

Room 3B

Room 3b was a room to be feared. If you went there you were dying. It was a place that prepared people for their forever journey. That doesn't mean people didn't escape room 3B, some did, like Shirley and Joan from Washington. Some escaped, returned and didn't escape again. Those were the hardest. The hope followed by the realization, this was the last room you would enter, the last bed you would sleep in, the final meals you would eat. It wasn't a fancy room, small and clean with two beds side by side, windows to the right of the second bed, the furthest into the room. There were two TVs and two bathrooms because people in room 3B couldn't be rushed if they had to relieve themselves. The nurses had special training. They saw death every day. They worked with death, comforted death, then made dinner, and helped little Johnny with his homework like that was the most important task they performed that day. They received counseling so they didn't go home everyday and jump into a bottle or write notes that started "I'm so sorry..." Nurses got two hundred dollars extra pay per week, enough to convince most to stay in the job. When someone left room 3B, their bed was empty just long enough to be changed, then the next customer arrived preparing for death. Nobody planned for the future in room 3B. Nobody thought "I must remember to watch that episode next week" as they turned off the TV. Next week was forever away.

Emer and John - February

John had enjoyed a fair innings by his own admission. He was almost seventy-nine years old.

"Three more weeks and I will achieve the average life expectancy for a US citizen," he said aloud. It was a goal, something to strive for. At each day's end he marked a notch on his bedpost. One day closer. He was married, but his wife died three years earlier. He loved her dearly. He had a son and daughter both of whom visited every day. He enjoyed their visits. They were full of laughter and

memories, more laughter than room 3B was used to. On occasions his daughter brought her children, but not always. They had things to do and visiting room 3b was not how John wanted to be remembered. He preferred they remember days on the beach flying kites or walking through the zoo on his shoulders, proper grandfather stuff. John's bed was closest to the door, furthest from the window. He didn't need a view. That could be for someone else. He had enough good memories to reflect on. He didn't require a view to get through the day. John seemed happy, although he wouldn't have minded a few more years. You always do. But he accepted his time had come, and he wanted to make that average, 78.94 years old. The average life expectancy for a US citizen.

The day he arrived the man in the other bed died. "Not the best introduction to the death chamber," John told his nurse.

"We don't talk like that here John," and he decided to be more upbeat for his final days on Earth. He had nothing to lose. Two hours after the man had been cleaned away, Emer arrived.

Emer was eighteen and fighting her disease for the fourth time. Her T-shirt said she was "brave as shit," but she was losing. It wasn't her choice to lose but she was exhausted fighting and wasn't sure what she was fighting for. A couple of years feeling ok, dragging an oxygen tank everywhere, then back into hospital to fight for the next remission. Emer was at peace with losing the battle. You had to at some point; you couldn't keep winning. She looked at her family and knew her passing would be a happy release for them. They would grieve, never accept what had happened to their only daughter, but they too needed to be released. They had lived every day of this illness and it showed. Her parents looked sixty, not forty. She knew she was too young to die, but she had been sick forever never attending normal school or allowing herself to dream of life free from her disease. Dreams were a torment for someone who lived remission to remission.

That first night everyone visited. John's son and daughter, a mistake they claimed, but John knew they enjoyed visiting as a team, and Emer's mother, father, and younger brother. Everyone was introduced before Emer's mother drew the curtain between the beds "to give them their privacy." John's son brought a video of his daughter dancing at school. It was hilarious and he laughed loudly. He wasn't sad he hadn't been there, just happy to see it. The video set the mood, and John very much enjoyed the evening. When it was time to leave his children joined John in marking the bedpost to signify the passing of another day. One day closer to making it to the average life expectancy for an American citizen.

On Emer's side it was quieter. They talked about doctors, tests, and results, understanding technical terms better than a person should. Sentences were started, then stopped as one or other of her parents remembered her brother was present or was reminded by the other's quick eye movement in his direction. Sometimes conversation stopped mid-sentence as the large guffaws from John's side of the curtain filled the room.

"How can they laugh?" her mother said breaking into tears. "This is so unfair. She hasn't lived." Emer's mother left the room weeping, her brother following to console her. Her father remained.

"It's harder this time, love. It's gotten worse faster. We had high hopes after your last victory. We're just not ready. We love you so much and we're not prepared for what may come." She listened to his words, said some stuff, consoled him. She played the role of the giver of hope. The fighter who wants to fight one more round. They were right though, on paper this was a desperately sad situation. But why didn't she feel sad? Why didn't she feel despair? In truth she felt like opening the curtain between the beds and laughing out loud like John and his children.

Later when everyone had left, their nurse pulled back the curtain. John and Emer talked, telling each other their story. John injected humor into the conversation and told Emer of his desire to make it to

the average age of 78.94 years. She asked him why such a specific target, and he told her that he had always considered himself to be above average, and wanted to prove it one more time before he died. They both laughed. The nurses outside the room sat at their workstations listening. They too needed a laugh. Emer told John her story and he was genuinely sad. She knew she was going to die, she accepted it, an eighteen-year-old who was prepared to die. John was impressed with her bravery.

The next evening played out the same, laughter and merriment from John's side of the room, sadness and grief from Emer's. At one point John's daughter apologized for the noise level promising to keep it down. The last ten minutes of Emer's visit was spent in silence listening to the sounds from John's side. Emer's mother had not visited that second evening. Her father said she ill but would be there tomorrow. Emer said she understood. When he was leaving, he leant down and kissed her on the cheek. She reached up and pulled him close giving him a hug. He tried to hold back the tears. He was supposed to be the strength in this fight, the one to say "keep fighting, we will beat this together," but he was crumbling. Emer knew he would break down completely when he departed. Before they left, John's family celebrated another day by marking the bedpost.

When the room was quiet, Emer called out to John.

"John, why is everyone sad that I am dying but not that you are?" John heard the question. He didn't answer immediately. "John, are you awake? Did you hear me?"

"Yes. I heard you, Emer. It's a tough question, I'm gathering my thoughts." He sat up in his bed.

"I don't think people are not sad that I am dying. They are sad, but mine is not a life that is being cut short before it's prime. I have lived a long time Emer, been married, had children, enjoyed a career and retirement. I've had experiences, both good and bad, made friends, and enemies. My character has been formed, and I will not change. There is no 'what will he be like when he gets older?' I am the 'older'

people spoke of. I am who I am because of the life I have lived. People know who John is, and they are choosing to celebrate the life I have lived and person I am.” He reached for a glass of water, and took a long swallow.

“So the reason that people are sad is because I am young?”

He smiled at her. “Mostly. In many people’s eyes, you are the opposite to me. If you die young, people will not see the person you will become, the life you will lead or enjoy your accomplishments. There is so little life to celebrate. You are just entering adulthood, when life really takes off. That opportunity is being taken from you. People are grieving for that lost opportunity.” Emer turned to look at him.

“Is it just that, the lost opportunities?” she asked.

“Yes and no.”

“What’s the no?”

“The no is that they will miss having you around. Thanksgiving dinner will be one seat less. Your dad won’t teach you to drive. There will be no ‘Emer’ in Emer’s room. There is loss of the person, the physical presence, the chatter, even the needs your illness brought. A vacuum will exist which is hard to fill. You’ve been a central part of your family for eighteen years. It will take time to recover when you are gone, but they will never forget you.” John sat up in bed now.

“Emer, you’ve got to remember that the only person who understands what you are going through, preparing to die young, is someone who has been through or is going through that experience. Your mother doesn’t understand. She had a first job. She was walked down the aisle by her father. She held her child in her arms for the first time. She wants that for you. You have never experienced those things, so it’s hard for you to imagine what they feel like, it’s hard to mourn that they will not happen. She is mourning for the loss of you and your future. She loses both. We see the future as next week.” John had talked for longer than he could remember, but he had one more thing to say.

“Emer, your parents love you more than anyone can say. I know because I am a father. I know what it means to love a child so much it hurts. Your parents love you so much it hurts. That love will remain forever no matter what happens.” Emer smiled to herself.

“Thank you, John” she said before slipping into sleep. John remained awake for several minutes before drifting into his own happy dreams.

John died ten days later. At his request the nursing staff gathered around his bed and gave a round of applause as his body was taken from the room. His bedpost was filled with notches, but he did not reach the average life expectancy of the US citizen. Emer died two days later. Neither did she.

July — Kim and Lilly

Kim had been a nurse for a long time, too long she often said. She’d seen her share of happy and sad endings although it seemed to be only sad endings since she had transferred to room 3B. She worked the night shift, which was fine by her. Her kids were older and gone. Her relationship with her husband had soured recently. She realized she was avoiding the inevitable ending to their marriage, but she wasn’t ready for that, so she hid from him at nights comforting people before they died. It was mostly cancer patients, sometimes AIDS, although none so far this year. She hated cancer. She hated the sight of it, the smell of it. She hated how it destroyed people, how it destroyed families. She rarely got to experience the victories, the wins, the “Fuck you, cancer” moments that other nurses sometimes enjoyed. She cleaned out the smell of death, so the next patient didn’t flinch. She got to roar, “Next please!” Well at least it felt that

way. Why do patients always die at night, she wondered. There were perks. The pay was good, and she slept all day. She developed a system to help her get through her shift, “a coping mechanism” the counselor called it. She never learned the patients names, not once. They were either patient A or patient B to her, no intimacy. “No intimacy, no feelings of loss,” and so far it was working. Patient B had just died. “Next please.”

Lilly was the opposite to Kim. She was young and enthusiastic. Nursing was her calling. Her mother and older sister were nurses, and she jumped into the profession with vigor. She volunteered for room 3B to make a difference. She didn't care about the money; she hardly noticed it. She cared about the care, about being the best carer possible. Often she would stay after shift end if a patient was going through a tough time or someone was running late. She didn't mind. She called all of the patients by name asking if they preferred to be called by their first names, last names, or a pet name they liked. She worried about the families who watched their loved ones struggle and, in the vast majority of instances, lose their fight. Nobody had survived since she'd joined the nursing staff. She liked her colleague Kim. They worked well together. Kim was functional, wrote and filed reports, administered medications etc., which allowed Lilly spend more time with her patients ensuring they were comfortable and had everything they needed to get through another difficult day. They were a good team.

September was a tough month in room 3B. Patient B or Anne, was a young mother with two toddlers. Anne was dying of breast cancer. Both Kim and Lilly were affected by it, you could see. Still Kim managed to stay all business.

“B needs a bedpan change.” “Time to change the saline drip on B,” but you could tell that Anne's situation was affecting her.

Lilly didn't hide her emotions. She spent several hours each night with Anne, talking to her, encouraging her, listening to her stories, giving sponge baths, whatever Anne needed to get through the next hour. It drained her. By the end of her shift, she was exhausted. At home, she would call the hospital to ask how Anne was doing. The hardest part of their shift was at the beginning just after she came on duty when Anne's husband brought the children to play with their mom. They were too young to understand what was happening playing happily on the floor or bed, the sounds of their industry in stark contrast to the sounds of the machines monitoring their mother's every function. Lilly visited the pediatric ward and borrowed toys so they would have something new to play with each day. Anne's husband was destroyed with their situation. It was all he could do to not break down in front of her. Kim brought tea because she did functional, Lilly talked with him before and after his visits to help him through the emotional turmoil.

Anne finally passed away near the end of the month. The room fell quiet. There were no sounds of play. No calls to mammy. No tears and cries to have a toy returned. The nurses felt it. Silence fell across them. Kim found Lilly crying in the bathroom the day after.

"This job is so tough," she told Kim. "So hard to accept the young deaths. When I meet God I will punch his face. She was way too young to be taken." Kim knew better than to get into a long conversation. In her mind Patient B had passed, a bed was free. "Next please!" Lilly looked at her.

"I can't do a young person again. Please let it be some miserable old fart in his eighties who has lived a full life and has family who can't visit. Please not another Anne." But that is not the way the world works. September was a month for dying young.

"Patient B. Young father, pancreatic cancer, two weeks to live. Wife, three kids," Kim announced.

"What's his name?" Lilly asked.

“Paul Franks.”

Lilly pulled herself together, straightened her hair, and opened the door to the room.

“Good evening, Mr. Franks, or do you prefer Paul? My name is Lilly, and I am one half of your nighttime team. We’re going to get to know each other very well.” Kim marveled at her.

One evening two weeks later Kim was particularly quiet, so much so that Lilly noticed.

“Everything ok?” she asked.

“Of course, why wouldn’t it be?”

“You seem quiet, that’s all.” But Kim wasn’t ok and Lilly knew it. Later on she asked again.

“Kim, I know you, what’s up?” Kim didn’t answer, just beckoned for Lilly to follow her to the bathroom. When she got there, Kim was already taking off her top and unclipping her bra. Lilly was a little taken back.

“What’s going on?” Kim took Lilly’s hand and placed it on her left breast just underneath her nipple.

“Does that feel like a lump to you?” she asked anxiously. Lilly moved her fingers carefully around her friend’s breast and felt it. Kim knew the answer by the look on Lilly’s face.

“Oh dear God,” she said and they both started to cry.

November — Rita and Sally

Both Thanksgiving and Christmas visit room 3B like any other room in the hospital. Patients get a lift from the holidays. They look forward to the food, presents and family visits understanding that it’s likely to be their last holiday celebration. By mid-November the beds were occupied by two fifty-four-year-old women, Rita and Sally.

Rita was one of the happiest people ever to stay in room 3B.

“I may be young, but I have lived a rich life,” she announced to the staff. And she had. Rita had visited fifty-five countries, run with the bulls in Pamplona, climbed to Base Camp 2 on Mount Everest and hiked in both Tibet and Nepal. She had been scuba diving in Australia, cheered Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and received the Pope’s blessing at the Vatican. She even skied on glaciers and surfed Mavericks. Out of season, of course, but it still counted. All the while Rita was running her own business selling jewelry she designed and, for the most part, made. She did more of course, “but I can’t be expected to remember every detail of my adventurous life,” she proclaimed waving her hand in the air dramatically before breaking into laughter for the tenth time that day. Rita had lived a life, that was for sure.

Sally was angry, very angry. She arrived in room 3B pissed off at everything. The world, her husband, her kids, her boss, God, everyone and everything. Rita was taken back by the anger. She didn’t say anything at first, but soon there was an edge in the room, and Rita wasn’t about to spend her final days on Earth tiptoeing around someone’s bad moods. She had learned if there was a problem, air it out, discuss and resolve it so that everyone can move forward. Rita looked at Sally.

“Is everything ok?” she asked. “Besides, of course, the obvious.”

Sally quickly responded. “Fuck off.”

Wow, thought Rita, fuck off. Interesting first words to share. “Why?” she replied.

Sally was a little surprised to receive a reply.

“Why?” she asked.

“Yes, why?” Rita responded. “Why do you want me to fuck off?” Silence. Ok, thought Rita, let her be for a while. She picked up her book and started to read. Five minutes later Sally spoke,

“Because of this. All of this is so unfair. I want you, the world, and everyone in it to fuck off because all of this is so unfair.” Sally started to sob. Her nurse heard and opened the door, but Rita raised her hand to stop her motioning for her to leave. The nurse looked uncertain, but Rita’s determined look sent her back to her workstation.

“Illness is always unfair, Sally. It’s unfair for both of us. It was unfair for the people in this room last week, and it will be unfair for the people in this room next year. Life and illness are unfair.” Sally looked over at her.

“But it is unfair for this to happen to me. I have lived an honest and hardworking life.”

“Sally, for the most part we all have.”

“You don’t understand, I have done nothing with my life in anticipation of retiring next year.” The sobbing stopped and she wiped her nose.

“I have never traveled. Not once beyond the borders of my state. I worked all of the overtime I could to pay for my kid’s schooling. I’ve have always wanted to race, but never owned a car. I rode the bus everywhere. I never ate out, wore a new dress or danced in new shoes. I have never been on a plane, let alone jumped from one. My name is Sally and ‘I have never,’ that’s me, the never girl. Look up the definition of ‘unfulfilled’ in the dictionary and it will simply say my name.” She paused and looked at her roommate.

“And it isn’t supposed to be like this. I scrimped and saved, and denied myself for years. I wrote lists of things to do when I retired and getting cancer was not included, but if it were, it would be the only item on the list with a tick. I had seven months to retirement, so I’m sorry if I’m angry now that I have a few weeks to live and will die a never woman.” With that Sally turned on her side facing away from Rita, and soon she was asleep.

“Wow,” thought Rita. “Wow,” but she knew what to do. She talked to her nurse, retrieved her cell phone from the bedside locker and talked some more. When you start a conversation with the words, “I need to help a friend who has only two weeks to live,” you can get pretty much anything you ask for.

When Sally woke the next morning, Rita was waiting.

“Don’t you ever sleep?” Sally asked.

“Only on the weekends,” Rita replied. “Anyway, this is a special day. We don’t know how many we have left, so let’s not waste any of them. I declare today ‘Sally’s day.’ ” The door opened, and two waiters walked in pushing what looked to Sally like an omelet station. A third entered pushing a table set for two. After rolling it between their beds he poured two mimosas.

“Madam,” he said and served a shocked Sally. Just as the omelet station was fired up, the door opened again and that cute chef from the TV walked in.

“Good morning, ladies. What will we be having in our omelets this morning? I’m hope no one is watching their figures.” Sally couldn’t believe what was happening, the day nurses gathered outside enjoying the spectacle. Sally enjoyed an amazing breakfast before taking pictures with the chef to show her husband.

“He will never believe me,” she told Rita. “That was awesome! Thank you so much, I needed that.”

Rita looked at Sally, “I hope you don’t think that was it. I didn’t say that this is ‘Sally’s breakfast.’ I said that this is ‘Sally’s day.’ ” With that the door opened once more, and a woman entered carrying several clothing bags. A second followed carrying boxes of shoes. It took a little time and some help and concessions from the nursing staff, but soon Sally was dressed in a brand new outfit, dress, pearl necklace, and shoes. She was beaming.

“I hope you don’t think that we are finished here,” Rita said. “No, no, no! A woman cannot go dancing in her new shoes without makeup.” Almost on cue, the door opened again and a man entered carrying a large makeup case. It took some ingenuity to work around the tubes and wires, but before long he had Sally sparkling. By the time she was done, the dance instructor had arrived.

“I believe somebody here has never danced in new shoes,” he proclaimed. He turned to Sally, offered his hand, and asked her for the first dance. And thus the day continued. They stopped for a long nap in the early afternoon and started again with an amazing late lunch of oysters and lobster. The pick of the afternoon’s activities was a wheelchair race around the hospital floor. The nurses decorated two wheelchairs to look like race cars and gave them names. One nurse made a checkered flag and waved it enthusiastically. It seemed the nurses needed today as much as Sally. A doctor stepped off the elevator just as Sally whizzed by throwing his charts in the air in shock, but he wasn’t angry. Five minutes later he was in one of the chairs racing against a nurse he liked for far too long. She, of course, knew and was giving him a deadline of the end of the month to say something or she would ask him out herself.

By the end of the day Sally was exhausted but exhilarated.

“What a day! How do we top that?” she asked.

“We will see,” replied Rita. But they didn’t. Sally died early the next morning, but at least she had one “Sally’s day.” Rita was saddened, but she knew where she was, a place where futures were measured in days and not years. Rita said goodbye to three more roommates, and then eventually to the nursing staff. Rita was the one. Rita was the one who made working in room 3B worthwhile. Somehow her strength improved enough to receive an experimental treatment which she responded amazingly well to. She was moved out of room 3B back into the regular hospital. As she left she was given the type of applause and cheers that are reserved only for the living.

Three Months Later

Rita rose early. It was a special day. She hadn't wasted a moment since she her release from hospital, and today was another first. She woke her husband to tell him she would leaving in thirty minutes. He jumped out of bed and made Rita a nice breakfast before she left. Rita's appetite had improved since her return home, and she had gained some of the weight she lost when she was sick. She kissed her husband goodbye. He wished her good luck and asked that she call him after the jump. When she got to the airfield, she met her instructor and her tandem jumping coach and told them her story. They were excited to be part of her first jump. Rita wasn't nervous as the plane pulled away from the ground. She wasn't even nervous as she stood on the threshold and looked down at the ground so many feet below. She was laughing with excitement, and feeling alive. The wind rushed past her cheeks, and she screamed with joy as they lunged into the open sky and hurtled towards the ground. She knew what to do and when to do it. She loved the speed, the wind, the tiny scene below her, and the big puffed-up clouds above her. This would not be her last jump. Her tandem coach pulled the ripcord, they slowed, and floated downwards towards the safety of the ground. Rita looked back at him. He gave her the thumbs up she'd been waiting for. Reaching inside her jumpsuit she pulled out a small packet that contained some of Sally's ashes. She opened the packet and released the contents into the wind watching them as they drifted away.

"Flying in a plane, check. Parachute jump, check," she said. "We're getting through your retirement list, Sally," she thought preparing her feet for landing.