

HER FIRST SHIFT

She stood at the entrance of the hallway, poised to take the next step into a whole new world. She knew not what awaited her, but she made this choice, and the moment finally arrived. It was February 1982. She was young, naïve, awkward and painfully shy. People laughed when they heard of her chosen profession. They made fun of her. This was a time to prove them wrong, a time to knock out any self doubt, and pretend that everything was going to be all right.

She spent the evening getting ready, carefully laying out her neatly pressed uniform, brown shoes polished, and cap starched. An expanding feeling rose in her chest, as she anticipated the unknown, planning the day and obsessing over every detail, making sure that she was prepared. Today, she wore the uniform with pride, taking on its meaning with a desire to accomplish her goals. This was her first day, the start of a new career, the beginning of a new life.

Now, standing before the large open steel doors, she pulled her eyes away from the highly polished floors to catch a glimpse of the hallway that stretches beyond, cut into tiny squares by the thin wire in the window panels. She noted the scrapings in places where hundreds of trolleys may have bumped into them. Suddenly, a draft of air hit her face, warm with a tincture of bleach. Ahead of her lay magnolia walls, decorated with paintings and some photos of hospital staff.

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There was a fluttery empty feeling in the pit of her stomach as she faced the Chief Nurse. Lifting her chin to appear relaxed, she tried to focus on the list of instructions given to her. The office was painted grey, and had one window behind a large swivel chair. Sunlight pierced through the half shut blinds and created silhouettes against the grim furniture. A bookshelf, groaning under the weight of medical textbooks, stood in a corner, and a stack of paper lay under a paperweight, ready for attention. The woman in front of her clicked one fingernail on the table whilst glancing repeatedly at the clock. An authoritative glare masked her face. Mumbling under her breath whilst mangling a paperclip in her right hand, she signalled for the team leader to give further instructions.

She tried not to let the frenzied activities overwhelm her as she nervously made her way into the ward. She felt like a lamb taken into the slaughter, ready to be devoured by hungry vicious beasts. Her gaze scanned across the array of beds, aligned in single files, reaching out to the end of the corridor. Nurses were changing linen with expert precision, furiously tucking at corners and placing benches symmetrically under the beds. Patients lay on their beds watching on helplessly, with crisp thinning sheets encasing their frail bodies, surrounded by limp curtains hanging from rusty chrome rails.

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There lay a woman in a bed next to the window that appeared old beyond her natural lifespan, and she seemed to be paying the price for it. Next to her was a man with wispy hair, whose arms bore the brunt of pressure sores, pink with contact from the bed frame. She hears coughing in the distance, soon increasing in intensity, creating the illusion of a disjointed symphony orchestra. Some patients were hooked onto heart monitors; others had tubes peering out through wrinkled and folded skin. Litres of fluids were suspended from stands, blood pressure cuffs wrapped firmly around vulnerable arms. There was always a call for assistance, some readily answered, others waiting in line. Medications clicked in little disposal cups, while the nurses hurriedly administered them, squeaking their rubber soles against the polished floors as they moved between patients.

She could smell the cleaning agent as the nurse was removing the dressing. Trolleys were adorned with little silver containers, overflowing with an assortment of colourful liquids. The wafting stench of burnt skin immediately triggered a nauseous pit in the depths of her throat. She moved towards an open window, hoping to find relief from this overwhelmingly repulsive feeling.

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The junior intern lathered his hand with sanitiser before attempting to insert a cannula. Latex gloves were snapped on before the sharp end of the needle made its way into the dark walls of the bulging vein. She observed as the scarlet droplets of blood scattered unevenly over the white sheet, causing the patient to flinch. Sadness overwhelmed her, and she was upset that she could not provide a comforting word. She felt the pain too, blinking as she turned away.

Her momentary distraction was soon to be directed to the calling of her name. Finding the source, she was suddenly face to face with the form of a large burly nurse, whose face told the tale of a career long expired. Fearing the worst, she was assigned her first task, making a concerted effort to appear interested.

Suddenly she found herself being directed to the far end of the ward. The doors opened to a room filled with metal contraptions, lined clumsily on a rack on the wall, making its environment appear cold and imperceptive. The familiar yet characteristic stench of faeces and urine defiled the air, rendering it morally impossible to take in a breath. It then dawned on her that she stood in the pan room. A place where one is subject to humiliation, degraded to the point of exasperation. She felt a rising antipathy towards the nurse responsible for entrusting her with this hideous task, almost to the point of yelling out. But suddenly she gave in, and closed the door behind her.

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In the confines of the notorious pan room she found her refuge. A strange calmness fell upon her, as she contemplated her fate. Did she make the right decision? Was nursing her true calling? Slowly plucking up the courage to continue with the task at hand, she reflected on the events of the day.

Okay, there were moments that she was thankful for, such as the new intern allowing her to use his stethoscope to listen to a heartbeat; the kind Enrolled Nurse who took the time to teach her how to read the mercury line on a thermometer, and thank God for the lovely cleaning lady who saved her from embarrassment when she tried to warm a bedpan in the oven. She needed a game plan, a strategy for survival.

Walking out into the ward again, she felt the smirking glances of the senior nurses on her. She decided on a different approach, feeling an ounce of renewed determination welling up inside her chest. Her purpose reignited, she ignored the nasty voices that belittled and downgraded her. She noted the manner in which the seniors displaced their frustrations on the juniors, randomly providing them with meaningless mundane chores. One was not to speak or retaliate against authority. This was an era where one stood up when senior staff approached. The overpowering essence of hierarchy was definitely felt throughout the unit.

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She knew that she wanted to be different, to tell a new story, to bring about change. She would want nurses to be confident, future leaders, embracing the ethos of nursing. For now, she was just a junior, starting out with a thought in her head, and a vision for the future. Leaving the ward, she drew in a much deserved breath, confident that everything was going to be okay. She survived the first shift, and that was the most important task of the day.