

The Doctor: Jim Health Plan

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Jennifer Gribben. . . . Jennifer.”

There was no response. The waiting room, as always, was crowded and loud. He would have to be louder.

“Jennifer Gribben.”

“She’s here somewhere,” MaryAnn reported and then pointed to a woman, slumped over, eyes closed in one of the phony leather chairs with cracked cushions. MaryAnn shook the woman’s shoulder, and with the next “Jennifer Gribben” she stood, rubbed her eyes, and followed Dr. Jim up the stairs and into the first room on the left.

He was Dr. Jim because no one in the clinic could pronounce his last name. He was also Dr. Jim because this was not one of the fancy offices on Highland Avenue or Dilworth Street. This was the free clinic on North Brewster where you could get a shower, new socks, and a chance to use the phone, if you were lucky.

Dr. Jim opened the chart as Jennifer inched up onto the examining table. “How are things going?” he asked as he put the chart down and moved toward her. Having seen her just two weeks ago, it didn’t take long for him to receive the answer. The cavity on her right forearm was full of creamy debris and had raised red edges.

“You’ve got to stop skin popping and start taking care of yourself. Things are getting worse, and you have more ulcers on your arms than last time.”

“Well, but, eh, this one is getting better, see,” she protested, pointing. It was hard to stop using and hard to take care

of herself on the street. “I’m supposed to use warm compresses and dry dressings. Ha, that’s a joke,” she added.

That was how the morning had started. Then there was Bill. It was not easy, Bill and Dr. Jim agreed. Not easy to take care of yourself when you have diabetes and live in a cardboard box.

“I keep the box dry,” Bill reassured the doctor, whose head was shaking. “I just can’t see that well in there to get the right amount of insulin. And someone stole my glucose tester.”

At least Arnold Benedict did have a place to live. It was in the basement of his daughter’s house. “But they is always drinkin’ and fightin’,” he told the doctor, who wanted to know why Arnold hadn’t been back to get his blood pressure pills. And look at how much weight he had lost. With his collar fully buttoned it would be possible to fit another neck in his shirt.

This went on and on that Tuesday morning. The schizophrenic who would not take her pills. The crack addict who had crushing chest pain when smoking but couldn’t stop.

It was only Orlando, the last patient called into the room, who seemed fit. Dr. Jim had known Orlando since the day he started coming to the clinic nine years ago. He had watched him grow weaker with dry cracking skin and bloodshot eyes. He had seemed to age as rapidly as this old row house they called a clinic.

But now on this rainy morning, after not having seen Orlando for more than a year, Dr. Jim was shocked. The guy looked great with full cheeks, no pimples, and without that twitch in his right shoulder. And he spoke using full words, one following the next into an

understandable sentence. *Was this really Orlando the wheezer?* Dr. Jim wondered.

Yes, it was. “And where have you been?”

“I’ve been away.”

“Away?”

Away, Orlando explained, meant that he had been picked up on a parole violation and *away* was the Burlingame Prison Facility upstate.

Suddenly Jim realized where he had gone wrong this Tuesday and every Tuesday since 1994. There was, he thought, hope for Orlando and for every other homeless drug dependent schizophrenic with no health insurance. Hope for every skin-popping heroin addict on Keeley Street. But the hope was not here on Brewster Street. The hope was two hundred miles north in Burlingame Prison. How could he have missed that fact? “Things will never be the same,” Jim whispered to himself.

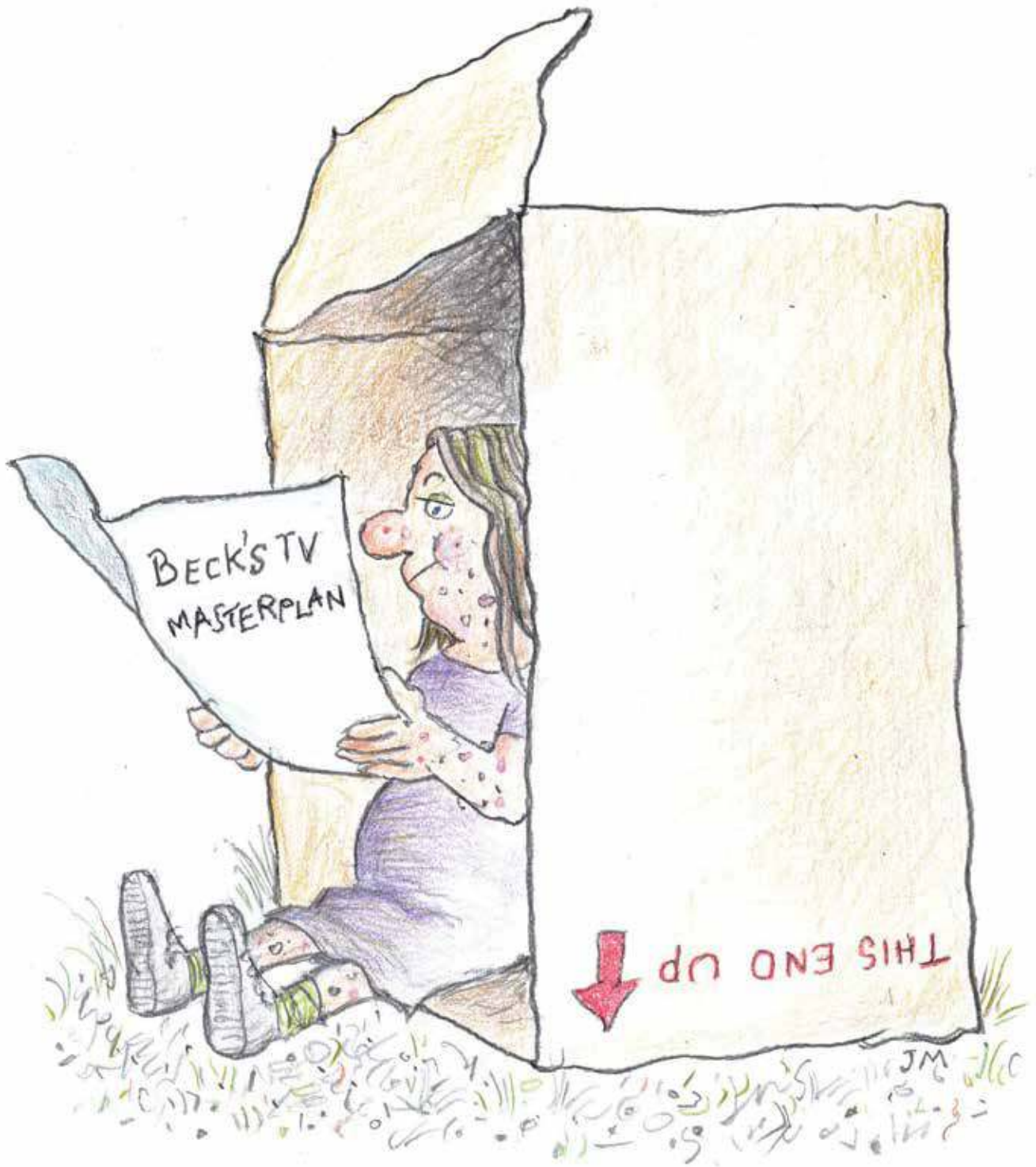
“Didn’t catch what you said, Doc.” Orlando, leaning forward on the examining table, responded. But Jim shrugged his shoulders and smiled. He would not repeat the words or reveal the plan they had triggered.

The plan, set into action that day, was obvious only two years later. Obvious only after the local police had the benefit of the new Crimestat Computer and Jennifer Gribben’s confession.

Her confession brought the police to the twisted peeling green door of the Brewster Street clinic and up the stairs to the examining room.

“Doc,” Officer Trevail asked Dr. Jim, who turned from the chart he was writing on. “Do you know a woman named Jennifer Gribben?”

“Well, I know her skin.”



“She told me that you gave her the floor plan of Beck’s TV Land so that she could burgle the place.”

Silence.

“Is that true, Doc?”

More silence.

“We would have ignored, skipped over, that little fact until we came to notice that the area crime rate, high as it was, has increased 472.6% in the last eighteen months . . .”

Dr. Jim shrugged his shoulders.

“. . . and that seventeen of your patients are now doing time.”

Beads of sweat collected on Jim’s neck.

“Do you have anything to say about that?”

“Yes, officer,” Jim smiled as he spoke.

“I have a question. How are they doing?”

“Far as we know, they are all doing quite well.”

Dr. Jim smiled. “Thank you. Yes, officer, a crime has been committed. Isn’t it a crime that so many people need to go to jail to get the basic services and health care that they need?”

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