

A Surreal Soundscape

The familiar cacophony of rattling curtain rails signalled the arrival of yet another patient into the next cubicle. My flimsy plastic screen billowed slightly as the new incumbent was levered onto the bed. I checked my watch in the vain hope that time had accelerated and dawn was approaching. No such luck. The hour hand stubbornly refused to budge past three o'clock which meant that more than seven hours had elapsed since I was admitted to A&E.

Although I was in constant pain, my probable shoulder fracture didn't put me anywhere near the top of the treatment list in this incredibly frenetic emergency room. And from my enforced, invisible hearing post I had been vicariously privy to a disturbing catalogue of human suffering.

Suddenly the silence was lacerated by a visceral scream of agony. "Nurse, I can't pee...Help me for the love of God, I can't stand it." A brief silence then another howl, "Sweet Jesus, where are you nurse?" These desperately insistent cries continued for several minutes until a nurse's voice intervened. "Patrick, you must stop shouting, there's been an accident on the motorway and all the doctors are dealing with the casualties. I'll give you something for the pain." Unfortunately, the analgesic didn't do the trick and Patrick's tormented calls continued for another half an hour until he was wheeled off somewhere.

I'd already had to listen to three patients before Patrick. Joel, the boy with a knife wound was harrowing to listen to. The elderly man with dementia who had to be restrained by several nurses whilst he hurled obscene abuse at them set my teeth on edge. Then the deeply troubled young woman who had just had her stomach pumped after taking an overdose. She saw suicide as the only way to end her torment at the hands of her brutal, drunken mother. But it was Patrick's constant animalistic screaming that had utterly shredded my nerves.

The neighbouring cubicle was not empty for long. I could hear two men speaking very softly. "Jack, we've got to get our story straight." There was a panicky timbre to the man's voice. "Son, we need to tell the police that the guy who punched you outside the pub ran off and we didn't see him after that. Nobody saw us catch up with him. He went for you again and was on top of you on the floor when you pulled out that effing flick knife and stabbed him in the side."

“Dad, he was bloody throttling me. I nearly blacked out....I thought I was a goner.”

“It’s OK son. I threw the blade into the canal so nobody will find it...Let’s just play it cool when the cops question us.”

The curtain rails rattled again as someone else entered the cubicle. An authoritative voice said, “Gentlemen, I’m D S Bradshaw. I’m investigating a fatal stabbing in Cumberland Street earlier this evening.”

Just then a nurse yanked my curtain back and I saw the shock on their guilty faces.....