

Story for performance #693  
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Source: Scott Shane and Edward Wong, 'Antiwar Iraqi in Washington has a more sectarian agenda at home', *New York Times online*, 14/05/07.

Tags: [animals](#), [disease](#), [dystopia](#), [death](#), [workplace](#), [intimacy](#)

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The doctors in the hospital were a miserable bunch. One day after something like sixteen straight shifts in a row, and faced with an already stupidly too-short 4am lunch break that was first prematurely bisected by some kind of erroneous fire-alarm that dragged everyone out to the razor-wired car-park, and then rendered totally meaningless by the long long and very slow-moving lines in the hygienically suspect and incompetent New You Burger Canteen, Jane skipped eating altogether, deciding instead to take a walk through the corridors.

This place—possibly the Northern General Hospital in Sheffield, 2001, but possibly a similar hospital in Alexandria some time in the nineties—with its grey/green floors, its fluorescent tube lighting and its paintings of countries that were closed now, done in colours that no longer existed—was her kingdom in a way, the place that she'd worked in and barely left in the three long years since she was nine.

She knew already from previous expeditions through the vast expanse of the facility that there was no hope of ever truly mapping the misery but she was still haunted by a notion that some of the remaining bays, wards, levels or specialist units might be partially immune to the thick moist air of melancholy that stifled the spirits of all who entered that place and which barely turned the fans in the ventilation system that was certainly obsolete and probably Russian.

It was hard even to find a pattern for it. The entrance lobby and lower floors—opened at some unspecified time in what people called the chronological past—by Sir Elton John and maintained for what they called Admissions—were pretty much of a much-ness and the people there—grimly shipwrecked from their lives and washed ashore on filthy beds—were as generally unsmiling as the doctors and other staff that supposedly tended them. Just when she thought she'd got the measure of it though, amongst the skull faces and the idiotic jabbering of translators who were helping the cops to interrogate men that were badly wounded and who needed surgery but according to Martial Law had to be questioned first in case they died in some way during medical procedure—just when she thought she'd got the nature of it, as a particular essence or local eddy of the misery—just then she'd see something unexpected that would throw her right off her judgement. 'Hard to find a pattern for it.' That was what her Swedish friend, Agnes, who had been dead since just after Ramadan, always liked to say. Hard to find a pattern, hard to get the measure of it all. Just when the misery got thickest it would suddenly clear again for no reason and there down by the loading doors of the Cancer Unit, Jane would find a sudden cluster of Bosnian nurses laughing hard at an X-Ray or something, or patching prank calls to a sex line through to a Muslim receptionist in Ear, Nose and Throat.

The lower floors were worse and rightly considered not a good place to go, at least unless you really had to find drugs for some reason. Kids had tagged all the elevators with slogans like LATINO-ACOLYTE and BLOOD UNIT, and the deeper you went there the more the lights weren't working any more and the more the floors had a tendency not to be there and the corners—where there were intersecting walls to make them—had a tangible odour of monkey piss. Jane always said that the monkeys were their own special branch of the misery; bred for some legally non-existent and now presumably

abandoned experiments, they had long ago escaped their cages in the Hillary Clinton Gift To Medicine And Public Health Wing, and now lived wild here and there throughout the building and its Housing Project environs. She heard a Somali elevator attendant say once that the white-trash jocks down in Anaesthetics were eating the monkeys—as a delicacy—but she did not believe that—it was just the kind of thing that people said sometimes to frighten kids.

When she'd waded through the floods in the basement just past the operating theatres, Jane paused and closed her eyes for a moment, waiting, breathing softly—a temporary respite or escape from the misery. With her eyes still closed she stepped forward and walked, running her fingers on the walls as she did so, only stopping when she felt the skin start to clog with the thick, somehow nondescript, texture that her fingertips were collecting.

She skipped the upper floors; although there was no system to it she was gripped by the notion that things might very well be worse up there these days, being that much closer to the sky, if that could be a reason. Impossible to say.

She did the next two shifts working nine hours straight and then washed in a bucket to the sound of helicopters outside the open window which looked out onto Los Angeles in 1986. It was night again. Not that it made much difference. The misery circulated in the building, pooling and flowing in strange eddies, like time itself, making no sense whatsoever of anything that it encountered.

Near dawn she went to sit with Agnes in the room they'd once shared and held her hand for a while.

'How is it?' said Agnes.

'Okay', said Jane, 'the same, you know, hard to keep track of.'

'Yes.' said Agnes.

'How is it for you?' said Jane.

'Not too bad.' said Agnes. 'I lost the Internet for a while but it's fixed now.'

'Yes. I think we lost it here too.'

'What's news?'

'Nothing much. They're trying to reboot at the core. Whatever that means.'

'I don't know.'

'Some notion they can restore chronology.'

'Assholes.'

'Exactly.'

Then silence.

'I miss you Agnes.'

'I miss you too Jane. I really miss you.'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Tim Etchells.*