

Update

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Update

Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to my family and friends, for never limiting how much I can say.

“Update” is a short required reading for all students progressing through the public education system which is typically assigned and discussed in secondary school. However, there is a growing trend of exposing this kind of thought-provoking literature to students of younger ages to promote discussions of ethics earlier. The author, who remains anonymous, insists that the story is based on a true story. Although literary critics, ethicists, and normal citizens alike have widely sought to uncover concrete evidence regarding the existence of Brenda and Bailey Watkins or Ryeland West Hospital, nothing remains known about the characters or places mentioned outside of what is included in the short story. As such, many approach the text more as a provocative moralizing tale instead of a non-fiction. While tackling the story, readers are encouraged, per the author’s preface, to imagine one’s parents or relatives.

Update

She was the one of the last people to be transferred to the updated system.

Mrs. Watkins was checked into Ryeland West Hospital after a stroke left half her body paralyzed and half her brain with irreparable damage. The other half of her brain? Being eaten away by a cruel cocktail of dementia and cancer.

The nurses knew Mrs. Watkins was near the end—all they had to do was glance, though they hated to do even that. She was a blank canvas. It disturbed them not to see the number count on her forehead. A bare face was a rare sight even then, a relic of darker times, of the unknown. They tried to maintain eye contact with her instead of staring at the wide, empty expanse of her receding hairline. No numbers which kept them from knowing how many words she had left. It was not unlike staring into an abyss. All the same, they took care of Mrs. Watkins: IV in arm,

daily sponge baths, assistance at meal times. She never said much anyway—the care team soon realized that Mrs. Watkins was a fighter, strapped in for the long haul.

Once Mrs. Watkins' daughter was tracked down three states over, the situation changed within minutes. As her mother's legal guardian and conservator, Bailey Watkins ordered that her mother be updated posthaste. She seized upon her mother's current state to, at the very least, do what she had wanted for years: get her out of prehistory and into the present. Bailey signed the consent forms and returned to work, not worrying further about her mother.

The attending doctor's eyes scanned the facsimile granting him the authorization, glossing over the fine details of insurance and billing. He hated not knowing the exact status of even just one of his patients, so the Watkins case particularly infuriated him. The anger subsided. Soon the update would be finalized.

Within a quarter of an hour Brenda Watkins' left temple had a number that made the nurses gasp. The doctor stood, appalled. He tweaked his instruments while scratching his head. As far as he could tell, the transfer had gone perfectly, no glitches. So why was the number so high? Surely this rotting bag of flesh did not have that many words left to say. Besides, her speech was erratic as things were. She would ask for “wadduh” when thirsty or muster a “channel” to indicate her displeasure at the television program. Her existence was limited to, at a maximum, three syllables at a time. At that rate her word clock would take years to wind down to zero.

Now, let it be known that medical professionals take ethics courses, but ethics are not something easily learned or taught; they are deep within us but always urging us to action. The particular nurses on the case began encouraging Mrs. Watkins to speak more. First came the audiotapes made for foreign language learners that prompted repetition of many words. Then

they withheld food until she had a complete conversation. The front was this: improved speech was necessary to live and recover from partial paralysis. Ryeland West's speech therapist cleared all her appointments and spent extensive, thorough hours with Mrs. Watkins—necessary medical intervention, of course. The word count dwindled; closer to null with every opening of her half-moving mouth.

See, for a patient like Brenda Watkins, there was no hope. The kind, *ethical* really, thing was to make her speak more. Ethicists had long ago agreed that a quick, painless death was better than the prolonging of life. Death was sacred; life was nothing except the meaning of limited words assigned to us as children. This hanging on to some kind of deeper meaning was ridiculous, an outdated mysticism.

Over the course of a month, the medical professionals, the saviors of our times, dropped Mrs. Watkins' word count down to under 1000. With so few words left, life could *maybe* be stretched out for another month if one were careful. Usually, it amounted to two weeks or less. This was considered the threshold for palliative care. A return to infancy in which nurses insisted on patients using pacifiers to inhibit speech. Increased sleeping pills to ward off wakeful words. No such measure was used this time. The insurance company had already reached out multiple times, explaining that the costs of the rest of the care would be left to the hospital. The hospital budget was tight, as always, and Brenda was an unaccounted for cost who had overstayed her welcome. Extraordinary measures were used; all ends were explored to expedite the process.

And as we know, when 500 is etched into someone's forehead, family members are called in. The nurses only managed to reach Bailey when Mrs. Watkins' word count dropped below 300. It would take another 150 words for Bailey to catch a flight and arrive at the hospital to exchange her last words with her mother.

“Why has the count dropped so much?” Bailey screamed into the phone. “It was over a hundred thousand a week ago!”

The nurse mumbled something incoherent. Bailey yelled some more and hung up, feeling like the news about her mother was ripping whole paragraphs from her life. Staring into the mirror, at her own word count, she took a breath. Exhaling, she felt that maybe she understood what life meant at last. No matter how fast she went or how many words she exchanged, there was no way she could get there in time for more than ten, maybe fifteen, words with the woman who had carried her for six months and then watched over her for the next three in the NICU. The very woman who had raised her.

Bailey wept on the plane, and the nurses listened in horror as Brenda Watkins repeated her daughter's name over and over again.

“Bailey, I love you...Bailey.

“Bailey...I love you, baby...

“My beautiful Bailey. Bailey.”

The nurses finally tried their hardest to slow down the spiraling count. They saw what they had brought on, but there was nothing that could be done. They thought of their own children, of their own parents, left grasping for syllables, reverting to sign language in an effort to extend their lives. Their supplications did not break through the stream of words. Mrs. Watkins' lucidity was miraculous. She used one hundred words demanding a lawyer, asking for a transfer to a different hospital where her life and words would be honored. The medical team repented, horrified, lost for words. Somehow they managed to get a sedative in her right as a large 1 popped onto her forehead. When she awoke, that last phase of lucidity was lost forever. Bailey came rushing into the room, shoving the nurses aside.

“Mom! It's me, Bailey!”

Mrs. Watkins looked confused. She had one word left.

“Who?”