

THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN

As my whole body shook violently, my Parkinson's seemingly out of control, the nurse quickly wheeled my chair down the busy hospital hallway. I was only vaguely aware of what was going on – I just felt dizzy and ready to vomit – as unseen hands lifted me onto a gurney. In my first few seconds lying there, I sensed someone on the other side of the space (I'd hardly call it a room) and then the nurse pulled a curtain shut, and I passed out.

I came to when I heard a man talking on the other side of the curtain. He spoke with quiet authority. "You have to take your medicine if you want to get better."

"It tastes so bad," said another voice, cracked and whiny, sounding vaguely like Peter Falk. "Can't I get out of here?"

"We'd like to observe you some more," the first voice replied. I opened my eyes and I could see the shadows of a number of people behind the curtain, all apparently standing around my neighbor's gurney.

My review of the situation was interrupted by a young woman dressed in hospital scrubs who entered my space, told me she was a physician's assistant, and asked me a few questions about my dizziness and nausea. She took some notes and left, and sometime later, a heavyset black woman in scrubs came in. My whole body was twitching – the Parkinson's again – and that soon made it hard to perform an EKG.

The woman left and returned with two more heavy-set black women, and I heard her talking to them as they entered the space. "You've got to hold him down," she was saying. "I can't get a good reading on him because he's twitching so much."

The two of them then held me down, and I said something about having three women all over me, which made them laugh. A few minutes later they left, and it wasn't long before a slight Hispanic woman entered and placed a long tube in my left arm, which started pumping some sort of clear liquid into me. "Don't move that arm," she said as she left.

I kept the arm straight, clenching my fist until it started going numb. As I lay there, I heard activity from behind the curtain. "Oh, shit," rasped the faceless voice. "Nurse! NURSE!! It's all wet over here! Oh, shit!" A wheezing, hacking cough followed. "Nurse!"

I felt trapped – unable to leave my gurney because of the tube in my arm – and became concerned that the hacking man would somehow hack onto me.

Despite my worries, I felt sorry for my neighbor. No one seemed to hear him, so I called out, "Nurse! This man needs help!" I then waved to a passerby, pointing to the man behind the curtain.

A nurse finally turned up. "What are you shouting about?" she said to him.

"I want to see the doctor!" he cried out.

"You've just seen the doctor!" she said, adding suddenly. "What have you done here? It's all wet!"

"I want to see the doctor!" he said again.

"You've got to keep this on your face!" she said, apparently referring to some device he had misused.

"It doesn't feel good. I want to see the doctor!"

"He's busy now! Do you want to leave?"

Silence.

"You can leave if you want."

I didn't listen to any more because the physician's assistant came into my space at this point. "How are

you doing?" she asked.

"My arm feels a little numb."

"Stop clenching your fist and straighten your arm." I did so and the numbness disappeared.

"I need to give you some tests," she said. "Follow my finger with your eyes." After a few more of these exercises she told me she had to go. "The doctor will see you shortly," she promised.

With the woman gone, I lay there, silently feeling the fluid entering my body through the tube in my arm.

"Thanks, buddy."

It was the wheezing man. I didn't know what to say. "Hang in there!" I replied lamely.

We were both silent for a few minutes, and then he spoke. "They don't give a shit about you here."

A pause. "Why are you here?"

"I felt dizzy and ill."

"Too bad. You live around here?"

"On 122nd Street. And you?"

"I live on 119th Street. In the park."

"You ever live in a shelter?"

"Nah. They're not safe. They rob you."

"Where are you from originally?"

"Queens. I lived there for 25 years." He paused. "I was married. My wife died." What about you, buddy?

Where are you from?"

"From here. I grew up in this neighborhood."

"Really?" He paused. "This area is nice, but it's too cold in the winter, with the river."

"Uh huh."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a writer."

A nurse entered my companion's space and said something I couldn't make out. "And what about food?" he asked. "When do we eat?"

"Soon," she replied as she left.

"The food here is lousy," he confided to me. "It's better at NYU. And they treat you better."

"Then why did you come here?"

"I got sick," he said simply. "I've got emphysema."

We were silent for a while and then I asked him, "What's your name?"

He mumbled something and I asked him to repeat it. He did and I still couldn't understand him. I asked again and he shouted, "ANTHONY!"

"Do they call you Tony?"

"Yeah. What's your name?"

"Tom."

Now that we had exchanged names, I wondered what was next? Tony, as I had already guessed, was a hotbed of complaints: the nurses were too slow and the doctors were uncaring; the food was lousy and they never gave you a fork; the world was a nasty place but if you got the right doctor, they'd put you in a real bed in a real room – and you might have it to yourself for a while.

After about four hours in the ER, a young doctor came to see me and told me I could go. I packed up my gear and looked behind the curtain. Tony was sitting up in his bed, eating greasy chicken with his hands. He was balding and frail, with a thin moustache.

He looked up. "Aren't you going to have any food? He asked. He flashed me a smile and I could see he only had three teeth."

“No, I’ll eat when I get home.” I handed him a ten-dollar bill. “It’s time for me to go.”
His face lit up at the sight of the money. “Thanks, Buddy!” he said.
I smiled, shook my head slightly and said: “Take care of yourself, Tony. I’ll see you around.”

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