

Janitor-Doctor

Category: Across Borders and Cultures
written by Anne Vinsel | March 2, 2017

I knew it wasn't a good idea to get sick on the Fourth of July weekend, but my body ignored that truism and gave me a raging case of MRSA, an antibiotic-resistant infection, on July 3. I made it through the ER all right, but when I got to the ward, the patient next to me was dying in a messy, noisy, prolonged way and so got all the attention.

Things got worse from there. I was moved onto the mixed medical-surgical service, and one of my bed's cords wasn't plugged in when they moved me; the call button was the function that was left unplugged. Furthermore, the hospital I was in had just shifted to all private rooms, with heavy doors that were kept firmly closed for patient privacy. My significant other was stuck in Seattle, chairing a conference he couldn't leave. And I have a partially paralyzed vocal cord and can't make myself heard across a table some days. So I had no way to summon help—which I realized I needed when my mattress got bloody.

In my addled, feverish state, the only thing I could think to do was try to make it to my room's bathroom, where the pull cord by the toilet might allow me to summon someone. I remember sitting on the toilet for a few minutes, bleeding into the bowl and crying (MRSA really hurts!); I'm not sure if I ever actually pulled the cord. And I remember Enrique coming in and finding me on the floor, halfway back to my bed. He'd been sneaking a cigarette in the stairwell next to my room and heard me crying.

Enrique was a janitor in this hospital, but he had been a physician in Colombia and had fled the country with no money when he annoyed some drug lords. He was working as a janitor to improve his English and save money for taking his U.S. boards. I didn't know this at the time, but the medical assistant filled me in later. The last thing I remember is somebody saying my blood pressure was 70 over something, and somebody else saying I was "circling the drain."

In the end, I was okay. I never saw Enrique again, however, as he was moved to another ward. I'm sorry he had to be a janitor. But I'm very grateful he was a janitor. We are shameless about immigrants, and that angers me.

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