

Surgery

Like fish on ice they laid flat and motionless on aluminum gurneys. The room was bone white. A single unadorned bulb glowed their tucked coarse sheets. Face up, with eyes closed against the white, or the pain, or the fear, the gathering ignored one another. When their eyes flutter open the view rivets into a shelf fastened three feet above their heads into a cement wall with angle iron. Oxygen masks peer over each fish hold. Two wrists receive the drip, drip, drip into their veins.

The patient in the corner began a second round of hiccupping with the same result as the first—increased frequency and strength, and then vomiting in an elliptical stainless steel container, and finally sobbing. One mustached middle-aged man with skin like chocolate moaned a one-note tedious melody.

In time, the room emptied except for one unclaimed patient. He perceived his future without anxiety. A mild sedative injected into his IV port didn't bring sleep, but bliss. Suddenly, the bed rolled with a start. He must have slept. A young nurse in dark blue scrubs and a white hair net whisked him into the operating room. Only one wall was scraped.

The relative sanctuary of the operating room was a relief from the pounding. Down the main hallway three workmen took turns with a heavy hammer and steel chisels to punish a section of concrete floor. At first, he thought it must be outside on the street. But a glimpse down the hall revealed the source. The crack of cement was unabated until 5:00, the scheduled surgery appointment.

In the operating room, an electric air-conditioner hung on the wall near the ceiling. It blasted cold. He was uncovered except for the backless green gown. He helped as he was lifted on to the table while holding together the meek covering of his back parts. A second nurse had joined the first and she wagged her finger at him, the ubiquitous sign for “no” and pointed. He understood immediately, take off the underwear. The briefs slid from his nakedness as he tried, without success, to cover-up with the useless gown.

They smiled. He smiled, sheepishly.

The swinging door banged open. A young man sprouting jokes for the enjoyment of the nurses pushed a grand machine next to the operating table. It appeared like sophisticated warp speed device from Star Trek. The jokester fiddled and fussed, plugged and unplugged, looked at the monitor, looked at the nurses and parleyed another joke. All was lost on the patient who a smidgeon of survival Spanish. Suddenly, the apparatus with a monitor on top was rolled out of the room. Maybe the surgery was canceled due to the machinations of the machine. It had been six-months from injury to this moment of healing. Not another delay?

No. The nurses asked him, in sign language, to hop on to the gurney and he was careened toward the second operating room and larger by two. And here was Groucho, doing his deadpan to the shameful giggles of nurse #1 and nurse #2. With agility of a vaudevillian, the plugging and unplugging, switching, adjusting, the entertainment continued to flow.

One of the gowned nurses gestured. He correctly guessed, “Roll over on your left side.” A group of firm hands with a lift and a push fulfilled the command. Here’s where

the bait-and-switch occurred. The sign language nurse flicked the air out of a full syringe. This is cake, he thought, I'm sporting the IV port the anesthetic will be a breeze. She tapped a few drips more and bent down to jab the rubber port; he felt a cold liquid swipe along his backbone. Oh crap. This surgery requires a regional anesthetic; the kind that a delivering woman receives with gratitude. He sweats. The numbing entered the body through a needle in his spine. The jolt was momentary and then his toes, feet, and finally his legs evaporated. Bliss returned. He was rolled on to his back; he couldn't possibly do that himself. He was legless.

Dr. del Gordo's magical face appeared. He and the unseen anesthesiologist had words together and both laughed. It must be a fund place to work. Paranoia steeped aside as another sedative dripped. Anesthetic. Who cares if they are bemused at his underwearless torso? He smiled like a drunk without stumbling, no legs. Then the nurses giggled politely, maybe four or five. A crowd. Who cares? He supposed his leg was raised and the foot placed on a steel foot brace that he had noticed when he helped lift himself on the table. It looked like a shoeshine step, only complicated. He attended to the monitor above the "machine." It seemed to be working but the picture revealed only albino whales attacked by a metallic shark. Dozens of white flakes floated from the whale. He raised his head for a closer look. The surgeon with two joysticks in his hands was likewise was gazing at the monitor and moving the sticks accordingly. Fascinating. These must be the camera and the thingy that scrapes, shaves, and cuts, could it stitch?

The surgeon quietly commanded, "Mr. please it good to you be down. It will hurt the anesthetic." Don't want that. The inflicted patient could barely notice the procedure if he tilted his head to the side. Now and then he'd sag and snooze.

The doc startled him conscious with an “Oh!” The sterile room hushed. The naked mackerel logically concluded the fun was over. Maybe a tendon was busted, or a cracked patella, but more than likely a sea of bone cancer. It seemed it was a secretive albino whale, missed by sonar. The event concluded with a warm smile, the doc leaned in with assurances. The patient smiled. H thought, why do does this man with whom I cannot talk about baseball or the fate of the world evoke such teary emotions—father or god-like, worthy of adoration, I wonder if he as a spare room. The euphoria wears off when the painkillers cease, or at the final office exam when all is healed and life lead away from scalpels, but for the moment, dependency.

Back on the gurney, a grind along the wall due to a miscalculated launch, he is returned to the hold of comatose fishes. The room was still. Out of the solitude, hiccups began and the inevitable. At least the concrete blasters were home for supper.