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This is the Night of Your 3 0 2

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In Pennsylvania, the Mental Health Act
No. "302" means involuntary hospitaliza-
tion" for mental illness.

I watched
through the glass doors
of our mental health clinic
for the person to be 302'ed,
he would walk through
the outer doors,
a man who'd lost the
finer workings of his mind,
and would be delivered up
for safekeeping by the cops,
escorted into a tiny room that locked
and was filled with windows
that can't be broken.

They were wild sometimes,
flailing,
crying out in broken words,
fighting to escape their captors,

believing until the end
deliverance was at hand.

From my perch at the door
the doctor joins me.
She is eating an apple and
talking about going out for
Chinese food after.
302-ing makes you hungry.

I tell her that once
I had ridden
in the back of a police car.
My senses gone,
alert,
radiating to the
staccato points of night
and the babble of the police radio,
I leaned forward in my backseat nest
like caged Hansel in the gingerbread forest
and stuck my little finger
through the iron grates that contained me.
It was all I had of freedom.

“Were you scared?” the doctor asked.
“Why, not at all,” I said.
“I thought they were taking me to a live
performance of the Nutcracker Suite.”

Thinking I was kidding
she crumpled up with merriment.

We watched as a police car
pulled in sideways with a flourish.
Black letters like ribbons scrolled
across the door.

I watched as
a man stepped from the car,
steady, unafraid,
handsome as a game show host
striding on stage
to marvelous applause.
Barefoot,
his hair uncombed with
great prodigal waves falling upon
his brow,
his face had a pulled-down look
I hadn't expected to see.
He'd played his chips and lost.

Chin up, I whispered.
This is your hour,
for now —
and for all time.
Use it well.
Don't get hurt,
run a comb through your hair,
And, for God's sakes, pay attention
for this is the night of your 302.

Ruth Z. Deming has had her poetry published in literature magazines, including *River Poets*, *Hektoen International*, *Mad Swirl*, and *Blue Lyra Review*. She runs New Directions Support Group, www.newdirectionssupport.org. Sometimes, later in life, bipolar disorder vanishes. Ruth is among these lucky people. She hasn't experienced a high or a low in 33 years and takes no medication for bipolar disorder.