

Baptism

It was summer and she was young, although that's not an explanation. She and her high school girlfriends were walking down the main drag on a Saturday night, looking for something to boast about next week. The sidewalks were crowded with teenagers and tourists like they always are on the weekend in lakeside resort towns. He was older, with no job, no responsibilities, and no thought of tomorrow. He was astride his motorcycle with a group of buddies in front of a liquor store.

"How 'bout a ride?"

I never found out whether she asked him or he asked her. Somehow I think it would be even more tragic if she asked him. Bystanders heard it both ways, so I guess we'll never know. I do know that she didn't know him before that chance meeting. Regardless, he gave her a ride, and the motorcycle reached a mile a minute before they slammed into the guardrail and flew over the river side of the dam. The dam curved sharply in the middle. I think he knew the dam curved sharply in the middle, but I don't think he knew that he couldn't make the curve at that speed. He died immediately. She was hauled back up onto the dam in a basket. I remember the dry explanation of one of the experienced firemen when I remarked how difficult it was for a team of men to pull her up:

"That's because it's dead weight."

It was my first night on the country ambulance as an emergency medical technician. The summer before I had spent weekend nights like the rest of the teenagers and tourists who by now had become a large crowd of spectators. After she was placed in the ambulance, the paramedic and one of the firemen attended to her more severe injuries. I was instructed to control the bleeding coming from her scalp. The blood had matted down the hair on her forehead and was running off her head onto the linens. She was awake at that time, and crying. More sobbing than actually crying. I knelt on the floor at the head of the gurney and before I finished dressing her wound the ambulance had already started moving. When I looked up, I saw that she was naked. The paramedic had cut away her clothes and was placing splints on her legs. I was surprised to see so little external evidence of trauma. Besides a few scratches, she really appeared to be bleeding only from her scalp. She soon lost consciousness because unfortunately the real damage you couldn't see or, more importantly, minimize. I watched in disbelief as her pubic hair gradually disappeared beyond the horizon of her slowly expanding abdomen as it swelled from internal injuries. The ride to the emergency department was a blur to me. She never woke up.

It was summer and she was old, although that's not an explanation. She was a long-time resident in a comfortably anonymous nursing home like the ones everywhere. It was 7 AM and my first day with the label of "nurse's aide." My only training in nursing was the trauma care I had learned the summer before. I reported to the unit nurse, who apparently took this job after a long career in the military.

"Give Mrs Fairbanks a bath."

The shock must have shown on my face because the glee certainly shone on the nurse's. She quickly moved on to her other duties, apparently assuming I required no further instructions. I didn't know how to protest, although I'd never given anyone a bath before, let alone an elderly disabled woman. Mrs Fairbanks had just finished breakfast and had some scrambled eggs still nestled in her suprasternal notch. She didn't weigh much,

so I simply lifted her up like a child, placed her in a wheelchair, took her to the bathroom, and lifted her onto the shower chair. Mercifully, she was wearing only a long nightshirt and was surprisingly easy to undress. The bathtub included one of those shower nozzles at the end of a long hose. I turned on the water and sprayed her off at arm's length with no particular target or objective. That seemed like enough so I reached for the towel.

"Ain't you gonna use soap?"

Reluctantly, I put some soap on a washcloth and scrubbed her back and shoulders in big impersonal circles while spraying the hose with the other hand much like you would wash the hood of a car. Then I stood at the edge of the tub and held the spray over her head for several minutes to rinse her off. Her face was wrinkled and shriveled and so presumably was her brain, but the rest of her skin and body was smooth and firm and unblemished. They were lining up other patients in the hallway who needed baths. I quickly finished the rinse, patted Mrs Fairbanks' back with a towel, and ruffled her hair; the rest would air dry.

It was summer and he was black, although that's not an explanation. He had been drinking in a local tavern, then got into a fight, then got into the morgue. He was handsome with an athletic build and not a scratch on him beyond the bullet hole in the side of his head. It was my first visit to the city morgue, too. There was a soothing stream of water gurgling down from the head of the autopsy table to a convenient drain at the foot of the table. It was really a big, shallow sink. The forensic pathologist was a pretty woman with dinner-party makeup and red hair. You could see her rings and the muted color of her fingernail polish pushing up from beneath her surgical gloves. She was talking to her assistant about everyday things in an everyday tone. Oblivious people were walking by right outside the door on their way to do everyday things. In minutes he was laid open from stem to stern. There was no bleeding. She spoke casually into a microphone that was dangling from an overhead light.

"The heart weighs 325 grams."

Systematically, each organ was removed, inspected, described, weighed, biopsied, and returned. She didn't hook them back up, though. They weren't even arranged correctly. They just lay in their cavities cockeyed and crooked and separate. The brain was last. To get to it without leaving superficial evidence of her intrusion, she had to fold the scalp from the back of his head inside out, up and over the front of his face. The front of his face was now the inside of his scalp and his brain was swinging on the balance and his insides were in disarray. The whole scene seemed even more unreal because there was no recognition by anybody that the scene was at all unusual. The steady stream of water carried the little pieces to the drain, and as was the routine, the assistant cleaned things up as the pathologist moved on to the next case.

At the time of the ambulance ride, the elderly patient's bath, and the autopsy viewing, I considered the experiences simple rites of passage. It takes a longer perspective to see the end result of a process begun with those first exposures. The early horrors change you on the inside forever. They quietly steal away innocence and dignity and mystery, while providing the protection and insulation of experience. You don't notice it at first because on the outside they are the very same horrors that provide our baptism by fire, and we aggressively sought out a baptism by fire because we knew it would catapult us among the ranks of the experienced. Most of us asked for the ride, the bath, and the view. But it takes a while to see what you really chose, and what it really cost. That's what happens with a baptism. Welcome to the family.

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