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Other Worlds

by Lorna Van Gilst

Twice a week I step off the elevator into the antiseptic world of Ward C-54. Always, it is too warm, and always, I have to step around a poor old duffer sitting in the hall, docile in his wheelchair beside the nurse's station.

I go on down the hall past the empty gurney that always stands in the hall with the "In use" sign on it. Always, I tick off the numbers of the last few rooms:

#6

#7

#8

Jalloh, Kabba

The second name in Room 8 is different every time I come.

Always, when I step in I wince at the stark whiteness of the sheets behind the Fulani face, like the kindergarten silhouettes kids take home to their mothers.

"Kabba," I call gently. His eyelids flutter open. His face breaks out a smile. "Ready to work?" I ask.

"Yes," he says. "Ready to work. But please, first turn back the sheets. It is so warm in here. Let's start with the Chordata today, and then Mammalia."

We discuss which creatures have movable eyelids and whether their hearts are three- or four-ventricled and if they are oviparous or ovoviparous. We are surprised to learn that I have more sweat glands than Kabba because I am a woman—until we read that a black has more sweat glands than a white. We are both too warm in this ward, and so we wonder if we are equally warm and equally sweating.

Some days I think we are equals from birth, though I was born in a red brick American hospital and carried home in a car in my mother's arms, and he was born in a thatched African hut and carried home a day's journey in a bowl on his mother's head. My father was a farmer; his, a district chief. I have only eight siblings; he has 200 or so, from nearly 100 of his father's wives.

Some days he knows incredibly more about living than do I, though he cannot touch his fingers to his own face. For ten months he has hung in that hammock suspended between life and death, in a body at war with itself. As the enzymes gather and multiply, they attack his muscle cells till he cannot reach up to scratch his own nose or wipe the sweat off his forehead.

So I come and turn the pages of his 1000-page zoology textbook and read to him of sweat glands and movable eyelids and heart chambers so he can pass the course. Some day he will go back to his people in Sierra Leone, and he will clear the swamp and plant rice on his mother's plot. Does he really need

Chordata and Mammalia and the white teacher who comes now to turn his pages?
Or is it that I need him?

His dark eyelids droop, and I must go. I am powerless over the enzymes,
so I pack away the big book, put on my coat, and move back into the cool world.

As I walk home through the silence of Woodburn Sound, I wonder if any
of us can really cross the bridge into each other's worlds. We think we try.
We enroll in Global Studies. We travel. We learn a foreign language, maybe
even try to use it. We go into a Chinese restaurant and fiddle with chopsticks
for awhile. We ask polite questions about each others' homes. We buy dashikis
and wear them once a year to a costume party.

And when we get back home and close the door, really, nothing has changed.