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Being

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Extract

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It must have been around nine thirty in the morning when the waiting-room door opened and the sandy-haired man with the clipboard came in. My appointment was at nine, so I'd already been waiting a while, but I wasn't really that bothered. I suppose I was feeling a little bit anxious, and there was something about the hospital gown I was wearing that made me feel weirdly uncomfortable, but I wasn't pacing around the room or chewing my fingernails or anything. I was just standing at the window, gazing out at the hospital grounds, trying to convince myself that everything was going to be OK.

It was just a routine examination.

All they were going to do was stick a tube down my throat and take a good look inside my stomach.

What was there to worry about?

'Robert Smith?' the man at the door said, glancing up from his clipboard.

I don't know why he asked, I was the only one there. But I suppose he had to say something.

I looked at him.

He nodded at me. 'This way, please.'

I followed him out of the waiting room and he started

leading me down a long white corridor. I wasn't sure what he was – nurse, administrator, some kind of assistant – but he was wearing a hospital tunic with a name badge pinned to the pocket, so I guessed he knew what he was doing. He walked briskly, with busy little steps, and as we crossed the polished floor, it was a struggle to keep up with him. Too fast to walk, too slow to run. I scampered along behind him.

'Dr Andrews will be performing your endoscopy,' he told me, glancing over his shoulder. 'He's very good.' He smiled reassuringly – a quick professional smile. 'There's nothing to worry about. It'll be over before you know it.'

I gave him a look – half-smile, half-shrug – just to let him know that I *wasn't* worried about anything, but he'd already turned his attention back to his clipboard and was marching away down the corridor.

I wiped my sweaty hands on my gown and carried on following him.

At the end of the corridor, just as we reached a pair of green curtains set in the wall, he stopped quite suddenly and spun round to face me. I scampered to a halt in front of him.

'Uh, sorry about this,' he muttered, peering at his clipboard. 'I just have to . . . um . . . sorry, I just remembered something.' He frowned to himself for a moment, then looked up and smiled tightly at me. 'I won't be a minute.'

'Uh . . . OK,' I started to say. 'What shall I . . . ?'

But before I could finish, he'd turned round and walked away, leaving me standing there in front of the green curtains, nervously fingering the hem of my gown, not knowing what to do.

I crossed my arms, uncrossed them, put them behind my back.

I shuffled a little.

I looked around.

I kept still and stared at the floor.

I could hear muffled sounds from behind the green curtains. Low voices, medical mutterings, the scuffle of small movements. Adjustments. The ring and tink of instruments. I listened hard, trying to make sense of it all, but none of it meant anything to me. They were just hospital noises.

I rubbed my eyes.

I scratched my neck.

I shuffled some more and carried on staring at the floor.

I looked down at the floor again.

Time passed. Seconds, minutes . . .

Nothing happened.

The hospital moved all around me. Porters, nurses, patients, doctors, men and women in suits. Everyone was busy.

I stood there waiting.

When the sandy-haired man eventually came back, he was carrying a large brown envelope in his hand.

'Sorry about that,' he said, slightly out of breath.

I looked at him, wondering if the envelope had anything to do with me. But if it had, he wasn't telling.

'Right then,' he said, whipping back the green curtains, 'let's get started.'

*

The little room beyond the green curtains wasn't really a room at all. It was more like a short white corridor. A chamber. A halfway place. An anteroom, perhaps . . . whatever that is. It was a small place, functionally cramped and quietly busy. Machines, doctors, nurses, trolleys. Monitors, instruments, bottles, tubes.

The machines hummed and whirred.

The doctors and nurses muttered gently.

It was a place of confidence and no emotion. Everyone knew exactly what they were doing. Everyone except me.

The air smelled of metal and clean hands.

Through a narrow opening at the far end of the corridor, a darkness glowed with a hidden light. Rinky-tink sounds drifted down from the darkness, and I knew that was where I was going.

Into the darkness.

It all happened so quickly.

So fast, so final.

'Lie on the trolley, please.'

I felt really awkward, clambering on to the trolley. I felt stupid and clumsy and useless.

I clambered.

I sat.

I lay down.

Now I was lying on my back, staring up at a strip light on the ceiling. The light was sterile, penetrating.

I blinked.

Swallowed.

Waited.

Nothing was happening.

When I raised my head to see what was going on, I saw a man in a green tunic removing a plastic syringe from a hygienically sealed packet. Dr Andrews, I presumed. He placed the syringe on a dull metal worktop. It rolled a little. He steadied it. He said something to a nurse. (What did he say?) She nodded and turned away. Somewhere behind me, someone was humming a tune – *hmm hmm hmm*. Shoes scuffed softly on the white-tiled floor.

My neck was stiff.

A nurse came over and put a blood-pressure cuff on my arm. I smiled at her. She looked at a monitor, read out some numbers.

Dr Andrews said something to her.

She nodded again.

She asked me to open my mouth.

I opened my mouth.

She told me she was going to spray something into the back of my throat, to numb it. 'It won't hurt,' she said. 'Don't breathe or swallow while I'm spraying.'

I nodded.

She sprayed.

It felt cold.

'You can swallow now,' she said.

My throat felt numb and it was hard to swallow, but I did my best.

Dr Andrews had a needle in his hand now. A shortish needle attached to a small pink tube. He moved up beside me and took hold of my hand.

'All right?' he said.

'Uh-huh.'

He started rubbing gently at the back of my hand, peering at it, looking for a vein. Talking. Rubbing. Talking . . .

He was talking to me.

'. . . just a very light anaesthetic, Robert, a sedative really. It might knock you out, but don't worry if it doesn't. It's not unusual to remain conscious throughout the examination . . .'

I tried to listen as he explained the rest of the procedure, but I couldn't seem to concentrate. I was too self-conscious, too aware that I was *supposed* to be listening. As he carried on talking, his voice calm and confident, I realized that my sense of touch was unnaturally heightened. I could feel everything – the firmness of his fingers on the back of my hand, the padded metal of the trolley, the dry spit glued to the corners of my mouth. The only thing I couldn't feel was the back of my throat.

'All right?' the doctor said.

'Uh-huh.'

I watched intently as he slid the needle attachment into a bulging vein in the back of my hand.

Ting – a tiny pain, sharp and bright.

I closed my eyes for a moment, then opened them again. The doctor was holding the syringe in his hand now. Studying it, checking it. It looked so small. A tiny plastic tube of almost clear liquid . . .

I wondered how it worked. A tiny plastic tube of almost clear liquid . . . how did it work? How did it do what it was meant to do? What was in it? Was it pre-filled? I didn't see the doctor fill it. Or did I? I didn't know.

Absently, as if he'd done it a thousand times before, the doctor did something to the syringe – shook it, knocked

it, jiggled it – and as I watched him, I wondered why the syringe was in two parts. I knew it didn't matter, but I couldn't seem to stop thinking about it. *Why is the syringe in two parts? Why is the needle separate from the body of the syringe? Why is the syringeless needle inserted into my vein and* then *attached to the body of the syringe?*

The question grew to hide my anxiety as the plunger was depressed and the anaesthetic was injected into my blood.

I felt it – that sharp, alien, liquid pressure . . .

Why is the syringe in two parts?

Some reason, I was thinking.

Some medical reason . . .

And then I wasn't thinking at all.