

THE WORLD IS FLAT

By Jerry Rabushka

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CAST: one male

The doctor was Chinese, the nurse was Czech, the tech was from some mysterious African country that has just suffered an incredible civil war. I told her that didn't narrow it down. She told me to forget about it.

You might have thought this was the United Nations, except that everyone was cooperating. There was a night nurse from India, and an intern from Canada. Funny thing, of all of them, I could never understand him. "A little blood again, eh?" Like I had any left.

I had to depend on the entire group. My leg was broken in about four places from a car crash. Hip, too, and the ribs weren't making life any easier. So I'm lying flat on my back, looking up at all these people from all over the world. Everyone tells me I'm lucky. I found out later two of the most dangerous intersections in America were within two miles of each other – in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Just my luck.

The nurse was like my mother, in a way, but she doled out sympathy in a syringe full of morphine. "When I grew up in Czechoslovakia, we didn't have the choice. I couldn't be a nurse. They wanted me to be a ballerina. I spent my whole life being a ballerina. I have a silver medal from a world class competition. You can be what you want here. You're lucky."

A silver medal! I was impressed.

And she pirouetted across the room, syringe in hand. "Feh! I hate to dance!"

The African girl was quiet. She'd wash my hair in a tub. She brought me Jello. I had a thing for Jello suddenly. Bright red Jello. Any flavor, just bright red. I used to hate it, but it was strangely comforting here. "I bet you never thought you'd have a African refugee girl washing your hair and bringing you Jello," she'd say.

"Well, no."

"You're lucky you weren't killed."

I never thought of being broken into 15 pieces as being lucky.

"My mother was killed. So were two of my sisters. I was there."

She seemed to like my hair. The nurse liked my eyes. The intern liked my blood. "We need to make sure you're not poisoned, eh?"

I told him I didn't know how that was to be avoided, what with the food they served me.

"Man can't live by Jello alone," he said.

Somebody was always taking blood, and occasionally they put it back in. I wasn't sure if any of it was mine, or why they didn't test it before they gave it to me.

The worst part about this was turning over. It hurt. Almost as much as standing up. But they said if I didn't move now, I'd have a harder time moving later. For this task, they brought in the Americans. They were old and incompetent. They had as much compassion as the girl at a McDonald's drive up window who has to miss the prom to serve chocolate shakes to Harley hogs. They never had to prove anything to get into this country – all they had to do was be born here.

It took two of them to move me. One to rearrange a lot of pillows under my leg as if I were a Ken doll, and the other to stuff a sock in my mouth to keep that Ken doll from screaming. I hated them.

I always made a quick assessment of everyone who walked in there. You look real quick at the face and the attitude, and hope: how much were they like my mother? It's just about all you want at a time like this. Mom. And Jello. The difference is relatively slim with enough painkillers.

I finally told the doctor to keep those two old women away from me.

"They're volunteers," he says. "You might just lay there all night and rot. In China we were lucky if we had any extra help."

"Neither of us are in China," I reminded him.

(as the doctor) "Then you're lucky. You want to go to a hospital in China, or you want to have two old white ladies turn you over once a night?"

"I'll take my chances."

The night nurse was from Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Bangalore... she said once; I was on too much morphine at the time. "You didn't finish your dinner," she said. Just like mom. "When I was growing up my mother always said in America they threw food away. I asked her why they didn't send it to us and other starving people in India. She slapped me."

I'd always asked my mother the same thing, and she slapped me too. "You could have had the spinach," I said.

(as the nurse) "Uck! I hate spinach."

"I want Jello."

(as the nurse) "No Jello until you finish your spinach."

Do you know what's more disgusting than cold cooked spinach? I don't either.

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