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Worst Shift

By Dana Reeher

The worst shift starts before you ever get to work, phone ringing, work calling to say you're late, and you realize you shut off your alarm instead of hitting snooze.

The worst shift starts when you arrive 30 minutes later without a cup of coffee. You realize your assignment includes the sickest patients on IV blood pressure meds and a patient in restraints who keeps trying to take his ventilator tubing out of his mouth.

Your worst shift ever includes trading away your patients to receive a brand-new one, ill with a virus untreatable by conventional methods. The patient is in isolation, so each time you enter the room, you must wear a paper gown, gloves, an N95 mask and a face shield.

You are trying to communicate with the patient's family but can't because they are Deaf, and you don't know sign language and the translator is too scared to come into the hospital and the translation device available doesn't include American Sign Language as an option. You finally communicate via written notes.

When you are trying to care for your patient, giving multiple blood pressure-sustaining medications and rotating the patient on their stomach to allow effective breathing, when you attempt to give a shift report bedside to the oncoming shift and when the patient's heart stops and they stop breathing and monitors alarm loudly, you start CPR, and the code team takes forever to enter—all extra PPE unavailable.

Your worst shift ends when your patient dies, despite your best attempts to save them.

Arriving home, two hours after your shift ended, and you realize you have a fever ... and are likely infected with the same virus. You worry, then sleep and then wake up, your coworkers staring down at you, now the patient, breathing in and out along with a ventilator in the ICU where you work; rolling from side to side, moving your arms and legs as if in a slow-motion dream, you suddenly sit straight-up in bed, coughing, gagging, gasping for air, beeping alarms, shouts of "Code Blue" echoing in your ears as darkness falls over your eyes.

Dana Reeher earned an MFA in Creative Writing at Carlow University in May 2022. She is a member of the Madwomen in the Attic writing workshops. She has a PhD in nursing and works as an adjunct professor while also working full-time as a nurse practitioner.

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