

A Place of Care and Healing

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"Let's hope the ship has a captain..."

Noam Chomsky

The door of the decrepit Malibu slammed shut, and the man quickly buried his hands in the deep pockets of his thick coat as he suddenly found himself exposed to the cold wind. Resolutely tucking in his chin, he turned to the east and began to walk hurriedly through the parking lot.

The parking lot was bathed in the orange glow of the streetlights under the black of the early morning October sky, taking on the appearance of warmth. A few abandoned-looking vehicles sat silent in their stalls, the ice on their windows bearing witness to the long night spent there.

To the north of the lot, a long line of vehicles crawled along road, the exhaust from their tailpipes distinctly visible in the cold. All of them moved in unison, as if joined together by a chain, heaving forward at the green light, grinding to a halt at the red, in a steady unbroken rhythm, like they had a common goal. It was six-thirty in the morning, and the vehicles were faithfully carrying their bleary-eyed drivers to work, drivers too intent on their downward-turned headlight beams to notice the tall office buildings looming to the south, corporate logos glowing against the black backdrop. Lights from inside the buildings were slowly turning on one by one, though some had remained on throughout the night, indicative of some clandestine public service.

Beyond the buildings, the High Level Bridge was reluctantly coming to life, spanning the river that divided Edmonton into north and south, the oldest of the eight fragile threads that just barely kept one half loosely associated with the other.

It was six-thirty in the morning.

When dreams end.

And work begins.

The man reached the end of the lot, still with hands in his pockets and head turned down, and continued walking briskly along the empty sidewalk. Across the street, desperately pushing a beaten shopping cart, moved the only other living thing in sight, a hunched-over figure unrecognizable as man or woman.

For two blocks to the east, shimmering like a beacon in the dark, stretched the grounds of the hospital. Seven buildings comprised the complex, connected to each other by tunnels beneath the ground and pedways above, through which the workers relentlessly scurried with their cargo: papers, equipment, patients, food. As the man continued he could see some of them through the glass that made up so much of the hospital's walls. He noticed that if he shifted his focus slightly, he could see the reflection of the office towers far behind him. Another slight shift, and his gaze once again penetrated inside the structure.

In five minutes he had reached the main entrance, his ears and face red from the cold, and as he passed through the door of the massive building, he was welcomed inside by a wave of warm, embracing air and bright light that pushed the cold and the darkness out behind him. As soon as the door was safely closed, he raised his head and unzipped his coat.

It was a short walk to the locker room.

The locker he used wasn't the one signed out to him; it was located in a part of the hospital rarely used anymore, and as far as Human Resources knew, it probably belonged to someone who had quit working there years ago.

After opening the locker and making sure a new pair of scrubs was inside, he took off his shoes and began to change, carefully hanging his own clothes inside as he took the scrubs out and donned them. Even the shoes were exchanged. The worn sneakers were abandoned for the new, white cross-trainers he had purchased, solely for work, which were more comfortable and made all the walking seem easier.

He tucked in the loose end of the shirt and made sure he had everything he would need with him: pen, elevator key, lighter, cigarettes. It was all there. He glanced over his image in the mirror, smoothing back his thinning blond hair and straightening the uniform. Satisfied with the image, he took his hospital identification from the shelf in the locker and hung it from his shirt pocket. In bold letters, beneath the photograph, was printed a title: *Porter*. Beneath the title was a name.

Curtis.

"Curtis!" three voices half-cheered as he arrived in the department. Two more people were still there from the night shift, about to go home, unable to muster the enthusiasm to greet him.

"Hey everyone." Curtis glanced at Brenda. "How was the night?"

She shrugged. "Oh, steady, I guess," she sighed, looking at the floor. "There's a patient move there for you."

He moved to the time clock and pulled a blank card from the box as two more women walked in, speaking in a foreign language. Looking briefly at the day's schedule, he determined his position for the shift: he would be number seven. He wrote a seven in the appropriate space, right at the top of the card. Beneath it, in order, went his name, the date, and the shift hours. Then he punched the first space on the card: six fifty-four, the time read, and beside the stamped numbers, he wrote "time in".

"How was your weekend?" a cheery voice asked from behind him. He turned to see Lydia, water bottle in hand, reclining in one of the chairs for the few minutes before the shift actually started. It was too bloody early in the morning for the bright eyes and happy smile; she was likely still pumped up from her workout. But damn, she looked good for a woman who must have been pushing forty. Beside her stood Janet. Not as attractive, he thought, but more down-to-earth.

"Good, good," he answered. "I got some work done on the yard." As he spoke, he noticed Brian sitting at the desk with his back to the three of them. "Lawnmower I bought last year works just terrific. It's got a mulcher on it..."

"I've been looking at getting one of those for my yard," mentioned Janet. "Mine's getting pretty old..."

Curtis watched for any trace of reaction from Brian as he went on talking to Janet about yardwork. It would have been clear to anyone that Curtis had his own house from the amount he knew, which was why the bastard was pretending not to listen; he'd never been established enough for that. Lydia sat as she always did, water bottle in hand, intently learning as much as she could. Janet seemed more or less impressed with the warranty Curtis had been given with

his new machine, and he went on to describe what had set it above the others to give Janet a better picture of what was available since she was considering one of her own. "It's great if you've got bigger trees in your yard," he finished.

Brian finally spoke. "Has Stuart come in yet?"

"I haven't seen him," Brenda said from beside the time clock. "It's about one minute to seven. He'll be here any second now." She threw her coat around her. "Anyway, I'm going home. Have a good day, guys."

"Have a good sleep," Curtis called after her, the others joining in.

Ten seconds later, a young man with gold-rimmed glasses walked in, apparently taking no notice of anyone. He carried with him a backpack, which, as they all knew, was full of books. Just before the time clock rolled over to seven o'clock, he grabbed a card and punched it.

Curtis saw Janet look at her watch and chuckle humourlessly at Stuart's typical punctuality, and he grunted under his breath. Not a minute before seven.

"Morning," Stuart said as he loudly stowed his backpack on a nearby empty shelf.

Curtis glanced at the others: it was time to go to work, and they all understood. He moved to the counter where Brenda had left a slip of paper, the information on the patient that needed to be moved. From the Plaster Room in the basement to Station 32. Simple enough. *By stretcher*. Damn. That would take a little more work. He punched the card once again. *Pl.Rm.>32*, he marked, nodded to the others, and headed to the door.

As he left, he could hear, just barely, two women behind him, still speaking Romanian. Or whatever the hell it was.

He arrived in the Plaster Room. A stretcher with a patient on it was sitting in one of the treatment stations, slightly pulled away from the wall. Curtis looked around for whoever was in charge, and spotted another man wearing scrubs by a small desk.

"Going to thirty-two?"

"Yeah, he should be ready to go."

"His chart's under the stretcher, here, eh?" Curtis said as he bent down to check. The blue binder was there, and he read the room and bed numbers off the spine: room seven, bed three. A room with four beds. Good. More space to move a stretcher around in. He raised the sidebars on either side of the patient and pushed the stretcher ahead slightly. You had to get the guide wheel turned the right way before you set it to steer, or else the whole stretcher would wobble. No IV lines to tangle with. The patient was conscious. Maybe he would be able to get into the bed himself, without much help.

Curtis pushed out of the plaster room and into the basement hallway. As soon as he did, the guy on the stretcher began to babble.

"Okay! I'm lost already," the man said, laughing. "The trip from Emergency to here had me confused as it was."

Curtis rolled his eyes. A talkative one. "Well, don't worry about it. I know where we're going." Blah blah blah... "I'll get us there."

"I'm glad you know, because I have no idea."

"Station thirty-two. It's on the third floor."

"Alright," the patient said good-naturedly. Hell, the way he said it, you'd think you could tell him you were gonna amputate and he'd just shrug and smile. "I wouldn't have the first clue how to get there, but I guess that's why you're driving." Curtis rolled his eyes again. They all said stuff like this if they said anything at all. "That's alright, though. I haven't had any idea

of what's going on since the ambulance showed up. They just started doing their thing, kinda poking and prodding and using these really big words with each other. Then they pull out this big pair of scissors, and I'm thinking, 'Goodness, those are big scissors. I wonder what they're gonna do to me with those.' Then they start cutting my pants off..."

"Yeah?" Curtis said, pretending to be impressed. God, would this guy ever shut up? He was way too happy for this time of the morning, and way worse than Lydia. They were passing the public elevators, but he didn't want to use them. Too many walking patients and visitors; it would be crowded with a stretcher in there. They were slow, anyway. He kept on going, still throwing in the occasional *yeah* or *really?* for talkative guy. The faster, key-operated elevators were straight ahead.

"Man, how far are we going?" the patient asked, suddenly realizing how many different hallways they'd been through.

"It's just outside the elevator when we get up there," Curtis assured him as he took his elevator key from his pocket and called for a car.

"Oh, okay. I was just thinking, 'My, we've gone a ways already'."

The car arrived quickly. There was a *ding* and the double doors opened, revealing an empty car. Curtis steered the stretcher in and hit the button marked "3". That would open the doors at the other end of the car, which led straight into thirty-two. The rear doors closed behind them.

"So, what happens to me at the station?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I just get you there."

"Okay, well, as long as somebody knows," the patient shrugged. Just then the doors opened. "Oh, god, I can just imagine my wife when she gets here... she's gonna get lost and just *panic*, she's just clueless following directions."

"I hear ya," Curtis chuckled. He knew that story.

He pushed the stretcher through the barely wide enough doors. You had to push it all the way out before you could turn it; the guide wheel was in the middle. There was barely enough room between the elevator doors and the station counter for its length, but it would fit.

Two nurses sat behind the counter at the station, chatting away to each other like they hadn't even noticed he was there with a patient for them. Curtis knew they wouldn't even look at him until he interrupted, and there was no point in wasting time.

"Hello, back from the Plaster Room," he said loudly, not waiting for a break in their casual conversation. Both looked at him with their typical sneers. God forbid he should bother them with a patient, he thought.

The nurse closest to him looked at a chart on the wall. "Seven bed three," she threw at him. "He can stand up okay." She waved her hand and turned back to the other nurse. Conversation didn't even skip a beat. *Let the porter take care of it.*

Room seven, he remembered, was on the right side of the station. He pulled the stretcher in the direction of the room, looking behind him at the room numbers as he went. It was good the patient could stand - he wouldn't have to use a slider board. The transfer would barely take any effort at all. And a four-bed room - this whole call had been a piece of cake.

It wasn't far down the hallway. He moved the stretcher away from the wall to make some turning room and swung the head end into the doorway. It was always best to go in head first if you wanted to avoid turning the whole damn thing right around. Backing in, bed three would be behind him and on his left. But if this guy could walk, or even just stand, he'd only have to get close. He brought the stretcher within two feet of the bed. "Can you make it from

here?"

"Oh, for sure. I've still got one good leg. They didn't do me in *that* badly."

Curtis grinned politely as he lowered the sidebar and set the brake. The young man carefully swung both of his legs over the side and touched his good one to the ground, one hand on the stretcher and one on the bed.

"Alright, now just turn back around and sit down," Curtis coached, glancing out the window briefly and noticing that it was still dark.

The patient sat, then began to lie down. "That was easy. Who needs two legs?"

Curtis lowered the other sidebar and popped the stretcher into neutral. "Okay, see you later."

"For sure. Thanks, man, have a good one. Oh, by the way, could you do me a little favour? I'm *really* thirsty, if you could just let someone know on your way out..."

Curtis nodded and began to move away. He remembered as he pushed the stretcher out of the room that the patient's chart was still on the bottom - he'd have to drop it off at the desk. No problem. The nurses probably wouldn't even notice. Likely still chatting about the weekend.

He could hear two voices as he approached; sure enough, same conversation. When he got there, he stopped, bent down, and grabbed the blue plastic binder from beneath the stretcher, and dropped it on the counter. Make just enough noise to annoy them, he thought. Idiots didn't even flinch.

"Excuse me," he said loudly, and the two nurses again looked at him. "Mister, uhhhh..." He quickly read the back of the chart. 3207-3: *GRENVILLE, Alastair James*. "Mr. Grenville said he's quite thirsty, I thought I'd let you know."

"Thankyou," she said with that look nurses get when you've pissed them off but done nothing they could really bitch about; it would take them a little more trouble to find the patient by name than by bed number. He smiled slightly as he waited for the elevator.

On his way back to the department, Curtis paid attention to how many twists there were in the hallways. The patient was right, the place *was* confusing. Vanessa would have panicked in here. She always had been horrible with directions. He thought for a moment as he walked, trying to recall a single time in the four years they had been together that she had ever driven anywhere herself. If she had, he couldn't remember it.

Curtis checked his watch: quarter to eight. He was back in the department, gowned and gloved, cleaning the equipment brought back by the other porters, mostly portable infusion pumps and the IV poles they fit onto. It was dull work, the stuff you did when there was nothing else to do. Like smoking a cigarette at a bus stop in the dead of winter whether you wanted one or not. Like he'd seen Vanessa doing two years ago.

He'd never understood why she'd wanted the ring so badly. The last thing he needed was someone claiming rights to what was his. She'd said it wasn't about that at all, but he couldn't see any other reason she would want to get married. She'd already been through one divorce, the rich Toronto bastard taking off on her when he'd found other amusements to occupy his time, and leaving her to fend for herself after covering all his angles so he wouldn't lose anything.

Curtis didn't understand her desire for marriage before she'd left him; until then, he'd always been suspicious. Granted, he'd been good to her, sharing everything he had, just never signing her name to it. The more she wanted it, the more suspicious he grew, and with his suspicion grew her frustration. She told him it wasn't about the house, it wasn't about the terms of the settlement. It was about the token, the gesture he wasn't willing to give, the responsibility

he wasn't willing to take. Telling her he loved her again and again, bringing home the flowers every Friday, all of it she had seen before.

After four years she'd left, crying in frustration and regret over what she called wasted time. He'd made no effort to keep her there.

He recalled the image now, seen from his car in the afternoon as he was driving home from work a year later. Standing there, grocery bags hanging limply by her sides, chin-length dark hair sticking out from under a toque and wrapped in the warm coat he had given her for Christmas. Waiting at a bus stop for a ride to god only knew what part of the city. In two years she hadn't afforded herself a car. Or even a cab ride home in February when the wind viciously licked at your face, when your hands were so frozen by the time the bus arrived that you could barely hold your pass. Standing at the mercy of the world. Right where he had left her.

A pump thudded heavily on the counter and he immediately set to work on another, with more concentration than became the task.

An hour later he was back by the time clock, where Brian was informing Lydia of some task that needed to be done.

"Equipment's finished," he said, leaning his head in the direction of Decontam.

"Alright," Brian sighed, not looking at him. "Nothing for you just now, Lydia's doing this one."

"Just a pump, to thirty-two," she clarified for him.

He nodded, his eyes following her as she passed him on her way to the shelf where the infusion pumps were kept. "You on second break?" he called over his shoulder.

"Yeah. I'll be back by nine. This'll only take a couple of minutes."

He checked his watch. Fifteen minutes. As he did, the phone by Brian rang, and Brian picked it up immediately, stating the department name.

Brian listened for a moment. "Yes she is, just a moment..." He turned around. "Lydia, call for you."

Curtis leaned against the desk and looked at his feet as she passed him, pump in hand. She set it on the desk and took the phone from Brian, who didn't even raise his eyes as he handed it to her. *Nothing* got that guy interested. Or maybe he just didn't have the energy to be interested after carrying that paunch around...

"Hello?"

Curtis pretended he wasn't listening. She was speaking quietly, and he couldn't make out much. Seemed whoever was on the other end was doing most of the talking, anyway. She had turned around and was now facing the wall above the desk, her back to him. That wasn't so bad. Brian was absorbed in whatever it was he was doing, and there was no one else nearby to notice Curtis staring. *It's perfect*, he thought to himself, narrowing his eyes. She was on the phone for about thirty seconds before she hung it up, then turned to him.

"Can you do that for me?" she asked him, gesturing to the pump sitting on the desk.

"Sure," he answered, wondering what the call was about. "Where's it going again?"

"Thirty-two," she said quickly, grabbing her water bottle. She never went anywhere without that thing. "Have you seen Anne?"

This was interesting. "Probably in her office," he replied, picking up the pump. If Lydia was looking for the boss, then she probably had to leave for some reason.

"Thanks," she quipped as she passed him a third time, heading hastily in the direction of the department's main office. It sure looked like she was getting ready to go, which would make

the hospital scenery a little less enjoyable. And the whole day a little more hectic.

He turned and punched his card, marking it appropriately, then headed out the door and into the hallway. With not much to look at, all he would be left with for the day would be hospital shit. On the other hand, he thought, he did have a job to do. The whole system couldn't function without porters, who really performed the grunt work of the operation. In a place this big, you needed people to run things back and forth and move patients around, even if you didn't pay them half as much as you paid the nurses. Hell, it was almost romantic. Operating from a tiny department that never closed two stories underground. He grunted. Like valiant little ants for the glorious queen.

As he waited for the elevator he examined the pump, wondering how much tax money the thing was worth. What was that little piece of red tape on the handle there for? Who knew. He didn't even know what any of the little buttons did. Hell, he barely even knew what the whole thing was for.

He felt the elevator begin to move after pushing the button for the third floor, and watched the numbers above the door as it ascended. Sub-basement: logistical departments, including his. Basement: cafeteria, Plaster Room, other stuff. Main: emergency, lobby, that kind of thing. Two through five were all medical units. Patient Care Units, they called them. Six had tighter security than the rest; the psych wards were up there.

He got off on three, right in thirty-two. There was only one nurse at the station desk this time, and she was on the phone. He dropped the pump on the counter, turned around, and headed back downstairs. No point in waiting for thanks, he thought, as the elevator plummeted back underground.

Back at the department, everyone was slacking. You couldn't really do much in the two minutes before the break. Besides, all the workers from first break were back already, and they had everything under control. Two of the immigrants were standing by the microwave, chattering away in low tones. Curtis had heard that speaking in your own language in front of everyone was grounds for a reprimand, which is why they all did it quietly and inconspicuously. There was a *ding* and one of them took something out of the microwave, a plastic container. Something from home for the break. Must be something ethnic, he thought, as he punched back in on his card.

"We're going to the main atrium," Janet told him. "They've got the comfy chairs there."

"Alright, I'll be along. I'm going out for a smoke first." Curtis patted his breast pocket briefly to make sure his cigarettes and lighter were still there. He would grab some change for coffee from his locker on his way back from outside.

Janet paused for a moment, thinking. "I think I'll come with you."

Curtis looked at her. "You don't smoke."

"Get some fresh air."

It took Curtis a second to understand. When he did, he just nodded at her. He was leaning against the counter now, waiting for the last minute to tick away. Everyone was looking at each other. He saw Brian look at his watch and Stuart grab his backpack from the shelf. Two immigrants standing a few feet away, still whispering to each other. Curtis looked at his own watch, then glanced at Janet, raising an eyebrow. She nodded back at him and started toward the door.

All at once everyone began to move. Curtis followed Janet out the door and into the hallway, turning left. The others all went to the right, to the main elevator bay.

"So Brian and Stu are heading upstairs?" Curtis asked as soon as he and Janet were out of earshot.

"They'll be there. We'll find them."

"I'm sure the two of them will have a great time," he jeered, trying to imagine what they would have to talk about.

"Yeah," Janet laughed. "Where are the others going?"

Curtis just shrugged. No one really knew where most of the immigrant workers went for their breaks. They always just kind of disappeared. Janet continued. "What happened with Lydia? I heard she left in a hurry."

Curtis pushed open the door to a stairwell. "I don't know. She got a phone call, and took off looking for Anne."

They were silent until they were safely outside. It was chilly, but they were sheltered from the wind, huddled outside an unmarked door somewhere by an old loading bay that wasn't used anymore. No one was around. Janet looked at Curtis knowingly. "I think something's up with her. I heard her talking on the phone to one of her kids the other day, saying she was going to be home late."

Curtis shrugged as he lit a cigarette. "That could have been anything."

"Well, she seemed to be kind of sneaking off just to make the phone call. Whatever it was, it was obvious she didn't want anyone here to know."

He took another drag. "Can you blame her in this place?"

Janet scoffed. "That's true. But I don't think it's just a one-day thing. Whatever's going on, I don't think it's got anything to do with her kids."

"You're probably right. Hard to imagine Lydia, though, having... problems. I mean, of all people..."

"Yeah, that would be a little ironic." Janet paused and looked around. "What else, though?"

"Who knows." Curtis smoked and looked around with her. "Makes sense. Trying to keep it quiet, not even telling her kids... doesn't sound too good. When was it you heard her talking to her kid?"

"Sometime last week."

"So it's been at least a few days now." He took a drag. "Huh."

They were silent for two minutes, as Curtis finished his cigarette. Janet was getting cold, so he smoked a little faster than normal. When he finished, he threw the butt to the ground. "We should go meet them."

Janet nodded.

The main atrium was filled with a subdued murmur instead of the clumsy din of the cafeteria, and felt more like a living room. Above the plush, cushioned, finely upholstered seats hung magnificently framed paintings of people from the past, dressed in almost regal fashion, who had somehow contributed to the practice of medicine. Above those was six stories of empty space, framed by brick walls on either side, until they reached the glass-domed ceiling that kept out the cold of the overcast sky.

As Curtis entered he noticed the other two sitting in chairs beside the glass elevator bay. As he started toward them, Janet leaned over to his ear and whispered.

"Well, look at this. What a surprise."

Stuart sat, right ankle on left knee, leaning back, clearly engrossed with the plain-looking

book in his hands, an untouched newspaper resting on the short table beside him. Brian, across from him, was desperately interested in the clip on his ID tag that was apparently not working properly.

"Hey, guys," Curtis said happily as he met them, eyes wide with excitement; neither looked up as they replied. He glanced back at Janet, who met his eyes perfectly on cue and smirked.

They sat. There was the sound of plastic squeaking on styrofoam as they both pulled the lids off of their cups of coffee, then the faint whistle of careful sipping. Stuart turning a page. Brian snapping his tag back onto his shirt pocket. An elevator stopping in the transparent bay beside them.

"Main floor," it said.

"So Anne's having another Thanksgiving party at her place this year," Janet finally began.

Brian grinned humourlessly. "I heard about the last one."

"You weren't there, were you?"

"No. I had to work."

"Oh, you should have seen it," she said, rolling her eyes. "A couple of us got just plastered..."

Curtis had been there; he tuned out Janet's voice, and instead took to glancing discretely at Stuart, first leaning forward to figure out the title of the book he was reading. *The Mechanical Bride*. What the hell kind of title was that? He peeked over Stuart's shoulder; the page on the left was covered in print, while the one on the right had some 'fifties-looking ad for soap. He tried to read some of the text; it was mostly babble. Go figure. Stuart reading a book with pictures.

Janet finished her story about the last Thanksgiving, and there were a few seconds of silence. Curtis put down the paper.

"Even Lydia was there last year," he added.

Brian looked away as he spoke. "Think you guys'll be okay without her?"

"It'll be a little busier," Curtis answered. "Probably not too bad, though."

Janet stretched casually. "I wonder why she left," she said.

Finally.

Brian raised an eyebrow, still looking away. "Couldn't tell you."

"You don't know who called for her, he?" Curtis pretended to assume.

"I have some idea, but..."

Sipping.

"Sound professional?" Janet continued.

Brian looked up for a moment before answering. "Yeah, maybe..."

"Maybe it was Revenue Canada," Curtis joked.

Brian and Janet chuckled briefly. "No, I don't think so."

Janet cast an upturned glance at Curtis, and he held it for a moment. "Well, it's none of our business anyway," she said with a wave of her hand, and took a sip of her coffee, still looking at him.

In the glass wall of the elevator bay at his side, Curtis could see the reflection of two Housekeeping staff, whispering to each other, in some distant part of the atrium.

By twenty to ten everyone was back at work. Brian had planted himself back by the phone, and was already busying himself with paperwork between calls. Curtis found himself a little

flustered, trying to get his own duties done while picking up some of the slack left by Lydia. There were patients to be moved, of course, but also used equipment to be picked up and cleaned, and specimens to be taken up to the lab on five. He was doing his best to delegate; Brian sure as hell wasn't going to step up to the leadership plate. But getting all the scheduled stuff done on time had become nearly impossible. It was frustrating. The immigrants, as usual, were always doing something, though somehow never really looking busy.

His punch card was getting more and more full as he listed each task on it. Punching in and out every time you left the department was a pain in the ass, but it was the only way to let the bosses know you were working hard. They were never around to actually see you do it with their own eyes. In all the time Curtis had worked there, Anne had never really been a normal part of his day. She just floated in and out from time to time, apparently just to make sure nothing was on fire, asking how the day was going but never needing to know anything more than "busy" or "slow", neither of which made any difference whatsoever. On Mondays she might ask about everyone's weekend, and on Fridays wish everyone a good one. As far as the workers themselves were concerned, the only useful thing she ever did was sign the paychecks, and that was all that mattered.

Up on the stations, the nurses were getting more and more annoyed at Curtis's department; everything was taking longer than usual. It didn't matter how many times Brian told them that the department was shortstopped. They expected things done right away, and all seemed to think that *their* particular patient was *clearly* more important than *any* other on the list. Brian was naturally placing the orders from the really bitchy stations further down the line than the orders from nicer ones. That was one thing he was good for, Curtis thought. You had to know how to keep the higher-ups in line.

Curtis purposefully volunteered for the longer, more involved jobs, anything that would take him to some distant part of the hospital complex, through the mazes of underground tunnels and fragile overground pedways connecting otherwise distinct buildings. From the glass pedway between the main building and its neighbour, he could see the Rehabilitation Centre in the distance, across the busy street and beyond the large park that constituted its front lawn. The drivers on the street never felt so much as a bump in the road betraying the presence of the tunnel beneath them that connected the Rehab Centre to the main building. Funny, he thought, that most of those people would never guess that the two facilities had anything at all to do with each other.

Shortly after, he was back in the department. It looked as though everyone else was busy - he and Brian were the only two there.

"Oh, good, you're here," Brian mumbled. "Everyone else is out right now." He handed Curtis the green call slip.

He glanced it over. Someone from station thirty-two. Going to the morgue. That was a little strange, he thought. Thirty-two wasn't a station people usually bought it on. Up on five was where the fossils normally stayed. And ICU took care of their own bodies.

"They said they needed it right away."

"What's the hurry?" Curtis joked, punching his card.

"I don't know," Brian said with a shrug. "I didn't ask."

Curtis shook his head and sighed. "Whatever."

The morgue stretchers were kept in a separate room in the sub-basement, a couple of turns down the tunnel. Normal stretchers for living patients stayed in the department, with cushions and pillows and sheets. The ones for the morgue weren't as complicated, probably

because it didn't really matter. Their surface was just a hard sheet of metal, sloping slightly upward at the edges, all one piece that you couldn't raise or lower. They steered differently, too, when they steered at all. Even the wheels that were supposed to stay straight never did, which made the whole thing wobble. Like a normal stretcher when you locked the guide wheel in backwards.

He took his time. The station had to call Security to let them into the morgue, anyway, and they never remembered to do that before you got down there. You usually ended up waiting with the body at the door.

On his way to the elevator bay with the stretcher, he passed the unmarked door to the morgue. Surprisingly, a guard stood waiting beside it.

"You waiting on the one from thirty-two?"

The guard nodded, but did not speak.

Curtis continued, looking down, to the elevator bay, took out his key, and called for a car. They must be in a hurry, he thought as he waited. Someone up there was making sure this was getting done quickly.

Ding.

The stretcher wobbled into the elevator ahead of him. He watched as the lighted numbers above the door changed. *SB...B...M...1..2...*

Ding.

The double doors ahead of him rumbled open, revealing the station desk immediately beyond.

"The porter's here," he heard someone say before he had time to push the stretcher out of the elevator.

One of the nurses at the desk glanced up at him, then glanced again. She whispered something he couldn't hear to the nurse next to her, who whispered back, eyebrows raised. The second shrugged. The first again looked at him.

"Okay, come with me, he's ready to go." She rose from her seat and led him down the corridor on the right side of the station. A few seconds later, he found himself at the door of room seven, pushing the steel stretcher in front of him this time, as he watched the nurse join two others at a bed in the back right corner.

As he approached bed three his pulse and breathing quickened. He couldn't help but read the tag on the zipper of the closed body bag lying on the bed.

GRENVILLE, Alastair James.

Talkative guy.

With the panicking wife.

Curtis tried to keep a straight face as he lined the hard steel stretcher up with the bed and locked the wheel. What the hell had they done to him? Just a few hours ago he was fine. Looked like a broken leg or something. Hell, he had come straight from the Plaster Room, for god's sake. No one who's about to cash in came through the plaster room. He diligently took his place beside the steel stretcher and, forcing himself, grabbed hold of the white plastic body bag.

"One... two..." one of the nurses on the other side of the bed counted out.

"Three." Curtis pulled the bag toward him and onto the metal surface as the two nurses opposite him pushed. There was a dull thud as Alastair Grenville's head bumped over the slight rise at the edge.

"Okay, let's go." The nurse who had led him to the room took hold of the foot of the

stretcher and began to pull impatiently. "Damn it, why won't this..."

"The wheel's still locked," Curtis mumbled as he bent down to release the lever.

He noticed her gesturing to the other nurses, toward an IV pole beside the bed. They nodded back at her and began to remove the infusion pump mounted on it.

He finished. "Alright, we're good to go." The stretcher began to roll towards the door.

Looking back on his way out with the nurse that would accompany him to the morgue, Curtis caught a glimpse of the pump the other two were still trying to remove. The little piece of red tape was still there.

The elevator plummeted back underground. All the way down, Curtis looked at the head of the body bag. For all his years as a porter, he could not remember ever wanting a call to be over as much as he did now. Occasionally he would glance up at the lighted numbers.

2...

He wondered what it was that the medical staff did up on the stations with the patients and equipment they asked for from the porters. All that had ever really mattered was that they took them off his hands. It wasn't in his job description to know what happened after that.

M...

He just did what he was told. You couldn't blame a man for that. They told him what they needed, and he brought it to them. Whatever they needed. To do whatever they did.

B...

Never once had he even wondered.

Ding.

The doors opened, and the security guard escorted them through the unmarked door, into the morgue. Without a word, Curtis and the guard moved the body onto another morgue stretcher as the nurse signed the papers. Then the door to the cold room was opened, and the guard wheeled the body inside, lining it up neatly with the rest.

By the time Curtis returned to the department, his shift was nearing its end. Janet was cleaning the last of the equipment over in Decontam. Brian was finishing up paperwork by the phone. Stuart was emptying the laundry bags that held the dirty cleaning rags and gowns. One of the immigrants was wiping down the counters. Pretty much like any other day at twenty to three.

He punched his card mechanically and marked it. 32 -> *morgue*.

"Everything under control?" he mumbled to Brian.

"Pretty much."

The phone rang and Brian tiredly picked it up, stating the department name. He listened, wrote something down, and hung up.

"What was that?"

Brian looked at his papers. "Fourty-four needs an infusion pump."

Curtis looked down hesitantly.

Then nodded.

And punched his card.

Obscured by clouds, the sun was on its way back down, though it would be a while before it reached the horizon. In a parking lot beneath it, a man, in a thick coat, hurriedly walked to a dented Malibu and unlocked the door, his breath visible in the cold air.

Exhaust sputtered from its tailpipe as its motor struggled to start. It fell silent, then sputtered again, caught, and the cloud of fumes gathered and grew at the back bumper, ignored by the other frost-covered vehicles lined up in the lot.

The window on the driver's side opened and an arm came out, the hand at the end of it bare and ungloved, with a cigarette between its fingers. Every thirty seconds or so, it would withdraw back inside, only to return again to the cold, this time accompanied by a plume of smoke.

A few minutes later, under the watchful eye of the office buildings looming to the south, the Malibu moved forward, turning toward the lot's exit to the north, and disappeared into the long line of vehicles that crawled along the road.

Edmonton, 2000