

Horrors of Memory

by Robert Burton Robinson



GENRE: Suspense. LENGTH: 1,612 words. SYNOPSIS: 90-year-old Mildred Applee is thankful she still has an excellent memory—until a surgical procedure makes her blessing seem more like a curse.

“Mrs. Applee, have you had anything to eat or drink since midnight?”

“Well, let’s see. I had steak and eggs and two biscuits for breakfast,” said Mildred. “Oh, and two cups of coffee.”

The nurse stared at her in disbelief.

“I’m kidding. I know the rules. This is not my first surgery.”

Karen Applee glared. “Mom—behave.”

“Remember when you had your tonsils out, Honey, back in 1947? We bought you that Betsy Wetsy doll. Then we accidentally went off and left it at the hospital. And when your dad went back to get it, it was gone. You cried and cried for that doll.”

“Okay, Mom. No, I don’t remember that. But I believe you.” Karen turned to the nurse. “My mother has a memory like a computer.”

“And guess how old I am,” said Mildred.

The nurse checked the chart in her hand. “Says here you’re 90.”

“That’s right. And I never forget a thing.”

“Well, that’s very impressive,” said the nurse with no particular interest. “The anesthetist will be in shortly.” She turned and walked away.

“I hate being put under,” said Mildred to her daughter.

“You’d rather be awake while they cut on you?”

“I think I could take it.”

A young female doctor walked in. “Hi, Mrs. Applee. I’m Dr. Johnson, your anesthetist.”

“Oh, Doctor, looks like my mother won’t be needing your services.”

“Karen,” said Mildred.

“Oh. You’re cancelling the surgery?” said the doctor.

“No,” said Karen. “She wants to stay *awake* for the surgery.”

The doctor's eyes widened.

"I was only kidding," said Mildred. "My goodness, Karen—can't you tell when I'm joking?"

Karen smiled at the doctor. "My mother is a big bluffer. Sometimes I just have to call her on it."

The doctor smiled back, and then looked at Mildred. "Well, I can assure, Mrs. Applee, that you don't want to have to bluff your way through this procedure."

"No, of course not." Mildred stuck out her tongue at her daughter.

Dr. Johnson assured Mrs. Applee that she would keep her comfortable throughout the surgery. Then she took out a syringe and injected a drug into Mildred's IV. "This will help you relax."

Two orderlies came in and unlocked the bed wheels and began rolling Mildred toward the surgery room.

"Love you, Honey. See you later."

"Love you, Mom."

"How are you feeling, Mom?"

"Okay, I guess." Mildred surveyed the room. "How long was I in surgery?"

"About thirty minutes. But then you were in recovery for nearly two hours."

“Wow. I must have really been knocked out. What time is it?”

Karen checked her watch. “A little after five.”

“Oh, my goodness. I can’t believe I’ve been asleep all this time.”

Karen looked confused. “Mom, you’ve been awake. They brought you here to your room over an hour ago.”

“Did I say anything to you when they brought me in?”

“Yeah. You said you were thirsty. So, I gave you some Sprite. And then I fed you a few crackers.”

“Oh, yeah. Now I remember. My mouth so dry that I could barely swallow or even chew.”

“But the Sprite helped.”

“That’s right. Now it’s coming back.” Mildred thought for a few seconds. “Boy, when they put you out, you’re really out.”

“That’s what you want, Mom. It’s a lot better than feeling the knife.”

“But I don’t even remember rolling into the surgery room.”

“You don’t?”

“No. I remember saying goodbye to you and then...nothing.”

“That stuff works fast.”

“Oh, Karen, what about Ed? You need to get home and make your husband some dinner.”

“He can order pizza, Mom. It’s no big deal.”

“No, no, Honey. You get on home. I’m fine. Come see me in the morning.”

“Are you sure? We could come up tonight.”

“I appreciate that, Honey, but I’ll probably be sleeping anyway. If you come you’ll just be waking me up.”

“Well...okay—if you’re sure.”

Mildred had been asleep for forty minutes when she heard the elevator doors close. Two men, presumably orderlies, began to talk.

“So, it’s got to be tonight. Once I silence the alarm I can disconnect her and just let her fade away. Then I’ll reconnect everything and the alarm will go off. You just make sure nobody walks in on me.”

“Right.”

“Because remember: I’m taking most of the risk, but you’re getting half of the money.”

“Don’t worry, Man—I’ll have your back.”

Mildred took a peek. She saw one of the men twisting a silver ring on this right index finger. She quickly closed her eyes. What money? she wondered. All she had was the house.

She heard the elevator doors open and felt herself being wheeled out, and down a hallway.

She could feel her body being transferred from the bed to the operating table.

After some talking in the distance that she couldn't quite make out, she heard: "Okay, then. Here we go."

Mildred recognized the voice. It was her surgeon.

She felt a sharp pain in her stomach.

No, wait—I'm awake! Help! Somebody help me! But she could not speak. She couldn't open her eyes.

She would scream, if only in her mind, until her face turned blue. Then the surgeon would notice, and stop cutting her.

Mildred jerked and woke up.

What a horrific nightmare. She gently touched the area of her surgery. It was the exact location as in her dream.

Then she noticed that the other bed was now occupied.

"Hi, there, Neighbor. What's your name? I'm Mildred."

No answer.

"What are you in for?" Sounded like prison talk. Mildred *felt* like a prisoner after that nightmare.

Still no answer.

It would have been nice to have someone to talk to. A fellow veteran from the trenches of surgery.

A nurse walked in. “Here’s a little something to help you sleep, Mrs. Applee.”

“Oh, I don’t think I’m going to need any help.”

“Well, the doctor ordered it, so…”

As Mildred took the little paper cup with two pills in it, she prayed that the orderlies in her dream were not real. Who wanted to be sound asleep in a hospital where killers were roaming the halls?

She dumped the pills into her mouth.

The nurse handed her a glass of water, and Mildred drank part of it.

“Sweet dreams,” said the nurse, as she walked out.

Mildred stuck her finger into her mouth, dug the two pills out from under her tongue, and stashed them under her pillow. She couldn’t believe she had pulled it off—just like in the movies.

But after a few minutes, she got sleepy anyway and dozed off.

The stinky breath is what woke her up. Onion and garlic with a dash of stale tobacco. But she didn’t open her eyes.

Then she heard the person walk away from her bed. She opened one eye just enough to see an orderly pushing buttons on the medical equipment that was hooked up to her roommate.

It hadn’t been a dream after all. It was happening right now. The poor woman in the other bed was being murdered! She quietly reached for the button on her bedrail and pressed it. Aha! Gotcha, Sucker!

“May I help you?” said the nurse over the speaker.

“Help! He’s trying to—“

A large hand clamped onto her mouth.

“It’s okay, Jessie,” said the orderly, “I’ll handle it.”

“Okay, thanks.”

No, no, no! thought Mildred. He’s killing that woman. And now he’s going to kill me!

The orderly jabbed her arm with a syringe.

She blacked out.

“Mom? Mother?”

Mildred suddenly woke up. “Oh, Karen. I’m so glad you’re here.” She checked to see if her roommate was okay. The bed was empty. There was no trace of the woman.

“What’s the matter?”

“There was a woman in that bed last night. And this orderly came in and disconnected all her life support—and *killed* her.”

“What are you talking about, Mom?”

“I saw him doing it. So, I pushed the button to call the nurse. But he covered my mouth and then shot me up with something.”

“Do you realize how crazy you sound, Mom?”

“I don’t care—it really happened.”

“Alright. Fine. Let me go talk to the nurse.”

Karen came back in five minutes. “There was never another patient in here with you, Mom. But you were yelling in your sleep last night. So, they gave you an extra dose of sleep medication.”

Mildred was stunned. Her memory was finally beginning to fail her. She hoped it was just a side effect of the drugs they gave her during surgery.

“When can I go home?”

“You’re already approved to go.”

“Good. Let’s get out of here.”

A nurse and an orderly watched from a distance while another orderly rolled Mildred’s wheelchair into the elevator. Then Karen stepped in, and the doors closed.

The orderly said, “That poor old woman had terrible nightmares last night.”

“But I think she deserved to know the truth.”

“And what if she told the media her wild story? Just imagine some investigative reporter nosing around here asking all kinds of questions about an orderly killing a patient. We have a hard enough time getting any respect.”

“I know.”

“It was just a crazy old woman’s nightmare. But the TV station would try to turn into a scandal—just for the ratings.”

“Yeah. But what if she finds out there really was another patient in the room with her? Then she’ll think we lied about it to cover up a murder.”

“Oh, come on—you can’t be serious.” A murder? Right here under our noses? That’s ridiculous,” said the orderly, as he twisted the silver ring on his right index finger.

THE END

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