

Noise

by **Zach Reichert**

“Why’s it gotta be so loud?” the patient in Room 2 groaned. “I’m going crazy in here.”

A high-pitched alarm chirped beside his head, slicing through the room with each tone. He covered his ears.

I reached to mute the noise. “How’s that?” I asked.

He paused and looked around the room. Sounds echoed from every corner of the hospital, building to a volume that was impossible to ignore. He looked back at me, his eyes half-closed against the glare of the sun in the window.

“Still sucks,” he answered. “Any idea what it’s like trying to sleep with all this noise?”

I can’t speak on sleeping in hospitals, but I know enough about the noise to sympathize. I think of the alarms and monitors, the voices of nurses and doctors, the cries and moans of the injured and sick filling hospital rooms like smoke. Many patients get lost in this cloud of noise, left to cope with their illness in loud and crowded rooms.

Unlike my patient in Room 2, Gloria was accustomed to coping. At only twenty-one, she was already a hospital regular. She had her favorite rooms and meals: the seventh floor was best, where the rooms were brightest and the food was warm. She knew that she needed exactly two blankets and four pillows to rest comfortably.

“I’m telling you, man, I could write *Being a Patient for Dummies*. I’d strike it rich,” she told me.

We met during Gloria's second hospital admission of the month. Not a personal record, according to her. Not even the worst month in recent history. She looked at me and shrugged. "I've been sicker than this," she said.

Gloria was born with spina bifida, a defect in her spinal column that damaged the nerves feeding her entire lower body. She told me that, as a child, she often sat in her wheelchair at the park, watching her brothers race from tree to tree. They dodged leaves and branches, jumped over rocks and fences, and zig-zagged through rows of swings.

"I watched them, then looked at my own feet and wondered how it felt to move them. To feel the ground. I dreamed about it all the time." She glanced at her legs. "I even wanted to fall and scrape my knee, just to see how it felt."

Bladder control was another dream. Every few hours she catheterized herself to prevent her bladder from overflowing, and wore diapers, just in case. She had frequent urinary tract infections and took antibiotics like daily multivitamins. It made her feel dependent, old, abnormal. Either that, or "normal" meant fevers, chills, and nausea. It meant relying on others to help her bathe and living with greasy hair and dandruff when they couldn't. It meant days filled with shots, pills, IVs, and surgeries.

"I've seen some pretty old and sick people around, and I think, yep, I'm just like them. Fine in the morning, but in the ICU by night." She stopped, her jaw set, eyes still on mine. "But I'm not the only one here. Others have it worse."

There was her older cousin with Down syndrome and severe heart problems, a friend who was orphaned after a tragic accident, a hospital roommate who died in bed only ten feet away. And then, there was her father, who had spent the past twenty years downing plastic bottles of whiskey and vodka, who came home for a few days at a time before wandering off again, leaving her mom and two brothers alone for weeks.

“Maybe he lived with another family,” she thought, “one that was easy to care for.”

But this wasn't where it ended for Gloria. Her father was more than just a disheveled, absent alcoholic. He was aggressive and violent.

“When we were kids, we could almost feel it, my brothers and I,” Gloria said. “After he drank, his voice would get loud and he'd start walking and stumbling all over the place. He'd yell at Mom, and that's when we went to the other room. We had a piano in there that my older brother could play. He'd start playing and tell me to sing. I sang and cried and sang until Mom came back.”

“You sang?” I asked.

“It was all I could do,” she answered. “There was nothing else. It helped me get out of that house. Took me somewhere else until it was safe to come back. I did the same thing when I was bullied at school. I do it here, too.”

Gloria's eyes drifted away from mine. For the first time, the room was silent. She shifted in bed and began to fidget with a pair of headphones that rested on her legs. After a minute, she sniffed and took a deep breath.

“You know I learned to sing first, before I spoke. That's why it's so special. As a kid, I just couldn't put words together. My brain worked faster than my mouth. So, the speech therapist had me sing everything first.” She smiled down at the cords tangled between her fingers. “Now I'm at the community college studying music. I have to take the year off, though, because, well, you know.” She rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “I'll go back though. And someday I'll teach other people how to sing.”

Later on, after Gloria had left, as I walked from bed to bed seeing other patients, I heard something new. It began with what sounded like a faint, rhythmic tap of the foot, like a

marching band far in the distance. The sound grew louder as I moved closer. Voices rose, with notes pitched high and low. In a room near the end of the hall, a group of four swayed back and forth over an old lady's bed, singing spirituals like any other day in church. An old man tapped his foot and leaned on his cane for balance. The rest held hands and sang.

Nobody knows the trouble I've been through

Nobody knows my sorrow

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen

Glory hallelujah!

The music carried through the room and into the hall, where alarms kept ringing and patients kept moaning. Voices interrupted over the intercom. Phones rang nearby. The old lady's infusion pump clicked out of rhythm. I wondered if she noticed the chaos still filling the hospital as the choir sang from trouble to hallelujah—if she felt bothered at all as she took a breath, filled her tired lungs, and joined in song.

I pictured Gloria smiling at my question. "I doubt it," she'd tell me, and sing along.



Zach Reichert is currently a medical student in southern California. He plans to eventually practice Emergency Medicine as he continues writing fiction and non-fiction pieces rooted in his experience both in and out of the hospital.