



An Internet Encounter

I'd stopped counting the cracks in my bedroom ceiling months ago. They hadn't changed, but I had — growing more restless, more aware of how vast the hours between midnight and dawn could be.

It was Margaret's absence that hollowed the nights. Fifty years together, then a hospice bed and a sound I'll never forget — her last breath slipping past her lips while the machine kept ticking away. I'd been told she didn't suffer. I'd wanted to believe it.

Now I wandered late-night chat rooms. Not the sleazy corners; I wanted conversation, the quiet human warmth that comes from knowing someone is on the other end of the words. That Tuesday, her greeting came almost instantly.

"I need to tell you up front," she wrote, "I don't talk dirty or say anything remotely sexual in these chat rooms."

A bit defensive. Almost as if she'd said it a hundred times before.

"That's fine with me," I replied. "I just want some friendly, platonic talk. Helps me get past the insomnia."

"So tell me about yourself."

I gave her the short version.

“Retired English professor. Widowed three years. Married almost fifty years. This helps fill the quiet.”

She typed back quickly.

“Sorry for your loss. My name is Sally. I’ve never been married. I’m a full-time ICU nurse at Springfield General. On the graveyard shift tonight.”

That word hung there — *graveyard* — like a cold draft through a closed window.

“Yikes,” I said. “Hope I’m not pulling you away from patients.”

“Not really. ICU’s mostly the deathwatch business. By the time they reach us, there’s not much left to save.”

A hollow feeling settled in my stomach.

“That must be hard. How do you cope?”

She took longer this time. I pictured her in a darkened nurses’ station, bathed in monitor glow, the beep of machines ticking down the last moments of someone’s life.

Then:

“You seem decent. I think I can tell you. Sometimes I help God along. A little extra morphine. A tube slipped loose. Quick. Quiet. Merciful.”

I stared at the words, my pulse quickening.

“That’s murder,” I wrote. “You swore an oath—”

She cut me off.

“I thought you might understand. Guess you’re like most men — can’t handle a powerful woman.”

“That’s not it,” I began, but my hands felt unsteady.

Her final message came like a knife slid between ribs.

“Besides... the ones I help to a merciful death are always men. Usually older. Widowers.

Insomniacs. But I'm saving a special vengeance for a professor who nearly flunked me out the nursing school."

My fingers froze over the keys.

Her username vanished from the chat list.

From the street below, a faint siren grew louder, then stopped — not fading into the distance, but cutting off mid-wail, as if someone had closed a door.

The light from my monitor flickered for a moment, and I swear I felt the air shift, like someone had stepped into the room.

Three months later I came across this news item on line:

Nurse Found Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity After Disconnecting ICU Patient's Life Support

By Staff Reporter

SPRINGFIELD, May 14 — A former intensive care unit nurse accused of disconnecting a critically ill patient from life support was found not guilty by reason of insanity Tuesday after a judge ruled that she was mentally incapable of understanding the nature of her actions.

The judge decreed: "I am directing the jury to find this defendant not guilty by reason of insanity," the trial judge announced from the bench. I am further directing that the defendant be remanded to an appropriate mental institution until such time as the defendant is able to function rationally and productively in society. This case is closed."

The defendant, identified as Sally Meecham, was immediately taken into custody by a court officer for transfer to a secure psychiatric facility.

Professor Left Critically Injured

The victim, Professor Daniel Sturges, remained hospitalized in critical condition following the incident.

Hospital officials said the professor was deprived of oxygen for an estimated five to six minutes after his ventilator was disconnected. Physicians described his condition as "stable but very serious," adding that if he survived, he would likely suffer permanent brain damage and require long-term institutional care.

According to testimony, Professor Sturges was the only patient in the intensive care unit that morning.

Prosecutors alleged Sally entered the ICU, deliberately switched off the professor's life-support equipment, and calmly walked out of the hospital.

She was arrested later that day after voluntarily confessing to investigators.

Defendant Claimed Patient Requested Death

During police questioning, Sally admitted disconnecting the equipment but insisted she had acted at the patient's request.

The defense later centered on her deteriorating mental condition.

During testimony that became a pivotal moment in the trial, prosecutors questioned Sally about her motives.

Q: Why did you kill Professor Sturges?

A: Because of the static electricity around his heart monitor.

Q: What do you mean?

A: The static electricity built up on the curtains around his bed. The dust particles gathered there and spelled, "Kill me."

The prosecution declined further questioning.

Mental health experts later testified that the statements reflected severe psychosis, convincing the court that Sally was legally insane at the time of the offense.

Relationship Revealed

Evidence presented during the trial established that Professor Sturges had once taught microbiology at the nursing school Sally attended several years earlier. Court testimony revealed that Sally had been struggling academically when Sturges allegedly invited her to a motel room, where the two engaged in a sexual relationship.

According to evidence introduced by the defense, the professor agreed to raise her failing grade to a barely passing mark. Sally testified that after the encounter, Professor Sturges told her:

"Sally, you're a nice girl, and I enjoyed making love to you. But I have to be honest. I don't think you'll ever be a good nurse. You lack compassion. Also, you seem to have a cruel, vengeful streak."

But the professor eventually raised. Her grade to a barely acceptable C-minus.

Neither prosecutors nor defense attorneys argued that the earlier relationship constituted the legal motive for the attack, focusing instead on Sally's mental state at the time of the crime.

Commitment Ordered

Under the judge's ruling, Sally will remain confined in a secure psychiatric institution until medical authorities determine that she no longer poses a danger to herself or others. The decision means she will not serve a prison sentence but may remain institutionalized indefinitely, depending on future psychiatric evaluations.

As deputies escorted her from the courtroom, observers reported that Sally appeared calm and smiled faintly before leaving the courtroom without comment.

Witnesses report hearing her say softly, "And I hope I can get back online real soon. I have another score to settle there."

I closed the news story and shut down the computer.

Sleep came easily for the first time in weeks.

The next evening, when I logged back into the chat room, there was already a private message waiting.

Hello, Professor.

I've been looking forward to talking with you again.