

Patient

You can feel the hospital groan alive in the morning hours. You can't remember if you slept or not; or if you were arrested from some half-sleep, half-waking trance stolen between medication rounds. The rhythm of the day is the sound of metal on metal: curtains shut, curtains open, allowing you to peer into the compartments of other inhabitants of the ward like rudimentary dollhouses. Last night was tough, you can see it on their faces, hear it in their tone. The atmosphere in the room is like a tide, rising as the morphine thins, and the cries begin to crash like waves.

First come the nurses, pushing trolleys laden with machines. You've started to recognise their voices, and you remember these few being quite nice. The curtain opens with a clatter of urgency. They talk you through their questions, the same ones every time. Thirsty? Any pain? Do you have a temperature? There's a beep of the thermometer, pressed into your ear before pain; just right to make you squirm, and then the familiar constriction of your arm. Satisfied, they remind you to wait for the doctor who will be here sometime today. You ask if that means they'll be here in the morning. They almost laugh. Curtain closed.

There's about eight of you on this ward. You've tried to study them - work out why they're here, their names, their stories. You're amused by the almost kaleidoscopic slice of modern life that's found itself here. Some old, some young. Some here for the first time, others practically old friends. Some of you are proud Mancunians, others just passing through. All not expecting to end up here. All wanting to go home.

Some people here make conversation, trading anecdotes from before your time. They talk about legendary nightclubs, the quiet change of the city centre, the decay of their neighbourhoods. It was an interesting conversation, one of the few times you felt connected to each other beyond being mutually unlucky. The conversation drifts towards politics, of voting, and their shared ideals. They ask you what you think, and your lie emerges fully formed: you say you haven't made your mind up yet. You remember them being nice people overall. You promise you'd remember their names, remember their faces, but now they've slipped from your memory like smoke.

Your exhaustion boils away to pain as the hours of the day creep by. You eat your breakfast and take your first sips of water. It's remarkably flavourless, memorable only by how uniquely banal it was. You take a glance outside the ward's one window, positioned far away from your bed. On the windowsill sits a collection of two dead flies. Sometimes in the morning, when the sun is low in the sky, it sends slants of light through. If you position yourself properly you can almost feel it dance across your face. The window overlooks a busy car park, and when the sounds inside the room dampen down slightly, you can hear the ring of ambulances pierce the stuffy air.

You're feeling better today, but the effects of anaesthesia do not quickly leave you. It was less being put to sleep, more your body being rewritten. A mask slipped over your mouth and a

needle placed in your arm and suddenly you disappeared. Now there's a chasm in your memory, an unknown period where you opened up your body for someone else to manipulate. The wake up is unnatural, and you jolt upright with a hazy recollection of where you are. Around you, your memory still murky, you become aware of the wires. You are able to trace one with your eyes and see what it connects to. You can feel the laboured action of your lungs as they adjust to moving independently again. You lay your fingers on your skin, clammy with sweat, and move them around gingerly. They catch on something. You can move your fingers along the twisted, knobbed scar that tears across your body. You can feel the etchings of metal that hold it together, willing it to heal. You stare at it as people buzz around you, stopping only as you are scared the weight of your gaze will tear it anew. You cradle it in your hands.

Visitors come in around eleven, and again at three. Some people had constant guests, arriving in noisy groups carrying plastic bags full of biscuits, crisps, and clean pajamas. You had thought long and hard about asking someone to come and see you, but you felt too awkward, too vulnerable, and hated the inconvenience of you having a horrible time. It was also hard to imagine anyone seeing you like this - hair unwashed, beard a mess, clothes unchanged. You could see the evidence of your time spent here etched into your face, seen only in stolen, unfamiliar glances in the mirror. The movement of family members in and out of the hospital punctuated the day nicely, and provided some necessary entertainment. People would get quite cross at the Ward Sister sometimes, who was particularly anal about the rules and said people could only come in during the designated times. She would say you have to be patient, and it's very important you wait until it's safe for them to come in. Patient. It's something you had never connected before - be a patient, be patient - the meaning shifting depending on the sentence, but both fundamentally being an instruction to endure. Hospitals were built on patience. You were not a patient man.

Your dinner comes in at some point or another, you can't remember. Someone told you a tip was to ask for the Caribbean menu, as it had an iota more flavour to the other stuff they liked to serve. The healthcare assistant sits it down and tells you to try and eat as much as possible. They adjust your blanket gently as they leave. You sit and watch the steam curl in the air.

Your time in the hospital ends one day. You were there for a while, longer than anyone expected. It was around two weeks you think, but it all blurred together by the end. It ended as anticlimactically as you could have expected - around midday, one of the doctors materialized and sat down on the end of your bed. You had spoken to this one a few times, and he seemed nice. He had kind eyes, and asked you how you were doing. He said it must have been really hard for you these last few weeks, but he's got some good news. He asks you about what you're most excited about, but you're honestly not really sure. Excitement still feels a long while away in your mind, but it's going to be good to get outside again. He says he couldn't agree more, and he wishes you the best of luck. Later, some healthcare assistants help you pack your stuff into a bag and then you're on your own. You keep the bag over your shoulder and manoeuvre yourself with your crutches around the hospital, stopping periodically to make sense of the corridors. You order a taxi, and a kind driver helps you get in with a warm smile.

It's been years now, but you still remember. It comes to you less and less but the hospital is still here - less haunting, exactly, more sitting quietly beside you. You talk about your time there often, be it with friends, when drunk, or at work, repeating it back like folklore. Sometimes you try and make it funny - like how comically mean some of the nurses were; or how one of the doctors was so hot it was practically a cliché - but you didn't think it was all that funny, really. You had tried, but the humour still felt out of reach. Truth was harder to share. There were never quite the words, never quite the time. Your body had started to mend itself, and you had in recent years forgotten to even keep track of the milestones. You ran a marathon last year. You cried as you crossed the finish line. Physically, it was a slow march to recovery, punctuated by sympathetic physio visits and a litany of clinics to attend. One day you met someone at an exercise class. The irony. He tries to understand. He kisses the sadness from your lips, then he kisses them again to be sure. Sometimes you wake up in the night screaming, and he holds you tight and whispers encouragement even though he knows you won't remember. He reminds you it isn't your fault, never your fault. There are sirens in the air, but this time they are too far away to matter. He traces his fingers along your body, cherishing every bit, even the scars. He says he loves them most of all, and you take comfort in knowing it's the only you he's ever known. You don't remember when, but one day it feels like you stopped waiting.