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Night Watch Roy Popkin

Preview

How often have you seen the advice, “Practice random acts of kindness”? The following story belongs in this category. It proves, in the words of its author, that “there are people who care what happens to their fellow human beings.”

Words to Watch

smudged (2): dirty with streaks or stains
relayed (3): passed along
boondocks (3): a rural region
maneuvers (3): military exercises
sedated (5): drugged with a pain reliever
oblivious (7): unaware
condolence (9): sympathy

The story began on a downtown Brooklyn street corner. An elderly man had collapsed while crossing the street, and an ambulance rushed him to Kings County Hospital. There, during his few returns to consciousness, the man repeatedly called for his son. 1

From a smudged, oft-read letter, an emergency-room nurse learned that the son was a Marine stationed in North Carolina. Apparently, there were no other relatives. 2

Someone at the hospital called the Red Cross office in Brooklyn, and a request for the boy to rush to Brooklyn was relayed° to the Red Cross director of the North Carolina Marine Corps camp. Because time was short—the patient was dying—the Red Cross man and an officer set out in a jeep. They located the sought-after young man wading through marshy boondocks° on maneuvers°. He was rushed to the airport in time to catch the one plane that might enable him to reach his dying father.

It was mid-evening when the young Marine walked into the entrance lobby of Kings County Hospital. A nurse took the tired, anxious serviceman to the bedside.

“Your son is here,” she said to the old man. She had to repeat the words several times before the patient’s eyes opened. Heavily sedated° because of the pain of his heart attack, he dimly saw the young man in the Marine Corps uniform standing outside the oxygen tent. He reached out his hand. The Marine wrapped his toughened fingers around the old man’s limp ones, squeezing a message of love and encouragement. The nurse brought a chair, so the Marine could sit alongside the bed.

Nights are long in hospitals, but all through the night the young Marine sat there in the poorly lighted ward, holding the old man’s hand and offering words of hope and strength. Occasionally, the nurse suggested that the Marine move away and rest a while. He refused.

Whenever the nurse came into the ward, the Marine was there. His full attention was on the dying man, and he was oblivious° of her and of the night noises of the hospital—the clanking of an oxygen tank, the laughter of night-staff members exchanging greetings, the cries and moans and snores of other patients. Now and then she heard him say a few gentle words. The dying man said nothing, only held tightly to his son through most of the night.

Along toward dawn, the patient died. The Marine placed on the bed the lifeless hand he had been holding, and went to tell the nurse. While she did what she had to do, he relaxed—for the first time since he got to the hospital.

Finally, she returned to the nurse’s station, where he was waiting. She started to offer words of condolence° for his loss, but the Marine interrupted her. “Who was that man?” he asked.

“He was your father,” she answered, startled.

“No, he wasn’t,” the Marine replied. “I never saw him before in my life.”

“Why didn’t you say something when I took you to him?” the nurse asked.

“I knew right off there’d been a mistake, but I also knew he needed his son, and his son just wasn’t here. When I realized he was too sick to tell whether or not I was his son, I figured he really needed me. So I stayed.”

With that, the Marine turned and left the hospital. Two days later a routine message came in from the North Carolina Marine Corps base

informing the Brooklyn Red Cross that the real son was on his way to Brooklyn for his father's funeral. It turned out there had been two Marines with the same name and similar serial numbers in the camp. Someone in the personnel office had pulled out the wrong record.

But the wrong Marine had become the right son at the right time. And he proved, in a uniquely human way, that there are people who care what happens to their fellow human beings. 15

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Freewrite for ten minutes on one of the following.

1. Did you enjoy reading this selection? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever spent time with an ill or injured person in the hospital? What do you remember most about the experience? How did it affect you?
3. Why do you think the young Marine did not immediately tell the people at the hospital that the old man wasn't his father?

VOCABULARY CHECK

A. Circle the letter of the word or phrase that best completes each of the following four items.

1. In the sentence below, the words *enable him* mean
 - a. stop him.
 - b. encourage him.
 - c. delay him.
 - d. make it possible for him.

"He was rushed to the airport in time to catch the one plane that might enable him to reach his dying father." (Paragraph 3)

2. In the sentences below, the word *dimly* means
 - a. clearly.
 - b. unclearly.
 - c. rarely.
 - d. often.

"She had to repeat the words several times before the patient's eyes opened. Heavily sedated because of the pain of his heart attack, he dimly saw the young man. . . ." (Paragraph 5)