

REEL NURSES VS. REAL NURSES

BY JANET WILLENER

"Scalpel-scalpel, sponge-sponge," parrots a neatly manicured Barbie-doll nurse. Only her thick fluttery eyelashes can be seen above the mask. She deftly dabs at the heavy pancake makeup on Gary Cooper's sweat-beaded brow. His bedroom eyes return her doleful gaze with that 'Watcha doing after' look. A beep-beep-beeeeeep on the vital signs monitor interrupts their implied plans.

When you hear the word *nurse*, what comes to mind. Do you think of the Valiant Knights of the Crusades, the Medics of the battlefields, or of Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton fame? Do you see in your mind's eye hundreds of courageous midwives on the Oregon Trail bringing new life to the West and weeping softly beside crude crosses near the wagon ruts?

Does *nurse* call to mind Ethel Merman in *South Pacific* washing that man right out of her hair? Do you hear taffeta petticoats rustling when Butterfly McQueen, as 'Prissy' in *Gone With the Wind*, whines, "Ah nevah birthed no baby befoah, Miz Scarlet"? Do you recall the moonlit surf scenes on *China Beach*? Can anyone forget the legendary bedside manners of Loretta Switt's 'Hotlips Hoolihan' in *M.A.S.H.*, the TV series that lasted longer than the actual Korean Conflict? Do you envision a doe-eyed Loretta Young floating effortlessly in her flowing black robes and dove-like cap to the side of Victor Mature? Or does a silly Sally Fields (TV's *Flying Nun*) soaring over city rooftops in condor-like headdress confound you? Only television's *E.R.* comes close to depicting real nurses. Some of the time *E.R.* tells like it is. And sometimes they exaggerate a lot with the ketchup.

Does *nurse* mean *heartbreaker* to you? Remember Jesse on *General Hospital*, a general gossip and hard-luck nurse who has been married and divorced from every doctor on staff since 1958? Did you wonder how Juliet Binache could abandon Ralf Fines, *The English Patient*? Did Louise Fletcher's 'Nurse Ratchet' break the spirit of Jack Nicholson in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (from Ken Kesey's book) because her whalebone corset and stiletto bra were too tight? And how about that LPN Cathy Bates? Did she personify real nurses with the *Misery* she inflicted?

Do you lean toward the cartoon character nurse? Do Groucho Marx or the Three Stooges entertain you when they leer at brainless bimbos with skirts up to *here*? Do you laugh at a get well card featuring a buxom blonde with blouse unbuttoned down to *there*, wielding an ice cold bedpan in her gloved-hand? Do you laugh at the fat old hag with the giant needle?

Let's get *real!* If your vision of nurses contains the elements of 'silly', uneducated, hard-hearted, sadistic torturers of patients, or sex-starved slaves of doctors, then misleading and politically incorrect portrayals on the silver screen have tarnished your view. You are about to be educated on the subject of reel nurse vs. real nurse.

REAL nurses pay dearly for their education, both monetarily and emotionally. Nurses are highly educated. They excel in math and science and endure from two to eight years of nursing education. In most states they must obtain 24 to 30 continuing education college credits every two-year period for the rest of their careers, just so they can renew their licenses. Additional licenses must be earned if they move from one state to another.

Real nurses are sincere caring people of both genders. They are real people with families to support, people to see and things to do outside nursing.

Rather than sporting revealing or sexy clothing, they wear practical washable pajamas called "scrubs", well suited to their profession, which includes a lot of thankless and down-right dirty work. Emptying filled bedpans and vomit basins and giving medications by injections and suppository are only some of those disagreeable duties.

Nurses are on their feet all day and night. A real nurse would never wear spiked heels that sexpots swear. Nurse shoes have actually evolved from the clunky white laced-up shoes that granny wore, to state of the art footwear that rivals in technology and price anything that *Air Jordan* could design. Their feet still hurt. Nurses never wear starched petticoats; flying sparks would ignite an explosion near a patient using oxygen. Caps of any size are completely out of the question, becoming tangled in privacy curtains and IV lines. Unpolished fingernails are kept short and gloves are worn to prevent transmission of infection

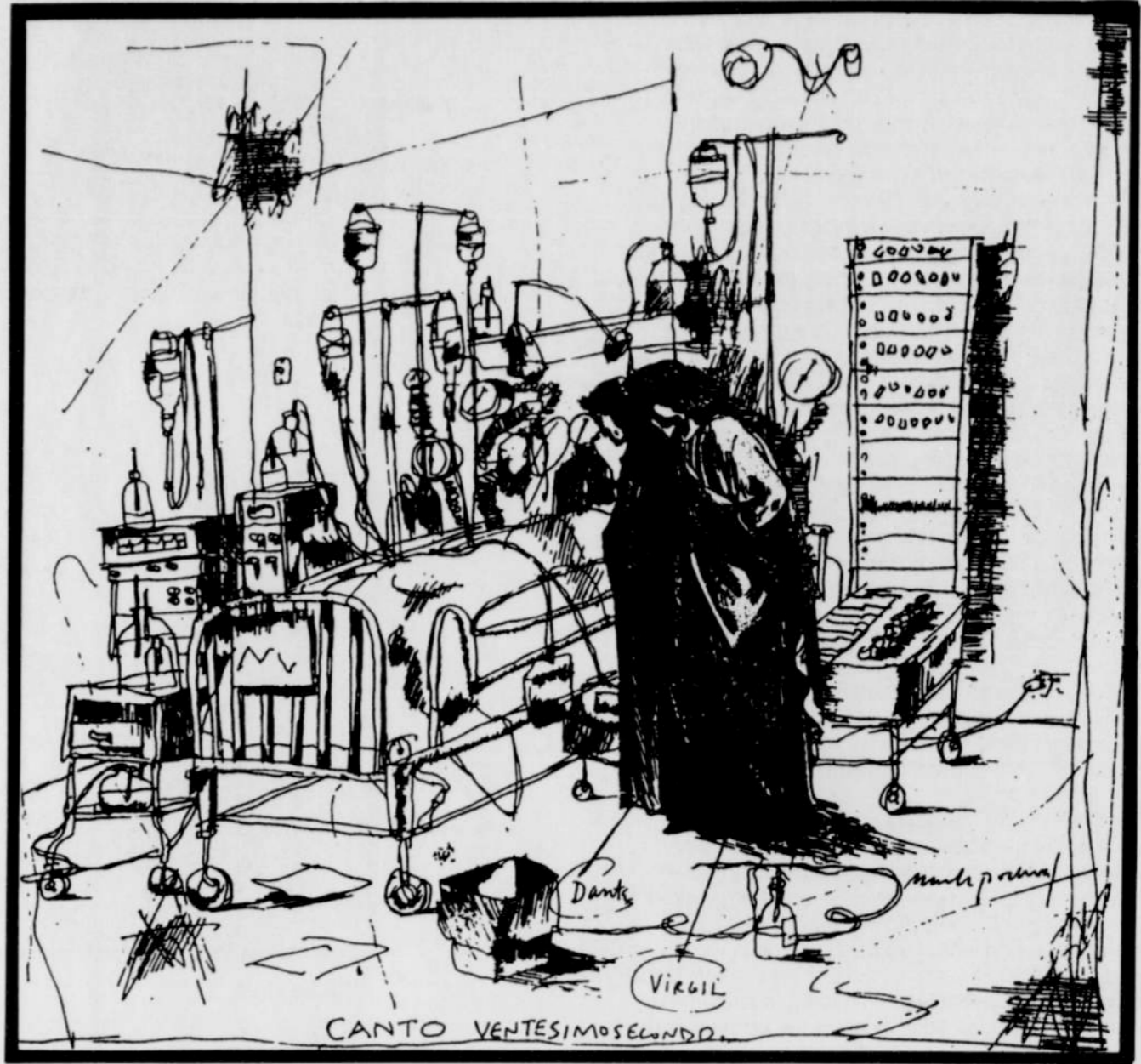


Time Out of Mind

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MARK PODWAL

from one patient to another. If you want to catch a serious infection, check into a hospital. That's where the really bad stuff lurks. "I wasn't sick until I went to the doctor," is often a truthful statement.

Most patients think of a hospital as a high priced hotel and restaurant. They expect a nurse/waitress to "Fluff my pillow, bend my straw." However, an average nurse cares for from 20 to 120 very sick people each shift. In spite of the nurses' natural inclination and desire to give quality care to the patient, the nurse is also deluged with hourly charting, paper work and written reports. In reality, a patient in a nursing home can expect an average of 45 seconds of personal attention from the nurse. In desperation, a patient, having not seen a nurse or doctor for what seems like hours, will sometimes seek medical advice from the nearest person wearing scrubs, most often a member of the cleaning staff. No wonder the confusion: nurses wear a variety of colored or brightly printed pajamas and so does the entire hospital staff.

A recent Hollywood flick, *Corky Romano*, a zany spoof on 'The Family vs. the Feds' features a buxom federal agent doing undercover duty as a nurse. This *nurse* shows obvious cleavage, skirts so short the top of her stockings show, and the fore mentioned impractical starched cap. She plays the *bimbo* to the hilt and specializes in groin hits for personal protection.

Stereotypes hurt professional nurses who are often perceived as easy objects of abuse and scorn. Female nurses are perceived as *easy*. Male nurses are viewed as *gay*. They get pinched, punched and propositioned. 80 year old men always prefer female nurses of any age, shape or color. 80 year old women won't let any male nurse in the room. Pity the poor male nurse who draws bath duty in the nursing home. "Help! Help! That awful young man is fooling with my toozy!"

Holidays are regular workdays, and *Club Med* is an advertising teaser, not a realistic restful destination for nurses. Real nurses seldom get a dinner break let alone a two-week vacation. After arriving at work before dawn and returning home 12 to 16 hours later, there is little inclination to be involved with anyone on staff. The rare nurse who finds the time or energy for a clandestine relationship at work is quickly dismissed.

Nurses get blamed for cold food, hard mattresses and missing jewelry and hearing aids. (Look in the Kleenex box or denture cup.) Nurses get blamed for doctors' handwriting that the pharmacist can't read. The nurse can't read it either, but becomes responsible for delivering the right medication to the right patient by the right route at the right time. Naturally the nurse is blamed for the patients' pain. And everyone especially blames nurses when Death makes its rounds. In the real world, it is often not the doctor who drops his mask and tells the grieving family, "We did everything we could to save her." It is usually the nurse who consoles the family, calls the priest or chaplain, arranges for the undertaker, then bathes the corpse and accompanies the body to the morgue instead of taking a half-hour lunch break.

So what makes me a credible critic? I have been a real nurse for over 18 years in hospitals, schools, addiction centers, psychiatric facilities, nursing homes and hospice settings. I've been on ER duty when my own 22-month old granddaughter was brought in dead from a backyard drowning accident. I had to finish my 16 hour shift before I could go home and cry the night my Dad died of a heart attack. I've gone home after working all night to find my child cut her wrists over a failed relationship, sat up all day and the next night in the ER, and returned to work two hours later. I have cared for all of the AIDS patients solo because other nurses would not go near them (even feigning pregnancy to avoid caring for them). I have been brutally attacked and permanently injured by demented patients and drunken visitors. I've worked under supervisors so bitchy they "eat their own puppies for breakfast." I've seen all this, and so much more that I wouldn't want new nursing students to know about in advance. They might quit nursing before they start. Let them enjoy their naiveté while it lasts. What? Me give it up? Are you kidding?

Like Rodney Dangerfield says: "I don't get no respect!" Did you really expect a real nurse to be respected? Nursing involves up-close and personal contact with some very angry very sick people, and their very hostile families, when they are at their very worst. Don't allow yourself to be numbed by the media portrayal of nursing! Nurses are hardworking fellow humans who are just trying to earn a living. Support your local nurses in their wage/hour negotiation efforts. And don't let this day pass without sincerely thanking a nurse.

Nursing is dirty work. Aren't you glad somebody does it — for you?

Janet Willener lives in Seaside.

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