

"NIGHT NURSE"
By Harry Shannon

"Night Nurse," from Harry Shannon's new Dark Region's collection "A Host of Shadows," was first published by Horror Drive-In 6/09. It went on to win the Black Quill Award from Dark Scribe Magazine, and has been nominated by the HWA for a Stoker...

Bud was speeding down the Hollywood Freeway in the fast lane when the pain came. He knew what it was the second he felt it, a sharp blow to the solar plexus, quick as the kick of mule. His upper gut contracted into a burning fist that wouldn't, *couldn't* relax. He groaned, doubled over, took his foot off the gas. The asshole behind him leaned on the horn. In agony, Bud managed to hit the turn signal. He forced himself to sit up a bit, checked the rear view mirror. Fortunately there was room in the lanes to his right. Everyone in LA was rushing to get home before dark.

Bud had already been hospitalized for stomach pain earlier that month, and the Gastro guy assigned to him--a nice Indian fellow with a lilting accent and an irreverent attitude--suspected he'd passed a stone. Since the guy couldn't prove it, so they called it acute gastritis and sent him home.

Bud pulled off the freeway and headed for the same hospital, wondering if he'd throw up or pass out before reaching the ER. A friend had told Bud that this condition was kind of like having a baby, but worse. Maybe she was right.

Damn it to hell...

Sunset was an ugly orange and red smear of smog when Bud reached the hospital, pulled into the parking lot, found a space. He opened the door and promptly barfed on the

pavement. Two PA's were outside smoking cigarettes. One sprinted for a wheel chair and the other rushed to his car. Bud realized he was shivering now, sweating up a storm. His shirt was soaked through, even his underwear felt damp. He was clearly running a high fever. The two men got him into a wheel chair, raced him across the pavement and through the sliding glass doors. The shopworn ER was packed, primarily with flu sufferers, many of them poor and likely uninsured. The walls were ogre green. The room smelled like a cattle car. Bud's stomach rolled over, but there was nothing left to expel.

The PA's wheeled him to Admissions. The overweight female behind the desk appeared indifferent, or perhaps just burned out.

"I think it's my gall bladder," Bud wheezed. He gave his name, let them know he'd been in the hospital only a couple of weeks prior for the same condition. He told the woman that this experience was worse, far worse, than the last attack. She pulled his file, found the necessary insurance information. A male nurse, some kid festooned with tattoos, was asking a lot of questions. Bud heard himself answering as if from another dimension. His fever was rising steadily. He was drenched. Concerned about a heart attack, the overworked staff rushed him down the hall and onto a gurney. IV's were inserted, a blood pressure cuff attached. A balding man in white came in, scanned the file, ordered drugs and mentioned scheduling surgery once the fever had gone down.

"Can I have some water?"

"Nope, nothing at all right now," the doctor said. "You'll toss it back up. You have pancreatitis. That could kill a man your age." He flashed a grin. "Hey, I promise I'll keep you so high you won't care."

Whatever they put in the drip, it made the world turn even more surreal. Bud remembered test after test, different faces doing different things, but the doc was right, he didn't much care. Well into the evening he was finally moved to a room. Saw the shadow of another man on the other side of a long white curtain. Someone who kept saying "I don't want to die, God give me another chance," in a low, raspy voice. The man's desperation made Bud's skin crawl, despite the heavy veil of medication. He closed his eyes wearily, fell asleep.

Pain woke him with a roar. The middle belly was on fire again. His right elbow hurt, too. Someone had strapped it down so he wouldn't move the IV needles. Despite the discomfort, Bud dozed again, this time for quite a while. He opened his eyes to blackness, except for a bit of moon glow from the window. It was quiet. The door opened, a long corridor of light speared the darkness. A new nurse came in.

"Bud? How do you feel?"

Kindness. A personal touch. His first name. Bud tried to focus. The night nurse appeared to be close to his age, perhaps sixty. She moved slowly, a bit stiffly. Her brown hair was flecked with grey. She smiled. Bud thought she had the kindest, deepest brown eyes he'd ever seen. She came to the bed, leaned over. Her lips moved, asking if he was in pain. Bud nodded. She vanished to his right, doing something with the IV. He was grateful, but didn't want to watch. Bud hated needles. Within thirty seconds another dose of narcotic flooded his system with warmth, and the world spun away.

An arrogant young surgeon visited him somewhere around dawn. Bud winced in the sunlight, cringed at the man's tenor voice. Things seemed way too bright. His eyes hurt. Someone had removed the white curtain. Bud's desperate, panicked bed mate was

gone. He did not ask where or why. It would be good to have a private room. Later, someone else asked about insurance, if he had any family to notify. Bud was so stoned he told the woman his life story. How his bitch of an ex-wife had moved out of state, that he'd lost his job and had to COBRA the damned insurance, had nobody in the world left who gave a shit. On one level Bud knew the woman didn't care, on another it felt good to complain to someone. Hell, even *talk* to someone.

He tried to watch TV, but couldn't concentrate. He'd sleep for an hour or two and they'd come back to draw blood or poke him with something. His bladder filled urgently and often. The IV was flushing his system out. Unable to move, humiliated and scared, Bud peed in the plastic bottle. He got a shot every four hours. The drugs made it all tolerable, but just barely. As promised, they kept him stoned. Bud missed the night nurse. Nobody else bothered to use his first name.

She came again just as the pain returned, which was shortly after dinner. No one brought Bud anything, but he heard all the activity and smelled the hospital food. It made him queasy. The night nurse stepped into the darkness, left the door open a few inches, as if concerned not to blind him, for which Bud was grateful. She flowed into the room gracefully this time, carrying a plastic tray with bottles. She put a small bit of ice on his tongue. It was heaven. Bud hadn't noticed the first time, but she was rather pretty for her age, and younger than he'd originally thought. Bud felt his body craving the drug and wondered if he'd leave the hospital with some kind of addiction. The gentle nurse wiped hot perspiration from his brow. He considered asking her out when all of this was over. Then slept.

They scheduled him for an operation, early morning of course, after one more day on fluids. The surgeon seemed concerned that Bud hadn't tried to get up. Bud explained he felt weak. The surgeon showed him how to disconnect the IV rig and urged him to try to make it to the bathroom once in a while, to just keep moving, keep the circulation going. Later that afternoon, Bud dropped the gate on the side of his bed. He unplugged the IV, heard it beeping. He couldn't believe how dizzy he became while struggling to stand. *I've lost weight, I can feel it.*

Bud limped into the bathroom, forced out a tiny, very weak stream of urine. As he turned to go back to bed, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. Saw deep lines etched in his face, blue shadows under his eyes, pale skin sagging. Bud thought he looked like some kind of ghoul now, fucking death warmed over. This thing was really kicking his ass.

The staff brought him some chicken broth, but Bud couldn't eat. The thought of surgery frightened him, being cut open like that. Naked in front of chattering strangers. The hours crawled by. He'd never felt so alone.

Soon it was dusk. The pain came on again, and Bud found himself staring at the door, willing her to come soon. At last the door slid open; a long, warm bar of light rolled across the linoleum and into the shadowy bathroom like a living thing.

Bud said, "Please." It was someone else's voice, very far away.

The nurse with the kind eyes nodded. She leaned over to kiss his forehead this time. She looked radiant. Bud had an erotic fantasy that surprised him, considering his pathetic condition. He didn't know if he'd been hallucinating before or was imaging things now, but the kind nurse was quite pretty really; thirty at most, with ample breasts

and thick black hair. He closed his eyes, waiting for the medication. The glow flooded through him. Bud felt his heart kick and then weaken. In fact, he suddenly felt panicked, knowing it wasn't sleep he was dropping into, but something far more sinister...

And then suddenly it became difficult to breathe.

Help me! Bud fought off the pleasant drowsiness, turned his head to tell her this was the wrong medication, that someone in the bowels of the hospital had made a terrible mistake...

The night nurse wasn't there.

Confused, Bud rolled his head the other way. The IV was unplugged and beeping urgently.

The last thing Bud saw was the gorgeous young night nurse crouched over the hospital bed, dark eyes rolled back in her head. She was gently sucking on the tubes coming from his bruised and bloody arm.

This is one of twenty-three stories in Harry Shannon's new collection published by Dark Regions Press entitled "A Host of Shadows." To order yourself a copy of this new collection please visit the following link:

http://www.darkregions.com/a_host_of_shadows.html