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...And for What?

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In the fall of 1960 while I was stationed at the U.S. Naval Hospital, Portsmouth, Virginia, a tragic accident happened that nearly caused me to despise the white race.

Norfolk and Portsmouth are twin cities that are separated by the Elizabeth River. A Negro sailor was crossing the street approximately three or four blocks from Norfolk General Hospital when he was struck by a speeding car. A white civilian ambulance was dispatched to the scene of the accident where they found this man in critical condition. He had a compound fracture of the left leg, the bone penetrating the femoral artery causing fatal bleeding. About his head and shoulders were multiple lacerations and bruises, internal injuries accompanied by profuse internal hemorrhage. The ambulance attendants picked him up and rushed him to Norfolk General Hospital because immediate medical attention was imperative. If they had brought him to the U.S. Naval Hospital about four miles from the scene of the accident, he would have died enroute.

The white doctors at Norfolk General Hospital refused to accept this dying man to their emergency room simply because he was a Negro. That sailor died in the hospital without one person on the staff lifting a finger to help him. The attendants then brought the corpse to us. I happened to be on duty when they arrived. Before I took the corpse to the morgue this story was revealed to me.
It was also brought to my attention that all white hospitals in these two cities adhered to this unequal practice. When doctors neglect their sworn duty, "to do anything within their power to save human lives . . . ", as listed in the oath of Hippocrates, the father of medicine, it is morally and ethically wrong. These men are not by any estimation doctors and nothing more than butchers. Doctors should be dedicated to saving human lives regardless of race, creed or color. That sailor who was willing to die for his country died because of his country. This man suffered gross pain and died needlessly and for what? As far as some people are concerned he was not even a human being. I suffered too. It took all the strength I could muster up within myself to keep from hating white people.

A couple of months later I became Senior Corpsman in the delivery room and head of all corpsmen in the obstetrical department. In my new job many white women patients and their relatives disapproved of my position and authority. One example of hate toward me while on this job is the time I saved the life of a child being born. This emergency occurred one night when all of the doctors on duty were delivering babies at the same time and one room was working on twins. I was taking blood pressures and temperatures in the admission room, when a white lady burst through the doors and yelled, "My girlfriend is having a baby in the car. Hurry, get a doctor, I don't know what to do." The doctors had their hands full and couldn't very well drop what they were doing and come running. In the past I had plenty of experience in assisting in hundreds of deliveries and was familiar with all the different types. Prior to this baby I had delivered nine emergency cases in cars. So, I grabbed an emergency kit (basin, scissors, bulb syringe, blanket for the baby and hemostats), and ran to the car. After reaching the car I discovered the patient was delivering her child in one of the most complicated ways, feet first (footling breech). I began by first comforting her as best I could under the conditions, giving her complete confidence in herself and trust in me. I had never delivered a footling breech but I had seen several born and knew what to do. Without much difficulty, I managed to get the baby's head out in time so he would not suffocate from lack of air. Some expectant fathers from the waiting room helped me put the mother on a stretcher and the baby boy in a crib and wheel them into the admission room. All the doctors and nurses commended me for a job well done.

Later that evening the patient's worried mother called from Miami, Florida, inquiring about her grandson's and daughter's condition. Doctor C. R. Richardson, head obstetrician, answered the call and explained to her what had happened and assured her that everything was fine. Satisfied, the grandmother asked the doctor if she could speak to me, so I talked to her for about fifteen minutes. She asked me if
her daughter was in much pain during delivery. I told her that under those circumstances her daughter was an excellent patient and endured no severe pain. She seemed to be very friendly, praising my competence, and promised to shake my hand the following day, telling me she would be on the next plane to Norfolk.

When she arrived that next day I was sitting in the T.V. Room with the doctors watching a football game. A nurse showed her to the room to see me. On first glance she appeared to be an intelligent woman, middleaged, wearing expensive clothes with a mink coat draped across her arm. She asked, “Which one of you is the man I owe my deepest gratitude to?” We all were dressed alike in operating room clothes. I stood up and walked towards her and she looked at me completely surprised. The look in her eyes was one of unscrupulous hatred. At once she became indignant. “If I had known this hospital was staffed with niggers, my daughter would never have come here at all,” is what she bellowed. This not only shocked me, but hurt me beyond all expression. Tears nearly came to my eyes and I am not usually emotional in situations like this. I did manage to compose myself before reaching the breaking point, just how, I'll never know. Finally, I turned to walk out of the room but Doctor Richardson put a hand on my shoulder and said, “Take it easy, Nolan.” Turning to her, he said, “Lady if you don’t like our hospital or anyone on our staff, you can take your daughter and get out.” “I most certainly will as soon as I find another hospital,” said the lady. Doctor Richardson began signing the patient’s release immediately. I started to suggest Norfolk General Hospital to her but decided it would be better if I said nothing.

The two incidents I have written about are just a couple of the many that I’ve been faced with. They taught me something I’ll always remember. Doctor Richardson and the lady from Florida were both raised in a southern environment and each felt entirely different about Negroes. As a Negro, I want to be accepted and respected as an individual. We don’t enjoy living in constant chaos at an almost tip-toe stance, never knowing what to expect next, continually fighting the brand of “nobodiness.” One should easily see why Negroes are revolting today and demanding what they have been denied, total equality.