

Desperate for Change

Category: The Waiting Room

written by Pamela Freundl Kirst | May 4, 2016

It is a mild Sunday afternoon in October, and I am standing in front of a closed reception window, desperate for change. It is the early 1990s, and we don't yet have cell phones. I have already exhausted my supply of coins, making calls on the public phone hanging on the wall in the ER waiting room.

Little more than an hour ago, having settled our seven-month-old for a nap—a task requiring cajoling, crooning and careful timing—I went in search of my husband. Only to find him outside, unconscious, in a pool of blood. When I touched his face, he spewed thick, greenish vomit, which terrified me still more.

Then I went inside our home and dialed 911.

In the ER, the physician treating my husband gave me access to a phone that didn't require coins, as he speculated about a dismal prognosis. From that phone, I called my neighbor to check on the baby. Marsha had taken him from my arms as the paramedics loaded my husband into the ambulance. "Your husband needs you," she'd instructed, prying the baby away from me. As much as I did not want to give up his warm ballast, his vitality and his comfort, I relinquished him.

Over the phone, Marsha told me she had contacted our regular babysitter, and Irma is on her way. I felt stunned by this: by the smooth forward movement of the machinery of arrangements, gliding things into place. I am more stunned, though, and caught in bewildered stasis, by what has brought me here.

Now the reception window glides open, and the woman on the other side hears my plea and refuses. Invoking "policy," she won't give me change for the dollar bills I thrust towards her. I am incredulous. In my state of suspended mind, swimming through the thick, stilled air of a vacuum, nothing makes sense.

Dispirited, I turn away, giving up.

But as I turn, I face a sea of outstretched hands. The room is full of waiting others eager to share their change with me. Whatever has brought us, individually, in pairs and groups, to this space of waiting, gripped by emergency, we are all in this together: waiting in this room to see what that emergency will bring.

Suddenly, I am much less alone.

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