

COLOUR OF EYES

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The ward was busy that day, as only a large city hospital medical ward can be, during a cold and smoggy winter. Part of a wing built over fifty years before, it contained forty beds spread in dormitory-style through the main ward to the verandahs, long since enclosed to match the demands of expansion. The walls were plastered brick with steel-framed casement windows, the floors wooden with strips of lino polished to danger point.

The patients were male. The majority were middle-aged and elderly, with chest and heart problems, or both. The more seriously ill, positioned nearest the duty office, were denoted by heart monitors, oxygen bottles and tilted beds. Coloured wiring and clear plastic tubing were also conspicuous. Strain and anxiety were evident in the eyes of these patients, as they strove to survive yet another winter, while authorities in the city argued still about apportioning blame for the smog. There were also the normal complements of cases like skin disease, cancers and tumours, or circulatory disorders. Deaths are common place in such a ward. Usually they occur at night, which is better for patient morale, but hard on night nurses.

On this particular day, lunch had been served and consumed, at least by those with sufficient interest or appetite. Wards-maids cleared trays and nurses moved quickly on their errands of duty. From charge nurse to probationer, they were all busy. Medications, bedpans, bowls, phone ringing, orderly reporting. Nurse! Toilet please! CRASH from the sterilizing room, curtains drawn, curtains pulled back, wiping of mouths, noses and whatever else, turning and positioning the feeble, whatever. First lunch nurses go NOW! Changing catheters, collecting sputum containers, check vital signs! NURSE! Turn the radio down please (headphones, what are headphones?) Visitors within the hour. An alcoholic is heard, from a side room, gibbering incessantly at an imaginary menagerie. Please don't anybody have a cardiac arrest, at least not until the visitors have gone! Phone rings againNURSE!

An orderly brought an old man in a wheelchair, parking him at the duty office, his old Gladstone bag beside him on the floor. Handing a chart to the Staff Nurse nearby, the orderly hurried away for conveyancing duties elsewhere. The old man sat quietly, draped with a red ambulance blanket, his eyes closed, grey head bowed. He seemed withdrawn, scarcely aware of his surroundings, and his cheeks had a dull flush against the pale skin of his face. The Staff Nurse called to another junior nurse working nearby, and directed him to admit the new patient. There was one vacant bed near the office, among the acute cases. It had fallen vacant at three a.m. that morning. The Staff Nurse left the chart at the foot of it. The other nurse finished his task, and approached the old man and greeted him after a quick glance at the chart.

"Hello, Mr. Quincy, I'll be looking after you. I'll put you to bed directly." At the sound of his name, the old man started slightly, and opened dry lips to say something the nurse did not catch. His breathing was laboured and rasping, as if it required much effort. The nurse picked up the battered Gladstone bag and wheeled the chair to the empty bed. He drew the curtains and pulled back the bed covers. A white hospital gown lay in readiness on the pillow. "Can you stand? Not very well. Okay, sit on the edge of the bed and I'll undress you."

Beneath the blanket was a clean but threadbare suit. As well, the old man wore a clean shirt and long underwear. Socks and carpet slippers covered swollen feet. Self respect maintained despite illness with the discipline of years. The clothes came off with skill borne of practice, and the gown was draped around the thin white torso. As the nurse positioned the old man in the bed, he could feel the heat of the tired body, and its frailty. Gently the covers were pulled up as the old head sank back into the pillow, forehead wrinkled slightly as if the softness of the bed caused pain to the tired limbs.

"Are you comfortable, Mr. Quincy?" A slight nod of assent, lips moving slightly. "I'll take your blood pressure and temperature now." The nurses went for the equipment and on returning, put a thermometer in the old man's mouth and bared the thin right arm. The pulse was ragged against the nurse's finger as the failing heart laboured. The temperature was raised, as was the blood pressure. The nurse noted these details on the chart. Oxygen was also ordered, he saw. Suspected pneumonia, with previous history; antibiotics given, erythromycin by injection.

"Have your bowels moved today? Yesterday?" Again, a slight movement of the head. Not eating, probably. Another glance at the chart. No next-of-kin named, only a neighbour's address and phone number. Perhaps he's independent and doesn't want anyone to know. The neighbour must have helped to dress him, helping to keep up personal standards even when ill and on the way to hospital. He had shaved recently, too. There was scarcely any white stubble on the lined cheeks below their flush.

Carefully, the nurse folded the suit, opened the Gladstone bag, and removed simple toiletries which he placed in the locker. There was a pair of pyjamas in the bag, two handkerchiefs and spectacles in a case. No books, no wallet, no cigarettes. Probably doesn't smoke given that health history. Not even a watch. Well, even a kindly neighbour can't remember everything. The bag and contents were noted on the chart under personal effects.

"You'll have oxygen soon, Mr. Quincy, that will help you to breath easier. Are you thirsty?" A slight nod of assent. "I'll put your bag away safe and bring you a drink." The nurse came back a few moments later with a jug of cordial and an invalid cup. "Here you are. I'll help you sit up a bit." He gently raised the old man's head. A couple of sips, then the old man turned away. The nurse lowered his head to the pillow, then looked at the ward clock. "I'm off to lunch now, so rest quietly and I'll see you later." Looks like he'll sleep now, anyway. The nurse checked his other patients, spoke to his replacement, caught the Staff Nurse's eye, and left the ward on his way to lunch. Outside, the winter sunlight did little to brighten the untidy lawns or leafless trees. He looked up at the pale sky, shrugged his shoulders and tried to put thoughts of the busy ward from his mind.

About forty minutes later, the nurse returned to the ward. Visitors were now filing in. He spoke to his relief and began to check each of his patients again. As he passed the bed where the old man lay, he noticed the stillness, the small changes that had taken place since he left. The eyes were still closed, but the jaw sagged slightly and the complexion was now sallow. The slight frown had disappeared. There would be no need for the oxygen now. Someone else's visitor sat beside the bed, unaware of the exhausted surrender close by.

The nurse casually drew the curtains and checked the vital signs to be sure. Nothing. He left the bedside, reported to the Charge Nurse and collected what was necessary for laying out the body. Soon after, the Charge Nurse stepped quickly through the

curtains holding the patient's chart, a look of resignation on her face. Briefly checking the body, she noted the time, approximately, and signed the form. She spoke: "A bit awkward just now, the side room has another patient. I leave you to finish the job while I arrange a trolley and a couple of screens so we don't spread alarm and despondency."
"Okay, will do," was the reply.

Once again, he undressed the frail body, this time to put on a mortuary shroud. How ironic, (or unsurprising?), that the solitary old man should die so quietly and unremarked in such a busy place. The change was so gradual, no-one had noticed at the time. Why now? Fear of the hospital as a last resort, where the old went only to die? Or was he just too tired to go on, life's toil forsaken from a clean white bed? Relaxing just a little too much with care now assured, weakening further the last of his will to live? Who knows? Old man's friend, pneumonia, had paid a last visit in a southern city.

Just a name and a body now. No old man's tales of what used to be. There wasn't enough time, old fellow, for either of us to talk. No time to ask questions, and no strength to answer. What was his youth like? Did he go to war, like so many of his generation, and survive, unlike so many that did not, perhaps to raise a family? What was his job? There had been no easy life, the hands were gnarled, but now soft-skinned, an old man's hands. Well, there would be no more winters to face, no further capitulations to dependence and care..... Oh, yes, remember the things in the locker.

The Charge Nurse returned with a patient trolley as the nurse finished his task. Together, they laid the slight burden upon it, placing the Gladstone bag at the foot. The curtains were pushed back fully, and the nurse moved the trolley quickly from the ward between screens. An orderly waited discretely at the entrance to wheel the trolley away, the old leather bag looming like tombstone over the covered body. On this busy day, no spare mortuary trolleys, apparently, so make do with discrete shroud to ease passage past the still-living.

The screens were removed. No-one seemed to notice, or at least, made no comment as glances were studiously fixed elsewhere. Too close for comfort, perhaps...even just a stranger's curfew. But there had not been enough time for even an exchange of names within that close group of men bonded by their similar dependence on sustaining of remaining health and life. As the nurse made up the now-empty bed, he realized that the only time he saw the old man's eyes was when he checked them for absence of life. They had been light-coloured, grey...or were they blue....?

Glancing up at the clock, he realized that the shift was almost finished, and changeover was imminent. Disposing of the barely-used linen, the nurse washed his hands, straightened his uniform, and returned once more to check the other patients still in his care.