

My \$17,000 Harem.

Recently I was in the hospital for surgery. My left shoulder, despite its dovish tendencies, volunteered for duty. Before receiving the nerve block - torpedo inserted at the base of my neck - I'm asked numerous times to examine my hospital bracelet to verify that the name inscribed is my own. It started in admissions. The attendant has a machine that makes bracelets, and after making mine she asks,

"Is your name Mark?"

"Yes."

"Is the information on your bracelet correct?"

"Yes."

"And do you go by Mark?"

"Yes."

Upstairs, Health Professional # 2, Becky, saunters in to take my blood pressure for the third time in thirty minutes. (Later, in the recovery room I notice that all the blood pressure measurements are taken automatically by a machine. I wonder if Becky's job might soon be out-sourced to India. Good fodder for a campaign commercial.)

"Is the name on the bracelet yours?" Becky lifts my arm. "Is your name Mark? Do you go by Mark?"

"Yes." I reclaim my arm. "Somebody already asked me that."

"What?" She looks up from her clipboard. "Did you say something?"

"I was just saying that another nurse already asked what I go by."

HP2 re-consults the chart. "Do you go by Mark?"

"I do. I do go by Mark. Don't these records get transcribed to the computer?"

HP2: "I don't work with the computer." Raps the clipboard on the base of my bed. "I'm an RN."

My wife surfaces from the stack of old magazines that she lugged in from home to kill time. She's been going through them tearing out the important pages for 'future reference.' Notices my irritation.

"Ann, please confirm for the nurse that I go by Mark."

After HP2 departs with the blood pressure cuff dangling from her pocket, I begin to wonder what the guy on the other side of my less than semi-private room is in for and how he is going to get home. He, Larry, was quite good at answering the name questions but came up short with the transportation interrogation. "I'm not sure. Maybe a friend will be pick me up," he says. I start to worry that he doesn't plan to go home - perhaps a suicide bomber.

In comes Monica, Health Professional # 3. "Hi Mark, I'll be your nurse for the next three minutes. I'll be taking your temperature. Then you'll be seeing another girl."

Temperature normal, blood pressure something over something, definitely an improper fraction. After a few treks up the mountain of TV channels and down the other side, I'm ready for more action.

Health Professional #4: "Hello, I'm Susie. I'm here to take your blood pressure - they told me that you got up. That could change things." She was right. I had snuck out of bed to check on Larry and the bomb project.

HP4: "It says here that your name is Mark. Do you go by Mark?"

"You're kidding - right?"

HP4: "The bracelet is correct, your name is Mark and you go by Mark. Is that is or is that not correct?"

"That's a very good question." I sense my comedic alter-ego coming out of the closet. "Complicated but good," I say. "My friends in the explorer club call me Marco but in Rome I go by Marcus. When I'm taking holiday in my Parisian Villa, the help calls me Messier Jean-Marc, and my acting coach calls me Marcel."

HP4: "I'll get the psychiatric nurse. She'll give you a sedative."

The recovery room...

In the recovery room, after 4.5 hours of anesthesia, I hear a siren in the background and faint voices trying to creep in.

HP27: "Mark, wake up, you're in the recovery room. Can you hear me? Mark?"

HP28: "Say it louder."

HP27: "Mark, WAKE UP, your surgery is over. Wake up."

I'm awake now, but will be damned if I share the fact with the horde of nurses.

HP28: "He's still not responding. Get a supervisor. Get Mary, she's good at this."

HP29 (Mary): "Mark, Mark, MARK"

I feel Mary's hot breath slopping its way across my brow. "Did you guys check his chart?" She says. "Get the chart. Maybe he doesn't go by Mark."

HP27: "It says right here that he goes by Mark."

HP29: "Mark, wake up damn it. We know you go by Mark. Stop faking."

I open my eyes and see them rolling theirs. "Would you leave me alone. I'm trying to sleep. I do go by Mark. But sometimes, I go by car, or by bike, I even have a scooter. Why are there so many of you?"

The harem...

I'm glad to report that the attention I received in the hospital was great. In less than 24 hours, I had thirty health professionals tend to me. Since most were female, I realized that it was the closest to a harem I would ever get. I milked it all the way. "Sorry to bother you, but could you open these crackers?" She opens the crackers. "Crank up the headrest an inch or two. The angle is off. I don't want to get a crick in my neck you know." "Did you gain weight since this morning?" "I need you to drag a comb through my hair? Is yours bleached?" "I'd like some more of that festive orange Jell-O."

There were a few male nurses and the differences were clear from the start. Contrast Mary's "Hun - can I get you anything else now?" to Jake's "How you taking it bud? I can hook you up with something from the kitchen." Or Betsy's "I'm going to take a peek at the incisions now." To Don's "Let's swap them bandages now, see if you've done infected yourself."

Pain relief...

Perhaps the best aspect of my stay was the ongoing and insistent attention to my level of pain. This particular hospital utilizes, I kid not, the Smith-Jones Management Algorithms for Palliative Care' - Wong/Baker Faces Rating Scale. This patented system is a range of drawings ranked from 0 to 10. Zero, no pain, is a 1970's smiley face. Ten, worst possible pain, is Howard Dean doing 'The Roar.'

The system really is patented and they asked me throughout my stay to rate myself. Even though I was hovering between zero and one, I raised it to four just for the free shots of morphine.

Today I received the bill for my 22 hour visit - \$17,000. Not bad for a harem, name check, and pain relief.

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