

Heather slammed the fist holding her fork to the table.

“Julian!” she yelled, with alarming volume. “What the fu—.” She caught herself, became silent, and snatched Rose’s unused cloth napkin to pick the pieces of food out of her hair.

Julian pointed an accusatory finger at me and smiled even more broadly as though he thought he’d successfully divested himself of blame.

“Julian,” Sara O. said in an ominous tone. “You know better.”

Stanley and I made eye contact. He smiled.

Most people would pay a hundred dollars for the opportunity to watch a retard fling meat sauce into their boss’s hair. I paid only two.

tongue like a chimp. He sat down to begin looping the belt around his waist. Halfway through finishing the job he got distracted by the food and started eating. His food wasn't cut or pureed like the other three, and he was the only one who'd been given a fork.

"We try to let them do as much for themselves as possible," Heather said.

Not helping made me feel mean. It seemed unnatural for someone like me not to help a purdeaf, disabled man.

"They need to be independent," Heather said. "It's better for them this way. Trust me."

I stared at the unbuckled belt hanging halfway out of his pants. I stifled the urge to reach for it.

"You'll get used to it. He's proud of the things he can do for himself."

I nodded.

Heather looked down to eat her last bite of salad. Something red flew from across the table and hit her on the side of the head. The glob of meat sauce stuck in her hair for a moment before sliding down to the floor, leaving a blood-red streak in her sandy-blond hair.

Heather looked up to see Julian holding his fork in the air, an incriminating smile branded on his face.

(from) ONE

My cell phone rang while I stood in front of my overfull kitchen sink, debating whether to do the dishes or leave them for my roommate. I placed my half-full can of Miller Lite down on the Formica counter.

"Hello?"

"Hi, John. This is Sheila, from your interview at headquarters. Welcome to the Department of Mental Retardation. Let me just say, we're very happy to have a college graduate aboard—especially such a young and recent college graduate. We think you'll add a lot to the department."

"I'll try my best."

"I know you will. So that's it. Once you pass your next interview you're officially hired."

I was confused. "Wait. I have another interview? I thought I was hired."

“Well technically, you’re not hired yet. You still have the in-house interview. But it’s just a formality, an introduction. It gives the supervisor of the house a chance to meet with you. But don’t worry. Headquarters decides who gets hired, not the house. Don’t tell your supervisor I said that, though. Do you have time to visit the Viridian house tonight? That’s the house to which you’ve been assigned.”

“Sure, I can go in tonight,” I told her.

I chugged the rest of my beer, put on my coat and headed for Viridian, East on Route 2. The dishes would have to wait.

From the outside, it looked like a normal one-story house.

“Always knock before entering the house, even if you’re showing up for work at a scheduled time. It’s *their* house; treat it that way. Answer the phone with a friendly ‘Hello.’ Never say, ‘Viridian House, John speaking,’ or anything like that,” the woman advised during my initial interview at headquarters.

“Oh yes, I hate that,” the other, older woman interviewing me agreed.

“And never use the **R** word around them. They are referred to as individuals and are not to be defined by

“Not a bit,” I said, finishing the last of my salad.

“Feel free to have seconds,” one of the women said. “We made extra when we heard a twenty-four year old man was coming over.”

“Are you sure?”

“Go for it,” Heather said.

I scooped some more spaghetti out of the bowl and onto my plate. Upon seeing me do this, Stanley reached his sauce covered hand toward the bowl. Just as he was about to grab a handful, Sara O. spirited the bowl away from the table.

“I’ll just redirect this bowl.”

Julian, fully dressed in khaki pants and a button up shirt, came back out of the hallway. The fat woman followed. He walked toward me. I prepared for another man-hug. Instead, he thrust the belt in his hand toward me.

“Would you like me to put this on for you, Julian?” I started putting the belt through the first loop but Heather stopped me.

“Let him do it, Johnathan. He knows how. Right, Julian? You’re just trying to take advantage of him because he’s new, aren’t you?”

I handed the belt back. Julian stuck out his

his room.

“That’s called redirection,” Heather said. “We never force. We only redirect.”

I concentrated on my food and watched as Eleanor shoveled hers every place but into her mouth. Rose awkwardly picked what was left of her meal off her clothing protector and ate it.

Stanley leaned to one side with a pensive, professorial look on his face. His eyes stared away, past the table, focusing on nothing. A fart reverberated through the wooden chair he sat on. He righted himself in the chair to resume his meal as though what he’d done was the most natural thing in the world.

Heather put down her fork to stare him down. Taking the hint, I put my fork down and stared as well.

The sauce congealed on Stanley’s chin as he shoveled huge piles of salad into his head’s monstrous orifice.

Realizing he was being scrutinized, Stanley rolled his eyes and mumbled, “Excuse me.”

“Thank you,” Heather said.

Stanley grumbled something under his breath.

“Does it bother you?” Heather asked. “Eating here?”

their disorders. Remember to foster their interests. If they like painting, suggest a time and place for them to paint. Best of all is when you participate as though you’re interested, as though it’s a normal thing for you to be doing with a friend. By all means, paint with them. Make it an occasion for two friends to enjoy a shared interest, rather than an activity you’re being paid to help them with.”

I stepped onto the concrete porch overhung by a green and white striped canvas canopy.

“A hundred birds.”

I was so preoccupied, I didn’t notice him at first.

He was at least seventy, his features wrinkled, his scalp almost entirely bald. The few remaining patches of hair were cropped down to the skin, more shadows than growth. His eyes, leaking toward the sides of his face like fried eggs, pinned me in a steady stare. I stared back, trying to think up an appropriate response.

The man switched his gaze past the canopy’s edge, toward the sky, as though he wanted me to look.

“A hundred birds,” he repeated, pointing with his left hand toward a section of the sky where a passenger jet had left vapor trails behind.

“Yeah,” I said, knocking on the door. “There went

a big plane full of people. Have you ever been on a plane?” I was involuntarily cooing. I’d have to stop that.

He closed his eyes, leaned his head on the chair back and rocked contentedly. I was dismissed.

“Me neither,” I said as my future boss opened the door.

“You’ve met Stanley. Come on inside, Stanley. You’re gonna get cold out here.”

Stanley stopped rocking for a moment, seemingly mulling it over. He closed his eyes again, leaned back and resumed rocking. A decision had been made.

“Oh well,” she said. “I can’t force him to come in.”

“Of course not,” I agreed. She was already trying to teach me; subtly impart correct attitudes.

“I’m Heather. Welcome to the Viridian house.”

“Thanks. I’m John.”

Heather led the way inside. To my surprise, the inside of the house didn’t smell medical. It actually smelled pretty good, like a normal house just before dinner. As she lifted her arms to hang my coat in a closet off the hallway I noticed the excess skin folds that hung and sagged off her body. She’d previously been heavier. She looked tired and spread thin, as though her body was still getting accustomed to its new lighter caloric in-

As I put a fork full of salad in my mouth, I saw Julian coming into the kitchen from the hallway where the bedrooms and bathrooms were. I turned my head to look and saw that, except for the baseball cap he’d been wearing earlier, he was naked.

“Hi, Julian,” Stanley said.

Julian came over and shook Stanley’s outstretched hand. His balls and penis jiggled independently of one another.

I resumed eating, trying to keep my eyes and mind off of his genitals.

“Bobbie like you, Julian,” Stanley mumbled.

“Bahbeee.”

“What are you talking about, Stanley?” I asked, in a futile attempt to divert myself.

Stanley went back to eating, but Julian turned toward me, his crotch inches away from my face. I stood up, startled, not knowing what to do. Julian extended his hand and as I was putting down my fork and paper towel to shake it, he shook his head, giggled and bear hugged me again. Without enough time or room to back away, I looked to Heather over his shoulder. She gave no direction.

The fat woman gently coaxed Julian back toward

that family.” Heather glanced into the living room, where one of the women had taken her plate to eat alone at the coffee table. The country music station blared on the television in front of her.

“But you don’t *have* to eat with them,” Heather said, finally taking her eyes off the woman. “Some of the people who work here claim they can’t eat with the individuals because . . . well, you know.” She looked at Stanley, who’d put his spoon down and begun eating with his fingers. Spaghetti, thick with meat sauce, ran down his face and onto his clothing protector.

“Stanley, don’t eat so fast, you pig!” one of the women scolded between bites.

“Yes, Stanley,” Heather said with a much gentler tone. “Chew your food more slowly and you won’t have so much trouble with gassiness.”

“Stanley takes three gas pills a day,” another woman said to me.

“Mm, my gas pill.”

I understood him perfectly.

“We shouldn’t really be talking about the medications in front of Johnathan. He’s not med-certified, and we’re not positive he’ll be working with us yet.”

“Julian!” the fat woman yelled again.

take.

Five women sat around the kitchen table. Only one was an individual. The rest, I could see, were employees.

“Everyone, this is Johnathan. He’s here for the interview.”

“Hello!” they all said, their greetings overlapping. They were all over thirty-five, none of them very attractive. I was immediately disappointed. I’d hoped for some girls my age from the Five College Area.

They introduced themselves one by one: Evelyn, Sam, Delores, and Annie. Another woman walked in from the hallway to my left.

“Hello, John. I’m Sara O. They call me Sara O. because I was the second to start working in this house.”

“The second what?” I asked. Everyone but me laughed.

“The second Sara,” she explained. “The other Sara doesn’t work here anymore. I kept the O. anyway.”

“Don’t worry,” Heather said. “There are more people here now than there usually are. But there are always two staff on. The minimum staffing is a four to two ratio; even on third shift.”

More disappointment. I’d been hoping to work

alone at night and get some serious studying for the GRE done.

“But if one of the individuals is out on a trip, only one staff is needed to attend to the rest. And we take a lot of trips here. They all get out at least once a day on normal days.”

“That’s great,” I said, smile plastered on my face. “Are there any men who work here?” I sounded uneager.

“Oh yes,” Heather said. “But they work mostly third shift. For your training you’ll be working primarily first and second. We’ll *in-service* you on third later on. You’ll find you have to be in-serviced on everything around here.”

“Third is easy,” one of the women at the table interrupted (I hadn’t even attempted to keep track of their names). “They don’t do anything.” Everyone but me laughed.

Heather shot her a reproachful glance. “Let’s go in the other room and let them finish their meeting, Jonathan.”

“Okay.”

We stepped into what would’ve been the den if a normal family lived in the house. Positioned in front of the television sat a loveseat and a recliner. But taking

prisingly thin), called down the hall for Julian to come eat. The rest began putting the food down on the table and serving it up for the individuals. Sara O. cut up Stanley’s spaghetti. Eleanor’s had already been pureed. A woman poured the red slop out of the blender and into the bowl sitting in front of Eleanor. The three individuals ate with spoons. The rest of us used forks.

After everything was set out, three of the women grabbed their coats from where they were lying in the office and headed for the door.

“Goodbye, John,” one of them waved to me as she held the door open for the other two. Hope to see you again very soon.”

I waved goodbye, my mouth too full to talk.

“Julian, come out here,” the fat woman called again.

“He takes his time in the shower,” Heather explained.

“Who doesn’t,” I said, after swallowing a mouthful of spaghetti and wiping sauce from my chin with the paper towel next to my plate. All the individuals were given cloth napkins.

“We try to all eat together,” Heather said. “This house is like a family home for them, and we’re part of

on my shoulders and guided me to a chair. “We’ll set a place for you.”

“Here, Stanley,” a slightly hunchbacked woman said, taking away the bowl of salad. She placed a tray of garlic bread in front of him. “Why don’t you pass this out to everyone?”

Stanley quickly stuffed an entire piece into his gaping mouth. His jaw seemed double jointed. I noticed the absence of his teeth when he began gumming the crusty bread.

“Stanley,” Heather said. “You know we have to cut that up for you. You’ll choke to death if you put big pieces like that into your mouth. If you don’t want to help out just say so. You don’t have to.”

Stanley took the slightly soggy piece of bread out of his mouth and put it back on the tray. One of the women rushed over and grabbed it before it contaminated the other pieces.

“That can be your piece, Stanley,” she said, placing it on the table in front of him.

Stanley muttered something.

“Stanley!” another woman who had taken the tray yelled. “Don’t talk like that! Please.”

The fattest of the women (most of them were sur-

up most of the room were two desks, a large file cabinet, a smaller file cabinet, and an exercise bike.

“Is that your exercise bike?”

“No,” Heather said, a curious expression on her face. “This is my office. It’s also Julian’s television room.”

The beeping sound of a van backing up interrupted us.

“*Speaka* the devil. Julian’s home from his job.”

“So he works?”

“Kind of. He doesn’t get paid very much, and it’s really just a glorified day program, but we refer to it as his job. He has a paper route on Fridays, too. It’s funny; he makes more money doing the paper route for three hours than he does working for thirty-two hours Monday through Thursday.”

“What does he do?”

“His company takes care of outsourced jobs from other companies.”

She could see I didn’t understand. “He puts little manufactured items into plastic baggies. They pay him less than a dollar an hour.”

Julian walked through the door, holding his reusable lunch bag and wearing a baseball cap. He was

about to walk past the office when he noticed me and did an immediate right face into the office, his left hand outstretched.

I shook his hand and said, more slowly than I'd intended, "Hello, Julian. How was work?"

He shook my hand vigorously, his odd sounding giggle running the gamut from low to high range.

"Johnathan might be working here soon, Julian," Heather said.

Julian continued shaking my hand.

"Julian," Heather said. "We have to talk now. Why don't you put away your bag and get ready for dinner."

Julian looked at her, confused, let go of my hand, and started to walk out of the room.

Heather whispered to me once his back was turned. "Julian," she began, but was cut off when he turned around to approach me again, dropping his lunch bag and extending both arms. He squeezed me in a bear hug.

"Julian," Heather said, prying his arms off of me. "There'll be plenty of time for that later."

Julian picked up his bag and left the room.

"Julian is mostly deaf," Heather said, finishing

the dinnertime dialogue.

"She wants a cup of tea," the oldest of the group said. "She loves tea."

The same woman grabbed Eleanor's mug and brought it over to the counter where she filled it with skim milk.

"Eleanor calls every drink tea," the woman explained, putting the mug down in front of Eleanor.

Eleanor dragged the mug toward her and lifted it to her lips, spilling half its contents onto her dress.

"Oh shit," the woman said. "I forgot her clothing protector." The woman blushed. "I'm sorry, Heather. I didn't mean to cuss. I guess I've been hanging around Stanley too long."

"That's okay," Heather said. "These guys are old enough to hear swears. Just try not to when you can help it."

The bowl of salad sat untouched in front of Stanley.

"Can I do anything to help?" I asked, walking toward the stove.

"I like this guy," one of the younger women said. "Let's keep him."

From behind, another woman placed her hands

Stanley sat at the table. In front of him one of the women placed the salad with two long-handled wooden spoons in it.

“Now you stir that right up, Stanley,” she said. Stanley mumbled something I couldn’t understand.

“Stanley!” the woman said, taken aback. “You know Eleanor and Rose don’t like that kind of language at the dinner table.”

I assumed Eleanor and Rose were the two individuals seated at either end of the table. One sat in a wheelchair, smiling brightly at me. The other ran her fingertips back and forth over her clenched teeth at a tremendous rate. I felt the urge to console her somehow, but took my lead from the women who’d worked there for years.

“Eleanor,” Heather said. “This is Johnathan. He’s here for tonight, and he might be coming back very soon.”

Eleanor continued smiling. With a slightly deformed arm, she reached across the table for the mug in front of her. After several attempts to get her hand near the mug, she successfully grabbed it, hoisted it in the air above her head and yelled, “CUPATEA!”

“What, Eleanor?” I said, trying to participate in

what she’d started saying before the hug. “He can only say a few words, but he understands about fifty signs, and if you speak loudly while gesturing, he usually gets the gist of what you’re trying to say. Just keep it simple and he’ll understand what you want. Getting him to respond appropriately is a different story.” She rolled her eyes. “You’ll learn to understand him in time. All the individuals living here have some sort of communication disorder.”

“Really?” I asked. “I understood Stanley fine when he spoke to me outside.”

Heather seemed pleased, almost surprised. “Good. That’s very good. It takes most people a couple weeks to understand him. What did he say?”

“He said something about a hundred birds.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“He says a lot of things out of nowhere. But it’s good that you understood the words themselves so early. Do you have any experience dealing with people who have disabilities?”

“Well that depends on what you mean by disability.” Heather didn’t laugh. “No. I don’t. Not people like these, anyway.”

“This should be interesting for you.”

“I hope so.”

Stanley walked into the room, his skin red, hands shaking from the cold. He ambulated by swinging his right leg in a forward side arc and kind of dragging the left (toes pointed out) behind it. It was more of a slow shuffle than a walk. He never really picked either foot up off the ground.

“Stanley,” Heather said. “We shouldn’t have let you stay out that long. I knew you were getting cold.”

“Mahhh,” he answered in a low drone trailing off into garbled speech.

“Did you understand that?” Heather asked.

“No. Did he actually say something?”

“Yes.” Heather smiled.

“What did you say, Stanley?” I asked. The women at the initial interview had told me never to act as though the individual isn’t in the room. Always direct your questions to the individuals themselves. Even if they can’t respond they still might be paying attention.

Stanley stared at the floor, rubbing the toe of his sneaker against the carpet.

“I’m not going to repeat what just came out of his mouth,” Heather said. “He knows he’s not supposed to

talk like that.”

Stanley smiled and grabbed a dog-eared copy of *Sports Illustrated* off an end table. Larry Bird smiled at me from the cover as Stanley shuffled out of the room toward the kitchen, where the smells of dinner emanated.

“He’s not supposed to take those magazines, either,” Heather explained. “They’re Julian’s. But we don’t tell them what to do. They have to work out their own disputes sometimes. It gets tough. There’s always something at this job, some new challenge.”

“Good,” I said, hoping I sounded more confident than arrogant.

“Would you like to stay for dinner? It’s usually two dollars if you eat the house food, but we’ll cover you for today.”

“I’d love to stay, but only if you’ll let me pay. I don’t want to take their food without reimbursing them.”

“Great,” Heather said. “And, it really is *their* food. They pay for it, and even help buy and prepare it sometimes.”

We walked out into the kitchen, where all the women, now done with their meeting, were busy making spaghetti, meat sauce, garlic bread, and salad.