

To the Man in Soiled Linen

(full version)

by Miriam Barber

To the man in soiled linen who lies with no voice,
No movement but blinking, no freedom of choice,
You lie in that box of a hospital bed,
And I've no idea what goes on in your head,
It's been 11 weeks now with no improvement at all,
Your previous life-can you even recall?
And with that my mind begins to explore,
Who could this man have been before?

A father, a husband and once someone's son,
Who's grieved for parents perhaps passed on,
What were your dreams? Your hopes? Your fears?
What reduced you to floods of tears?
Where did you come from? Where felt like home?
So many things that I'll now never know,
Is this all part of some weird higher plan?
How is your life in a stranger's hands?

What habits shaped this man that I never knew?
Did you bite your nails when stressed or confused?
How did you like your coffee- black or white?
Did you tuck your children in at night?
When embarrassed did your face flush red?
Did you have a favourite side of the bed?
They say old habits die hard but with you that's not true,
You've lost the things that made you-you.

So how do I have the right to care-
For this man I don't know just lying there?
To wash and bathe him and hang his peg meals,
When I know nothing of how he feels,
His family ask me what's going on?
They hope somehow, somewhere he's not gone,
That miraculously there's a light still on,
I'm sorry but I'm praying that they are wrong.

I'm sorry so often it seems these days,
For the sheets I had no time to change,
I lie in bed and picture your clammy face,
And as your nurse I feel disgraced,
To the man in soiled linen with breaking down skin,

Because of the sheets that you lie in!
It's been so long they've actually dried,
Please believe me when I say I tried-

My best. I tried my utter best,
But your needs simply weren't addressed,
Time just slipped right through my fingers,
And yet for you the time just lingers,
To occupy space and time is all you can do,
With nothing but the ticking clock to torture you,
The irony never escapes my mind,
You're lifeless yet I'm 200 jobs behind.

Your lips are cracked, your teeth covered in paste,
How horrendous your mouth must taste,
I make a vow to stay late this evening,
To deliver the personal care you're needing,
Your finger nails are growing way too long,
More evidence of time just ticking on,
Your muscles are wasting, your arms are thin,
I shudder again to think of the sheets you lie in.

Visitors come and go-they're not impressed,
They're angry to see you look such a mess,
I hear them judge the care they see,
Which really means they're judging me,
It's fine- They just don't understand what we do,
I simply cannot prioritise you,
You're so dependent- you need a 1 to 1,
What the hell has the NHS become?

I've 10 patients and I'm gagging for a cup of tea,
It's been 9 hours since I even peed,
I'm exhausted cos I lay all night awake,
The thought of you I could not escape,
I cannot get over the state of the ward,
Is this all the NHS can really afford?
1 patient is septic with several post-op,
Most are immobile, 1 is in shock.

One of the patients is utterly ruthless,
He's constantly calling the doctors useless,
He becomes more abusive day by day,
Threatening and swearing to get his way,
One time he actually spat at me,

I mean-really?

Another time he bit me in the hand,
That's 3 more blood tests for me now planned.

To the man in soiled linen in bed 22,
I'm sorry if he's scaring you,
Would you defend me if you could?
I like to imagine that you would,
You don't throw the abuse that others might do,
And for a guilty second I'm relieved you can't talk or move.
My silent hero, that's who you are,
My peaceful, uncomplaining shining star.

But then there's your wife, what will she do?
She's a 6 month old baby and not a clue-
How to even speak English- translation was up to you,
Well look after her too- cos that's what we do.
See that's another thing that people do not know,
About all the hard work and all the back bone,
We are trying to give patients, their families meaning, purpose,
Yet they only see what's on the surface.

I think of the naive student I'd been,
The things that I had yet to see,
They did not tell us all the ways,
Our hearts would break every single day,
That our souls would feel crushed and our energy slip,
Right through our fingers bit by bit,
I wish with all the energy I have to spare,
That people would see how much we care.

But we need more funding, we need more nurses,
We need more doctors and all health care workers,
We need the government to tell the truth,
To understand we're just human too,
We need the public to not abuse us,
And recognise that they will lose us,
If they don't stop all this negative press,
It's sucking the life of the NHS.

So love us, support us, show us some appreciation,
We are the heart and soul of this little nation,
Understand what's going on,
Cos you'll damn well miss us when we're gone,
It's not good hours, it's rubbish pay,

It's emotional turmoil every single day,
We studied for years, our backs are sore,
If we didn't care- what the hell would we do it for?!

Regardless of wealth or status, whether old or young,
We'll treat you equally no matter what you've done,
Whether criminals or homeless, we have no space to judge you,
We only have room to care and love you.

To the man in soiled linen in bed 22,
We will never give up on you,
We're not perfect but we're trying our very best,
Because that's what we do- we're the NHS!