

# Sunnyside Nursing Home\*

**Sarah** lives at Sunnyside Nursing Home, where she is comfortable and has a nice view. Until Sarah met **Jack**, the nights were very lonely. Now they play cards and when they get drowsy, they cuddle in bed together. Sometimes they do more than just cuddle.

The problem is that Jack has Alzheimer's and has recently been moved to a special locked ward. On his good days, he comes out to the recreation room and Jack and Sarah play cards, but he is not allowed in Sarah's room, nor she in his. Hospital rules, they say. Sarah appeals to the **charge nurse**, who says patients with Alzheimer's can't legally give consent and therefore can't be considered consenting adults. She says these rules are to protect the patients and Sarah should not try to see Jack anymore. He is too ill to be interested in sex anyway. Sarah knows better; she knows Jack. That evening, the **night nurse** brings the medication tray and with a cheery smile says, "Well, Sarah, are we ready for bed? Here's our sleeping pill. The doctor wants to make sure you take it, so be a good girl, won't you, and take it without a fuss."

The next day Jack comes to the rec room with several other patients from his ward. When it is time for them to leave, Sarah joins the line. She makes it as far as the locked door before the **social worker** spots her. "Now, now, Sarah, you know you can't go in there. Go back to the rec room. They're going to play Bingo this afternoon. Won't that be fun?" Sarah doesn't like Bingo. She sits despondently looking out the window.

That night, when the smiley-faced night nurse comes with the sleeping pill, Sarah puts it under her tongue and spits it out as soon as the nurse leaves. She pretends to sleep until all is quiet and then silently slips down the hallway, reaching the door to Jack's wing, but it's locked. Just then, she hears a noise behind her and whirls around. It's the **maintenance man** making his rounds. Sarah tells him she needs to get in to the ward to see an old friend. He asks, "What's in it for me?" Sarah pulls out her coin purse and takes out a \$20 bill. He unlocks the door.

Sarah creeps down the corridor, finds Jack's room and slips into bed beside him. Whether Jack knows who she is or is just happy to see her, is a mystery, but they quickly get reacquainted and fall asleep in each other's arms. And that's how the **psych nurse** from the Alzheimer's ward finds them. "What is going on here? How did you get here? You don't belong here! I'm calling Security! We can't have you upsetting the patients." With all the noise, Jack gets agitated; Sarah feels scared.

Informed of what happened, the **director** calls a meeting the next day. The charge nurse and social worker say they have talked to Sarah and it didn't do any good. The director calls Sarah's **daughter** and asks her to talk to her mother. Sarah's daughter comes to the home and says, "Mother, it is embarrassing to be called by the director. Really, Mother, how could you, and at your age too! Promise me it will never happen again." Sarah sits in silence.

Sarah is persistent, trying first one way and then another to be with Jack, until at last the director feels he has no alternative and asks the maintenance man to put a lock on her door. And that was the end of Sarah and Jack.

\*This story, written by Anne Terrell, M.S.W., is based on an actual nursing home situation. The Center for Family Life Education, Planned Parenthood of Greater Northern New Jersey