

Jerry Hated Hospitals



Self-Portrait, Edvard Munch, 1919

Jerry hated hospitals, so it wasn't easy for me to see him in a hospital bed. His feet peeked sadly over the outer rim of the bed, horrible bright yellow one-size-fits-all hospital socks covering his swollen, mottled feet.

"This one can be aggressive. He can grab at you. Be careful with him."

It surprised me when I realized they were talking about Jerry. This was the same person who could not watch Holocaust movies

because they were "too sad." He insisted on spotting me when I used to climb onto counters to get a glass or a plate. His dementia had made him say strange things, but also at times be surprisingly lucid.

The hospital was called St. Joseph's, a Catholic hospital in Sandy Springs, Georgia with more than ten floors. As I understood it, the higher one went, the more serious the cases. Jerry was on the ninth floor. Each room had a sink and mirror, a small bathroom and a white board with the patient's name, emergency contact, and prescriptions written on it. The floor had two wings, with patient rooms fanning out from the nurse's station at the center of each wing.

Jerry always had great hearing and so when the nurses and doctors spoke to him in an artificially raised voice, he responded by speaking quietly but firmly.

An Indian female doctor asked the typical questions to assess his mental state.

"Where are you?" "When is your birthday?" etc. etc.

"But I want to know about you," he said. "Where are you from?"

She explained that she was from somewhere near Calcutta.

"And what about you, Mr. Hoff, where are you from?"

"I'm from Delhi," he said, his white face and American accent belying the statement.

"Oh yeah, do you get home often?"

"No, not enough," Jerry said with a straight face.

Being poked, prodded and even washed by total strangers wasn't easy for him, and yet he also seemed to handle this with humor, although his desire to escape never left.

They would not discharge him without some degree of mobility.

We waited anxiously each day for the physical therapist. He did better with male nurses, male doctors, and male physical therapists. The whining, high-pitched voice of the female physical therapist was a complete "fail." Jerry would not cooperate with her at all.

He rang the emergency bell incessantly and when the nurse's aide came in, he had no emergency.

"Yes, Mr. Hoff."

"Oh, I just wanted to see if you were still there," he said cheerfully.

"I'm still here, Mr. Hoff. Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm fine. It's good to see you again."

It must have been maddening for her, even if slightly amusing.

Sometimes you heard the most terrible sounds as soon as you stepped off the elevator, low agonizing moaning sounds or deep barking yells. Other times the floor was as still as could be, with only the tapping of the computer keyboard or some innocuous low chatter at the nurse's station at the center of the floor. You got used to the rhythms of the place: the energetic hustle of early morning when the doctors made their calls, the short sporadic bustles at meal times, followed by the more languid pick up of trays.

Nights were the worst. When my daughter and I first arrived, I promised to stay the night at the hospital, but my daughter objected, not wanting to sleep alone on her first night at my parents' Atlanta home. I split the difference, waking up at five in the morning to go stay in Jerry's room. The silence of the ninth floor when the elevator opened felt almost like a hand grabbing your throat. It was a violent, unpleasant stillness. When I opened the door to Jerry's room, he cocked one eye open.

"Nice of you to join me," he said.

I had to smile. He was letting me know he had not been fooled by mid-shift arrival. He had slept through none of it. Not long after that, he closed his eyes and nodded off, sleeping until ten or so in the morning.

It was a typical Jerry. He had a way of needling you if you failed to follow through on a promise, but he made his disappointment known through irony, and then once voiced, he would quickly forget the whole thing and move on.

The nurses threw around the names of various physical therapists, but the one that raised our hopes was Jason. Jason: It was a male name. Jerry might cooperate with Jason, and if Jerry complied, he might be deemed mobile enough to be discharged, and then he would stop ringing the emergency alarm, and he would not be grabbing at the nurses or otherwise be unruly, and we would be released back in time for Thanksgiving, with a big feast to celebrate his homecoming.

Jason might have been from Trinidad or some other Caribbean place. He had a steady, cheerful voice, and he seemed to like Jerry, asking at one point, "Does he always have a good sense of humor?"

"Yeah, pretty much," we all nodded.

Jason wrapped a thick white harness belt around Jerry's middle and tightened it up. He asked Jerry to lift himself up out of the wheelchair.

"He's strong," Jason said, impressed.

The harness belt reminded me of a horse bridle, and the way Jerry was joking I could tell he too was becoming more hopeful that his papers were coming.

Jason asked Jerry to stand and climb a few stairs. Jerry rose, his hospital gown flapping, his strong legs girding to pull

him up those stairs. Jason steadied him as 89-year-old Jerry motored up those stairs.

“Ok, Mr. Hoff, that looks good.”

Jerry’s legs continued moving.

“Okay, Mr. Hoff, you’re good.”

Where did he think he was going? He was fastened to Jason, but Jerry kept on motoring as if trying to escape the hospital through his flight upward.

He would be discharged the day after Thanksgiving, and, surprisingly, the nurses and nurse’s aides who warned each other that he was aggressive would see him off with big hugs and loud farewells. Over the week he had become the darling of the ninth floor. From their worst patient to their biggest jokester, he was graduating and going home, and they all said they would miss him, which surprised me most of all.