

I Didn't Know

Category: Crying

written by Louis Verardo | April 2, 2017

In my second year of college as a premed, I signed up to be an emergency room volunteer at a municipal hospital located just off campus. It was 1969, and the neighborhood reflected the larger urban community, including both established residents and newly arrived immigrants.

I arrived for my first shift early on a Sunday morning, prepared to work hard for the next eight hours; the nursing staff quickly brought me up to speed on my duties. Within minutes of my brief orientation, a distraught woman was brought in by five big New York City cops. She had just lost her newborn child to what was then called crib death, and the burly officers were barely able to contain her as she wailed loudly and kept twisting out of their grasp. Too stunned to do anything but stare in amazement, I watched as the diminutive charge nurse gently guided her into one of the private rooms off the main ER area, motioning to several colleagues to come forward and help tend to the patient.

About an hour later, I was asked to stay with a woman being transferred to a nearby psychiatric facility. She sang, with a faint Caribbean accent, a recurring lyric about betrayal and revenge. When she got to a certain point, she would become agitated and grab my jacket. I would do my best to calm her down, she would back off, and the song would cycle through again. The staff from the other facility eventually came and took her, and I went back to the main ER room.

About 120 patients came through during the eight hours I worked there that day; we never stopped moving. At 3:00 pm, I left and returned to campus, struck as I walked along how serene everything appeared as I passed stately buildings and manicured grounds.

When I got to my dorm room, my roommate was there. He, too, was a premed and was already an experienced ER volunteer, at a hospital in Brooklyn. I sat on my bed and suddenly started crying, releasing the emotion of all I'd experienced that day. He let me cry. When I was finally able to say "I didn't know," he said in reply, "No one does. It's okay to cry here, so you can go back tomorrow. Now, let's go and eat."

Louis Verardo
Centerport, New York