

Hospital Happiness

There's a lot that can be said about hospitals, but not that they're not nice places to spend some time. I always love being in hospital. First you've to take off *all* your clothes, and put on a sort of butcher's apron, except that it's flimsy and blue, with the back left open to the four winds. Then you get into bed and stay there – unless bidden to do otherwise. It's a chance to have a proper rest and have everything done for you. What's not to like?

The nurses are so super-pleasant, most of them, that is. Of course they're all bossy, that's their job, but bossy in a good way. They're there to help you, just like the doctors, although they're a bit different, some of them at least, reserved and distant, "listening" with a sometimes unnerving scepticism to what you say in response to questions they lob at you from left-field, as if anything *you* might have to say about your own experiences is a farrago of pure fantasy mixed with overwrought emotions. And don't be surprised if you have to repeat what you've just said because it turns out they haven't been listening after all, but have been trying to work out what they think *you should have said*. For their part they say only what they think they have to, sometimes choosing their words with extreme circumspection as if formulating a presidential response to the threat of the imminent arrival of Russian nuclear missiles in Cuba, sometimes talking down to you as if you're some first-grader, but sometimes with a witticism and a winning smirk, like Cary Grant in *Bringing Up Baby*.

Actually you've only come in for a chest x-ray, or so you were told by your GP, perhaps a trick, or a bit of black humour on her part, however you shouldn't judge her too harshly. So it's actually something of a bonus to be kitted out like this and treated to what looks suspiciously like THE WORKS. First a nurse, in this case male, but none the worse for that, and a bit like Brad Pitt in *Thelma and Louise*, rolls up your sleeve, checks your BP and pulse, then thrusts a needle, "just a scratch", into your arm from which blood flows miraculously into a plastic tube filling various bottles which are labelled and dispatched. You'd forgotten you had this stuff, so it's reassuring to see it flow freely and sport such a dashing incarnadine brilliance. Then an ECG machine is wheeled in and rubber suckers attached to wires are stuck to your chest as if you were being subtly appraised by a sci-fi octopus.

Next door is the resuss room. You can hear that something is going on there. Commands are given in low-pitched voices but with a certain edgy insistence: "pink up that heart, let's get these fibrillations chunkier and back to a shockable rhythm ASAP".

Meanwhile back here, things are progressing in more relaxed style. A sweet young doctor, who bears more than a fleeting resemblance to the luminous Harriet Andersson in Bergman's *Summer with Monika*, wants a list of your current medications, your faithful friends as you like to think of them, which include a few fancy numbers such as tzsazipan, bentformin, torphium, skydamil, grandilopril, foxiphen and chlorfentoflair. Each is accorded a minimalistic nod of recognition, save gintonipex – you have to explain that it's new, used only in rather *special* cases, and you feel quietly proud of being one step ahead of the game at this point and able to do your bit for CPD (continuous professional development). Apparently the drug companies, inspired no doubt by Don Paterson's dictum that a poem's a mini-machine for remembering itself, employ prize-winning poets to coin glamorous and haunting names for their latest pharmacological confections, which just goes to show that poets have their uses after all.

It's off to the x-ray room, where you're pressed against a refreshingly cold metal frame and your chin and shoulders are brought into an aesthetically pleasing alignment before everyone else abruptly disappears. The whole room seems to emit a growl, and the charming radiographer returns and escorts you back to your room – regulations apparently, in case you should suddenly collapse, so reassuring to know this.

After a good hour in which you meditate briefly on this world of tears, this *lacrimae rerum*, but then remember your enormous good fortune in being in such a haven of hospitality, your reveries are interrupted by the nice doctor who tells you she has discussed your case with her consultant, whose authority is only enhanced by her absence, and noted that although your heart has some dodgy rhythms, they're already well-known and are, frankly, boring. Actually she doesn't use the words "dodgy" or "boring", but you know this is what she really means. Blood tests are "as expected" (sphinx-like formulation, that, don't you think?) and the chest x-ray is "unremarkable". Although you find the word "unremarkable" much more remarkable than she apparently does, you can't help feeling you've let her down badly by not presenting something more intriguing and challenging. The "good news" is you don't have anything serious at the moment (although things may look up in the future). What she doesn't mention is the bad news: you're being turfed out of this DEMI-PARADISE before you've had time to settle in properly and enjoy your comprehensive lack of autonomy, the extravagantly over-the-top room service and the wall-to-wall stereo of beautifully titrated professional sympathy.