

By Madeleine Mysko

As I drove through the intersection of Calvert and Pleasant streets the other day, I was thinking of the Mercy Nurses' Residence. It's gone now. Or perhaps I should say *it has been removed*, because that's how I picture it: The old place wasn't really torn down after all, but rather plucked up by the hand of a greater power. I have this sense that someday I'll be traveling in another part of the city and there it will be: the old nurses' residence, put to good use as low-income housing or a retirement home for nuns.

When I was a student there back in the 1960s, the residence already had a history. It was built in the 19th Century as a home for boys, and its heavy countenance was that of a Victorian—fussy eaves and fascia, mansard roof and dormers, below which, on the Calvert Street side, one could still read the plain name: Boys' Home. In my room on the third floor, I slept in a bunk bed where, decades before, a little boy must have slept. The headboard was carved with a row of cowboys on horses, galloping across a plain. I sometimes thought about that long-ago boy, tucked in for the night below those cowboys, homesick for somewhere else.

There was irony in the wild freedom of those cowboys, because in my day student nurses weren't free to gallop anywhere but across Pleasant Street to the hospital. Once a new student arrived, trailing behind her father lugging the suitcase (move-in day being the only time ever that males were permitted beyond the front parlor), it wasn't so easy to get back out.

On that first day, the good Sisters of Mercy laid down the rules, which were based on the lay of the land: No venturing west, where "hobos" camped in the park; or south toward the harbor, where dangers crouched in the shadows of the warehouses; or east toward the "red-light district." As for north, we were permitted to go only as far as St. Ignatius for Mass on Sunday. Henceforth our activities would be confined to the nurses' residence, where the house mother kept one eye on the door.

Some girls could not be confined, of course. Some girls got out. I wasn't one of them — obedient Catholic girl that I was back then — but I heard the stories, whispered between floors in the lurching elevator with the accordion gate, or in the low-ceilinged recreation room before lights-out.

One story went that a certain Miss S. discovered a window without bars, just above street level in the nursing fundamentals classroom. On St. Patrick's Day, Miss S. lowered herself to freedom on a couple of sheets and jiggled across the street to purchase a six-pack with her fake ID. Another story went that Miss S., Miss C., and possibly Miss L. escaped through that same window and danced in the street with the rest of Baltimore, on the night the Orioles won the World Series.

I marvel whenever I read about the '60s in Baltimore, particularly about the political unrest. *Where in the world was I?* And then the image floats up: *The Mercy Nurses' Residence*. If I did breathe the air of that turbulent time, it must have been out in the courtyard, that open square at the heart of the residence, which was reminiscent of a small prison yard. Into the courtyard a student nurse might step for a breath of air, but in every direction the view would have been of windows looking nowhere but across at each other. Above would have been the sky that carried the weather over the rest of the city.

By the end of the turbulent '60s, that sky looked down on feverish unrest: a country wracked by war, a city wild with grief and dissent. But I had graduated by then and had taken a job out in the county. Looking back, I believe I was a good nurse at the age of 21. But I wasn't much of an activist. In truth, I rarely read the newspapers.

Why is it that I'm riveted now to this memory of a long-ago nurses' residence? Perhaps it's the epiphany in it — that I wasn't really sheltered those years when I was a student nurse, for my training required that hard look into the face of suffering, that placing of the hand against another's pain. The Sisters of Mercy taught me, at age 18, the art and the science of our profession. They also taught me to hold back on the tears, at least until the end of the shift, when I could return to the nurses' residence and fall into that bunk bed with the galloping horses.

It's taken me all these years to grow up — to get out, so to speak. I'm surprised when others refer to me as an "activist." But when I write about my concerns — wounded veterans who aren't getting the health care they deserve, the working poor who cannot afford to buy medicine for their children, all those soldiers killed in Iraq, soldiers the age of my own children — I know that I'm empowered, and comforted too, by what I learned so long ago on the corner of Calvert and Pleasant. I can put the words down, like a hand against the suffering. I can hold back on the tears until the work is done.