

Invisible Grime

by Foster Trecost

Most everything is white because white means clean and hospitals are supposed to be clean. They wouldn't let me leave.

"Mr. Grimes, why don't you stay until we have the results? We can put you in a room, you'll be quite comfortable. It shouldn't take long."

The room isn't comfortable so ask if I can walk the halls. "Just don't go too far."

In the halls, white scrubs jostle toward me. White means clean. "Which way is the cafeteria," I ask.

"Take the elevators down to the first floor—follow the signs."

I'm not hungry, but I want to see if they keep the cafeteria clean, too. Another uniform streaks my way. "Which way are the elevators," I ask.

She answers with a gesture I interpret to mean down the hall and to the left. She's in a hurry. She doesn't look at me. Or maybe she does, but she doesn't see me.

Down the hall, but not yet to the left, a man mops a floor that looks as though it had just been mopped. The name Clarence is stitched on his shirt—I wonder if that's his name or someone else's; because he doesn't look like a Clarence. Clarence's wear thick glasses and sometimes have a mustache that crawls too far over the lip. He had neither.

I turn to the left, but misinterpreted her gesture because there are no elevators. The floor gleams as though it's just been mopped. A heavy smell of sanitation fills my senses; I fill my lungs and wish it were that easy to clean them.

I peak into an empty room to see if they all look the same but it's not empty; it's being cleaned. "Excuse me, where are the elevators?" "Not in here."

No, they're not. I leave and look for Clarence.

I know why they want me to stay. They know why, too. It's like when a policeman says he'd like to ask a few questions. He already

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knows the answers, but he asks them anyway. Policemen and doctors have a lot in common.

I follow wet floor towards Clarence, only to find he's mopped himself clear down the hall. "Where are the elevators?"

"You're almost there. Turn here."

"How often do you mop?" I ask.

"Non-stop. When I finish here, I go up to the next. And then the next."

"That's all you do, all day?" I try not to sound condescending.

"Well, I clean the bathrooms, too." He's being sarcastic.

"Oh," I say. His tone works and I feel ashamed "I noticed they were very clean."

"It's a hospital. That's what we do, we clean things."

I no longer want to inspect the cafeteria. Instead, I look up and wonder if they clean the ceilings. "Who cleans the ceilings?" I ask.

"Ceiling's don't get dirty," says Clarence. "Nobody looks up, anyway."

That's not true. People being wheeled to surgery look up. It would be depressing if the last thing I saw before going into surgery was a dirty ceiling.

"But what about..." I start to ask him about the patients going to surgery, but decide not to. "You're right," I say instead. "Nobody looks up."

I find my room again. The bed is clad in ivory white because white means clean and I sit on the sheets. The door pushes open and a clipboard enters followed by a doctor. The clipboard clamps down on what he already knew and he pretends to read the results as if for the first time. "Mr. Grimes—"

"—Don't say it," I say. But he already did. He said it when he asked me to stick around. He said it when he said my name. I look through the window and think about Clarence:

It's a hospital. That's what we do, we clean things.

