

A Night At

The waiting room is full, and smells of sickness and aged disinfectant. The walls are painted a nauseating neutral, the corner tube TV plays some blithe local talk show.

I'm watching the others. The kidney stone who can't stop moaning for morphine and blessed death. The shrunken woman on oxygen, whose brightly colored knit hat juxtaposed her grim exterior. The child whose running will not stop and is beginning to strip off his filthy clothes, reaching into his diaper.

My name is thankfully called before I could see what the sticky child produced. My left hand is wrapped in what was once a white kitchen towel, now stained with growing red spots. I'm glad I didn't have to put it down in something less than savory.

The pepper I was chopping remained mostly intact, even if I did not.

Brightly lit and lacking most of the hospital trappings, the clinic portion sits on one side of the Emergency Room the actual real life or death side could be seen from my exam chair across a central desk, where a rainbow of colored scrubs flit around in butterfly motion.

It might be the blood loss making my vision wavy while I wait. The towel spots are growing and coming together to form larger splotches. I ponder the towel. It's small, actually part of a larger one. It got a hole, an afternoon and a crafty video later was three perfectly good kitchen towels. Well, two perfectly good kitchen towels now.

I decide it's not blood loss, I'm blinded by the lights. Bright, clean and new compared to the dingy misery of the other side, everything is reflective here.

The old clock and loudspeaker combo, its industrious self ticking by. I imagine myself as the character in one of those old movies where the protagonist is hanging on for dear life by the second hand and what that would feel like. Maybe I'm Charlie Chaplin? No, Buster Keaton. I'm Buster Keaton.

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The Physician's Assistant walks in just as I was picturing myself falling off the second hand. He's young, younger than me. He probably has never had to chop a pepper, probably still has his mom to do it for him. I frown as he unwraps the towel, which has started to stick to my hand. It doesn't hurt so much as it feels odd. He rinses the wound with a hospital bottle of sterile water and pronounces I need stitches. I don't react, I want to tell him I'd have used a Band-Aid or not for all the blood. I decide I'm going to call him Junior since I missed his name.

Junior leaves the room to get the supplies to repair my hand. He returns with a large syringe of lidocaine and the suture kit. Across the desk there's a commotion and I look over. It appears to be a young, wet person the real emergency staff is working on. Junior stays on his task and numbs my whole hand with a nerve shot. I'm not paying attention to him as I watch the action. The colored scrubs are running in and out, the police are standing around. Junior excuses himself to assist the butterflies with the child. My hand is starting to tingle a little, fingertips down. The wound looks ragged, uneven.

The stretcher person looks serene, almost golden. I realize it's the light on that side of the emergency room. I realize the kid isn't coming back from this one, not matter how hard they work. It's an odd change of color in the lips I could see from that far away; gone from a dusty rose to a purply-blue.

I think of the sticky kid in the waiting room. I think of my own kids who so far have survived. I think of myself. A chill runs up my spine and I shudder. Someone isn't going home. Parents going to an empty house, siblings to feel guilty the rest of their lives. A missing leg, a cut finger all weightless in comparison. I take a deep breath and savor the stagnant air.

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Junior returns to close the gap cooking dinner caused. The curtains close and with it my window to the unfolding tragedy, but I already know the steps that come next. Junior bandages my hand and tells me to keep the wound clean, I instantly forget the rest of the instructions as he hands me paperwork. I thank him and head for home, and wonder about the chaos.