

## God's Hotel by Victoria Sweet

That wasn't all I learned from Mr. Bramwell. There was his sister-in-law, Lorna Mae.

Lorna Mae was Mrs. Bramwell's sister. While not as beautiful or as statuesque as her sister, she was just as tall and just as dark and rich a color, and a year into my rather ineffectual treatment of Mr. Bramwell, she turned up one day at his bedside. At once, as soon as she saw me, she burst out, with a big, embracing smile and a lit-up face, "Is that you...Miz Altman's great-niece?"

I looked at her. It took me a while to remember.

"How is your dear mother? And your sisters? And how are you?" she went on.

Suddenly it all came back. Lorna Mae had taken care of my great-aunt Bess years before. I remembered her walking out of the kitchen, as I was sitting with my aged, feeble great-aunt, to bring her soup; and I remembered her at my great-aunt's funeral, too.

She'd come to the funeral with two other friends, and they sat in the back. It was a formal funeral, attended mostly by white-haired little white people in black suits and ties, black dresses and pearls. Since my great-aunt was not religious, in lieu of a service there was a violinist and a cellist, playing Bach. I sat on the side of the chapel, and the mood was somber, staid, and philosophic. The little white-haired white people sat in front, listening in silence to the cello and violin, and dealing as best they could with the meaning of life in the face of death.

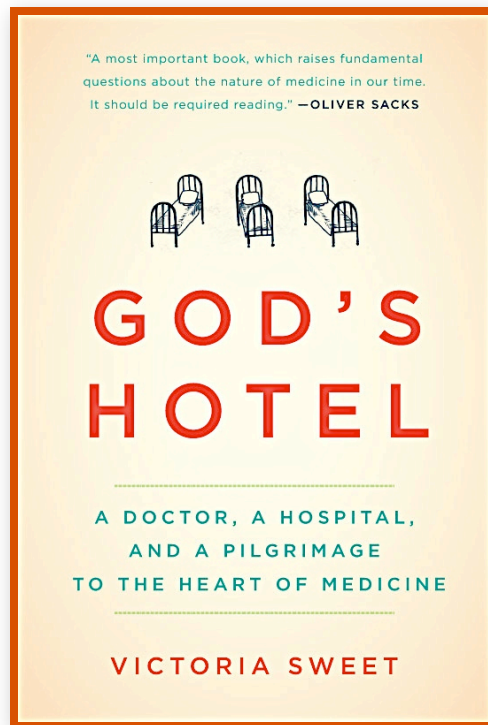
But I could see Lorna Mae in the back row. I didn't know why she came, whether to mourn my great-aunt,

to honor her, or, perhaps, from a sense of accomplishment - a job done well, now over. She was not dressed in black, but wore a heavy dark purple silk dress and a huge purple felt hat with a swooping green feather. She did not seem sad or dismayed; she sat confidently, with satisfaction, I thought, in the sure and certain hope of resurrection and faith in a life to come. Her confidence and her purple hat with its green feather became the focal points in the first piece of writing I'd ever published.

And here she was, fifteen years later.

Sitting by the side of her brother-in-law's bed, she looked at me expectantly. What would I do for him? And what hit me at that moment was the reversal of our positions. Once I'd been sitting by my relative's bed, and she'd been the giver; now she was sitting by her relative's bed, and I was the giver. It was the reversal of our positions that struck me. It illuminated something I'd been puzzling over, which is that the root of hospital is hospitality, and the root of hospitality is *hospes*, which can mean either "guest" or "host."

In Rome *hospitalitas* - hospitality - meant caring for the traveler, the stranger, and the pilgrim, but only when he was of the same class as oneself, because then one could expect an equivalent return. So Roman hospitality was a kind of fair exchange. It was based on the idea that every host (*hospes*) was also a guest (*hospes*) somewhere else; that one's identity as either host or guest was interchangeable.



*This excerpt from God's Hotel was selected by Lin Galea who writes: "Like one of those little miracles that happen along the Camino, Victoria Sweet's book crossed my path: I wasn't looking for it - It found me. God's Hotel takes place at Laguna Honda Hospital in San Francisco. In this book, Dr. Sweet weaves together the tapestry of her medical profession, her interest in the history of medicine, and her own experience as a pilgrim along the Camino, and how she incorporates that experience into her profession. Hospitaleros, pilgrims, nurses, doctors, and those interested in how the Camino relates to our every day life will find her book a fascinating, comforting read."*

After Rome collapsed, the monasteries grew out of their old villas, and took over many of the social contracts left in Rome's dust, especially that of hospitality. But the hospitality of the monasteries was radically different from Rome's, because the monks and nuns opened the door of their hospices to everyone, regardless of their social standing. To rich and to poor, to travelers, pilgrims, and the sick, to Muslim and to Jew. The reason for that was Matthew in the New Testament, who had quoted Jesus as saying: "Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me." Which was interpreted by the monks to mean that any guest was welcome in the monastery because any guest could be - and therefore was - Christ. That was how the Roman *hospitalitas* turned into the medieval hospitality of the monastery's hospice.

What I'd been puzzling over when Lorna Mae and I recognized each other was why, in Latin, French, and even, originally, in English, the concepts of guest and host were not differentiated; there was no word for telling them apart. They were the same. And at the moment when I recognized Lorna Mae, I suddenly understood why: it was because our parts are, in fact, interchangeable. The essence of hospitality - *hospes* - is that guest and host are identical, if not in the moment, then at some moment. Whatever our current role, it was temporary. With time and the seasons, a host goes traveling and becomes a guest; a guest returns home

and becomes a host. That is what the word hospitality encodes. And in a hospital, the meaning of that interchangeability is even more profound because in the hospital, every host will for sure become a guest; every doctor, a patient.

That is what I realized in that moment with Lorna Mae. I, too, would go from being a host in the hospital to being its guest; I, too, would become a patient.

Although sobering, that was the essence of the matter.

Mrs. Bramwell's sister takes care of my great-aunt; I take care of her brother-in-law. I teach my medical students to be good doctors, and it is not entirely unselfish, because sooner or later, they will be taking care of me. It was the measure of the Golden Rule and a good, selfish Golden Rule: Do unto others as you want them to do to you because pretty soon they will be doing unto you, directly or indirectly.

It was in this sense - *hospes*, the non-distinction between guest and host - that hospitality was, and should be, the essence of the hospital. That is what I learned from Lorna Mae.

And although I never heard it talked about, the longer I was at Laguna Honda, the more sure I was that its first principle was not medicine, nursing, or a balanced budget, but hospitality in the sense of taking care of anyone who knocked at the door because - it could be me. It was me.

Extract from *God's Hotel: A Doctor, A Hospital, and a Pilgrimage to the Heart of Medicine*

By Victoria Sweet

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Dr. Sweet is an Associate Clinical Professor of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. She is also a prize-winning historian with a Ph.D. in history and social medicine. She has practiced medicine for more than twenty years at Laguna Honda Hospital in San Francisco, which is where she began writing. Her writing has received numerous honors, including the Shryock Medal, the Estes Award, and the Stannard Memorial Award. For more information visit [www.victoriasweet.com](http://www.victoriasweet.com).

## Reflections on Portland Hospitalero Training

"As with so many of the trainings, we all went away with the feeling that we'd been back on the Camino for a few days. The atmosphere of an albergue quickly infused the weekend with the real feeling of the Camino. Kathy, Franc and Jeanette were strong proponents of the spirit of hospitality. I felt like we were once again passing on the spirit as we learned it from Jose Ignacio and Mariluz and Jan. Already we've had two applications sent to the Federation!"

Daniel De Kay  
Hospitalero Training Coordinator