

Meal Trays

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I am walking faster than my legs are. I have lost feeling in my feet three hours ago. My mind is racing, I have been shooting from the hip, putting out spot fires and rallying for human rights every damned step I took. The wailing, the smells, the blood and the guts of it, the life and death of it and the despair of a hundred hearts living here. It was to be my last RN shift in a nursing home.

I had chosen to work casually here and saw it as a vocational hiatus or a clinical sojourn until I started my next permanent position. I did not realise that this job would slam me down, drain my blood and rip my throat out before I had time to check my fob watch. One RN in charge of 100 high care beds. I skated through the suffering and attempted the tasks of Schedule drug rounds, enemas, blood sugars, insulins, catheterising, colostomy bags, setting up oxygen therapy, pessaries, wound dressings; identifying anaphalaxis, urinary tract infections, pulmonary oedema, delirium, depression, dying; sorting out staff conflict, replacing staff, pharmacy orders, bowel charts, medication charts, incident reports; looking for lost shoes, walking sticks, mangoes, minds, the right hoist sling and tubigrip that will fit and a stethoscope that works. My aim is to heal, avoid injury and to keep the vibe calm and happy. The thought of being a "change agent" is long gone as I struggle to stay upright and to convey calm professionalism.

I collapse at the "Sister's" desk and start my long list of notes. I still flinch when I type in a resident's name and the ACFI payment comes up next to it. Say, Joe Bloggs – \$186.99/day. Not "Joey" who could fix anyone's lawn mower or who had sailed the Whitsundays or who had held his wife when they learned that their grandchildren had died in a house fire. Not even Joe Bloggs, CCF, COAD, NIDDM, Ca Prostate. Just \$186.99/day. Good to know.

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I have so many stories curling around the edges of my nursing notes. Mrs Trimmer telling me about her podiatrist husband, her coy smile and blush the same as her faded wedding photo from 70 years ago. And Beryl who weighs 200 kilos and can sing window cracking opera has a crush on her GP – “It is just chemistry” she shrugs, “he feels it too”. And the bickering about food and who has the most food on their tray. I distract the dining room by asking who do the women prefer – “George Clooney or Brad Pitt?” to break the tension. Mavis surprises me by yelling out “Tony Jones can park his slippers under my bed any day!” We all have a chuckle, but I am scanning to make sure people have food and are managing their meal.

Every night I fight for ice cream and respect. I fight for kindness and hot soup. I fight for a drink to accompany the meal and for the meal tray to be placed in front of the resident. I fight for enough food and enough compassion. The residents are human beings and this is their home is what I say out loud and to myself. The horror of the work load and the translation of that into care disturbs me more than I can bear to think about.

Jean waves me over in the dining room, she is distressed and whimpering and I know what she is going to say “where am I?”, “how long have I been here?”, “where is my mother?” We have this ritual and I crouch down near her and speak softly. She hangs on to my every word and I beam kindness. Jean becomes calm and smiles in time for her meal tray to arrive. It has hot soup, casserole, buttered bread, dessert, serviettes, salt and pepper and juice. The nurse places it next to Jean after helping her sit forward. My own eyes tear up and I hope I can make a difference. One meal tray at a time. I go on then to check the other dining rooms.