

The Snail

The janitor was the first to notice the visitor. He noticed the visitor because he bumped into him by accident. If he hadn't bumped into him the janitor would never have paid the visitor any mind.

But they had bumped into each other so the janitor apologized. "I'm sorry."

The visitor didn't reply and shuffled away without a word or look of acknowledgement. This bothered the janitor. He studied the visitor carefully.

The visitor was strange and not like the usual family members that visited the hospital. This visitor looked lost and out of place, even a little bit suspicious the janitor thought. It was as if he didn't want to be seen.

He briefly thought to inform the staff but then stopped himself because he knew that the doctors and nurses didn't want to talk to him. They had never talked to him so he had never bothered talking to them.

Why then should I tell them about the visitor? Let them figure it out for themselves if they can. I will keep an eye out for

the visitor myself.

So he wouldn't forget, the janitor formed a picture of the visitor; grey, deep set eyes that avoided eye contact, a head full of grey hair and unkept, long yellow nails. He thought the visitor had been tall once but his thin body was now bent with age. He wore a London Fog overcoat, white button down shirt, and stained khaki pants. He smelled slightly sour.

The janitor remembered the way the visitor moved quietly so as not to be noticed; hugging the walls and moving along slowly and steadily. Like a snail. That was a good nickname for the visitor he thought. The Snail.

The janitor wondered how long the Snail had been around before they bumped into each other. He might of been wandering around the hospital for months the janitor thought. Maybe years. Maybe he has been here longer than even I have.

The next day when the janitor arrived at the ward he took his time so as to catch sight of the Snail. It was the only place he ever saw him and the janitor quickly realized that they were both creatures of habit. Both he and the Snail showed up in the ward at nine in the morning, right as the shifts changed.

At first the janitor thought this was lucky timing, but then he realized it was for another reason. At that time everyone was either distracted with starting or finishing their day. The

Snail would go unnoticed. He would just be a slow moving snail in the blurry background of the busy ward.

But then why was he there everyday at the same time? The janitor knew he had to be going somewhere and had to be up to something. There were no other visitors who had such regular habits and who kept coming back every day. There was no reason to. The ward was the "Last Ward", the last stop for patients who weren't going to make it. No one lasted long enough to have regular visitors.

The janitor had to think of a way to follow the Snail without him knowing. Because he had to scan sensors placed throughout the hospital that kept track of his movements, there was only so much time he could spend in the Last Ward. The janitor thought that if he rushed through his duties he could stretch his time in the ward long enough to follow the Snail.

The janitor worked quickly and made sure he was in the ward at just the right time. The janitor hadn't given much thought to why the Snail was always only in the Last Ward, he just wanted to find out what he was doing in there. He knew no one lasted long enough for him to be seeing one patient in particular. Perhaps he was seeing more than one patient the janitor thought. But then why would he be doing that? He had to stop himself. He didn't want his thoughts to get away from him because he could

imagine all kinds of weird possibilities.

Right on time the Snail appeared. He watched as the Snail entered the ward and slowly made his way past the nurses desk. No one paid him any attention, almost like he was invisible or a ghost that no one could see. As he watched the Snail, the janitor was struck by another mystery; how was it possible for him to get past security and up the elevators in the first place? No one should just be able to walk right in.

At the same time everyday the security guard by the elevators saw the visitor coming in. The visitor had become such a part of his morning routine that the security guard never questioned him.

"Good morning. How are you today?" the security guard asked.

"Good morning, good morning. I am well, how are you?" the visitor said.

"Good thanks. Have a great day."

"Thank you, you too."

The visitor made his way into the elevator and hesitated at the key pad. "Seven," the security guard called out.

"Got it," he said just as the doors closed.

God, what's his name thought the visitor. I wish I could

remember his name. He has on a name tag. If only I could see better. Next time I will have to get closer to see the tag. But how will I manage that? Maybe I could ask him a question then reach out to brush something off his uniform. But that might make him nervous. Maybe if I bring him something, a cup of coffee. I think he would like that. Next time I will bring him a cup of coffee.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. He stepped out and looked at each possible hallway, pondering them, waiting for some affirmative feeling to come to his mind. But nothing came so he set off down the hall to his left. He knew he was headed in the right direction when he saw the janitor bent over, replacing a trash can liner. The janitor was always there when he came into the ward. We keep the same schedule. Funny how some people's lives fall into sync. Was there some inexplicable connection between people who came into frequent contact he wondered. Some energy or force that drew them together, or was it just happenstance, or timing, good or bad? The janitor seemed involved in his own business and was perhaps unaware of all those questions so it wasn't worth any further thought. He had to focus on where he was going anyway. Where was he going?

The janitor changed the can liner, taking his time, all the

while keeping an eye on the Snail. Once he passed by, the janitor finished and pushed his cart down the hallway behind him. He kept a safe distance and was ready to resume his cleaning routine if necessary. Now we'll see where he has been going all this time.

The Snail abruptly stopped in the middle of the hallway and looked from one end of the hall to the other and from one side to the other. The janitor had no option but to keep rolling down the hall past him. He hadn't expected this. The Snail was behind him now and he couldn't well turn back or stop and see what he was up to. Could it be that the Snail had become suspicious?

I will wheel around the corner and wait a minute. But he knew he couldn't just peek his head out and take a look. He had to think of something less obvious. He also had to scan the next check point soon. If he didn't there would be questions. But where had the Snail gone?

I will just peek my head out and take a look. The janitor stood still, frozen by indecision. He wasn't accustomed to thinking about what someone else might be thinking. You're an idiot, just take a quick peek.

There was no sign of the Snail. He must have gone into one of the rooms, but which one? There was nothing he could do about it now. He had to continue on his rounds otherwise his supervisor

would ask questions. He would have to try again tomorrow.

The visitor sat in the chair quietly watching the still body on the bed. His expression was serene as if quietly sitting there was satisfying enough in itself. The body in the bed stirred slightly and rolled toward him revealing the wrinkled face of an elderly woman. She was relaxed and her expression peaceful. He thought about how pretty she looked, how familiar she looked. He had seen her chart when he came into the room. Her name was Opal. He liked the name right away. He didn't have to get used to it like some names or struggle to remember it. It came naturally to his mind and now that he saw her face it fit. She was like an opal, glowing from some inner energy. Her eyes opened and she looked at him with confused concern.

"Who are you?", she asked.

"I'm Jonathan. You're Opal."

"Yes. How do you know that? Should you be here?"

"If you want me to leave I can."

He started to get up to leave.

"No, no. I didn't say that. I was just wondering how you know my name. What you are doing here?"

"I saw your name on your chart and I just thought you might like company."

Opal quietly studied him. He accepted her gaze and sat there while she made up her mind.

"You're the first person to visit me."

"Don't you have anyone? Any family?"

"No. No family that are near enough to bother I suppose."

"Sorry."

"There's no reason to be sorry. It's just the way things are. Are you here visiting someone?"

"Yes," he said.

She looked at him as if she expected him to say something more.

"I don't mind if you stay," she said.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure, as long as you don't mind telling me a bit about yourself."

"I don't mind. What would like to know?"

"Who are you visiting?", she asked.

"You."

Her expression slipped into surprise. "Do I know you?"

"No," he said.

"Then I don't understand. Why are you visiting me?"

"Like I said before, I was passing by and thought I would pop in for a visit."

"Do you do this often?"

"I don't know. I suppose I might."

"You don't remember?"

"I remember this place, the hospital, but I don't remember when or why I started coming here. Coming here makes sense to me somehow. Does that make sense?"

"Yes. It does I suppose. Where do you live?"

He pondered for a moment before answering. "Bird, a bird, a red bird. Robin Lane. Not far really."

"And you come here everyday?"

"I do. Yes."

The janitor sat on his worn couch that night and brooded. His favorite show was ruined by his brooding. He had to find a better way to follow the Snail. I mustn't let him get behind me. If he stays in front of me I will be able to see where he goes and what he is up to. I have to finish my duties on the ward before the Snail shows up so I don't have to rush. The plan gave him just enough peace of mind to drift into the world of his show.

The visitor woke that morning feeling like something important had happened the day before but he couldn't really remember what

it was. He thought about it till his brain ached. It wouldn't come to him. He had to force himself to relax. Breathe and relax. If he relaxed then maybe it would come to him. If that didn't work then he would retrace his steps, what he could remember of them. I will let my body guide me. He began with his breakfast. During breakfast he worried about the unknowns outside his door but he had to trust that he could find where he needed to go and get back to where he had had been.

His trick for this was to remember the story of the day. Each day he created a story about what he did, about what he wanted to remember, and then all he had to do was recall the story and retell it the next day. The hardest part was always the beginning of the story. But he found that if he began his story with; "An old man wakes up and eats breakfast," things got easier from there.

After breakfast the old man bathed, got dressed and went into the world. When he reached the foyer of his building he thought about how in his story he always went out the building and to the right. Always right, never left. He pondered for a moment where going left might take him, thought better of it and went right.

The janitor was waiting in the Last Ward. He had come in early

and completed his rounds. Right on schedule the Snail made his entrance. He appeared lost in thought, but he was the same mysterious presence that no one paid any attention to.

The janitor could see the confusion oozing out of the Snail and the more he studied him the more he felt pity for the way he shuffled along. He truly was like the snail you come across right in the middle of a path. You wonder how the snail could possibly survive without getting squashed by someone. How many times had he bent down, picked a snail up and moved it to a safe place. But where was the Snail going?

The visitor said hello to the janitor as he passed by but the janitor was too lost in thought to reply. The visitor recalled the janitor from the story he was telling himself and made sure to remember him as a character for next time. The next part of his story involved a number. He had always liked numbers. His first job had been in a warehouse and he had found that remembering the part numbers of items came naturally to him. He had only to see the number and then he could visualize the corresponding part. Not long after taking the job he had begun to dream in numbers. The numbers had formed a bridge from his waking world into his dream world. Now the numbers were a bridge from his reality to his memory. 736. That was the number he was

looking for. He walked down the hall and there it was. 736. He peered inside at the sleeping figure on the bed. Opal seemed at peace to him.

The janitor watched as the Snail entered the room and disappeared from view. Now he knew where he went, but how was he going to see what he was up to in there? He knew that the Snail had been coming to the ward before the current occupant of Room 736 arrived. So what could their relationship be? What could he be up to in there?

The janitor couldn't just walk into the room and find out. He decided to walk by and hover near the door for a moment to see what was happening. He would drop something and pause just long enough to glimpse in.

He set off with his cart, positioning a spray bottle on the edge so it would fall at the slightest bump. Across from the room he gave the cart a nudge with his knee and the bottle fell. It fell such that the spray top snapped right off, the contents spilling out. This was better than planned. He quickly grabbed some paper towels and knelt down to clean it up, all the while keeping one eye on the room. He would think about what he had seen later when he felt guilty about what he had done.

There was the Snail, sitting in a chair, holding the woman's

hand. His head was bowed over, almost touching the pale blue hand. The janitor looked at her face and could see that she was gone. He thought he could hear a faint mumbling coming from the Snail but he was too far away to hear clearly what he was saying. Maybe he was muttering a prayer.

He quickly cleaned up the spill and walked to the nurse's station. As always he was impressed by their efficiency. He stood by as they covered the woman and led the Snail out of the room. They walked him over to some chairs in the hallway and helped him sit down. One nurse talked with him while the others dealt with the woman.

There was no way the janitor could leave now. They had called security. There would be questions. They would want to know why he was still in the ward. He would have to explain how it was because of the Snail. He would have to tell them about his suspicions about the Snail if he was to save himself.

The visitor made his way toward the bank of elevators just beyond the guard station.

"Excuse me, excuse me," the guard called.

He wondered who the guard might be addressing.

"Please sir, you must stop."

The guard had left his post and was making his way toward him.

He probably just wants to say good morning the visitor thought.

The guard looked troubled.

"I'm sorry, but I can't let you go upstairs."

"But, why?", the visitor asked.

"I don't know why really. I was just told you can no longer go upstairs unless you are visiting a patient."

"But I am a visitor," he replied.

"Do you know who you are visiting?"

He had to think about this for a moment. He could not really think who he was visiting. He knew, or he thought he knew, that there was someone.

"I just can't remember, but I'm sure if I go upstairs I will remember."

"I'm really sorry but I can't allow that. If you can remember who you're visiting, and go sign in, then I can let you upstairs."

"Oh, okay."

"You're welcome to sit over in the lobby while you try and remember. Stay as long as you like," said the guard.

The visitor made his way toward the lobby and sat in a hard plastic chair. He thought about the story he told himself that had gotten him there. Why didn't the story include who he was visiting?

He watched the people moving through the lobby. These people seem to know where they are going. Their stories are working for them he thought. I will start another story. In the story I will go out and to the left tomorrow when I leave my building.