

Over the Summer

By Julia Hyman

Over the summer I met hundreds of people. I worked in a job that required no higher education, so I was overqualified, even just out of high school. We all have to start somewhere, and the first rung of my ladder was registering patients in the Emergency Department of a large teaching hospital in Boston.

My first day out of training, I met a family. I was sitting at the Walk-In Desk that was for walk-in patients and people looking for patients. A family of six had rushed through the double set of double doors requesting their mother. I had been warned about the woman in Room 2. I got the nurse who got the counselor who got them into a room designed for the purpose. Within two minutes one of the daughters, who looked to be my age, ran out of the room sobbing and screaming, “Not my mom; she was fine this morning; I saw her this morning.” She ran out of the double set of double doors repeating the mantra: “Not my mom; she was fine this morning...” The soundproof doors shut.

I met a man who walked as though his legs did not work, his face contorted in pain. He told the nurse sitting next to me that he had had an allergic reaction to the steroid shot he just got in his back, so he was in excruciating pain. He needed something to treat the pain. He walked out within the hour with a prescription. I met him again exactly one month and three days after; every month patient records are transferred to a separate system to conserve space. He walked in the double set of double doors as though his legs did not work, his face contorted in pain. He gave the same story. I knew from my father’s experience that his story was false since one can only receive shots once every three months. I asked the woman who trained me if I should tell the nurses; she told me it was not my place. He strolled out within the hour with a new prescription and a smirk.

I met other people with drug habits. I met people who told me their life story because no one else would listen. I met people who paid me no respect because I had no white coat. I met people who were different than anyone else I had met in my lifetime. I met more people with tattoos than I ever had met before. I met pregnant women who were younger than me; they terrified me. While my whole life was at my feet, their lives were already growing in their bellies. I met a man whose family brought him to the hospital because he was not dying quickly enough. I met a nice-looking girl who was raped. I met a man that weighed 487 pounds; they had to use a special scale and put him in a special bed. I met people who were so sick that they were incontinent; the smell made me sick. I met young children whose mothers mistreated them, so I printed out coloring book pages to keep them out of the way. I met a couple that had been in love for more years than either of my parents has been alive.

I met people who I knew through my parents but who did not know me. I would turn my nametag around so that the red, fire safety card showed instead of the name plate and introduce myself by first name as if nothing were different, and for them nothing was.

I met people who spoke only Spanish and were, thus, cut off from everyone who could help. The doctors would point with their own fingers to their own bodies and in elevated voices with thick American accents would say, “Dolor? Donde? Aqui?” They would move their fingers, “Aqui?” I sometimes tried to help translate when the translator was busy.

I met a woman who did not understand what the doctor, who had cut me off mid-sentence, was trying to say. The doctor spoke in English, did not bother to call the Spanish interpreter, which is against Standard Operating Procedure, asked for permission in English to do a procedure, and began. I barely understood the gist of what the doctor had said in English. The woman, who had skin as soft as my own grandmother’s and a face just a half shade darker, was scared. I did not have to be able to speak this woman’s language to understand her. “Por favor” she whimpered, but the doctor began sticking the tube down her nose anyway. The woman gagged as I did. She teared up as I did, and she was frightened as I was. The doctor promptly left for me to continue my job. She did not ask the woman if she had any questions, she did not make sure that the woman was okay, and she did not look back.

I met a man who had gotten out of prison the day before when he suddenly realized he had nowhere to go. He had no family, no friends, no house, and no medical care. He told me honestly that he needed a prescription for his allergy medication. He was one of the most respectful people I met.

I met a man who thought it would be funny to spray his foot with a high power hose to see what happened. I saw him with a two-inch hole through his foot so that his bones and tendons were visible.

I met a man who had a six-inch nail through his hand. He had been working in a construction site, his attention had wandered, and next he was in the hospital with four inches of metal showing through his hand while the other two inches were still imbedded. I met a lot more men from construction sites.

I met a heavysset woman who tried to convert me on the spot. She must have smelled that I was a member of The Tribe, or seen my last name, or sensed somehow that I was not a devout Christian. I told her that I would think about it.

I met a man from New York who, when I asked about his “Marital Status,” he asked if there were a box for “Partner.” He explained that he and his partner of thirteen years had come here to get married when this man started having chest pains. I saw him again the next day when he had not been discharged. They had to postpone wedding.

I met an ambulance driver who recognized me by my sneakers. He did not remember my face, but every time he saw my gray and orange Nikes he said, “Nice kicks. How’s it goin’?”

I met people who had been shot. I met people who were handcuffed to their beds. I met people who needed to be watched every single second, even in the bathroom.

I met too many well people who thought they were sick and too many sick people who had thought they were well. I met sick people who had been sick for a long time and newly sick people who will be sick for a long time.

I met a woman with liver spots who grabbed my wrist from her gurney and spoke to me in Portuguese. The ambulance driver said the woman had forgotten English two days ago. I knew she had a long journey ahead of her. When my grandmother started forgetting things, we made excuses. She was getting old. When she forgot who I was, we made fewer excuses. Then, she forgot her own children. After ten years, she still spends every day in prolonged purgatory, counting from one to nine, pausing, one to nine while playing modified dominoes

because the rules left her mind when I did; she released numbers past nine from her mind along with her children. Oh yes, I knew this woman had a long, lifeless time waiting for her.

I met a man thirty-eight times within my two-month job. His name is Nomar, he was seventy-two years old, I still have his Social Security number memorized, and I do not know if he is still alive. I barely had to look up from the Walk-In Desk to recognize his smell. Almost every day after work when I walked to the train station, I saw him on his corner talking to himself, scratching his scabies, asking for change. He was the most regular of the regulars.

Over the summer I met hundreds of people, none of whom will remember me, except maybe for Sandra. I met Sandra my first day, and she trained me. She had been there so long and worked so hard that she earned herself a scrubs jacket even without medical school. She had the gift of calm. During the ten to eleven am rush, she handled each patient efficiently and effectively while training me to scan the line that stretched through the double set of double doors for those urgently needing care like the one nearly comatose woman whose life Sandra saved. In my three-day training, she taught me her labeling method that assured each of the six pages of the triage packet was labeled with the patient's information in one minute flat, a skill only one other had mastered. When she saw me printing coloring pages, I came in the next day to coloring packets neatly stacked in boys and girls sections, each with a set of crayons. She treated everyone with respect even when none was due. If she remembers me, my summer will have been a success.

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