

## Lil Miss Nursey

“It’s mad, huh?” Lindsey said, pointing her finger to this morning’s Guardian newspaper which was carelessly spread out on top of the unattended front desk.

“And horrible,” I whispered back, scanning an article featuring the sentencing of the Guilford Four, charged and convicted of murder on October 22, 1975 for bombings carried out by the Provisional Irish Republican Army; five persons were killed, 65 Wounded.

“Scary too, since it happened only a month ago and not too far away from here – actually, really near one of my friend’s flat,” sighed Lindsey. She raked her fingers through her light brown wedge-cut hair.

I shook my head slowly in silent commiseration with her, the families of all those who had perished, and the survivors.

In the dimly lit welcome room, Lindsey and I stood closely together, flanked by three fellow psychiatric nursing students I had had some light conversations and exchanges with over the past few days. We were all waiting for the nursing officer in charge to bring us on the ward to start our rounds.

Within a few seconds, a stout, middle-aged woman with bright red cheeks and a halo of blonde curls came bounding down the hallway.

“Alright! Good morning students, and welcome to your third week at Bethlem Royal Hospital. You are all to recommence your engagements with the patients assigned to you two weeks ago. And please do not forget the self-protection training we provided in week one. We will have a refresher next week, so stay tuned. First things first, we’ll check the Dangerous Drug Act cupboard, or the DDA cupboard, together. As I explained to you before, you must do this each and every time you come onto the ward. Now, come along!”

Over the past two weeks, the nursing officer in charge and a handful of registered nurses had thrown a deluge of responsibilities, tips, and precautions our way. To say the least, I and the other student nurses were still working through ebbs and flows of anxiety. My apprehension was compounded by the fact that I was new to England, the hospital, and the world of psychiatric nursing. There was a lot for me to adjust to at one time. That said, I took the weekend to become more centered and remind myself that I was not a complete neophyte when it came to taking care of patients. Indeed, I was the only double-trained nurse in my cohort, having earned certifications from the Bahamas School of Nursing as a State Registered Nurse and a State Registered Midwife. After receiving the second certificate, I worked for a year at the hospital in Nassau, Bahamas before deciding to pursue certification as a state registered mental health nurse. And trust me, I didn’t come all this way to fail.

Despite the myriad of differences between the British and Bahamian health care systems, there was one core behavioural attribute the most exceptional care providers upheld, without compromise: Building and maintaining relationships, especially with our patients. Bearing in mind

that over the next seven weeks, I would engage with patients with various psychotic and neurotic conditions, I took great pains in thinking carefully about how I could effectively develop a relationship with each patient, maintain it, and then compassionately and responsibly conclude it. Over the past two weeks, I've liberally consulted with the registered nurses on the floor and the nursing officer in charge about my method and progress. I wanted to get this right.

I was determined to build on the steps I had already taken towards establishing trust and encouraging open dialogue with my patients. I accompanied forty-something-year-old Fredrick to his carpentry classes and sat in silence until he was ready to speak with me – not a moment sooner. Every morning just after breakfast, I went out for walks in Bethlem's renowned flower gardens with twenty-five-year-old Birdie, who happily chirped about whatever came to her mind – so I listened, nodded and periodically asked questions. Every afternoon, I sat with Billy to play chess. He peppered me with questions about my family and friends, and begged me to speak more because, as he said, in all of his fifty-five years on earth he “had never more enjoyed hearing the voice of an ebony goddess.” In his case, I was always careful to balance the conversation so I could learn more about him rather than vice versa. And finally, there was Sully – a seventy-three-year-old man, who spoke only when spoken to and provided mostly monosyllabic responses. Once, as I was helping him out of his seat, I heard him utter a slur that nearly knocked the wind out of me. The first time always hurts the worse. However, I maintained my composure and gently brought him to his feet.

There was so much for me to do – to improve on and to learn – so, on this particular Monday, after the DDA cupboard inspection was complete, I fast walked over to the lovely Birdie to chat with her before breakfast and our walk. As she was telling me about last night's dream, I could feel the eyes of the nursing officer in charge burrowing into my back. Once Birdie left to get her breakfast, I turned to the nursing officer and she waived me towards her.

“Sidney, I need you to...” She paused and cleared her throat. “Could you go to room seven and check in on Ms. Rowe? She has not come out of her room for breakfast. She...she may not be well. We need you to see to her.”

I raised my eyebrows and stared at the nursing officer.

“Ok,” I said quietly and made my way over to room seven.

Ms. Rowe was the only patient who did not have a student nurse assigned to her. On our first day, we were told that she was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. She was sixty-nine and had been on the ward for ten years. During that time, she had been verbally abusive to several nurses who had attempted to engage with her and she had thrown small objects at anyone who challenged her. Moreover, she refused to eat her meals with the other patients. Instead, she would emerge from her room with her own bowl, fork and spoon, serve herself, and return to her room until she was good and ready to rejoin the others for group therapy...sometimes. But today, she did not come out for breakfast, so it was my duty to see to her.

I rapped softly on her door, holding my breath. I hoped – nay, prayed – that she might have fallen asleep.

“Piss off!” She yelled from inside.

I opened the door slowly and caught a glimpse of her sat up in her bed. In her left hand, she had a small book raised above her head. I quickly shut the door and closed my eyes as the book banged against her side of the door. I sighed, slowly cracked the door open again and peeked through the slit. She didn't have anything in her hand this time, so I opened the door a little wider. I could hear the book dragging on the floor.

“Ya gwen destroy ma book!” Her British accent was highlighted with a Caribbean twang. If I weren't so frightened, I would have asked her if I could come in to talk. I peered at her. I so badly wanted to reach for a comb and re-do the two thick, salt-and-pepper cornrows that danced on her shoulders as she shouted and gesticulated at me.

“No ma'am. Can I pick up the book for you? You won't throw anything else?”

“Pick it up now!” She screamed at me.

I picked up the book and without looking at it for too long, I stepped into the room and placed it on a small table next to the foot of her bed.

“Ms. Rowe, I'm here to ask you if you want any breakfast because I can...”

“Piss off!” She screeched. “Piss off, I say! You cyant hear? You deaf or dumb?”

Tears collected in my eyes as I watched this tiny, honey brown-skinned woman contort her face and fling her arms at me in an attempt to push me away from her – to create more distance than had already been established between us. But I hadn't come here to fail, so I persisted.

“Ms. Rowe,” I lowered my voice. “Would you...would you like me to piss off before or after I bring you your breakfast?”

She stared at me. Then, she pushed her head back and expelled a loud cackle. She laughed so hard that tears streamed down her face. I took the opportunity to quickly wipe my own eyes using the sleeve of my blouse.

“Ya brave...lil Miss Nursey! Yeah, gwan! Gwan, lil Miss Nursey! You can bring me my breakfast and then piss off!”

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At the end of the day, as I was filing out of the ward with Lindsey and the other nursing students, the nursing officer in charge called me over. Lindsey walked towards the welcome room's front desk to wait for me.

“Sidney, I spoke with Ms. Rowe and she mentioned you and...your experience at breakfast time. She has asked that you see her again for breakfast tomorrow. I’d like you to see to her.”

“Oh? Ok, I can do that.” I offered hesitantly.

“You made a difference today, Sidney. Perhaps more than you realize. Ms. Rowe has never shown even an inkling of an interest in engaging with anyone but you. And mind you, we've had other Negr--...bl...Black nurses before, but you’ve left quite an impression on her. You may not have set out to establish a relationship with her, but she seems to want one with you...Little Miss Nursey, it is, yes?”

I smiled and nodded.

“Thank you, and see you tomorrow,” I said to the nursing officer.

I walked toward Lindsey, linked my arm in hers and we strolled out the hospital, sharing stories about our day.