

# ***Back Man's Desire***

I walked into the emergency room. It was packed. I navigated my way to the check-in counter, showed them my insurance card, and sat down to fill out a new patient form. I never go to emergency rooms, but this hangnail just wasn't going away and I was tired of dealing with it. So, I listened to the room's chorus of muffled coughs and private groans of discomfort and impatience as I took my time filling out the sheet. I could tell I would be there for a while.

I had taken a seat the furthest I could find from the several televisions scattered around the room. My morale was low enough without being forced to listen to young couples argue over paternity test results, or smarmy show hosts mock stupid criminals caught on tape.

The door to the examination rooms opened for a moment and many of the heads turned hopefully toward it. The nurse in the doorway scanned the waiting room. It seemed to me that as soon as he spotted me, his eyes widened slightly before he ducked hurriedly back into the other room, the door swinging lazily closed on its pneumatic cylinder behind him.

I noticed the person sitting directly across from me had a cast running from their toes up to their knee, with only the tip of their big toe poking out from the open end of the cast. The toe was a sickly purple, and the hole of the cast it protruded from was crusted with a browning smear of whatever comes out of a toe that looks like that. Their face was pale and splotched with angry red eczema. Perhaps worst of all, every few minutes they would pull their shirt up to their sternum—revealing several more acres of eczema and dark, curly hair—to scratch at their bulbous stomach with a sound like a butter knife scraping a slice of burnt toast.

The entire room was a horror show of medical conditions. An older man constantly coughing into a shirt sleeve that had long since become darkly drenched in spittle and mucus, as veins stood out on his balding head from the strain of it. A young child with a gash along their hairline, which they would finger absently between rounds of earnest nose picking. A middle-aged man in a bloodied white t-shirt, absorbed in a rerun of *The Maury Povich Show* playing on the television across the room—his concentration broken only by the occasional wince as his hands leapt to his abdomen in a momentary

attempt to soothe whatever wound seethed under that thin layer of ruddy cotton. Everywhere I looked I saw pain, sickness, and general misery. It made my hangnail seem insignificant by comparison. But I wanted it dealt with none the less.

It took less than a minute to take in the scene, and I was barely a quarter of the way through my intake form when the same nurse as before strode into the waiting room and called my name. Surprised, I looked up at them, making that vague sort of ‘who, me?’ face one tends to make so many times throughout their life. He locked eyes with me and repeated my name with a knowing grin. I looked around the room a bit sheepishly as I stood, clipboard in hand, and began pacing past grimaced faces and shifting bulks, eyes tracking my movement in indignation, hands twitching with the sudden urge for a ragged, vigilante justice to be wrought upon me.

I stopped short while exiting my row of seats as a particularly miserable-looking man lurched forward, almost toppling out of his chair onto his face, and retched onto the floor. Everyone within a several foot radius flinched away in disgust mingled with pity. My shoes were flecked with vomit and the acrid reek of bile filled the room.

I looked back at the nurse in the doorway. “The doctor will see you now,” he beckoned. The man who had vomited slumped back into his chair in wretched relief, wiping his mouth, breathing heavily with eyes closed.

I skipped over the spreading pool of sick and continued toward the waiting nurse. Audible grumbling rippled across the room as I reached the door. “Are you sure I’m next?” I pleaded guiltily to the nurse in little more than a whisper. “All these people were here before me, and I’m in no rush. Really. It’s just a hangnail and-”

“The doctor is ready for you,” he interjected, cutting off my remonstrations. “These folks can wait,” he said dismissively, casting a pitiless glance at what I’m sure was the man in the bloody shirt—who was noticeably paler than before, and leaning more heavily on the armrest of his chair, eyes still locked on the television screen. “He’s really only interested in you at the moment.” The word interested was accompanied by a wink and a sly grin.

I stepped through the door being held open by the nurse. Across the corridor, standing beside a low-lit examination room, which was dotted with candles and roses in vases, stood an elderly physician in a rumpled medical smock—a white haystack of hair spilling scantily across his head—smiled rapturously at me, and lifted the lid from a large silver platter on a serving cart parked next him. “I hope you’re not allergic to shellfish,” he crooned at me as he plucked a lobster tail from a heap of seafood on the dish.

“Actually I’m terribly allergic to-” was all I got out before my throat cinched closed as the doctor approached me with the shellfish, dripping with butter and dangling from an elegant long-handled fork. I don’t recall feeling an impact, just the coolness of the floor against my swelling face, and the frenzied voice of the doctor over me.

“Why weren’t his allergies reported to me?! Where’s his form? It wasn’t completed? Why wasn’t it completed?! This is the third time this month! Who checked him in and why-”

The doctor’s reprimand wafted away on the dark wind of my retreating senses. I hoped distantly that they would take care of the hangnail before I regained consciousness so I wouldn’t have to pay for any anesthesia.



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