

Dying to Know

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My dear friend Jeremy died a year ago. He became very ill very suddenly, and never really got any better. He spent quite some time in Bart's Hospital in London. When I went to visit him for the first time, his instructions were to wheel him out into the air, so he could have a fag and tell me, I later realised, that he did not expect to recover and did not much wish to be striven over. He was not content, but he was, being Jeremy, a bit amused. It was mild, for November, but November still. And it struck me that the little square in which we were sitting was unmistakably a quad, Bart's being laid out as many hospitals have been, as a kind of university, distributing the body into different medical specialisms, sometimes corresponding with body parts – neurology, optometry, dentistry, ear, nose and throat – sometimes not – oncology, paediatrics, accident and emergency.

I come from a medical family, though not in any posh sense. My mum was a nurse, and my dad was a hospital porter. They met in hospital and I was born where I was, in the little seaside resort of Bognor Regis, for medical reasons; my dad was from Merseyside but had TB and TB patients were thought to do better in southern climates. Hospitals have the reputation of being alien places, but *humani nihil a me alienum puto*, and so I have always felt comfortable in hospitals. Hospitals are where humans go to work, it is where we do things, where humans are most human. There is a more local reason. My mother, I realised far too late for it to be any good for to her, became a nurse because of her craving for knowledge; for, in the 1950s, at least in my mum's family, becoming a nurse was still almost the only way a young girl could get to take exams in anything. If I go to hell, which is looking no less unlikely with every passing year, my vilest citation, against which I shall offer up no defence, will be my pampered adolescent contempt for her pride in her nursing qualifications, the RFN (Registered Fever Nurse) and BTA (British Tuberculosis Association).

My school was called Christ's Hospital, set up as a charitable foundation by Edward VI in 1553, and still today functioning in more or less the same way, providing an intensely academic, public-school style of education for those who on the whole lack the means to afford it. It can only do this because people give it money to do so, and, if you have spare money, you should give it to them. It was the only kind of public school to which a woman like my mother, with her intense academic ambitions for her children, could possibly have sent my sister and me. It was an odd school, and seems to turn out anomalies, exceptionalists and, because of its epically preposterous uniform, exhibitionists. One of the odd things was the name. It was strange to be thought of as being a student in a hospital. Of course, the school was called a hospital because it was a common name for any institution that was a refuge for the poor and needy: when St Bartholomew's Hospital was refounded by Henry VIII, its official title was 'The House of the Poore in West Smithfield in the suburbs of the City of London of Henry VIII's Foundation'. A hospital is a house, a hostel, a place of hospitality: the affectionate name for Christ's Hospital, or CH, is 'Housey'. I like very much the fact that the college in which I am now a Fellow, Peterhouse, is also a house, rather than a college (one of the first things you learn when you join Peterhouse is to tut-tut at the tautology of 'Peterhouse College'). My school was not just organised in 'houses' like many schools, but the pupils lived in them. Mine was Middleton B, named after a

colonial bishop. The Virgin mega-company began operations as a cheap mail-order company for vinyl records, and I remember receiving a delivery at school, I fancy of an LP by The Fugs, addressed to 'Middleton B Ward'.

Hospitals are often, of course, also academic institutions and, if you have got any sense at all, and, despite all the dull-witted cant you will hear dinning at you from every side, you will not entrust yourself in any extremity to a hospital that is not full of people who are more interested in the idea of your illness than its embodiment in you. Being seen by a doctor for whom you are the thousandth example she has seen, and not any kind of individual instance, is the only kind of 'holistic medicine' that will do for me. There is safety in numbers, and catastrophe in the number one.

So this is why one of the songs that reaches deep into me is 'Hospital Beds' by Cold War Kids, with its chorus, especially good in Florence Welch's hollering version, 'I've got one friend/Lying across from me/I did not choose him/He did not choose me'. For no, we do not choose our friends: the hospital does. The song is a revision of Eliot's *East Coker*:

The whole earth is our hospital
Endowed by the ruined millionaire,
Wherein, if we do well, we shall
Die of the absolute paternal care
That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere

It is not just the word 'doctor' that connects the academic and the medical worlds. Medical knowledge brings together the care for knowledge and the knowledge of care. We live in an era in which knowledge has turned in on itself, with the discovery and explication of DNA making possible a kind of anthropotechnic auto-engineering unimaginable before now. Wish you better.