

The Twelfth Bed

by Dean Ray Koontz, 1945-

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The Twelfth Bed has a strange history—and one which was maddening as it was unfolding. I sat down to write a grimly realistic story about death and old people—but with an upbeat ending. When I was finished, I thought I had something that might possibly sell to a major circulation magazine. I mailed the story to *Playboy*. A week later, I received a two page letter from an assistant editor there. They were rejecting the story, but thought it „brilliant”. Why, then, you may well ask, were they rejecting it? Because, the editor went on to say, „it was too grim.” Next, the piece went to *Esquire*. I was told, when they rejected it, that it was a miserably depressing story, and it was inferred I had a warped mind (that rejection was half a page letter). *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* (then publishing) all returned it. Not one of them sent a form rejection, but came through with letters about the story—and all of them said it was depressing and antihumane and even „so horrid as to be obscene.” Depressed, I decided to try the lower paying

markets, though by now I was certain the story was an utter catastrophe. Ed Ferman, at F&SF, bought the story immediately with a note that said: „...yet it is so powerfully charged with Hope...” Hope? Could this be the same story that was „grim” and „obscene” and „miserably depressing”? Yes, of course. Because the editors of those slick magazines had taken the plot of the story and judged it only on that. They had failed to consider the lead character and his attitude at the end of the story. What our narrator says in that last paragraph is a testament to man's ability to come back from the worst possible blows to his psyche, to come back and make a go of it again, even if he believes that, this time, the twelfth bed is the one in which *he* sleeps...

Now in the dark and the silence with the metal nurses whirring and smiling and rolling around, now with everyone gone and everything lonely, now with Death hovering near me and now that I have to face him alone, I have decided to record the whole marvelous affair. I have crayons, pastels, and the art paper they gave each of us. Maybe they will find the art paper, like my voice echoing out of the past and whispering tales to them. Maybe.

I'll have to hide the finished document; the supplies closet would make a fine depository, for there is already a great deal of paper in it, and this will be mistaken for unused stock. The metal nurses can't read, but they always burn all your papers when you die. This would not be safe in my desk. That is part of what makes this place a breathing, snorting Hell—not being able to communicate with the outside world. A man should be able to reach through and see progress and pretty women and children and dogs—and oh so many things. A man should not be bottled like a specimen and shoved away in some forgotten file. Batting my fragile wings against the bottle of my imprisonment, I write.

In the beginning, there were eleven of us. The ward can hold twelve. We knew that several of our number were very close to death and that new vacancies would open up. It was nice knowing there would be new faces. There were four of us who lived through eight years or more in the place, and we valued new faces, for they were all that made life interesting (crayons, pastels, and checkers being limited in their attractiveness after a number of long, empty months).

Once a real Englishman with fine manners came into the ward. He had been to Africa twice, and he had quite a number of safari experiences to talk about. Many a good hour was passed listening to the tales of cats, lean, well-muscled cats that lurked in the brush with glistening claws and yellow teeth to slash and rip and tear at the unwary. There were stories of strange birds. There were tales of strange temples, exotic rituals, narratives about smooth, dark native women.

But then the Englishman died, spitting blood from his mouth and nostrils.

So it was that new faces brought new ideas, making one feel that life still had something in its dried-out carcass to make you want to live. And like I said, there were always fresh countenances. Libby (his real name was Bertrand Libberhad), Mike, Kyu, and I were the only regulars. Old-timers of the first order, veterans. Libby topped me by being a patient for eleven years; my own term was nine years long. Kyu and Mike were the juniors, having put in only eight years each. And the

others in the ward were temporary, here for a week, a month, two months, then gone, carted away to be thrust into the raging fires of the Flue and burned into ash. It was good for us veterans that so many of them died; new faces, you know.

Yet it is because of one of these new faces that I am now alone, sitting here in the dark, listening for heavy wings of blackness—alone.

The new face was Gabe Detrick. That wasn't odd, for every face has a name just like Libby and Kyu and Mike. But he was so *young!* He seemed to be no older than thirty. We went to sleep with the twelfth bed empty; when we woke, there was Gabe, a great, naked man not long ago a boy. Some eyeless moment of the night had seen him wheeled in and dumped on the bed like so much fresh meat.

Much speculation ensued as to why a young man should be brought to the Old Folks Without Supporting Children Home. One had to be fifty-five before they came in the night, those lumbering crimson-eyed androids without mouths and with gleaming wire sensor grids for ears, and shot you with drug guns and carted you away. But this man on the bed was young—nearly a boy.

When he finally shook off the drugs and came to, silence fell upon the room like the quiet after a giant tree has crashed upon the breast of the earth and now lies solemn and dead.

Every eye fell upon him, even Kyu's blind one.

„Where—“

No one allowed him to finish; everyone scrambled toward him to explain his present predicament. When he finally forced his groggy senses to an understanding, he ranted almost as a mad man would. „I'm only twenty-seven! What the Hell is going on here?“ He jumped out of bed, swayed slightly on his feet, and began to pace around the room, searching for an exit. We followed, him—the few of us who could walk—like sheep preparing to watch the shepherd kill the wolf.

Eventually, he noticed the dim lines of the flush door and streaked toward it, mouthing everything foul he knew. He pounded on the blue paneling even though word was gotten to him that it would do no good. He pounded and pounded and swore and pounded until the decibels of his uproar reached sufficient quantity to stimulate the „ears“ of a passing robot. The automaton rolled through the door and asked if anything were wrong.

„You're damn right something is wrong!“ Gabe shouted.

The robot leered at him. Robots actually have no facial expressions comparable to a human being, but they had been assigned expressions by the patients. This one—who we called Doctor Domo—always seemed to be leering. Perhaps it was because his left eye glowed a dimmer red than his right.

„My name is Gabe Detrick. I'm an accountant. Address: 23234545, Lower Level, Mordecai Street, Ambridge.“

There was a familiar crackling that always preceded *ev*-everything Dr. Domo said, then: „Do you want a bed pan?“

We thought that Gabe was going to smash a fist right into the leering devil's alloy face. Kyu screamed as if it had already happened, and his terror seemed to dissuade Gabe from the act

„Dinner will be served in—*click, clack*—two hours,” Domo squeaked. „Is that the trouble?“

„I want out!“

„Are you dying?“ crackled the metal man.

„I'm only twenty-seven!“ He said it like anyone older must be ancient papyrus cracking and flaking and ready to crumble to dust. I think we all disliked him a bit for his tone.

„Do you want a bed pan?“ the robot asked again, obviously bewildered. It was programmed to answer seven hundred different questions: *May I have a bed pan, may I have more paper, what's for dinner, I have a pain*. But nothing in its tape banks was designed to cope with this particular problem.

Then Gabe *did* do it. He pulled back one powerful hand and let go. Of course the blow never connected. One thing the metal nurse was programmed to do was fend off insane and angry patients. With one jolt from its swiftly extended, double-pronged shocker, the machine knocked him flat on the floor, colder than yesterday's pancakes. And believe me, in here, yesterday's pancakes were cold enough yesterday.

We helped him into bed, Libby and I, and put cold compresses composed of worn out undershirts on his forehead.

„Where—“

Kyu started to explain all over again, but he was hushed.

„Never argue with a robotnurse. You can't win,“ Libby said. He knew from experience, from his early years in the ward.

Gabe forced himself to a sitting position. His chin was bruised where he had fallen on it, and it was beginning to blue his face like a dull beard. It certainly wasn't pretty.

„You okay?“ Kyu asked.

I kept quiet, for I never have been one to say much about anything at any time. Which reminds me of something Libby always used to say when I wrote my short stories (which the robots burned methodically). He would pucker up his scarred lips, open his wrinkled mouth very, very wide, and say, „Boys, old Sam doesn't say much, but he's going to be our Boswell. And he'll do a better job with our collective biographies than that old-time runt ever did for Johnson's!“

Well, maybe Libby was right. Maybe I will chronicle it all. Maybe I have enough time left that I can go back from this last chapter and write all the ones that come before. That is all that is left for me now with everyone gone and the ward cold. Silence prevails, and I cannot stand the silence.

Anyway, for weeks after that, Gabe seemed older than the rest of us, almost like one of the walking dead. He explained to us all about the old man who lived next door to him who had been due to go that night, and how the robots must have gotten the wrong address. We explained there was no grievance board of human beings to take the problem to, that we had never seen a human other than patients since we came into the ward. He pounded on the door, took more pokes at more robots and learned the hard way. With the truth creeping in on him, that he would never go free being a thought constantly in his mind, his spirit faded. He was more depressed than we were. Yet he tried not to let it show, he turned outward with his misfortune and directed his vigor at us, trying to cheer and pep. He was always sympathetic, more so the longer he lived with us. I remember once:

„Goddamn it you took them! I know you took them! You mamza pig! Thief!“

Hanlin, a new face, was so red that his nose was a mighty volcano preparing to burst, his lips already sputtering white lava. „Brookman, you’re a liar. What do you want me to say? What would I want with them, hah? What for would I want your silly toys?“

„I’ll carve you up when they bring the knives with to eat! Little mother pieces. Blood all over your lousy face!“

Everyone had turned from his bed to watch the drama unfold. But the fact that Brookman and Hanlin were supposed to be friends kept the significance of the scene from weighing on us immediately.

Gabe was quicker. He vaulted a bed—actually leaped right over it—which proved a great pleasure to the bedridden among us who had too long been confined with doddering old men and had forgotten the agility of youth. He vaulted the damn bed and picked Hanlin and Brookman completely off the floor, one wrinkled old skeleton in each hand. „Shut up, you two! You want some robot comin’ in here and shocking you both to death?“

„That lousy kike called me a thief!“ Hanlin bellowed. He fought to get away from Gabe, but he couldn’t twist enough strength out of his old lemon peel body.

„What’s the matter?“ Gabe asked, trying to bring some measure of calm to the affair.

„He stole my straws. The Goddamn mamza pig stole—“

„Hold it, Brookie. What straws?“

Brookman got a strange look on his face then, somewhat like a child caught at a dirty game. He was no longer the fighter, every inch the old man. „Man’s gotta have somethin’. Somethin’ his own, God.“

„What straws?“ Gabe asked again, uncomprehendingly.

„Been savin’ my milk straws. You can make all kinds of things with them. I made a doll. Just sorta a doll like the one Adele and me gave to our Sarah when she was a baby.“ There were little crystal droplets at the edges of his dark eyes. Several of us turned away not wanting to see; but the words still came. „Just like little Sarah had. Move its legs and everything, make it jump and swim and everything. And if you pretend, God if you pretend, those paper pipes is anything. They can be people that you talk to and move around; they can be money, each straw a five, a ten, even a thousand dollar bill. They’re anything. They’re most of all being free and having Adele and Sarah and—“

I had to look back at him, because what he said made me feel funny inside. He had his old, brown-spotted hands drawn up in front of his face, the veins standing out in bas-relief. He was shaking.

„You take his straws?“ Gabe demanded of Hanlin.

„I—“

„You take them!“ That was a scream; Gabe’s face was twisted up something awful, his lips drawn back and his teeth bared. He looked like some frantic, wild, hungry animal.

„He hoarded them!“ Hanlin barked.

„You took them?“

„Damn kike just hoarding and hoarding—“

Gabe dropped him to the floor, but not easily like he did Brookman. Then he picked him up and dropped him again. „You give them back, you hear?“

„He should share—“

„You give them back or I’ll peel your skin off and give him your bones!“

Hanlin gave them back. Gabe spent the better part of that week with Brookman. He saved all his straws for the old man and played games with him. Hanlin died that week; Gabe never even joined in the prayer we said as they carted him out. Not many of the rest of us had our hearts in it, I suspect.

But lest anyone think it was all sad times with Gabe here, let me set the record straight. I said he was unhappy. He was. But he had this special way about him, this special talent to make other people laugh. He always had some trick planned, always something to pull on the robots.

When the clanking, whirring nurses came in to serve breakfast, Gabe would always be up and around. He would follow the humming metal nannies, and when he saw the chance, he would stick a leg out and let them trip over it when they turned around.

They were those robots that roll on one leg, and they were easily upset. He would tumble one, then dash away from the scene so fast that a lightning bolt couldn’t have caught him. Then the other robots would come skittering to the aid of their fallen comrade, pick him up, and *cluck* (every damn time, mind you) what they had been programmed to cluck in such a case: „Nasty, nasty fall. Poor Bruce, poor Bruce.“

Then everyone would roar. Gabe had done it again.

We never did know why they called the robots „Bruce”— all of them. But it could have been the quirk of some egotistical design engineer of the same name. Anyhow we would roar.

„Good one, Gabe!“

„You’re great, boy!“

„That’ll show em, Gabie!“

And he would grin that silly grin of his, and everything was all right, and the ward was not a ward for a while.

But the ward was always a ward for him.

He was never happy, not even when he clowning for us.

We did our best to attempt to cheer him, inviting him to participate in our words games; nothing worked.

Gabe was not an old man, and he did not belong. Worst of all, there seemed to be no way out for him.

Then, quite by accident, as the by-product of one long and terrible and ugly night, it seemed a way had been found to fight back at the robots.

It was like this:

It was the middle of the night, dark as bat wings, most of us asleep. We might have remained asleep too, if Libby’s pillow had not fallen to the floor. He was muffling his sobs in it, and when it fell, he did not have the strength or the sense of balance to reach over the edge of the high bed and pick it up.

We were shaken from our sleep by sound of his weeping. I don’t think I have ever heard a sound like that. Libby wasn’t supposed to weep. He had been in for too many years; he was a veteran of it all; frustration should have been flushed

from him long ago. Not only that. He had had a rough life too, rough enough to rule out crying. He came from Harlem. White parents in Harlem are one thing you can be sure: poor. He was raised in every degenerated part of New York City. He learned young where to kick to hurt the strange men who tried to tempt or drag him into alleys. He knew first hand about sex when he was thirteen—under a stairway in a tenement with a woman thirty-five. Later, he turned to the sea, worked as a dock hand, shipped the hardest runs, and always seemed to lose his money in a fight or on a dame. He had been and seen and felt too much to cry.

But that night it was Libby, heaving his guts out on the bed.

I too must have cried a bit, for Libby.

It was Gabe who put a first hand on his shoulder. We could see him there in the half-darkness of the ward, sitting on the edge of Libby's bed, a hand on the old man's shoulder. He moved it up and ran it through Libby's hair. „What is it, Lib?“

Libby just cried. In the dark and the closeness and the shadows like birds, we thought he would make his throat bleed if he didn't soon stop.

Gabe just sat there running gray hairs through his fingers and massaged Libby's shoulder and said things to soothe him.

„Gabe, oh God, Gabe,“ Libby said between gasps for air.

„What is it, Lib? Tell me.“

„I'm dying, Gabe. Me. It wasn't ever going to happen to me.“

I shuddered. When Libby went, could I be far behind? Did I want to be far behind? We were inseparable. It seemed that if he went, I must die too—shoved into the ovens where they cremated us—side-by-side. God, don't take Lib alone. Please, please, no.

„You're as healthy as a rat, and you'll live to be a hundred and fifty.“

„No I won't—“ He choked trying to stop tears that moved out of his eyes anyway.

„What's the matter, pain?“

„No. Not yet.“

„Then why did you think you're going to die, Lib?“

„I can't piss. Goddamn, Gabe, I can't even—“

We could see him then, lifting the thin, wrinkled body we called Libby, Bertrand Libberhad, lifting it against his young chest and holding it. He was quiet in the darkness for a time, and then he said, „How long?“

„Two days. God, I'm bursting. I tried not to drink, but—“

He seemed to crush Libby to him, as if the old man could gain some strength from the flower of his youth. Then he began a rocking motion like a mother with a babe in her arms. Libby cried softly to him.

„Did you ever have a special girl, Lib?“ he asked finally.

We could see the head rising off the young chest—just an inch. „What?“

„A girl. A special girl. One who walked just so and talked like wind scented with strawberries and flooded with warmth. A girl with smooth arms and nice legs.“

„Sure,“ Lib said with not so many tears in his voice. „Sure, I had a girl like that. Boston. She was Italian. Real dark hair and eyes like polished coal. She was gonna marry me once.“

„She loved you?“

„Yeah. What a fool I was. I loved her and was too dumb to know. Mistake, huh?“

„We all make them. I had a girl too. Bernadette. Sounds like a fake name, but that was hers. Green eyes.“

„Was she pretty, Gabe?“

„Pretty as the first day in spring when you know the snow is gone for good and maybe a robin will build a nest outside your window soon. Real pretty.“

„Sorry for you, Gabe.“

„And did you ever tie on one helluva drunk, Lib?“

„Yeah.“ There were tears in his voice again. „Yeah, a few. Once in New York for three days. High as a kite, not knowin' where I was at.“

„So did I,“ Gabe said. „New York too. You could have picked me up and set me down in the middle of a cattle stampede without me ever the wiser.“

I think Libby might have laughed then. A funny little laugh that threatened tears and didn't really announce joy.

„And Lib, did you see much of the world, you're being a seaman?“

„Tokyo, London, Australia for two weeks. I been in every one of the fifty-six states.“

„More than I saw.“

Then in the wings of the shielding darkness, you could hear it—like phlegm bubbling in his old throat. „But, Gabe, I can't piss.“

„You've been in love and been loved, Lib. That's more than a lot of people can say. You've seen almost every corner of the world, and some places in it, you've drunk yourself silly. Don't forget all that.“

Then I realized that he was not trying to con the old man into forgetting his sickness. He was trying, instead, to show him that there was a dignity in Death, that he could hold up his withered head and say that life had not been an empty cup, the dry bed of a river.

Libby saw a little of that too, I think.

He said: „But Gabe, I don't want to die.“

„No one ever does, Lib. I don't; Sam doesn't.“

„It does hurt!“

„You said it didn't.“

„I never would admit pain.“

„How hard have you tried to relieve yourself?“

„I think blood came a little the last time. Oh, Gabe, blood. I'm an old man, and I've rotted to pieces here for years and saw no sky and no girls and no newspaper, and now my vitals are bleeding on me and my gut feels like it's gonna up and explode with the pressure.“

Gabe pulled out the bed pan potty and sat it on the floor. „Try once more, Lib.“

„I don't want to. I might bleed.“

„Just for me, Lib. Come on. Maybe you can.“

He helped him out of bed, set him on the degrading little chair, knelt besides him. „Try, Lib.“

„Oh, Mother of God, Gabe, it hurts!“

„Try. Take it easy. Nice and easy.“

The darkness was horrible.

„Gabe, I’m—I can’t!” Libby was crying and choking. We heard the potty chair go skidding across the room. The next thing, Gabe was crooning, holding the old man to him there on the hard floor.

„Lib, Lib, Lib.“

And Libby only moaned.

„You’ll be all right.“

„I’ll sleep. It’ll be just like sleeping.”

„That’s right. That’s all it is—just a sleep, a nap.”

Libby shook, his old crumbling paper lungs wheezing. „The robots sleep at night, Gabe. Only they wake up.“

There was a sudden change in Gabe’s tone. „What do you mean, Lib?”

„They sleep. They charge up, plug themselves in. Ain’t that hell, Gabe. They sleep too.“

Gabe put the old man back in the bed and waddled around the baseboard looking for the nearest outlet. „Damn-it, Libby, you won’t die. I promise you. There’s a way out. If we can blow the fuses, catch all the metal people plugged into useless outlets—“

Several breaths were drawn in.

„Lib, you hear me?” Gabe was crying then. „Lib?”

Libby could never have answered. He was dead, lying lifeless in the heap of old gray linen that covered his sagging mattress. But that seemed to give Gabe more determination than ever. „Anyone have a piece of metal? Any metal?”

We were packrats by habit. Kyu had a fork he had held back one day when they had given him two by accident. I had a length of copper wire I had saved for years. It had held the shipping tag on the bottom of my bed. One day, musty years earlier, I had found it while crawling under the bed to see if a dip in the mattress could be corrected.

He almost got electrocuted doing it, but he managed to blow the fuses, all the current being soaked up by the old bed no one was using—no one living, anyhow—the bed wired to the fork that was stuck in the socket. The night light winked out when the fuses blew.

We all worked together to break down the door. The healthy ones put their backs to it, the invalids cheered them on.

We never counted on the replacement robots who stood essential duties while the main crew recharged. Maybe, in the deepest parts of our minds, we knew it. But there was Libby on the bed and strong Gabe to follow. We easily brushed any such thoughts aside.

Gabe died quickly, I think. At least, that is what I like to think. He went down under the flames from a robo-pistol, charred, smoking. The rest fought madly. I broke my leg and was out of most of the action. Now there are eleven beds vacant, and I am in the twelfth. The darkness is close around and there is nothing to say and no one to say it to.

I think now only to write. I think about Gabe tumbling the clumsy robots; I think about Libby, about Gabe holding him there on the bed as a mother with her babe. And I write. Gabe once told me that someone as old as I forgets most recent events first. I must not forget.

The vacant beds will be filled again, and my story is a good one, better even than those of the Englishman.

