



A Song for Nurses

By BRIAN DOYLE

The first time I saw a nurse was when I was 4 years old, and someone cut my tonsils out, and I woke up addled to find a cheerful woman wearing white leaning over me and murmuring something gentle. The room was all white, and the bed was all white, and there were white curtains framing the window. I thought I had died and was in heaven and the woman leaning over me was an angel. I was deeply relieved to be in heaven, because I had recently sinned grievously and my brother still had a black eye.

For a moment I wondered if the woman smiling at me was the Madonna, but then I remembered the Madonna wore blue. The woman leaning over me then said gently, “Everything will be all right,” which it was, after a while, during which I discovered that I was not yet dead and that she was a nurse. But for me ever since nurses are essentially angelic, and even now that I am deep into my 50s, and have lived long and seen much, I have never yet been disabused of the notion that nurses are gentle and witty and brilliant and holy beings who bring light and peace, even though I know they must have dark nights when they are weary and sad and thrashed by despair like a beach by a tide.

I have seen nurses help bring my children out of the sea of their mother and into the sharp and bracing air of this world. I have seen nurses praying by my tiny son’s bed before and after his heart was edited so that he could live to be a lanky and testy teenager today. I have seen nurses grappling cheerfully with the wires and coils and tubes and plugs and buttons and toggles and keyboards of vast machinery beyond my ken. I have seen nurses with blood on

their blouses, in the nether reaches of the night in emergency rooms. I have seen nurses hold my children’s heads as my children were sick upon their shoes, and never a snarl did I hear from those nurses, but only a soothing sound deep in the throats, a sound far more ancient than any civilization.

I have heard friends of mine who are nurses speak eloquently and articulately about their work as witness, as story-saving, as patience and endurance, as being those souls who stand by the door between life and death and usher other people through it in both directions. I have quietly gaped in awe at the sinewy courage and flinty

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strength and oceanic grace of nurses, and many times considered what our hospitals and hospices and clinics and schools and lives would be without them; which is to say starker and colder and more brittle and fearful. We would be even more alone and scared than we are now when faced with pain and confusion.

We take them for granted, yes we do. We think of them with reverence and gratitude only when we see them briskly and gently at work, leaning over us and those we love, being both tart and sweet at once; but here, this morning, let us pause a moment and pray for them in the holy cave of our mouths, and thank the Mercy for these most able and skillful agents of His dream for us, that we will rise to love and joy, that we will achieve humility, that we will shape our humor and labor and creativity into lives that are prayers in motion, prayers applied to salve and solve the pain of our companions on the road.

Let us, in short, pray not only for the extraordinary smiling armies of nurses among us; let us pray to be like them, sinewy and tender, gracious and honest, avatars of love.

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