

ENCOUNTERS

Hospital food court vignettes

They say it's the busiest Tim's in the city. There's always a line. The Tim's jingle rearranges itself in my head. "You've always got time ... There's always a line ..." Now I can't remember how it's supposed to go.



Voices behind me.

"You can just pay for the cremation if you don't want the ashes back, but if you do they charge extra for the box. Although if you want an urn, it's even more — \$250."

"That's a lot."

"Yeah. I can sorta understand about the urn. But charging you for a *box*? I'll bring my own damn box, thank-you-very-much."



Her hair sticks out in wisps around her face. Someone has made an attempt to tie it up in pigtails but the hair isn't long enough so there are two little blonde palm trees sticking out of the sides of her head. Cute. She clumps along in shiny hot pink boots, skipping, dancing, holding his hand. She only comes halfway up him — her dad? I bet she chose her own outfit, because she's dressed with the kind of exuberance most people lose when they're old enough to know that other people's fashion sense may not be the same as yours. The parka, hanging open, is a flowery primary print. Sparkly silver miniskirt. Purple turtleneck. Some kind of necklace. I can't see the details. I only know that they are happy clothes. The hand that is not holding on to the man is holding a grubby baby doll. The doll has lost its clothes. It does not seem to care about fashion.

The dad — let's call him that — is more subdued. He's learned to dress like everyone else. Jeans, hoodie, ball cap.

He leans down and says something



Fred Sebastian

into her ear. She pulls on his arm, and they move toward the burger place. I bet he's convinced her that a burger would be better because the line for Tim's is so long.

Why are they here at the hospital? It's a game I play while I'm standing in the always-a-line at Tim's. Guess the story. There's always a story. Who's the patient here? Is it the little girl? She looks much too healthy, with the happy obliviousness of childhood. Although she is thin. Her black leggings hang clumped around her knees, her legs two gnarled sticks planted in the bright pink flowerpot boots. No, I say to myself. Don't let it be the little girl. Tell another story. A happier story.

There is a delivery service upstairs. Maybe the mom — where is the mom? — is panting and screaming and pushing a new life into the world. A new baby brother or sister for the little girl. I like this story.

Although the man is frowning.



"He's so thin. I check his dish, and he's barely touched his food."

"It must be so hard for you."

"I hate to see him like this."

"Uh-huh."



In front of me there's a young woman, an observant Muslim, wearing a beige hijab tucked into her severely cut black wool coat, legs carefully covered up in jeans and brown leather boots. She's not with anyone.

The line inches forward, zigzag, between the queue poles and their velvety ropes. Suddenly at the place where the line doubles back on itself, I am looking at the other side of the story.

Her black wool coat is hanging open. The front of the hijab is tucked into the plunging neckline of a skin-tight fuschia sweater, hip length. The sweater outlines two full breasts and an obviously fecund abdomen.

What am I to understand from this? Her face is a blank page.



She's sitting in a wheelchair, clutching two baby dolls wrapped in one blue flannel baby blanket. The blanket could use a wash. So could her hair, which sticks out in wisps around her face. Someone has made an attempt to tie it back without success.

The man looks at the line and sighs. "There's always a line ..." The words sing inside my head.

He parks the wheelchair near the till and tells her to wait, that he's going to stand in line. She pulls on his arm to stay; he pats it and walks to the end of the queue, extending past the elevator now. Her hands start to shake. Her pale eyes, haunted, follow him

along the line then lose their connection. She is lost.

What's her story? The woman wears a hospital gown with one of those rumpled blue print cotton robes tied over it. Her face is as grey as her hair. Her arms are grey sticks, blue veins bulging. The man looks healthier, his ruddy face, plaid shirt, jeans, boots and feed cap all proclaiming farmer. Who is he? Her husband? A brother? There's some resemblance. The husband — let's call him that — stands patiently in the line. The wife — let's call her that — becomes more and more agitated. She clutches the two dolls and rocks silently in her wheelchair.

This is wrong, I think. She ought not to have to wait. I'm nearer to the front now so I turn and motion to the man. Please, go ahead of me. He shakes his head shyly. He's not used to charity. No, go on, I say.

The nurses — let's call them nurses — behind me have stopped talking about cremation. They tell him wheelchairs can cut the line. Yes, says the lady in the hijab. Wheelchairs should go first. Murmurs of agreement. Suddenly everyone in the line is nodding and pointing at the till, so he goes over and stands next to the wheelchair. Her hands stop shaking.

The queue loses interest.



"They have lots of other options if you don't want an urn. They have this package where they'll take his foot and make an impression with it. They will even paint it the same colour as the fur. Then they mount it, and you can put it on the wall."

"That'd be a nice keepsake."

"Yeah."

"How long do you think he's got?"

"Days. A week at most." A sigh. "He keeps meowing. He's in pain, I know it. I hate to see him suffer. I think I'm going to have to put him down."

"You're gonna miss that cat."

Another sigh. "Yeah."



The man has wheeled his wife over to one of the tables. He's bought her some sort of hot drink and is blowing

on it and stirring it to cool it down. He puts a straw through the lid and then puts the cup in her hands. The two baby dolls rest in their blanket in her lap. She takes a sip on the straw and smiles.

The little girl is sitting with her dad and eating a burger, her pink boots swinging happily under the table.

The woman in the hijab is gone.

I stand at the till and order a medium double-double.

The two nurses order extra-large double-doubles and joke about how the new cups don't fit in the microwave if you want to reheat them during your shift. But you can always cut off the

top inch if you need to. One of them brandishes a pair of bandage scissors on a lanyard.

I pay and head back to work.

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All characters in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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POETRY

She hits me

She was 14 years old, and very angry.

She had come to see me for a suspected eating disorder. She was not interested in any therapeutic alliance. Her crossed arms and schoolbag planted firmly on her lap made her displeasure clear.

Her mother was quiet, pleasant and polite. She tried to make up for her daughter's reticence. I spoke to her alone behind closed doors.

"She hits me." She began to cry. The mother, not the daughter.

Hers was a heart-wrenching story of domestic violence. Of divorce and all its painful aftermath. Now the daughter was following in her father's footsteps.

I listened, and consoled. I offered several suggestions and avenues for help. But mainly I just listened.

"Thank you so much." Some of the tension had left her face. *Now I can go on.*

The rest of the consult was methodical, aimed at excluding organic causes of vomiting. For the first time in a long while, I left the clinic feeling that I had genuinely helped someone.

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