

Another Night in the ER

Category: The Middle of the Night

written by Greg Mahr | October 29, 2016

The November snowstorm is a surprise. The ER will be full of cold and homeless, coming for a meal and a place to rest.

I see the ones who say they are suicidal. That claim guarantees an overnight: a metal bed with a black foam pad, a clean sheet, turkey on white wrapped in cellophane and, if there's any left, a precious six-pack of Oreos.

They won't be suicidal in the morning. In a few days they'll be back. Everyone looks exactly the same: cold, haggard men, smelling of urine and the streets; more snowflakes dissolving in the slush.

Maybe they really are suicidal. Maybe we're all suicidal. It might be a gun to the palate, or the roulette of the extra pack of heroin, or blackberry Mohawk. In my case, it's the apneic potato chip slumber, the bad heart, the bad marriage, the endless shifts. We all kill ourselves, just the rate varies. In the evening they pretend to be suicidal, in the morning they pretend not to be. We con ourselves and each other.

I studied literature in college, at an urban university in Detroit. There was a homeless, gaunt, young man named Jim, who hung around the English lit building. He offered poems for a handout, asking, "Do you like poetry?" How could I say no? I'd buy a few poems. We'd chat a bit on warm days, behind the fountain that never worked.

Years later, when I was purging my shelves of college papers and trying to be a family man, I found Jim's poems. Feeling pompous, I tossed them. Bad poetry, I decided. I imagined that I, by some starchy MFA standards, could judge the pain of a homeless street poet.

On bad nights I think of him, hoping to find a crumpled poem by one of the ER cots. I never do. True stories don't go that way.

Soon after I finished school the neighborhood around the university gentrified; even the fountain came to life. Jim probably drifted toward cheaper rent and meaner streets. There his gentle lines wouldn't work so well.

God surprises us. He cares little about poetry, bad or good. Only souls matter; tiny delicate things that drift from heaven to earth, shimmering crystal, carefully etched, awaiting an unknown fate far from their Maker.

Plows have heaped the oily slush into piles. Maybe somewhere a luckier flake alighted in the glove of a child and was granted the moment of awe and wonder it deserved. They say each one is different. We finally remember that truth again when we get old.

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