

The Respite Room

Paul Lamb

Roger had a paper cut but found they were out of bandages. He told himself to remind Kristen when she came in, but then he realized she wouldn't listen. Until Kristen made the discovery herself, his words would be no more than background noise. Since everything about the respite room was her business, though, sooner or later she would discover it herself and deal with it.

A paper cut was a mundane sort of injury. With all of the sickness and pain in the hospital, bodies broken through violence, lives blighted by a throw of the genetic dice, what was a paper cut? Hardly anything at all, but when you have a cut, you bandage it. Infection doesn't consider the magnitude of an injury. Only the opportunity. Even the slightest disregard can lead to affliction of the whole.

His shift had begun routinely. He was filing the new family's registration forms when he sliced his finger. They were Somali, he thought, and he guessed the parents didn't have much English because their son, who may have been eight or nine and was the smooth color of dark chocolate, filled out the papers laboriously in his unformed hand. The boy turned to his father as he wrote, asking questions in their language and receiving a word or two to write on the lines. The three stood before the reception desk, the parents clearly nervous and glancing around as the boy plodded through the forms. The father had to sign in two places, but he didn't read what he was signing, nor could he, Roger supposed. All of that documentation just so they could use the respite room. Yet the place was funded based on its census, and Roger wanted to be conscientious, so he made sure procedure was followed. Three more tick marks on the hourly log sheet.

Roger's job then was to show them around. He'd had a little training for dealing with guests who didn't speak English. Speak slowly and clearly. Gesture to whatever he was talking about. Repeat important words. Show how to use the TV remote. The microwave. Open the refrigerator and point to the food. There were a dozen fresh donuts in a box on the kitchen table. Show them where the cups and plates were. The napkins. Smile. Be patient. As Roger spoke, the boy translated for his parents, who nonetheless looked cautious and stood close together. Despite his training, Roger caught himself more than once speaking to the boy rather than the parents. A mistake. A type of rudeness, but he sensed that he made them nervous despite his best effort at being inoffensive and decided to finish the tour as quickly as he could. He invited them to sit on the couch before the television, then smiled a last time before retreating to his desk by the door to file their forms.

They had a child in NICU. From the name on the sheet he couldn't tell if the infant was a boy or a girl, but the child had been born only the day before, and Roger realized then that the mother had walked more slowly than the father, holding her stomach with one hand. A birth defect most likely. Underdeveloped lungs. A malformed heart. Any number of ailments and with a limited number of treatments,

The Respite Room

2

Paul Lamb

all with technical names that were a foreign language to wounded parents, regardless of their mother tongue.

From the next room came the murmur of the television. Good, he thought. Something besides the sound of beeping monitors and sucking respirators or the squeak of the nurses' shoes. It was a cartoon show. The boy was working the remote.

Roger had been home for several months, casting about for something to focus on, yet pausing while he gauged his strength, the reservoir of his commitment, and his need for rest before plunging in again. The food bank wanted him. So did a community center down in the barrio.

He wasn't sure, so for now, the respite room. A day of training and he had the job mastered. His people skills were hard won. His Spanish useful much of the time in the hospital. No one asked for details, but everyone seemed to know his general background and that he was back in the States because of some misfortune. He had credentials that the other staff couldn't touch, and he seemed like a good catch.

Make coffee. Make cookies. Make ice. Make lunches sometimes. Make the guests feel comfortable for an hour or two. There was a full kitchen in the respite suite. Also a large eating table. They had a storeroom packed with food and personal supplies, but Kristen kept it locked unless a guest specifically asked for something. These supplies were never to be offered to guests, he'd quickly found out. "They just take everything they can get," Kristen had said sharply. "They need to ask you for it first. Make them ask."

A television, a couch, and soft chairs waited for guests. Two bathrooms including one with a shower. A washer and dryer in the large closet at the end of the hall. A separate quiet room with a telephone. A large blue bin sat by Roger's small reception desk, ready to accept donations of food or grooming products. It was empty.

Roger stayed at his desk when he wasn't otherwise keeping house, not that much was needed. His work didn't require cleaning or cooking unless he chose to. He didn't have to entertain the families, and, in fact, the policy was to leave them alone to their grief and fatigue unless they approached him. Their business was not his business, and even if they chose to unburden themselves, he was not permitted to give counseling and certainly not medical advice. All he really had to do was be present, an official representative of the hospital so that the door to the respite room could stay open and guests could wander in if they wished. Beyond that, he had some small filing chores to do. He had to take an occasional walk through the rooms. He was expected to note any shortages of supplies, burned-out lights, dirty floors. He gave directions to different areas in the labyrinthine hospital or showed someone how to get an outside line on the phone. And then he would fade into the background. Overall, it was straightforward work, and except for the occasional paper cut, not at all hazardous.

The room itself, an escape for the teen mothers, the fretful grandparents, the confused siblings, did the real work. Sooner or later they all had to break away from their bedside vigils. The respite room was a kind of permission to seek their own personal recovery, to indulge in a quiet cup of coffee and a sandwich, or simply to steal a few minutes in a soft chair.

Paul Lamb

Already in his few months on duty, Roger had seen the extremes. A young woman who did nothing for two hours but stare out the window and cry. An Amish family that had never seen a washing machine. A grandfather whose need for respite happened to coincide with the length of a televised basketball game. Simple folk too meek to ask for anything and then overwhelmed with gratitude when he offered them lunch. Dazed wanderers who passed through but did not linger. A large family that prepared itself a generous meal and laughed all the way through it, then left without any effort at cleaning up, their pockets stuffed with all of the packaged food they could find. Bags of laundry dropped at his feet with hurried instructions. He had to explain to dismayed faces that they must do their own washing.

Yet each guest was in an extreme circumstance. His life intersected with theirs during their worst moments. He quickly understood that he couldn't empathize, that all he could really do was make the room available and see to it that some approximation of the rules was followed.

The Somali family hadn't moved from the couch in front of the television for nearly an hour. Their eyes forward in a solemn stare, their hands in their laps and their feet together as though they were trying to take up as little space as possible. Even the volume of the television was low, barely discernible from Roger's desk.

Only when a low rumble began to fill the room, growing louder until it rattled the lights, did the family look away from the television. The Life Flight helicopter was arriving, its landing pad outside on the rooftop, though sadly out of view from the windows where it might have provided some diversion.

The family settled back to the television once the rumbling had stopped. The helicopter's arrivals and departures had startled Roger when he had begun there. It recalled the helicopters that flew up from the valley and then low over his village. Twice a day for weeks, with no purpose beyond intimidation. Roger had heard the rumors of insurgents in the nearby rainforests though no one believed they'd come that far north. He didn't know, didn't care. He was there to build houses and teach English. Then some unknown catalyst triggered the escalation. Shots were fired. Whether from the village or from the helicopters he never learned. An all-night dash to the provincial capital. He was extracted with several others. Back home. Debriefings. Cautions. Concerns. He wound up at the respite room for the time being, doing what he could until he figured his next step.

"Slow afternoon, eh?"

Patrick Casey was beaming down at him like a cop on the beat, though not a real cop but a security guard for the hospital, and as far as Roger could determine, with no assigned beat other than to wander the halls. He always made a visit to the respite room when Roger was there, and likely when he wasn't. Easy enough work in his rumpled uniform; the man bore his menace solely in the canister of pepper spray on his belt. He was good for a bit of congenial conversation, then he'd be about his real reason for visiting.

"Quiet. Yes," said Roger. "Only one family right now. In there watching television." He looked in the other room and saw the father staring back at him, at the two of them, his head turned to an awkward angle. His eyes, inscrutable.

Paul Lamb

“Fine, fine,” said Casey. “I think I’ll just wander through then.” Which meant he passed behind the family on the couch and into the kitchen, where he poured himself a mug of coffee and turned his attention, at last, to the donuts.

From down the hall Roger could hear that the load of kitchen towels he had put in the washer was still turning. Later he might wash the sheer curtains hanging in the quiet room window, holding years of dust that had gone unnoticed until someone actually opened them and began sneezing. Or he might scrub the refrigerator and pitch the outdated food.

Roger rose from the desk and wandered into the television room. Casey stood in the kitchen, each hand filled as he gazed at the cartoon on the television. If he went in there, Casey would insist he join him in the donut feast, so Roger remained behind the couch where the family sat watching the show. The afternoon in the respite room was quiet, more quiet than normal when he might have a dozen or more people about calling for his attention. And that, thought Roger, would be preferable to killing time watching a cartoon.

The Somali man turned to his wife and whispered a few words. She responded but was cut short by sharper words from her husband. In the next moment the three rose from the couch and left the room, the father giving Roger an angry look. The television played on.

“Must not have liked the show,” chuckled Casey though a bite of donut. “Funny how these foreigners always watch the kiddie shows. I guess they’re all just simple people really. That’s why you don’t see any of us clamoring to get into their countries, you know.”

The silly music from the cartoon filled the air. Roger stepped around the couch and turned off the television but then turned to Casey. “I’m sorry. Were you watching that?”

“Not at all. Just finishing my coffee.” He turned the mug to his mouth a final time then placed it in the sink. “Can’t tarry.”

In another moment, Roger was alone in the respite room. When he was first teaching himself Spanish, he had started with children’s books, but there were no children’s books for the arcane language of the medical world. He began to think then that this would not be a long-term stop on his journey.

The afternoon grew more quiet as he stood in the empty room. He lingered for a moment beside the couch then decided to check on his laundry down the hall. The towels had finished their spin cycle, but as he transferred them to the dryer, some soapy water got into the cut on his finger and sent an instant of stinging pain up his hand. He had nearly been able to forget about the paper cut, but that hadn’t made it go away, and he wished again they had kept a better first aid kit. It was ironic, he thought, that an advanced, well-funded hospital would be short on such an essential item.

The afternoon passed. No other guests came in during his shift, though one of the PICU nurses stopped by looking for anyone from the Mendez family and didn’t seem to believe him when he told her they weren’t there.

Roger took the key from the desk drawer and went to the storeroom at the end of the hall. Inside, the shelves were lined with canned foods and boxed meals. Bags and bags of chips were balanced atop each other. There were cake mixes and

Paul Lamb

cereal boxes and eight varieties of salsa. Roger had to squeeze past cases of soda to enter. He collected several cans of green beans from the dozens on the shelf and a tube of toothpaste, and he grabbed a bag of chips before he left the storeroom. Back at the reception area, he placed the items carefully in the bottom of the blue bin.

Roger passed the rest of his shift folding the dried towels and staring out the window. He sucked on his cut finger and checked the guest cards for proper alphabetical order again. He found that the refrigerator was still in good order from his last shift, but he broke all of the ice trays and refilled them. He'd abandoned his idea for washing the curtains since there was so little time left in his shift. They would not be ready to re-hang before Kristen arrived, and she would object to his initiative in her respite room. Better to save it for the beginning of his next shift. He could have them washed, dried, and re-hung without her ever finding a reason to object.

"Here I am," called Kristen as she walked into the room. "What can you tell me?" She set her purse and canvas bag on the reception desk, pushing aside the towels Roger had folded. "Those shouldn't be here," she said with casual annoyance.

"Quiet afternoon. No guests for the last two hours. A family was in earlier. A few walk-ins this morning. Housekeeping has been through."

Kristen looked at the log and frowned. "Our census has been down this whole month." She turned from Roger and pushed a stray bit of hair behind her ear. Then she grabbed the log and added several check marks randomly through the hours of the day. "You are counting pregnant women as two like I said, aren't you?"

"Of course," he said, lifting the stack of folded towels from the desk. He turned to carry the towels to the closet. She let him take a few steps before speaking.

"There's been a complaint filed against you, Roger," Kristen said, shifting to her more imperious voice, the one Roger recognized when she needed to keep her staff at arm's length. During his first weeks in the respite room she used nothing but her imperious voice with him. Only recently had she become more cordial, and he took it that she considered him part of her team finally. Still, he knew that having a complaint filed against him was a boon for Kristen. It took him down a notch, made him more provisional, thereby raising her. "Do you want to tell me about the incident in here today?" she remonstrated.

"An incident?" The respite room had been so sparsely visited that there had been no chance of an incident: no breach of patient confidentiality, no fights or loud voices, no need to call security, no lack of hospitality. Not even spoiled milk in the refrigerator. "Nothing. There was hardly anyone here the whole day."

"Some man filed a complaint," she said, now in her exasperated voice. "Some foreigner. I can't even pronounce his name. Said you made him feel unwelcome. Said you stalked him out of the room." Kristen laughed. "I'll bet the translator had a wild time with his complaint."

"There was a Somali family in here earlier. They left a little abruptly." "Probably them." She fingered the log sheet. Her voice was more moderated now. "Good riddance. People come in here and think they can just help themselves to whatever they want like they're entitled to our largesse. Take. Take. Take. And they never say thank you. Have you noticed that? And then they dare to complain?" She snatched her purse and canvas bag. "You bend over backward to help people but

Paul Lamb

they don't ever appreciate it. Good riddance." She shoved her things in the large bottom drawer of the desk and turned the key to lock it. Then she slipped the key in her pocket.

They won't be back. And they wouldn't be welcome if they were. Don't worry about them. If they want to use our facility, they'll need to show a little more humility." She smiled at Roger. "You should consider hiring on here permanently. Become part of my team."

It was then that she noticed the few items in the blue bin. "Well marvel of marvels. It's good to see that some people understand the concept of giving!" Roger waited until he was certain she was finished. He still had the towels in his arms, and by putting them away, he could get away from her as well. He'd made his decision. His shift was over.