4. The Radcliffe Infirmary

The Radcliffe Infirmary had a character and spirit that was quintessentially British. Understated, slightly turned up around the edges and always bustling with people. For half a century this hospital, and its environs, have shaped my life, more than any other place on earth. John Radcliffe bequeathed £140,000 to Oxford University upon his death in 1714. He was a famous London physician who treated royalty. He attributed his success to his Oxford education. The prime use of the money was to build a beautiful library in the heart



of Oxford, known today as the Radcliffe camera. After building the library there were £4,000 left in the trust and this was used to build an observatory and a hospital, the Radcliffe Infirmary. The architect of the main building was the wonderfully named Stiff Leadbetter. It was built

in 1770 on 5 acres of land just north of St. Giles and closed in 2007 when it moved to a new site in Headington, Oxford where it became known as the John Radcliffe Hospital.

Intersections with a life:

- A small boy, perhaps 5 or 6, is out shopping with his mother. They take a short cut down a narrow road which runs by the Radcliffe. It is the road used by ambulances. The entrance to the emergency room has heavy, black, rubber, swing doors through which the stretchers carrying the injured can be pushed. The doors are scratched and scuffed. They make a dull thud when they slap back against one another. An ambulance, with its insistent bell, pulls in. The small boy is thrilled and scared.
- Three years on the 8 year old boy sits on the cold, worn, clean linoleum floor of the Radcliffe with a dozen other children. Each wrapped in a blanket, each anxious and afraid in the dimly lit corridor. One by one they are taken into the operating theater. After 15 minutes the victim is wheeled out again on a stretcher, looking to the rest, as they sat huddled and shivering in the corridor, as if he or she were dead. The procedure was tonsillectomy. The last thing the boy



remembers is being wheeled into place and the anesthesiologist placing a felt mask over his face and telling him to take deep breaths.

- Another three years and the 11 year old boy gazes from the top of a double decker bus on his way to school. It is winter - grey, cold, damp and confining. A fountain in the form of Triton stands in the front courtyard of the Radcliffe Hospital. He looks at the cascading water turned to ice
- It is 1967, the boy is 13, he has developed Type 1 diabetes. He sits in the diabetes outpatient clinic at the Radcliffe. He is still thin as a lath from the ravages of the uncontrolled disease and trying to grasp what is happening to him. Long waits, the ignominy of having to pee in a bottle so they could test his urine for sugar and his heart sinking in shame as the solution turned bright orange indicating that his blood glucose is high. This is followed by a venous puncture to measure blood glucose. His only solace is a Dr. Hockaday who is the lead consultant diabetologist. He took a shine to the boy and his gentle reassurance filled the boy with hope.
- Another three years and the 16 year old boy takes a summer job in the Radcliffe's X-ray department. He is paired up with an old, eccentric fellow to develop the films slotted into a hatch in the wall of the dark room. One day, as the boy fed a film into the developer, the old man struck a match to light his cigarette which, of course, ruined the film. The surgeon hammered on the door and screamed at them to know which one had switched on the light. The exposure had been the key one in a barium meal series being given to some poor 7 year old child. We both remained silent and endured a torrent of abuse.
- A 21 year old man, complete with an undergraduate degree in biochemistry from the University of Bristol, joined the Department of Clinical Biochemistry, which had its laboratories in the Radcliffe Hospital. The laboratories were housed in nondescript brick buildings



attached to the main hospital. They were enriched by being next to the Tower of the Winds and The Observatory. The Observatory, which opened in 1778, was the second in Britain after the one in Greenwich, London. The tower was inspired the ancient Tower of the Winds in Athens, built c.100–50BC by Andronicus of Cyrrus for the purpose of measuring time. Like the one in Athens, that on the grounds of the Radcliffe is of stone in the form of an octagon, with eight relief images of Greek mythological wind gods at the top of each side of the tower. On the top of the tower, which is some 112' tall, are Atlas and Hercules supporting a globe.

- A 23 year old man sits at a research bench. His shoulder length hair hangs forward over his jaw line as he peers through a microscope into a petri dish. He is picking islets of Langerhans to conduct experiments



on the regulation of insulin secretion. His lab mate Peter, calls his name. The man looks up to see him standing with a red-haired, smiling woman just arrived from America, his future wife.

- It is 1999, 22 years later. The man's father places the hospital ward phone on the pillow next to his wife's head. She talks to her son in America. Well, she tries to but the effort exhausts her. She tries again and says she is sorry that she did not send him a birthday card. The first time is his 54 year life. The next day she dies from lymphoma in a ward at the Radcliffe.
- In 2007 the Radcliffe Infirmary in Woodstock Road closes and is moved to Headington.
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