

Joseph Hansen

THE DARK/THE DIARY

(In memoriam: J.B.H., 1917-1994)

I

In the front room, the chairs are
Heaped with books and videos.
To sit with her, he's had to
Bring a kitchen chair in. She
Sleeps on the floor in twisted
Quilts and newspapers, a nest
Lumpy with *Foreign Affairs*.

He reads to her. Or describes
What he sees on television.
She is almost blind now. Not
Every chair. Some are filled with
Unwashed clothes. She used to
Drive him to the laundromat.
Now she can't see to drive.

Anyway, she's too feeble.
"'Feeble?' Be serious." But
It's true. And bulky, and slow.
When he washes dishes, or
Opens cans to feed the cats
And dogs, she begs to help. He
Sings out, "Rest. I can manage."

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"Don't try to take the trash out,"
She will call. "You'll hurt your back.
Get Soto to do it." She
Tries to watch over him. He
Tries to watch over her. She
Needs it most. She is oldest.
"Write," she'll say. "I can manage."

She can't, but she rejects his
Help. "Write," she says, meaning
Leave me alone. He writes, but
Junk piles up around them. Paint
And paper peel, the place stinks.
"Nobody lives like this," he
Wails. She only stares at him.

Her eyes grow beautiful as
She grows blind. Wonderfully
Blue and clear. He writes. Followed
By dogs, she makes slowly for
His bedroom where he won't hear
Her ring up shops for books and
Videos she'll never see.

He takes her tea. Something has
Happened to her speech. It's thick.
"I think," she mumbles, "I've had
A stroke." He wants to call an
Ambulance. She shakes her head.
"It will pass." It passes. She
Is terrified of doctors.

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II

It's new to him, having to
Get up at night to empty
His bladder. Old men do this.
Yes, he's old, but surely not
That old. Not yet. He shuffles
To the bathroom, shuffles back,
Lies down, and starts to shiver.

He tugs blankets up over
Him, blankets that reek of dog.
The dogs complain. He shivers
Harder, shudders, his joints want
To fly apart. He clutches
His arms, draws up his knees. No
One has told him about this.

The bed is giving him a
Rough ride. It rattles. His teeth
Chatter. What's it called--ague?
Will it ever stop? It stops.
He sleeps, but wakes up later,
Has to piss again, comes back,
Lies down, and starts to shiver.

Covers himself, curls tight, shakes
So hard he moans. It eases
Off, he sleeps, but wakes to act
The whole thing out again. How
Often? He loses count. Often.
He can't be sick. If he gets
Sick, who will look after her?

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Light comes in through grimy panes,
Almost blocked off by heaps of
Newspapers, cold winter light:
March. There's barely room for him
In the bed. Sharp-cornered books,
Glossy art magazines fill
Most of it. He struggles up.

The dogs whine, scratch the door, lead
Him eagerly through the
Greasy kitchen. He lets them
Out, calls to her, "Good morning,"
Fills and sets a kettle on
The stove to heat for tea. "How
Are you?" "Freezing to death, thanks."

Cats yap at him from the top
Of the refrigerator,
From the stove, the counter, lean
At him, jump on his shoulders.
He feeds them, makes tea, and takes
The two mugs into the dim
Front room, where she waits for him.

III

In old age he has become
Delmore Schwartz's heavy bear.
His legs grow weak, and he is
Breathing hard by the time he
Reaches the elevator in
The medical building. His
Doctor stands inside, dapper,

White coat, neat little beard, a
Pretty nurse with him. "Hansen,"
He says, "Why do you always
Wait to come to me until
You're dying?" "I was busy.
I thought it would pass. My wife
Sent me. She's the worrier."

Nurses draw blood and disappear.
Pressure, pulse, temperature.
He blows down tubes to prove
His lungs are shot. He lies fetal
While a finger probes his prostate.
He: "I've lost twenty pounds. Pleased?"
Doctor: "It scares me to death."

X-rays have come a long way:
Edward Weston might have
Taken these: bladder stones the
Size of marbles. A surgeon
Who, from the plaques around him,
Seems Chairman of Everything,
Smiles and says, "Friday morning."

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From his window he can see
Hills he has seen from home for
Forty years. They comfort him.
At night, lights creep across them.
Shadows come, needle him with
Morphine. He sleeps to waken
In a sweat-soaked bed, ice-cold.

The surgeon's white coat is too
Small. Commonly he smiles, but
Not today. He carries thick,
Gray loose-leaf binders. All went
Well, he says, but when a lab
Analyzed the stones, they found
Cancer. Patient looks away.

Filled with atomic wastes, he
Spends days in vast white chilly
Rooms, wheeled flat on his back
Into immense machines, told by
Recorded voices when to
Breathe, X-rayed for hours, bone
By bone. No one stays with him.

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IV

Between his surgeries, two
One-time foster-children, now
Fortyish, come to the house
On weekends, armed with mops and
Brooms, to clean up. The dust flies.
The main point is to get her
Back to her room, to her bed.

It is a shock to her, she
Wants nothing thrown out. "Don't hurt
My spider ladies." He coughs,
Sits useless on that kitchen
Chair, shrinking sheepishly out
Of the way as plastic sacks
Of trash heave hulking past him.

On a night after they've gone,
In a black jogging-suit that's
None too clean (she lives in it
Day and night), white hair stringy
(She has grown afraid of shears),
Helping him feed cats, she yelps,
Clutches at him, almost falls.

She is heavy, he is weak,
But he gets her to her snarled
Covert. "I'll phone the doctor."
"Please, no. I'll be all right." And
In three hours, the scare has passed.
And in three months, he is knifed
Straight from navel to pelvis,

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The cancer goes, the prostate
Too, which makes him a new man
In several ways. When he has
Visitors, his smallest dog
Comes too, though they can't see it.
Female, wrapped in a sari,
He sleeps on a mandala.

Someone down the night hall shouts:
"I have to get out of here.
Help. Somebody please help me."
It repeats and repeats, then
Ceases. He can sleep. At three
A.M. the door bursts open.
New patient: drive-by shooting.

He is dressed and packed to be
Discharged, though he's still bleeding.
The phone rings. It's a neighbor.
"Your wife has fallen and I
Can't get her up." The Doctor:
"Impossible woman." The
Husband: "Tell me about it."

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V

It's not the stroke the doctor
Is faulting her for. It's that
She won't cooperate with
Anyone assigned to help.
He finds her in a wheelchair
In Emergency. On legs
That scarcely hold him, he stands

Talking to her. She seems pale
But otherwise all right. Her
Mouth's a little crooked, but
Her speech is clear. She wants him
To take her home. They hand him
White sacks: *Patient Belongings*.
Her watch. Her unclean joggers.

At home, he takes to her bed:
Nurses can get to him on
This bed to change his dressing
Every day, tall black women,
Young, unearthly beautiful.
He can't go anywhere. Friends
Bring him food. Flowers arrive.

He totters around, feeding
Cats and dogs. Diplomacy,
Finesse, intimate knowledge
Of tastes and preferences,
Are demanded for this, no
Stranger could do it. It tires
Him horribly. But they eat.

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All except the smallest dog,
The oldest, known as Raggy
Baggy Pup. He misses her.
The man sits with him, petting
Him, crooning to him, feeding
Him by hand. But after while
That's no use. He grieves for her.

In the back yard, he digs small
Graves and hides in them and won't
Come when the man calls. Eyes bright
With pain, he looks, drops his chin
On his paws again. "Goodbye,"
The man says in the vet's white
Rooms. "Goodbye, little Ragbag."

The youngest dog's a firecracker,
Spinning top, cheerful demon,
Pisser in the man's bed when
The man goes to see his wife
In hospital. To forestall
This, man takes dog for walk, is
Yanked off feet, falls, and breaks arm.

VI

The middle dog's become a
Rack of bones, her sleek coat dull,
Her clever eyes sullen. She
Chews all day at his bed, shut
Up alone. The youngest dog
She'll kill if she gets at him.
The man, one arm trussed up, can't

Control her. Sensing that he
Is crippled, the cats turn thieves
At meal times: the meek will starve.
It's a bleak November night,
His first alone in forty
Years in this old house--no cats,
No dogs, no kids, no wife.

She's in a nursing home, a
Shiny hell, trapped in a bed,
In pain, half crazy, weeping,
Who never wept in sight of
Anybody. To tell her
He has given away her
Animals would finish her.

He takes her poinsettias
For Christmas, hand-knitted shawls
From India: she's cold here.
They serve turkey and fixin's,
And she will not eat. She talks
Of silver candelabra
And her mother's place-settings.

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Dogs gone, he calls in Soto
To clean the old house out, scrub
Walls, woodwork, repaint. Glass
Needs replacing everywhere.
He wants to bring her home. He
Can't look after her alone,
He can't look after himself.

But he'll work something out, the
Agencies will help. She wants
To come home, begs him every
Day. "Please, Joe. I hate it here."
He has a new wall furnace
Installed: she's always cold now,
Hands, arms, feet, legs, all frigid.

She has six months to live. "What's
Killing her? No one seems to--"
"She's starving herself to death."
She'll eat if he cooks for her.
The work's going too slowly.
Why did she hoard all this trash?
He'll get more help tomorrow.

VII

The house shakes, something falls on
Him, he sits up shouting "What?"
It's pitch dark. The house twists in
Agony. Nails shriek, joists crack.
He tries to stand. The floor heaves.
Many things fall. He can't stop
Them. He sits again. The lamp

Won't light, radio and phone
Are dead, the TV's vanished.
He lights a cigarette, which
Could blow him up, but doesn't.
The house shudders again. A
Shout. "Senor? Are you all right?"
"I'm okay, thank you." But how

Does he get out? The floor is
Deep in books, books block the door.
He waits for daylight, The house
Shakes, shakes again. He digs out.
At the nursing home, she is afraid,
Afraid. He knows now he will
Never get the place cleaned out

So he can bring her home. It's
A wreck, every room, hopeless.
"Don't worry: there's insurance;
We'll clear the lot and rebuild."
She frets about the trees, the graves
Of animals. She needn't:
The insurers won't pay up.

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In San Diego, after
Weeks on life-support machines,
His brother dies. Numbly, he
Flies down. He brings her a jade
Necklace. "Feel the stones," she says.
"How warm." How cold she must be.
He reads her Chinese poems.

For their anniversary
He takes her tiger-lilies.
That month reads her Eliot's
Clark lectures, and *The Divine
Comedy*. She is best pleased
By this, even the footnotes.
They finish the Inferno,

Half the Purgatorio,
Then, in the dark, the phone
Awakens him. "Your wife died
At five o'clock." It's ten past.
He opens the front door, and
Stands for a long time, watching
Day break above the treetops.

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