

I've grown accustomed to the uncommon scenery of most emergency rooms due to an ongoing neurological illness. Beyond the sniffles, the cries of pain, is a system in organized crisis among the chaos, that frenetic pace few are familiar with.

This time every surface was littered with the remnants of those who came before me. Two broken quarters of Funion, a perfect Nilla Wafer and a multitude of boredom induced ER art sat on the floor beneath a young couple with their son. These abstract expressions of mutual frustration ranged from a perfect silver sphere, an egg, and one that resembled a vague rendition of Paul Revere's famous hat—all made of gum wrapper floorigami.

Much love echoed in that space. It radiated, along with despair like an aura surrounding one group—young parents with their wheezing boy, who was wearing red and black Star Wars pajamas, delirious, flushed, being rocked by his mother while his father massaged his bare feet. This wasn't their first scare. They wore experience in the creases between their eyes and at the corners of their mouths.

A distraught man in his fifties walked from behind double doors that opened in one direction. A sign said "Exit Only" in bold red lettering. A security guard was posted next to the door. The people that emerged from the other side weren't expected to come back if they were well treated.

"She's actually not doing too bad...they think her brain is OK..." he said to his late night ER companion, who sighed with relief.

Unrelated giggling rang out from the two girls sitting behind the intake desk.

A homeless man named Eddie slept wrapped like a mummy in a black commercial garbage bag propped on a pile of backpacks—his entire world.

Far in the distance behind a cage of endless windows stood an elderly African American man wrapped in a cream colored blanket, who stood, did a single revolution, sat back down, then began again—an Obsessive-Compulsive dance. Nearby a young man in red flannel mouthed something indiscernible to himself in repetition. That must've been the psychiatric waiting room with no apparent entrance or exit.

“Jimmy lives in Antioch,” said the girl at the front desk to her coworker. “At least he isn’t too far...” their conversation was interrupted by a new arrival who walked in shoeless from outside already wearing anti-slip hospital socks, tinged brown with street grime. Every few seconds his head would twitch to the left and he was blinking without pause.

“I’m going to hurt myself. I stopped taking my medication,” the newcomer said.

“Do you have anything that can hurt you or anyone else in your backpack or on you?” the then robotic girl asked.

He responded with an exaggerated nod of his still twitching head.

“Give me your backpack, empty your pockets and have a seat.” she said, as he complied.

“He’s taking me to Buffalo Wild Wings tomorrow...” The girls returned to their previous conversation. “Finally a day off.”

“That should be fun,” the coworker said.

“It beats working.” the girl said, looking up to listen to the mother’s booming voice.

The mother stood, changed the channel, and announced to nobody in particular, “Family Guy is too explicit for small children...” as she changed the channel to CNN.

The suicidal man watched footage of RPG rounds being fired at Isis in Iraq. “ooh!” he screamed in a mixture of fright and delight several times, as each of the rounds exploded, hitting a concrete structure behind which rebels were hiding. The doctor took him into the back.

My name was called. Finally it was my turn. "Sorry, I have to take someone else first. He's been here all day. You are going to have to wait just a bit longer." Eddie, the homeless man was taken into the back for a meal and a place to sleep, as one of the nurses told me had become common practice. Despite the pain of my condition, I didn't mind being passed over by someone less fortunate.

An hour later I was directed towards room number thirteen. As I stood up and hobbled into the back I almost tripped over a spot of worn out laminate, and noticed a dedication on the wall thanking the hospital's benefactor, "whose generosity made this vision a reality. April 2007." I wondered what that family would think of the state of this place a mere eight years later, or if they even knew or cared to know what had become of their generosity.

"I'll get you a wheelchair said the girl at the desk." She returned as promised and sat me in front of the door, blocking traffic. Another man came moments later and moved me out of the way, scolding me for creating, "a fire hazard." The pain in my legs and back was so bad that I hoped for a fire, so that I could be trampled. I pointed out a bloody bandage on the floor.

"Don't worry about it. We have housekeeping to take care of stuff like that," he said as he walked past it for the third time to sit down and stare out the front doors. I wondered if he had ever heard of Hepatitis C, or the million other blood borne illnesses that the two second act of squatting and picking up the biohazard could prevent being spread.

Finally a nurse came to bring me to the back. I was awarded the lone gurney available in the building upon which to rest my ailing body for the next thirteen hours before I went upstairs. The hospital was filled beyond capacity. It had been every night for the last two years.

After I recited my litany of familiar symptoms, gave my doctor's instructions to have me admitted, I needed to take my mind off of my situation, so started making what I expected to be casual conversation with my RN while he put in my IV.

"How long have you worked here?"

"I'm not a permanent employee." Ken said "I'm what they call a 'traveler.' My contract is up in May."

"They hire you as a temp so they don't have to pay benefits?"

"Basically. I'm not cheap though." Ken said with a smug look of satisfaction. "I guess at some point I should think about my future and crap. I just got my Bachelor's. I just want to have fun and make money for now. Here's some medicine. Try to get some sleep. I'll check on you in a few minutes."

Minutes turned to hours and no nurse. I had severe pain in my back, neck, head, abdomen, and was nauseous, so I pressed the call button. My neurological condition that was being combatted by mega doses of steroids caused shooting pains throughout my body, like having a million electrified needles stuck in each pore. The only treatment was just about worse than the condition. An hour later Ken popped in. "Have you seen my stethoscope? It's missing."

"No, but I'm in pain."

"I told your doctor—like face-to-face, so I'm sure she will put the order in soon." Ken said, as his mind wandered. "Maybe I put it in the laundry by mistake... I'll go check..."

An hour later the girl from the front desk walked in, "Have you seen a stethoscope? Your nurse is missing his."

"No, but I'm really sick and need some medicine. I've been waiting for hours."

"I'll go check on that..."

An hour later another nurse walked in, "Have you seen a stethoscope?"

"I don't care about a missing stethoscope. My pain level is 8!"

"I'll check..."

I looked behind me and noticed that my nurse left a vial of Morphine on the counter, and the cabinet unlocked, with all the drawers open. It was there all along, mere feet behind my head. Yet I was powerless to end my own pain. That required a nursing degree and more courage than I possessed.

It was then morning, time for shift change, and my traveler walked back in with his stethoscope around his neck. Ken flashed me his familiar grin to wish me a good night.

"I'm so glad you found your stethoscope." By then I had given up on relief.

Moments after the door closed a new nurse walked in and was horrified to notice the unlocked cabinet and the Morphine vial on the counter.

"I spend the first two hours of my shift cleaning up after him, instead of taking care of patients. It is always like this. Nobody should ever have to be in pain. I'm so sorry. Some of the travelers are good but many more are just in it for the money."

She took care of my pain and brought in a real bed from upstairs to lay on while I waited.

Two hours later I said the magic words to get myself a room, "Can you transfer me to another hospital please? I can't take this anymore."

"Your room is ready." My nurse said.

I was immediately brought to my room upstairs.

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As my nurse went over the intake paperwork with me I glanced outside and noticed a dead pigeon on the roof four feet from my bed. I inquired why nobody cleaned it up—to silence.

Though my surroundings had changed, I was still experiencing severe pain as I smelled my nurse coming in from smoking a cigarette outside at the, “smoke free” campus. I told her what happened in the ER.

She said, “Honey, I would have cleaned out that cabinet and thrown a party for the three of us. That would teach him. haha. You screwed up. Once the Charge Nurse saw that cabinet empty he would have been fired for sure. I brought you this pill because I like these ones. I’ll take it if you don’t want it!”

“Will someone please help me?! I’m a 96 year old woman being held against my will by my son! Can I please have a nurse?! Can I please have a nurse?!” Screamed the woman with dementia in the room next door. Then she was 94. Then 92.

“Give her some more Haldol.” Said one of the nurses treating the man in the bed next to me.

“How? She is too combative.” Another nurse asked.

“I don’t care if you have to hold her down. She is disturbing the other patients.”

Both nurses left the room and she quieted down just as fast.

The man in the next bed was dying of cancer. He was groaning in pain and struggling to breathe. He could barely speak. And his meal trays remained untouched for three days before someone noticed. Late at night, between gurgling sounds, gasping for air, and delirium he had moments of clarity, in which he would say things that were crisp and filled with torment.

“Halleluiah... I want to die...” and “why?” were all that I could make out.

The following night he was at his worst. I muted my television, sure he was about to die. He deserved peace in what I thought were his final moments.

“Uh... uh... aaah... uh... gluh... uhhuhhhhhhhh... cuh... cuh... mama... mama... take me...”

After several nights of sleeping two hours, I began to feel the deep emotional strain of my surroundings. I asked to be transferred to another hospital for the fourth time and my persuasive doctor talked me out of it. Between the all night utterances of my neighbor and the woman screaming next door, I felt as if I were in a psychiatric hospital.

I asked one of my new nurses why those patients weren't in skilled nursing facilities where they could get round the clock intensive care from a dedicated nurse. "All of the patients on this floor are like that. We get the worst on this floor."

“Two years ago the hospital decided to fire all of their lower level nurses and replace them with travelers. Now they don't even have aides at night anymore either. They rotate RN's. We are too short staffed to do much more than keep people alive and medicate them. We've become a very expensive skilled nursing facility with too few employees.”

After my third meal in a row without food, almost in tears, I looked down at a meal of what resembled gruel. I was brought the wrong tray. I asked my case manager for a health advocate. “We don't have health advocates on weekends. You can speak to the Nursing Supervisor though. She'll be happy to address your concerns.” She said.

A few minutes later she returned, looking down at her hands as if ashamed, “She said she's dealing with things that are a higher priority... Not that your concerns aren't important... She's well aware of your situation though...” and just as quickly as she spat it out, she walked out of the room.

By that point I was reserved to accept my miserable circumstances until I was freed from what began to feel like an incarceration, rather than a hospitalization. At least I wasn't dying in that place.

By my second to the last night I walked a new nurse with a bright, healing spirit. I'd gotten into the habit of asking my nurses at each shift change if they were 'staff or traveler,' to gauge whether it would be a good or a bad night.

"Wow, you talk!" said the wide-eyed traveler.

"Is that unusual?"

"Given the patients I work with in the ICU, yes! It is a first!" She said, smiling. "I'll be right back."

She returned with a Peerless Coffee cup with a handful of Skittles in it. "You're on a regular diet. Want some Skittles?"

"Sure. How do you like being a traveler?"

"I used to eat healthy food, organic, non-GMO. Now I eat Skittles. When I agreed to move to California, friends said this is the 'land of milk and honey.' It reminds me of working in a hospital in post-Katrina New Orleans. Things I thought I was leaving behind I experience every day here. It brings me right back to that ugly horrifying place. The Skittles get me through."

"It is more like the land of Morphine and Skittles," I said trying to make light of our mutual misery.

The only constant during that hospital stay was the decaying pigeon outside my window that was by the time of my discharge covered with flies. Maybe it came to the hospital to treat a broken wing and nobody noticed it was there until it left the land of the living, a place I sometimes took for granted. Maybe I took its bed. I couldn't help but feel guilty that it died and I

was on my way out, feeling a little better, unlike many others on my floor, destined to leave through the back door. If that pigeon did come for treatment, it was better off outside on the roof than in there. At least it died in peace in the warm California sunlight.

One of my doctors later remarked, "I noticed that pigeon two weeks ago. Maybe I should call facilities to get rid of it."

"I think it is the perfect metaphor for this hospital," were my final words of my fellow traveler.