

Diagnosis.

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"I've got an appointment with the Doctor," I say. Her piggy eyes don't raise a smile.

"Uh-huh," she replies and refers to her keyboard.

Tap tap tippity tap.

"5.30"

"Uh-huh."

Tap tap tippity tap.

I'm not late. I know I'm not late because I hate being late: Especially for my appointment.

"Name?" She knows me. You know *me!* You know *my name.*

"Martin?" Think about it lady. "Stillen?"

"Uh-huh."

Tap tap tippity tap.

"Are there many waiting today?"

The receptionist finally lifts her twitching beetle lids and lets her sharp glassy stare seek out my soul. Our eyes don't meet; they are just matching magnetic poles juddering repellently.

"Just the one," she says coldly. She manages the diary with Third Reich efficiency and

won't be questioned.

"Waiting room's through there," she nods.

"I know," I say. *I do know.*

The tiny glass peephole sighs shut.

She's a liar: The waiting room is full.

I open the door and the chatter spills out: Slices and snippets of sound that crash together all around me. I step cautiously into the middle of the room – it's 360 degrees surround sound.

Every single higgledy-piggledy mismatched chair is occupied. But one. I sit in it and take a moment to breathe.

The words don't cease, they chew their way into my head:

"...vegetable aisle, two trolleys..."

"...unfortunate timing, and anyway..."

"...glass screen, hit his head..."

"...everywhere, I don't know about nine quid..."

They make no sense together of course, so I try to concentrate on one conversation at a time. But I've lost thread of their context. Some voices are soft and lulling, others clipped and harsh. Only the Old Man sat opposite me doesn't say a word. I peer at him from under my brow. I feel he's studying me so I do that trick that I do when I don't want to think about something I don't like - I put my hands flat together between my legs and press really, really hard with my knees. I can feel the back of my hands begin to ache and it makes me feel calmer.

Like a butterfly I snare one sentence in my palm. I peel my fingers slowly open:

"...no time, is it, for proper examinations? What, ten minutes? I ask you. What if it's cancer? Cancer doesn't work to 'ten minute consultation time slots', does it?"

Theses are the vinegar-tinged moans of the elderly lady to my left talking to her friend. She angles her shoulder away from me to stop her words spewing into my lap. But words don't go in straight lines, do they? They bend and twist, they curl and fold, creep under doors, through cracks in floors, into ears.

Whether you want them to or not.

"...barely got your coat off and he's shuffling you out the door again..." She moans.

Waiting rooms are full of moans. Moaning is the energy that fuels the perpetually ill

I've realised.

A white-hot numbness courses through my knuckles like a morphine injection. I feel a beautiful tingle and my equilibrium returning.

The lady to my left is so masked by powders and paints that she could be anything between fifty-five and seventy-five. But it's clear her jowls are beginning to melt. The bird's nest of copper wire on top of her head has been dyed to within an inch of its life. I can see the pink bowl of her scalp beneath it. She wears too much blue eye-shadow, too much crimson lipstick and too many patterns in one outfit.

"...it's these Eastern Europeans," she says, "they should get their own NHS and leave ours alone..."

Her companion is a placatory: Trained to nod on each verb. She wears the same shapeless blouse and skirt as her bigoted friend, but hers are dipped in the colour of squeezed-out tea bag. She's been left in the sunlight too long and has started to fade.

"...and that's the hidden cost, shorter appointment times..." Bigoted Lady continues. I feel her companion melt through the vinyl cover into the foam padding of her chair.

"...on top of the taxes we pay..."

"It's always so warm in here. Don't you think?" Says the Old Man. He won't stop staring at me. He's sat next to the surgery door and is tapping his stick on the point of his toe. I like his eyes, they are sparkling with questions. He has big hairy hands that he rubs all over his face.

Let me take you around the rest of the waiting room. It's full and you need to understand who else is sat there. I'll start with the Old Man and go clockwise:

Old Man.

Hyper Mum.

Hyper Mum's Son.

Banged-up Teen with toddler.

Friend of Banged-Up Teen with toddler - could be her sister.

Soulless Husband.

Soulless Wife.

Me.

Bigoted Lady.

Bigoted Lady's Friend.

They've all got something to say for themselves. But that is people for you: Too much noise, not enough reflection. Example:

"...2am, then he's texting me next morning, I was like, don't even..." Banged-Up Teen spills her giddy barrage of crashing vowels and consonants all around the room. *"...at Gav's all morning – apparently – yeah right, then, what the, he rocks up at the flat..."* She goes on: *"...I'm like, get outta my face. I've had enough, right? But he's all, you know..."* Her friend – no, it must be her sister, they share a nose – skips her plastic nails across the face of a tiny illuminated screen cradled in her palm. Her jaw chews on repeat, her lips snogging an imaginary lover. I can see her calves. I can see her knees. I can see the inside of her thighs. I feel my repulsion and lust hard to reconcile. Banged-Up Teen continues her monologue, her child swinging from her shiny plastic Primark boots. Even the child is bored by his mother's inane yakking. He chews on a leaflet about chlamydia and pulls the magazines from the table. He is under the chairs, on the table, amongst the box of books in the corner, pulling at the blinds, tangled in the blinds, pulled away from the blinds, next to my feet, on my feet, at my legs.

"Get the fuck off." I shout.

The voices explode to silence.

Ouch! You have just witnessed the power of a moment. We all have the ability to surprise every now and then. That was my moment.

It was just a word. One word, but the voices have stopped. I only have a brief moment to revel in my outburst before they start to build again.

"Now then, son". The Old Man says. "You okay?" He looks even more worried now. I like that someone cares.

Slowly the chatter starts to flow back into the cracks in the air:

"...your pot's not in here, Anthony, honestly..." Says the Soulless Wife to her Soulless Husband beside her. Soulless Wife peers into the pit of the bag nestled on her lap. I expect a golden glow to light up her face as she prises its mouth apart.

"...It was on the hall table..." Soulless Husband whimpers wringing his osseous fingers. She plays the contents of her bag like a librarian's Rolodex.

"...it's not here..."

“Do you want me to call the nurse?” The Old Man asks. I think I shake my head. It’s sometimes difficult to know. I try not to shake it too much; I don’t want to lose a thread on the voices playing in there.

“...*You’ll have to fill another, do you need to go?*” Soulless Wife is pulling out ephemera like she’s looking for her husband’s sample pot in a magician’s hat. Her head bobs with disappointment.

“...*ask the woman for another pot. Honestly.*” Soulless Husband peels himself from his seat. His walk is slow and broken.

The Old Man is *still* staring at me. Please don’t.

I look above his head, to his left and to his right. He is framed by flyers and posters that remind us waiting room guests of the fragility of our existence. The power of suggestion is a potent aphrodisiac to the hypochondriac: Check out the malingerers’ daily charter:

However Cancer Affects You - talk to us.

Are you in the 45 to 49 age group?

Do you have at least one of the following risk factors that could lead to a chronic disease later in life?

Know your pulse. Talk to your doctor.

Are you exhausted for no reason?

Thyroid UK. Ask us.

Most common illnesses don’t need antibiotics.

Know your rights at the doctors.

Get your immunisations today.

Chat to a professional.

She may look clean but some girls have gonorrhoea.

I busy my mind reading about home births for pregnant mothers. It’s a familiar distraction technique that I know won’t work. The voices continue their nattering, chattering insistence:

“...*two weeks behind on the maintenance, and anyway...*”

“...*walk right into the benefits office and sign on...*”

“...*well, press the bell if she’s not there...*”

For Expectant Mums-To-Be:

Home birth is a relaxing way for parents to welcome baby into the world.

Expecting? What is any mother expecting? All these voices have mothers, were they what was expected? Did Hyper Mum expect this? Or did she think her sweet baby would be a talcum powder pink ball of helpless fun forever? Did she expect the curtain of greasy hair over the dead black eyes. The tantrums and threats, bile and hate? Did she expect blackheads and eczema? Depression and psychosis? Expecting? What's any mother-to-be expecting?

"...you mumble, and he needs to hear it from you..." Hyper Mum says. Son looks like he is weeping beneath his hair. He can't keep his angular hips still and she prods his leg. *"...responsibility. Are you listening?..."* He doesn't say anything. I think he nods. It's the quiet ones you need to be wary of.

It's when the voices fall silent that you start to worry. That thought comforts me. Sometimes I think the voices are too much, but every now and then I am reminded that they are my brain-blood pumping through my head. I complain about the noise, but really how would I cope with the silence? I'm aware that I might be expressing some of my inner thoughts on my face. The Old Man is looking at me with a concerned frown. I want to tell him to butt out. But he reminds me of my granddad and my granddad was a good person.

Then the Old Man is standing up and stepping over to the surgery door. I hadn't noticed but the Doctor must have called him. He stutters to a stop and I fear he might topple over without the aid of momentum. He looks at me. And I don't like it. His eyes are soft watery jelly, they look younger than the crumpled plastic bag skin around them.

"You okay, son? You don't look so great."

I try to nod, or wave, or something. The door opens and the Doctor fills its hole. But I'm paralysed by the Old Man's stare. It's pulling me in and I don't like what the voices around me are saying. They are all chattering away at once again, words tumbling over each other, sentences fractured and splintering so nothing makes sense any more:

"...broken... downstairs... aren't we... now.... rental based on... guess what?... filled up... see?..."

“Why don’t you see the Doctor before me, son.”

I can’t tell whether the others in the room agree with him or not. None of them will stop for a moment and let anyone else have a say. I really do wish they’d all shut up.

“No,” I insist. I can’t let him give me his appointment. He will have to wait until everyone else has been seen. I can’t do that to someone who looks so much like my granddad.

“She said there was no-one else waiting,” I say, glaring at the Doctor. I wave my hand towards the Old Man, “you can’t expect him to wait whilst you see all these, these... people.” I know I shouldn’t let the frustration snare me, but I feel it filling my chest and expanding inside me. “She lied,” I cry and the Old Man steps to hold my arm. His fingers are giant spider legs. I flinch and put my hands between my knees again.

I stare at the Doctor, it’s his fault the room is so full. If he kept to the designated ten minute consultation slots. I want to tell him what I think, how I feel. I want to raise my finger to point at him, but it is numb from having squeezed the blood from it and it feels like a cold lump of lead dangling from my hand. Anyway, he’s not in front of me anymore, he’s sat down in the chair to my left. Where Bigoted Lady is... was, used to be. Where did she go? I didn’t see her leave. I can still hear her voice clack-clacking away. My arm is bare. I can feel my hairs twitching on the cold skin. The Old Man is standing in front of us. Hug me or go away, I want to say to him. I look at my arm and watch the needle slowly disappear into the waxy epidermis. I feel cold and I feel hot. And I feel my head fill like a wall cavity pumped full of foam.

Welcome to peace and quiet everyone.

They’ve all started to leave the room. Soulless Husband holds the door open to the reception area and they all shuffle out of the waiting room. Banged-Up Teen’s sister is still tapping away on her phone, but I can’t hear her fingers any more. I can’t even hear the footsteps. Then they are gone and the door to the waiting room swings shut. I think I can hear the remnants of a whisper before a sense of calm washes over me like a sea of bleach. I feel my mind emptying; its contents glugging away slowly.

The doctor is very insistent:

“...your course of medication...”

“...control the psychosis...”

“...need to take it, we can’t help if...”

“...audio hallucinations...”

I think I shrug. It’s hard to tell, my body has joined my mind and given in to undiluted

inertia. I feel hollow and empty.

I feel alone.

I feel lonely.

I miss them. I miss their voices so much I want to cry. I want them all back - Bigoted Lady and friend, Hyper Mum, Banged-Up Teen and sister, Soulless Wife and Husband, even toddler with his grubby fingers winding their way around my legs.

I want them to come back.

But it's too late, they've gone. The Doctor has scared them away with his needle. The Old Man looks at me sadly. I know what will happen - I will sit on that hard chair in the corner of his room and he will peer into my eyes with that pen with the little light on the end. He'll tell me to breathe and ask me stupid questions designed to catch me out. But he won't because I know the right answers. Then he'll tell me how he's going to mess with my medication again and pat me on the back as he pushes me out of the door. But I won't take his tablets. They take away the people close to me. They shut up the voices. And I need to let them back in.

So: I will tip his silly white pills in the sink and I will pick up the phone to make my next appointment.

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