

Room for a view

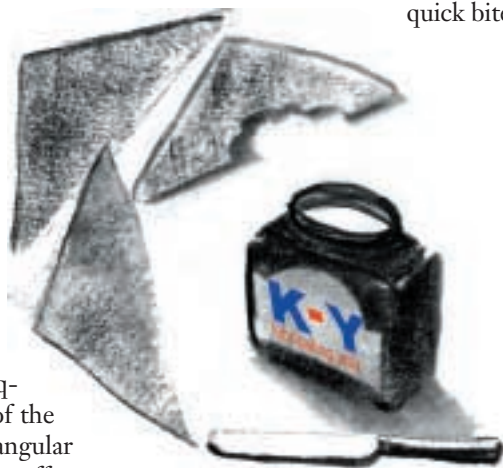
## Kentucky jelly

It wasn't as if I were complaining or anything. Not exactly. I was merely stating, into the open air, that it was seven hours into an eight-hour shift, and that in all that time I had not eaten a single bite or had so much as a sip of coffee. Granted, this was announced within earshot of several other members of the emergency department staff, who could have heard me if they chose to. But my statement received even less pseudo-sympathy than I had anticipated. In fact, it was utterly ignored. I skulked out of the ER, dodging several nurses along the way who I knew took pleasure in making me work. I headed to the coffee machine.

The lounge was blessedly quiet. Over in one corner stood my little friend Mr. Coffee, ready to listen to my woes with an open and sympathetic ear while simultaneously dispensing a consoling hot beverage. I plunked a few coins into the slot, and the exclamatory "Product being prepared — Watch!!" appeared in the liquid-crystal display on the front of the machine. Below this a clear rectangular window invited me to witness my coffee being conjured up in the precise and mechanized bowels of the machine. The invitation turned out to be more of a warning, for no sooner had my attention wandered than the machine

splashed what felt like molten tar generously onto my scrubs in the vicinity of my groin.

To think that my walk *out* of the ER was a skulk. My return, sporting a conspicuous and muddy stain on my pants — now *that* was a skulk. It seemed that even the coffee machine conspired against me, and I had even paid the little sucker. I threw on a new pair of scrubs over my stained ones, my stomach rumbling miserably, and approached the charge nurse. Certainly she would see reason and allow me to sneak away for a quick bite.



"Well, now that you mention it," she said, "Mr. Duncan in room 5 has a complaint about the food here. He has asked for you specifically, and I told

him you'd be right in." She exchanged a knowing smile with a few of the other nurses. Looking at that smile, I wondered how I could ever have imagined I would see sympathy there. Sympathy is an emotion ordinarily felt only by humans. I headed morosely over to room 5.

The patient in room 5 was a pleasant and elderly chap, just shy of birthday number 93, from Possumtrot County in the Deep South. In previous conversations he had seemed to take little comfort in my admiring comments that, for his age, he was in remarkably good health. Having been in hospital before, he wanted no part of the experience, least of all the food. At that moment I was beginning to feel as though I would give anything, anything at all, just to have a tray of food to complain about. I wondered vaguely if I should offer to pull my car up out front so he could jump in and we could screech off together into the night, straight to the nearest Denny's.

Mr. Duncan sat upright, a small and hunched little chap, his wrinkled face frowning down at what appeared to be someone's scientific version of breakfast on his tray. I asked him what the matter was.

"It ain't so much the taters," he said. "And I don't much mind the aigs neither. But I'll say I don't much care for the Kentucky Jelly, tell you what."

He motioned to two small white and silver packets on the table beside his food tray. Written across the white side of each packet, in bold blue letters, was "KY Jelly."

My smile, perhaps a little wooden to begin with, became downright oaken when I glanced at his toast, covered in a layer of glistening, clear gel. There was a single large bite (such a *healthy* bite, for a 93 year old!) out of the side of one of these toasted triangles.

"Now I want to see if'n you disagree," Mr. Duncan said, holding out in supplication a slice of toast toward me. His hand shook ever so slightly; a long, quivering, stalactite of goo was hanging from the toast. Several gratified-looking nurses had gathered in the doorway behind me. My teeth were becoming dry, so wide was my smile.

"I've been to Kentucky plenty, and don't never recall having jelly like this before."

My choices seemed to be either to explain that somehow we had substituted a popular brand of lubricant for his grape jelly, or to simply play along. After all, there was some toast in it for me, and KY is perfectly harmless to ingest. Isn't it? And so I did what just about anyone would have done in a similar situation, I suppose. I took the coward's way out. I accepted the piece of toast from him gingerly and chewed off one corner, just chewed right on through that smile. Actually, it wasn't all that bad. A little greasy, perhaps, and slightly sweet. I took a second, more enthusiastic bite, even managing a hearty "Mmmmm!"

"Well, I'll be," Mr. Duncan said

quietly, shaking his head and beginning to look at me as if I were a particularly gifted lab rat. Behind me, the nurses could no longer suppress their laughter.

"I didn't think you'd fall for it," he said.

I looked at him, slowly lowering my toast.

"You mean ... "

"Son, what do I look like, a dang fool? Here, have some more toast."

The nurses were in gales now as he held out the second piece of lubricated bread.

But at least one good thing came of it.

"Uh, no thanks," I said. "I'm not really that hungry any more."

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