

# **The Grail of the County**

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It was the sight of the Franciscan friar that really stunned me. First his head and chest poked around the door of the Emergency Room: "A wheelchair here?" Nobody paid any attention. The rest of him appeared, in full Franciscan regalia -- long brown habit, rope belt, wide lappet, everything. A young man with a small neat black beard, he presented a sight I had not seen in 20 years of living in New York, the kind of thing I thought had gone out with my youth in Ireland 40 years before. I stared in disbelief, but nobody else seemed in the least bit fazed as he walked past my gurney mumbling about his chances of finding a wheelchair.

For this was King's County Emergency Room in Brooklyn where I had been brought at noon with pains that gave a very good imitation of a heart attack. The pains had subsided now and I just lay there watching with interest what went on around me. There was plenty to watch.

Enter two policemen, one white, one black, with a prisoner in handcuffs. The black policeman had a clear but unostentatious pride in his appearance. In his 40's, with well-clipped beard, slightly grizzled, he held himself with something of a military bearing but without excessive stiffness. When he took off his jacket, he folded it on his nightstick with an easy precision you had to admire. While his colleague went into the back somewhere with the paperwork, he stayed with the prisoner who was, it seemed, from the "Mental Health" part of the hospital — the G Building, I think they call it. At the prisoner's quiet request, the policeman released him from one cuff so that he could sit down on the plastic chair to which he mildly locked himself with the other cuff like a man accustomed to a routine. He seemed harmless enough, perhaps because he had been sedated. Sitting as he was directly opposite me as I lay on the examination bed, once or twice his eyes met mine — not hostile, I thought; not friendly either. I hoped he had really grappled himself to that chair with hoops of steel because the policeman didn't exactly stand over him all the time. I consoled myself that he probably knew his man and that there was no great chance that he would grab that all-too-accessible gun at the cop's side, and blast us all into a world where there were no heart attacks and no need of emergency rooms, jails or policemen.

Nothing happened.

The noise (mostly talk) and the human traffic in the place were extraordinary. Rather to my surprise, the room was almost over-staffed with young physicians, all of whom seemed competent and ready to do their job, so that people did not have to wait forever to be seen. In fact, at one point, the one who seemed to be in charge, a cheerful, tall goodlooking black man with precise speech, remarked ."There's something wrong here. More professionals than patients in this place." Later, noticing a lull in the noise level, he said cheerfully: "You can tell the doctors have gone." Indeed many physicians seemed to find this strange place a good spot to come and chat.

Anxious relatives added to the semi-chaos. They would come slipping or striding through the doorway. "Out. Please wait outside", somebody orders. They leave only to reappear a few minutes later by the other door.

A patient, looking sick as hell, sits on one of the chairs with everyone else who isn't on a gurney. Then he is on the bed next to mine and I don't pay much attention as the young female doctor talks to him behind the screen which gives minimal privacy. His lover (?) comes in to talk to him and goes and sits on the chair opposite the bed, handbag held primly on his knees. AIDS? Now I AM beginning to notice. My comfort is not increased as the two young physicians standing at the foot of my bed exchange a few words about his symptoms and lifestyle, and discuss the report in that morning's paper: "Did you see the bit about health care workers getting AIDS from contact with patients?" Neither of them seems unduly disturbed. I am duly disturbed.

Enter two more policemen, again one white and one black, and again with a prisoner, this time from the Department of Correction, and with leg chains as well as handcuffs. This young prisoner leaped with a practiced motion into a sitting position on the bed. Just before helping him off with his shirt, one cop took his own gun, shook it out so that the chamber fell loose, and handed it to his partner. Again this seemed like a practiced motion, and I speculated about the point of the exercise. What struck me most was the relationship among all three. It seemed amiable, even democratic, as they chatted about prisoners who had gotten away or tried to get away, chains or no chains. ."Did you hear about the guy at Rikers ....."?" This was going on at the other bed next to mine, and I was pleased to notice that the two cops never moved away from their charge more than a foot or two.

The whole place is much too small for the traffic it holds. The relative of one patient, who seems to know his way around, pursues a nurse's aide who has a wheelchair, and who seems very reluctant to part with it. A small, good looking woman in a nurse's uniform and with a quiet air of command comes in (the head nurse of the whole place?), surveys the scene calmly and remarks to the nurse in charge of the room: "It isn't nearly as busy as I'd been told." Clearly here was someone who had seen battlefields. She seemed not at all perturbed as she surveyed a cosmopolitan lot: nurses, patients, cleaning men, aides, visitors, seekers of wheelchairs; black, white, hispanic, oriental. There was also a notable diversity among the doctors: Carribean, Egyptian, American; with yarmulkas, without yarmulkas. The head nurse was a little sardonic as she remarked, apropos I don't know what, "English is getting to be the minority language in America," a view easily acquired in Brooklyn these days.

One partially dressed man kept insisting from his chair that he wanted his pants back: "I need a quarter. Have to make a phone call." His concern was not totally ignored in all the traffic, but they didn't organize a search party either. Eventually the precious trousers turned up under the pillow of the gurney where he had been lying earlier.

From behind the curtain around the bed next to me ,which now has a new occupant, I can hear only the voice of the young doctor, not the replies, rather like hearing only one end of a telephone conversation.

"Have you been sober at all lately that you can remember?"

Mmmm.

"Do you ever see things — spiders, things on the wall, elephants?" (Or Franciscan friars, I thought). "How much did you drink today? (It's about 1 in the afternoon). Uh-huh. Half a case of Budweiser. King size or regular? You're going to float .... !"

He's clearly a regular and they know him well. *Deus sit propitius huic potatori.*

Doctor to colleague: "Go and look at that guy down at the end. He thinks Richard Nixon's still president."

"Rios over there [a patient]; he's been here nearly 24 hours. No bed available."

There was a time when the hierarchy in hospitals was signaled by dress codes pretty strictly observed. No longer. Not at the County anyway. The one formal article of dress all the young male doctors had in common was a tie. "The last relic of auld dacency", as they used to say in Ireland. Female physicians, nurses and aides seemed to come dressed in the kind of variety that was personal and whimsical rather than ordained.

When finally (finally!) it came time to pull me out of there on the gurney, guess who got to pull this 180 pound man down the corridor to the ambulance that was to take him to Downstate Hospital? The small female doctor who had attended to him since he had come in:

"He's a heart patient. He has to be lifted into the ambulance," she says to the driver.

"You goin' to help me?" he asks, looking down at her.

I got into the ambulance somehow, mostly by my own efforts. It was rather cold, especially as I was wearing only one of those absurd and humiliating hospitals bibs. Fortunately, remembering the man and his lost pants, I had clung to my jacket and shirt, and now the young doctor draped the jacket over my chilled shoulders.

At the end of the short trip the ambulance driver did reluctantly condescend to go and get a wheelchair. No matter that the one he found had only one foot-rest. Guess who got to push me up the ramp in the rain? Not the ambulance driver.

"Why are **you** doing this?" I ask the young doctor.

"Who else is going to do it?" she answers simply. "Doctors get to do everything at the County."

When I left the hospital three days later someone else wheeled me out in semi-papal splendor in a chair with — of course — one foot-rest. To keep one humble in the

County of Kings.

Not to complain. The Friar is probably still questing after his wheelchair, for the wheelchair is the Grail of the County.