she didn't smell what she smelled. She didn't see what she saw.

Boy, am I wrong.

A week later, Susan, a cranky-but-reliable nurse in her fifties, opens the door in the middle of the night and finds Paula topless fondling Connie's breasts through her button-down.

The next morning, the duo ignores sunrise as always, missing lunchtime, waking in the early afternoon, hungry and ready to begin their loop.

Now one might think, with healthcare being the most regulated industry in the U.S., with rules upon rules and so many regulations one has to break one to follow another, the higher-ups would flip out and come up with something, maybe move Connie to a different unit or transfer Paula to another nursing home completely.

But no. In a moment of inspired assent, the facility says that if neither woman is in distress, let it be.

Wait. So, love wins? *Really?*

And whether it's genuine consent or just fatigue, the family doesn't even object. Maybe they see how futile it is to fight after the complete failure that was the room change.

I'm supervising the dining room during supper. Today, in one of the few times I can

remember, Paula and Connie have forgotten each other. Paula took a nap in her real bed and Connie relaxed in the common room watching TV for an hour. Now they sit and eat meatloaf, completely oblivious that the other is there.

Nobody else even notices, but I'm secretly distraught. Is the connection gone?

The meal's finished. I'm collecting trays. Residents begin to leave the room, and Connie looks around for what to do next. She spots Paula. Paula sees her, and the joy and familiarity burst through. The relief in their eyes says, "Oh, it's *you*, old friend."

(Names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.)

Author

K. Uwe Dunn, CNA, MFA (in painting), former newspaper editor, writes in both English and German. His work has been featured in *The Gramercy Review*, *The Northern Virginia Review*, *The Petigru Review*, and *Kestrel: A Journal of Literature and Art*, among other publications. He lives in rural Pennsylvania with his wife, Isabella.