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Today and Today and...

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Amanda Aramintha Upjohn lay very still in her bed. Her bed was located in a private room in the newest section of the Woodlawn Memorial Hospital.

Each morning, when the nurse came in to wake Amanda and do all the hundreds of little things nurses always do in the morning, she always groaned and tried to turn from the light. What time was it? 6:30? But that’s the middle of the night! What’s the idea of calling me out at this hour?

Then her fogged mind would remember, and she would sigh and settle down in the bed and look up into the face of the kindly nurse who had been sent to wait on her. Wait on her! That was a good one! Even now, Amanda could appreciate a bit of humor. And not the salty humor of the new generation, either. There were still funny good things in the world.

The nurse mumbled her usual morning ritual over the tired old body and then swept away to other duties. Amanda was alone to think for at least half an hour before the breakfast tray would arrive.

Life hadn’t always gone on within these four white walls. Once there had been grass you could touch and real silver and sparkling glassware and tinkling laughter. The walls hadn’t been painted then. Paper, with gay big patterns had hung on the walls, and the decorators were usually bustling about the place, in one of the rooms, somewhere in the house . . . the house . . . the big house on the corner . . .

“Oh, yes, nurse.” “Thank you.” “It is a fine meal, nurse.” “Oh no, just dozing a bit.” “Alright.”

Where was she? Oh yes, the big house on the corner. Thoughts weren’t working as well anymore. Ought to send them out to have them repaired . . . wonder who to call . . . oh, but that was silly. Who ever heard of sending thoughts out to be repaired! What would Johnny, dear old Johnny, think of this little rambling . . . still, it was fun to ramble, just let the mind go where it would. It was certain the body could never move again.

No. They had left no illusion about that. Once, they had pretended, and quite successfully, too, for a while, that it would get up and carry her around again. And, foolish girl, she had believed in it, had worked and prayed and looked forward to it, until she saw
the little projects getting further in the future, felt in the arms that could not move, the absence of power.

Power . . . everyone sought power in this world. On the football field, in business, everyone striving for his own personal goal. Walking, running, driving, talking, laughing, and woven through it all, the one silver thread of goal. Everyone had to have a goal, they said. They mourned the happy-go-lucky fellow who seemed to have no goal in life. Everyone had to have a goal.

Yes, everyone, even if you were flat on your back and would never rise again, you had a goal in life. Yes, Amanda, you too once had a goal. And yours was no easier to attain than anyone else’s.

You had set for yourself the almost impossible goal of not hating the God who had let this happen, who could have so easily chosen someone else, though, God knows, you couldn’t wish it on anyone else. That was in the days when your mind at least was still alive. You still had some human spark in you then, trying to overcome your animal-like, hurt-creature attitude.

And you, just like everyone else, fell short of that goal, didn’t you? First it crept in, day by day, just a few minutes at a time, you hated, your mind rebelled against this cage of inert material that scarcely made a hump under the bed-clothes, and you hated. It came only once in awhile at first, when you caught a glimpse of a child running down the street, heard the footsteps on the floor above.

Then it became almost a daily ritual, you waited eagerly, watched the hands on the clock move toward the hour which you had set aside to hate all of God and his creatures, and the arbitrary world they had made in the sunshine.

And then the final stroke. You didn’t look forward to it so much anymore. Somehow, in some way it seemed to stay by you, coloring every thought, every word, and, if there had been any, every deed. Slowly, as the hour hand reeled off the days and the weeks, you ceased to hate. There was no point in it, no constructive object.

And after all, there was no object in thinking thoughts which would never be told to another, or of contemplating actions which could never be done. And you ceased to think. Yes, admit it! Even worse than hating that which is merciful to the Sunday Christian, even worse that lying in bed year in and year out and never feeling a muscle twitch, except in your mind, you stopped thinking!

But how can a human stop thinking? How can the cerebrum, the largest section of man’s mind, cease to operate? It isn’t done at once. No master switch is thrown. No, as you look back, Amanda,
there was no particular hour or day, or even month when you ceased to think. You can’t even remember the day when you realized that you didn’t think anymore. Unimportant day. Just like all the rest.

And now you’re free, Amanda. No one even expects you to think anymore. And you’ve had your Hell, on earth. Now there’s nothing more to do but live out an eternity, any way you want. To run in the sun, to run your fingers over the keys of a piano you can’t play, to read a book, talk with an old friend, to feel the good feeling of a spring day.

Well, what will it be? Everything before you, yours to choose. What? A soft white bed? Why, yes, it can be arranged.

Regression...

Between constricting walls
A candle’s pale light
To keep the darkness out
I wait for sleep to come.
Why should I fear the night
Start with each branch against the pane
And the shadow of the leaves?
I used to think of — such things — what?
Why can’t I recall?
Now I think of grotesque shapes
And a thousand melting images.
The candle’s almost melted away.
Soon it’ll die in a wraith of smoke
And its fitful shadows’ll be absorbed
In closing night and I’ll be afraid
To light another. It’s a child —
It’s a childish thing.
Should I read a book — or walk
In the streetlight’s yellow glow?
I’ll not dare light another.

... John McClure