

ENCOUNTERS

Room 23

I enter the intensive care unit. I have been paged several times for an “urgent” inpatient consult. My beeper flashes “911” again as the heavy automatic doors heave open. The attending physician stands wilted, leaning on one elbow against the nursing station. He looks gray–green–pale. Three police officers surround him. They are scribbling on their tiny notepads. The doctor sees me approaching. He raises his arm and waves three urgent *come here*’s high over his head.

He then walks slowly, too slowly, toward me. There is something about the way he is moving that scares me ... like a strange, stiff soldier.

My new shoes are killing my feet. I limp ...

... click, click, click toward him.

He has tears in his eyes. He holds the patient’s blue chart like a horrible treasure.

We huddle over the patient’s notes.

The grotesque details of this patient are unfathomable.

He offers to walk me to her room.

A vice grip clamps and squeezes my toes.

... my stupid new shiny shoes.

I am standing in front of Room 23.

The three policemen now sit in a slumped semicircle outside the room’s glass doors.

The youngest looks up at me with kind, frightened brown eyes.

“Are you here for the assessment?”

He slides his chair sideways, offering a pathway toward her door.

Instead, I watch her from the safety of the hall.

My legs feel inexplicably weak and rubbery.

I stand and I watch her.



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Slowly, I enter the stuffy, dark room.

She is sitting up in bed, eating scrambled eggs and cereal.

Her hair is long, muddy brown with maroon highlights.

She squirts ketchup on her eggs and shoves a folded piece of toast into her wide mouth.

The strawberry jam drips down her chin.

She wipes her mouth with her fingers. She nods, waves and points to her chewing mouth, almost apologetically.

Her long fingernails are covered with chipping silver–grey nail polish.

I sit on the hard plastic chair next to her bed.

I feel slightly sick.

I have to slide in my chair backward a foot or so away from her.

She looks younger than her stated age of twenty-one.

A serene, almost holy smile lights up her waxy face.

She is clammy and pasty pale ... probably from all the blood loss.

Last night her heart stopped beating.

They had jolted her back into the hell of her body.

Her eyes are such a strange mixture of grey, gold and yellow.

She has electric blue mascara applied and I wonder how this is possible.

Remnants of sparkled pink lip gloss are smeared across her upper lip.

She sits crumpled in her bed like a scary doll.

Her gaze is almost predatory.

I am truly afraid.

She never blinks.

Slowly, she snaps open a container of lime green Jell-O.

I ask her about the night before.

She is oddly calm.

She describes what happened before she came to the hospital.

Her voice is soft and raspy.

I don't believe anything she is telling me.

She sips her tea and stares at me with a sociopathic lack of self-consciousness.

She smells like something rancid.

She spoons the green Jell-O into her mouth

and starts to cry.

I wait.

Empathy seems impossible for me.

I expect some piece of truth from her.

I hope for some kind of mercy.

Tears stream down her pale cheeks.

"The police have taken away my cell phone.

My phone is my life."

I want to grab her ratty brown hair and shake her.

I look down at my notes.

Childish loops of squiggle scrawl sideways down the page.

I ask her the same question again and again.

She has a strange, ponderous and vague quality of speech.

I know she is lying.

She finally sighs, looking bored.

"It's very strange.

We think we can just hide something and just be rid of it forever.

But I guess some things we do just come back and get us ... And kill us ...

Because that's what we deserve."

She describes what happened last night.

Every detail of horror is recounted in monotone.

Her deviance and cruelty scare me.

I know she is no longer lying.

Evil can be hideously jarring and impossible to look away from.

All the fear and revulsion that has been churning in my gut rises up to my throat.

She slowly shifts her gaze to my lap.

I realize that my hands are trembling.

I am breathing.

I slowly stand up and edge toward the door.

I can't feel my legs.

I leave the room.

The consulting physician is waiting at the nursing station.

Finally he asks me,

"What did she do with her child?"

And I tell him.

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This story is based on the author's experience, but clinical and other details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

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