

I Wish This Was Fiction

by S.H. Gall

The convalescent home's common areas are surprisingly well-appointed, given the neighborhood, which makes his actual living quarters that much more dismaying.

Poorly lit, dusty, stifling, the room reeks of socks worn for weeks on end. My nostrils burn, and my eyes adjust to a long narrow space containing a bureau, a chair, three twin beds, and piles of unnameable filth, all strewn about like so many jacks tossed in from above. Two of the beds are occupied by prone men wearing arbitrary pieces of clothing, underwear and a flannel shirt on one, the other in sweatpants and a sock. They are both turned away.

He sits on his bed and I take the chair, which is thinly upholstered under a rind of grimy polyethylene. Already streaming with sweat, I remove the interview form on its clipboard from my agency bag, and begin.

He seems emotionally withdrawn, speaking in a barely audible monotone, frequently losing his grasp and asking for the question to be repeated.

When I get to "How do you feel about yourself in general?" his face crumples. He is unable to voice the option, "Completely Dissatisfied," and points to it on the prompt card instead.

It takes him a minute to compose himself, while I sit in a vise of pathos and anger. I know people are failed by the system. I've been there myself. I've heard the stories at conferences and symposiums and panel discussions. Mental health issues are, consensus says, notoriously hard to address.

Faced with this man, in this room, in this section of town, and the odds slowly breaking him, it's hard. Prayer being a ruse and a sham, I draw on positive energy. When I leave him with a free pen, keychain, and Annual Report, he beams and shakes my hand.

This may just be "inappropriate emotional response" - according to the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale - but I sense it's not. Anyway, I'll take it.

