



THE WHITE DEATH

By

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Brenda Morris climbed out of her foster mother's brand new '64 Buick Riviera and slammed the passenger door shut. She was supposed to have Thursday nights off, but the old bat was forcing her to fill in for another candy striper that'd gotten sick at the last minute.

Yeah, sick of working at a geriatric sanitarium, probably.

Brenda stalked away from the car without bothering to wave goodbye and headed towards the institution's imposing main entrance.

She took a deep breath, savoring the brisk October air, and gazed up at the gothic monstrosity that was Woodhaven. A full moon hung so low over the hilltop structure that it appeared to teeter upon the bell-tower.

She stood still for a moment to admire the effect. "That's just so *cool*."

A whirlwind of dry leaves skittered past her, and she exhaled slowly. No use putting it off any longer.

Brenda entered the ornate lobby and wrinkled her nose. One never got used to the cool mustiness and the smell of stale urine. Quite often, the pitiful moans of elderly residents could be heard echoing down the long hallways.

No wonder the place was short staffed.

Brenda climbed the winding staircase to the second floor. Before beginning her rounds, she paid a visit to one of the restrooms to wash her hands and run a comb through her auburn curls. She smiled ruefully at her reflection in the smudged mirror. The red and white striped apron made her look like a sweet, innocent fifteen-year-old.

Brenda's foster mother - her seventh in so many years - no doubt wished it were true. The witch had busted her one too

many times for smoking and sneaking out at night to meet up with "the wrong crowd." She'd given Brenda an ultimatum: Volunteer at one of the local hospitals several evenings a week or spend some time in Juvenile Hall.

Brenda had picked Woodhaven because her dark nature was drawn to its morbid history. For several depressing decades, it had been used as a sanatorium for those suffering from The White Death. Tuberculosis had claimed thousands of lives here - not including the suicides it had provoked among patients and nurses alike.

But, God, I'd rather die of a disease than grow old and useless, Brenda thought, leaving the restroom. She could hear a woman yelling just down the hall.

It was Mrs. Hauser in Room 212.

"Somebody help! She took it away! It's mine and she stole it from me!"

Brenda reached the room and paused in the doorway, grimacing at the all too familiar sight. The old lady stood by her bed stark naked. She stared at Brenda with watery gray eyes full of righteous anger.

"Mrs. Hauser, calm down and tell me what happened." Brenda hurried over and grabbed a blanket off the bed to wrap around the woman's cold, saggy body.

"A strange little girl took my new robe. My pretty blue robe is gone - it's gone and I want it back now!"

Brenda sighed. Mrs. Hauser was hallucinating again. It was probably another patient - they were always "borrowing" things from one other.

"Okay, stay here and I'll go look for it. I'm sure the girl didn't go very far."

Brenda went back out into the hall, and a noise caused her to glance right, towards the elevator. Just before the doors slid shut, she caught a glimpse of something blue.

Here we go.

Brenda hurried over and punched the UP button. Catching the person would be easier now. For some freaky reason, every elevator in the building insisted on visiting the basement first, no matter what floor was chosen.

She wasn't really bothered by this fact - it just made the place more interesting.

Brenda listened to the distressing hum of the contraption as it ascended. It passed the first floor and then stopped. The doors opened slowly.

Empty. This meant the thief had gotten out on the basement level.

Well, they are loony, after all.

Brenda rode the elevator down and waited impatiently for the doors to open. When they did, she was grateful to see that the hall light had been left on. At least the morgue was located clear over on the other side of the basement.

Not that she was afraid of dead people. What could they do? It was the live ones that were scary.

As she exited the elevator, Brenda heard a cough behind her. She turned and looked as the doors began to close, but she saw no one.

"Great, now *I'm* hearing things."

She let out a sigh and began walking down the dimly lit corridor, shivering slightly from the damp chill that hung in the air.

A few storage rooms were located on the right side of the hall, but she knew they were kept locked. The only open room was the janitor's "office," just ahead on the left. The light inside was on.

"Big girls don't cry, big girls don't cry."

The sudden blaring of a radio made Brenda jump. It was Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons.

"Biiig girls don't cry-yi-yi (they don't cry), big girls don't cry (who said they don't cry?)."

Brenda stopped in the doorway of the break room, expecting to see the janitor, but there was no one around.

The radio played on.

Somebody's trying to play a trick on me. Bet they're hiding under the table.

Brenda started across the room, and suddenly noticed the small red splatters on the concrete floor. Blood?

Maybe it was just paint.

She followed the trail over to a large oak table that sat against the south wall. An ancient radio rested on top.

"*Big Girls Don't Cry*" faded out and then Brenda heard nothing but static. She reached across the table to hit the OFF switch, just as a child's voice came out of the radio.

"I'm right behind you."

Brenda stifled a scream and whirled around. The light overhead began to flicker on and off and in the doorway Brenda saw a tall, gaunt-looking woman wearing a blue robe. She was holding the hand of a little girl with long, black hair. The child was dressed in a white hospital gown.

Brenda forced herself to remain calm.

This place simply has old wiring. The woman is a patient here and the little girl is just visiting. They're playing games, trying to scare me.

The basement lights went out for a full five seconds. When they flickered back on, the doorway was empty.

Brenda sprinted out into the hall and saw the woman and child get into the elevator. The little girl waved at her as the doors closed.

It wasn't fear Brenda was feeling now - just plain old irritation. She jabbed the DOWN button and watched the elevator stop on the first floor. When it began to descend again, she knew where she needed to go.

The stairwell was on her left. Brenda figured it would be quicker to fly up the steps than to wait and ride the unreliable rattletrap.

She burst out into the first floor hallway, panting hard. The place was eerily quiet - all the patient room doors were shut. Brenda noticed there wasn't even anyone on duty at the nurse's station, located at the far end of the hall.

She noticed something else too. The heavy steel door to the draining room was standing ajar.

When she'd first arrived at Woodhaven, Brenda had been told about the room's gruesome history. She'd sneaked in there shortly afterwards, but the only things that remained from the past were the metal poles that the TB victims used to hang from. The corpses had been slit from groin to sternum so their infectious body fluids could drain out before they were sent on to the mortuary.

Twisted and fascinating.

Brenda approached the steel door and pulled it open, preparing herself for the loud, screeching noise it made. She reached in and flipped on the light switch.

Of course, it wouldn't work.

Brenda remembered there was a single light bulb hanging from the center of the ceiling, but she couldn't see the chain. She walked forward a few steps, and then heard a child cough on the other side of the dark room. She knew they were both in there.

"Look, Mrs. Hauser just wants her new robe back. You give it to me and I won't tell anyone what happened, okay?"

No answer. They were just trying to mess with her head, but she could play that game even better.

"Okay. Maybe I'll just lock the two of you in here, since you like the dark so much."

A sudden inky blackness fell over Brenda like a suffocating cloak. The light from the doorway was gone, but she hadn't heard the steel door shut.

She took a deep breath. *A temporary power failure, that's all. The generators will kick on soon.*

Brenda laughed nervously. "I'm not scared yet, are you?"

The little girl coughed again. And then the room became filled with the sound of labored breathing.

It became so loud that Brenda had to cover her ears. She backed up, trying to find the doorway, but ran into the concrete wall instead.

God, where was it? Where was the way out?

A chokingly foul stench polluted the air now. It made her want to vomit.

Brenda went into full panic mode, running back and forth along the wall, her hands searching for the doorway.

How could this be happening?

The heavy breathing slowed; the sound became softer, more pitiful.

Brenda screamed when something cold and slimy touched her bare ankle. She tried to kick it away, but the snake-like thing encircled her leg, slithering up to her knee.

Brenda sobbed, falling backwards onto the hard floor. She grabbed at the thing's soft, squishy flesh, trying to pry it off, but somehow it held strong.

It pulled her towards the center of the room, into a sluggish, putrid stream of what felt like human tissue and blood.

"No, God, no," she wailed. "This isn't real!"

Brenda heard a soft click, and the bare bulb in the center of the ceiling began to glow, shedding a dim light over the horrific scene around her.

The tall, thin woman in the blue robe stood directly underneath the chain. Her sunken, dead eyes stared at Brenda. Naked, draining corpses hung upside down from the metal poles, surrounding them both.

"Our fate is yours," the woman said. Her voice sounded hollow, far away.

Brenda lay in a fetal position on the icy-cold floor, bathed in bodily fluids, entangled in entrails. She couldn't scream anymore - it hurt too much to breathe. Her lungs felt like they were on fire.

She prayed, begging God to let her lose consciousness, and was on the verge of fainting when the bare light bulb above her went out.

To her left, the steel door stood wide open, the light from the hallway cutting a deep slice into the pitch-blackness of the draining room.

The woman, the corpses, the stench and bloody filth - all were gone now.

Brenda couldn't stop herself from coughing and choking, but she mustered up the strength to crawl over to the door and pull herself up.

God, it hurts so bad. She wiped her mouth, and her hand came away smeared with blood.

Brenda's vision blurred. "No."

It couldn't be. Maybe she was losing her mind, but she wasn't sick. She needed to find help.

As if in answer to her prayer, a nurse hurried by, heading away from the elevator towards the north wing. Brenda stumbled out into the hall, smiling in relief.

"Please, can you help me? Something's wrong. I don't understand what's happening."

The nurse stopped walking, but didn't turn around. Brenda heard a loud crack, like a bone snapping, and the woman's head suddenly tilted to the left at an unnatural angle.

She turned around slowly, and Brenda gasped, backing away from her.

"It's The White Death," the ghost said, in a low, raspy voice. Her face was a ghastly greenish-gray color.

Brenda tried to scream, and violently coughed up more blood - splattering the front of her candy striper uniform.

The nurse approached her at a steady pace. "You need us, Brenda. Don't be afraid."

The tall woman in the blue robe stepped out of the draining room into the hall.

Brenda rushed past her and tried to open the door to the stairwell. It was locked.

She sank to the floor, crying.

The dead women were walking, side-by-side, down the hall towards her.

"No, please. Leave me alone."

Brenda crawled over to the elevator. Just as she reached it, the doors slid open.

The dark haired child greeted her with a sad smile. The front of her white hospital gown was now stained crimson.

"Shhh. Big girls don't cry." She grabbed Brenda's arms and easily pulled her into the elevator.

Brenda had no strength left. She lay there, struggling to breathe, and watched helplessly as the doors closed.

The little girl pushed the button for the fifth floor and this time the elevator immediately began to ascend.

"My name is Katie," the spirit child said. She sat down on the floor and stared at Brenda, her face pasty-white. "Mama says you need a real family. Would you like to be my big sister?"

"I...can't...die," Brenda gasped out.

"Shhh." Katie began stroking Brenda's damp hair. "It hurts to be sick, but Mama can help you, just like she helped our nurse, Miss Nora. You'll see."

God, please, let me wake up. Let this be a nightmare.

Another violent coughing spell caused Brenda's body to convulse in pain. She tasted more blood.

Katie stood up as the elevator doors slid open. A rush of cool air swept over them.

The fifth floor was also the rooftop. Room 502 stood empty and alone in the center, beneath the bell-tower. It was where the mentally ill TB patients had once been housed.

Katie dragged Brenda out of the elevator into the moonlight. Two figures emerged from the shadows - the hideous nurse and the ghost in the blue robe.

But Brenda was past caring. She was about to lose consciousness.

The nurse knelt over and spoke in her low, raspy voice. "Alma will take away your pain now."

The world started to spin.

"I promise it'll be okay soon." Katie rested her head on Brenda's shoulder. "Mama's going to help you."

Brenda closed her eyes and felt a numbing, icy chill settle over her body. It seeped inside her, and all the pain disappeared. She could breathe normally again.

God, am I finally waking up from this nightmare?

Brenda opened her eyes and tried to move, but she had no control over her limbs.

The nurse was holding Katie's hand. Alma was gone.

The child smiled down at Brenda. "You'll be part of our family now."

The entity inside of Brenda grew stronger, forcing her to stand. Brenda's mind was growing numb with fear, from denial, but still she tried to fight the possession.

It did no good.

Brenda realized she was walking - slow steps towards the edge of the rooftop.

Almost there.

A Hunter's Moon filled the velvet-black sky, and a crisp breeze tossed around her auburn curls. She could hear the wind playing in the naked trees.

Brenda reached the roof's edge, but was unable to tear her gaze away from the brilliant moon. It seemed so close - close enough to touch.

She stepped forward into the mellow darkness.

THE END