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Chester Metcalf, The Potato-Eating Dog

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CHESTER METCALF, THE POTATO-EATING DOG

We're awake.

"Listen!"

I'm shaking; no, someone's shaking me.

"Listen! Here she comes! Up-and-at-em, buddy boy, today's the day!"

It's Barney, trying to wake me up. I can hear the nurse clicking down the hallway in quick, efficient steps.

"This is it, chum." Barney says, and he starts singing "Where will youuu meet yer Waterloo?"

The nurse enters the room, walks over to my bed and says, "Good morning, how are we today?"

"Good morning," I answer.

"Were you speaking just a moment ago? I thought I heard your voice as I was coming to your room."

As soon as she says this I kind of freeze up but Barney says right away, "I just arose but a moment ago. I was half-dreaming." Barney can deal with these people better than I can.

The nurse smiles real big then and says, "This is a big day for you, you know. Or have you forgotten?" She puts the melody in her voice just like she puts on her smile or her uniform. I hate her.

"I haven't forgotten," I tell her.

"Well, you certainly don't seem very happy about it. Is there anything wrong?"

I don't answer her. She's starting to lose her patience. There's an edge creeping into her voice now. I'm not acting the way she wants me to, and that bothers her.

"You're a little anxious, aren't you. That's perfectly normal, you know," she says.

I can't take it any more. I say, "I don't want to go! I've changed my mind. I don't think I'm any better!"

She just smiles some more and says, "You sound like you're a little frightened. There's nothing wrong with being nervous. It is quite a big step after being here for so long."

She's mad. She's trying not to show it, but I can tell. Well, I'm not going to play her game anymore.

"I'm not ready," I say. "I don't feel any better than when I came in!"

I'm shaking again.

"You have butterflies, that's all. I know. It's perfectly natural." She leans close, "It's going to be all right, believe me."

She doesn't fool me. I know what she really thinks. It's all show, all bedside manner. What an idiot I was to come here! My voice is shaking, but I don't care. "Get out, let me alone." I'm almost begging her. "I'm still not well, can't you see, I'm not ready, I'm scared! Why are you doing this to me?"

For a split second she drops her smile. Then it returns and she says, "Well, why don't we just talk to Dr. Beiner and see what his opinion is?" She starts to leave. Just before she goes out the door she turns around and says to me,

"It's going to be all right, Barney, really."

She walks down the hall until I can't hear her anymore. Uh, she's mad now, I can tell. She lost the argument, and that never happens. None of them can stand to be outsmarted. They'll never admit they are. She wanted me to go, even if I didn't want to. But now good ol' Dr. Beiner will show her a thing or two. She couldn't resist that last parting shot before she left, but I won.

"You look awful smug for a sickie," Barney says to me.

"Leave me alone."

"Okay, how much do you need?" He cracks me up. Then, out of the clear blue sky he says, "43!"

"What?" I can never figure out what he's doing. He says, "43!" again.

"43 what?"

He answers matter-of factly, "43 potatoes."

"What?"

"Were eaten today by Chester Metcalf. He also enjoys chicken pot pies. He's a dog."

"So what?" He acts like he doesn't know what I'm talking about, so I ask, "Why did you tell me that?"

"Tell me what?" He says.
"Tell me about Chester Metcalf!"
He says, "I just did!"
"No, I mean why did you tell me about Chester Metcalf?"
He looks at me and says, "Who?" He drives me up a wall.
"Chester Metcalf." I almost shout.
Barney asks, "What about him?"
"He's a dog, and he eats chicken pot pies and potatoes."
"I knew that," he answers.
"So do I!"
"If you knew, then why did you ask me in the first place?"
"I didn't."
"Well, neither did I."
"Great," I tell him. "Just drop it."
"Fine. Drop it."
"Okay."
"You wanna know why, pal? 'Cause he has ears in the back of his eyes, that's why."
"Shut up, Barney. I don't want to screw around."
He got serious. "Something's bugging you, huh, old buddy?"
"Yeah, Barney. I don't think I'm ready to leave."
"How come?"
"Because I'm not any better. I'm still as crazy as I ever was."
"You're not any crazier than I am. But you like it here, is that it, chum? A lot easier sitting here on your can than trying to get along, isn't it?"
"No, I hate it here. It's not helping me."
Barney laughs and says, "You must have been crazy to ever come here in the first place, right pal?"
He's not as stupid as I thought I was. Of course! I must have been crazy to ever come here in the first place. That is why I came here in the first place! I'm crazy. But if I came here because I was crazy then how could I know if I'm not crazy now? It sure isn't doing me any good. That goddamn nurse! I was crazy to come here, so why should I stay? Now I get it. Just in time, too. I can hear Dr. Beiner coming down the hall.

He comes in the room, sits down on by bed next to me, smiles, and says in fake severe tones, "Now what's all this about your not feeling ready to be released today, Barney? Your nurse seemed quite concerned."

I can play the game, too. "Oh, nothing, really, I guess. Just butterflies. It's only normal for me to be a bit anxious, isn't it? I'm fine now," I answer.

And that goes double for Barney.

/ A.J. Brizzolara /