

No Human Bias Involved

By JL Lycette

The nurses were the last to quit.

This is how Gran always starts the story—and Rinna knows she’s telling the truth because Gran was one of them.

“What were *hospitals* like back then, though?” Rinna prompts her. Gran likes to talk about this part.

Gran gets a faraway look in her eyes. “They brought out the best and worst in people.”

Rinna laughs, then feels bad. But she can’t help it. This isn’t something Gran has said before. “How could something bring out both the best and worst?”

Gran’s warm brown eyes focus back on Rinna. “It got to a point where the lives we were trying to save, well, sometimes, the things we did to them, it was like they weren’t even people anymore. Because of that, I got to realizing, sometimes, neither were we.”

Rinna frowns. This wasn’t part of the story.

When Gran remains quiet, Rinna prompts her. “And then the Great Pandemic happened.”

Gran meets her eyes. “That’s right.”

The Pre-Guardian times must have been so strange. As hard as Rinna tries to picture it, she can’t, not even with the recent lessons in her sixth-level classes. She closes her eyes, and her history module replays in her mind. *After the seventh year of the Great Pandemic, humanity still could not contain the virus. It was not until the 2050 U.S. decision to put the Health Guardian™ in charge of daily mask requirements, based on the A.I. predictions of virus levels and rates of spread—and enacted criminal penalties for violating the A.I.’s guidance—that the deaths started to decline...*

Rinna studies Gran. “In the Pre-Guardian times, when you were a girl like me, people really didn’t know about wearing masks?”

Gran shakes her head solemnly. “They did not.”

Rinna giggles. “But you did know about *underwear*.” This finally makes Gran smile, and Rinna beams. “I’m glad we have the Guardian and live in the Collectives now.”

Gran nods, more slowly this time.

Rinna fills the silence. “And now you get to be a Health Steward instead of a nurse and you don’t have to work in a terrible *hospital*.”

Gran leans forward and kisses her forehead. “How’d you get to be so smart, anyway?”

Rinna ducks because she’s too old for kisses but relaxes when she realizes no one else is around to have seen. Her device chimes, and she checks the screen to see the Health Guardian™ icon pulsing. It gives her a warm, fuzzy feeling. They’re so lucky to have the Guardian to take care of them. Not like Gran’s generation.

The icon tells her it’s a mask day. Either due to air quality or virus levels, or both. She digs her mask out of her backpack. “Come on, Gran, I don’t want to be late for school.”

Gran clips her work badge on her collar after getting out her own mask.

The badge gives Rinna a surge of pride. *Julie Bronnwood, Health Steward, Wal-Glax-Zon.*

Rinna lets out another giggle. She can't think of Gran as anyone but Gran. "Come on, Julie."

Gran rolls her eyes, but there's a twinkle to them. She moves around to the back of Rinna's wheelchair. "Let's get going then."

* * *

Julie holds her I.D. badge up to the scanner and lets out a sigh of relief when the door glides open. It's her second week after being reassigned from Pfi-Mod-Nova, and why she should still be nervous, she can't figure out. It's the same job, only a different conglomerate.

She's early, at least. The new job's a much closer commute to Rinna's school, and for this, she's grateful.

But her earlier conversation with Rinna weighs heavy on her mind. That child is too interested in the Pre-Guardian times for her own good.

In some ways, Rinna's right. Even at Julie's age of sixty-five, being a Health Steward now is more manageable than being a nurse in her twenties had been. Before the Health Guardian™ took over healthcare decisions in 2050, ten years ago, and the Collectives scrambled to form out of the pieces of the former pharmaceutical giants.

She doesn't miss the old hierarchy between nurses and doctors. Since the A.I. now dictates the healthcare decisions, the Health Stewards only carry out the treatments. Everyone's role equal.

If she'd been younger, she might have asked to train as a surgical Steward. Still, she's content to be a medical Steward in the geriatric habitation where the Guardian assigned her. Lord knows, she's glad to provide the care she hopes another Steward will bestow when her time comes. It's closer than she likes to think.

Before heading to her first patient, she stops in the central task room to sync her device and check for updates. Her heart sinks. The Guardian didn't approve Mr. Olman's bionic knee.

Not enough remaining life-years expectancy to justify expense.

There you had it, straight from the Guardian's algorithm. No human bias involved.

Still, it was the hardest part of a Steward's job—to relay the Guardian's decision when it would be a disappointment to the patient. Yet, it was better than in the past. Back when patients screamed or spit or even punched and kicked their nurses when they blamed them for anything and everything they didn't like about their experience in a hospital. Or worse, when patients started bringing their guns.

Now, patients knew the Stewards had nothing to do with the decisions. It was all the Guardian's objective algorithm.

Like when Rinna was a toddler, and the Guardian didn't approve her spine implants.
Chance of success too low to justify expense.

And that was that.

There wasn't any use grieving it or getting angry.

But Julie's daughter, Emma, hadn't been able to cope. Rinna's mother. Shortly afterward, she'd taken off, leaving Julie to raise another little girl.

Julie misses Emma every damn day, but Lord knows, she gives thanks every moment for the chance she was given to raise the dazzling joy of a girl Rinna has been.

Her mind wanders down a path she doesn't often allow it. A low chance of success didn't mean *zero* chance. In the Pre-Guardian times, they could have found a surgeon who was eager to try. What if it had worked? Emma wouldn't have left...

Julie can't allow her mind to go there.

That was the problem with the Pre-Guardian Times. Doctors dangled out hope for every patient, no matter how unlikely. Since they hadn't had an A.I. to predict *those* bad outcomes, the system strained under the weight of their complex care. With scarcer and scarcer resources, they were unable to offer care to those who *would* benefit. That's why it was better now under the Guardian—

"Julie."

She looks up to realize her supervisor's been calling her name more than once. Her screen glitches, catching her attention before focusing it on her supervisor. "Yes, I'm so sorry. What is it?"

"You're needed in Mr. Olman's room." Helene stands over her with crossed arms. "Sari's already in there."

Julie knows Helene well, from the Pre-Guardian Times, in fact. A supervisor back then, too. An ugly memory flashes in Julie's mind. Helene marching up to her at the beginning of the pandemics, before they could even guess at the decades to come, culminating in the Great Pandemic.

What do you think you're doing? Get that off your face.

But they're saying the virus is airborne again, and I feel safer—

You'll scare the patients.

Helene ripping the mask off her face.

Julie blinks the memory away, then sighs and rises to her feet. She's glad it's a mask day, so Helene can't see her expression, and she's careful to keep her eyes neutral. She pauses, then addresses Helene. "Do you ever think about how the pandemic era only ended after people were willing to listen to something *non-human*?"

Helene's brow furrows above her mask. "Not really."

Does she even remember? Does she remember that day?

Julie can't stop herself and presses onward, unsure what she wants to say, the words tumbling out of her. "I was just thinking how in the end, what we so painfully learned was, collectively, we all—as human beings—couldn't be trusted to do the right thing for each other."

Helene snorts behind her mask. "I don't think that was it at all. The A.I. was simply better at weighing the evidence, processing the data. It could identify the trends, and it ended all the speculation. Its objectivity reassured people. Now don't keep Mr. Olman and Sari waiting any longer."

At the second mention of Sari's name, Julie registers what Helene is saying. Sari is a surgical Steward, one Julie holds in high esteem. But why would Sari be in Mr. Olman's room if the Guardian didn't recommend surgery? Julie opens her device and nearly drops it at the new status icon blinking beside his name. *Approved.*

Helene pointedly clears her throat.

Julie gapes at her. What's happening? The Guardian's decisions never changed. Had Julie looked at the wrong chart? No, she knew she hadn't.

Helene scrutinizes her. "Is something wrong?"

"N-no." Julie turns on her heel and heads to Mr. Olman's room in a daze, her feet on auto-pilot. Helene doesn't follow.

Sure enough, when Julie enters, Sari is at his bedside.

Mr. Olman turns to Julie, his eyes lighting up at the sight of her. “Tomorrow’s the big day, did you hear?”

Julie glances from him to Sari, but all she can manage is a nod, not trusting herself to speak.

Is it her imagination, or will Sari not meet Julie’s eyes?

Sari sidles to the door. “See you tomorrow, Mr. Olman.”

Mr. Olman rubs his knee and hums, a self-satisfied air about him, as if he’s finally received something he deserved, despite having done nothing to earn it.

A surge of anger overcomes Julie. She has to get out of there. She rushes out into the hallway.

At the end of the corridor, she spots Helene and, before she can think it through, calls out to her. A part of her warns herself to stop. But Julie cannot let this go. Not this time.

Helene crosses her arms as Julie approaches, her irritation conveyed in her stance and her narrowed eyes above her mask. “What is it now?”

Julie hesitates. What should she say? That she saw Mr. Olman’s plan change, almost before her eyes? *The screen glitch*. But Julie can’t say that. She just got this position. She has to think of Rinna.

Still, something inside her won’t let it go at nothing.

“I saw,” she says, not backing down from Helene’s glare. “I want you to know. I saw it, and I know you did too.”

Helene’s brow furrows, and then she closes her eyes. When she opens them, Julie sees something in them she wasn’t expecting.

Defeat.

Julie swallows the bile rising in her throat. “I want to know why. You owe me that, at least.”

“Fine,” Helene says, stepping closer and dropping her voice. “But you didn’t hear it from me.”

She clears her throat again, leaning her masked mouth to Julie’s ear, her voice the merest of whispers. “He signed over his estate to Wal-Glax-Zon.”

A wave of dizziness threatens to overcome Julie, and she steps to the closest window, bracing herself on the sill and pressing her forehead against the cool glass. Helene hurries away, and Julie doesn’t try to stop her.

Julie supposes she isn’t surprised, and a part of her deep down has always known. Human beings, collectively, couldn’t be trusted to do the right thing for each other. Not for free, anyway.

She can’t stop a bitter thought from entering her mind as Helene’s back disappears down the hall. *Look who’s wearing a mask now, Helene.*

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