

The Quiet Room by Doug Holder

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My name is Leon...Leon Dunn. Most nights I wake up at 8 or so, still feeling bloated from dinner. Mostly I have early dinners. Eating makes me sleep. I have to sleep...I work nights. I go to school at night. For that matter...most of my days are in the dead of night.

Did I mention that I am 35? I guess I'm young to some, not so young to others. I live in a room. The room is quite small. It's a walk-up--Bowdoin Street--Beacon Hill--Boston. Eighty bucks a week, can't beat that. Next door to me is a retired school teacher. She doesn't say much to me. She watches me pass through the crack of her opened door, then slams it when I am down the stairs. Real friendly joint.

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I keep my life very ordered. Order for me is security. I am sure of some things. Like the fact I work five nights a week, and sleep during the day.

I don't have many friends to complicate things. I work a strange schedule anyway. I never gave much thought to working days.

Any women in my life? I thought you would get around to that. I haven't been with one in five years. They make me nervous. You know demands, expectations. Anyway...I work nights. You know how it is...

Tonight I am going to work as usual. The night shift is ideal for me. I work at a large psychiatric hospital just outside the city: McFallow. At night there are no messy confrontations with patients. The frenzy of the day shift is a mere echo by now. The dust has settled, and for a good deal of the shift I am left alone. I read, bide my time. I occupy myself with thoughts of remote possibilities, or dead ends. Then before you know it morning comes.

Tonight is like any other night for me. I wake up slightly bloated, and it's dark out. The smell in my furnished room is stale. My flat is a study of disrepair with cracked ceilings, leaky faucets, a hot plate, not to mention a view of a back alley and brick wall.. Yet I feel comfortable here. It's my home. I sleep here, I eat here, and it is mine. This is where I go after work. Simple as that.

Soon I am walking down Charles Street. I climb up the stairs to catch the subway to Cambridge. I stand on the platform, and let the winter winds whip me across the face. I like the drama here. The expanse of the Charles River, the view of the stars unobstructed. It's almost like I am emerging from a tunnel of my own making. The air is fresh and bracing...my life has a horizon.

The train stops, and then hurdles across the choppy water, only to be sucked up in the bowels of Cambridge. I inhale the vaguely urinous air of the subway car. My window seat has a clear view of a passing pristine night sky. It seems like the stars are competing with the skyscrapers for attention...then all is a roar and black...

I check my bag. It contains: *The New York Times*, "*A Portrait of a Lady*," two magic markers, three yellow legal pads, two packs of Camels, a tube of hemorrhoid cream, and a Valium. Hey...whatever gets you through the night, right?

Years ago I went to work with nothing. Now-I find it necessary to carry things. I have to have them. I find myself anxious without them. I clutch my bag now, before it was loosely slung across my shoulder. I keep it. The shoulder strap won't break. It's so hard to let go of things. I guess working nights will do it to ya'.

The subway leaves me off in Harvard Square. I walk like a ghost through the crowds of young revelers, celebratory Harvard Students, and street hustlers who line the street. My eyes are fixed on the ground, rushing to catch the 73 bus to McFallow's.

McFallow's is on a hill in the town of Belmont. Belmont was once voted the most "boring" town in the state by the *Boston Globe*. But I guess that is a good place for a mental hospital be located. There is a sort of hush here. The town could be described as "sedate", and McFallow was in the business of sedation.

Sybil greets me on the unit I worked, Trinap 3. She is the night nurse. She runs the shift. Like many of us she is a creature of the night. Her face is pale and drawn for lack of sunlight and sleep. Her body is bloated, its bulk sagging, hangingly limply from her stooped frame. She seems at times to be in as much acute stress as her patient charges; alternating between agitation and distraction. She often demands my immediate attention, and dismisses me in the

same breath. But she doesn't really bother me. Like the contents of my bag, she is a necessity. I like to know what to expect...no surprises, five nights a week, get my drift?

Sybil is sitting in her usual spot in the nursing station. She seems to be totally asorbed in her paper work. Her graying beehive hairstyle bouncing up and down, to and fro, behind the fortress of note books she is working on.

" How are you, Sybil?" I ask.

" Fine dear.. she replies, and then abruptly " You are not going to stand there all night are you!"

I have to laugh to myself. I find her perversity comical.

" Calm down the shift hasn't started yet," I respond.

" Of course... we must have lunch, one of these days. I know this cute little place in Newton Village..."

I usually shut her off by this time. She usually babbles on about her niece and her new husband, a "darling" antique store she found in Concord, or the incompetent people the nursing agency sends over.

She stops her late night stream of consciousness in mid sentence and says:

"You will be specialing a patient tonight."

Sybil then resumes her speel, something about the lack of morality in young people today.

I am barely listening. Tonight I bless my good fortune. To "'special" a patient simply means to sit in a comfortable chair and watch an

inert, sleeping or drugged body strapped to a foam mattress for a couple of hours. The patient is almost always asleep, and even if they are awake, they ramble on like Sybil. I just turn them off. I am free to read, work on my thesis, or reflect. I have been relieved from the normal tedious duties of the night shift. The symmetry between the patient and me is perfect. Both of us are in our little self-contained world. We are housed in a hushed and dim ward. I often check on these patients for breathing and vital signs. They are securely restrained by leather straps and their every need is met by the workers. They usually have been violent, but now they are sedated into a soothing haze. I almost envy them.

After pouring a cup of coffee that was consistently polluted by a terminally cheerful day nurse, I went down to check on the patient. He is a man about my age, with the sort of muscular torso that comes with hard labor rather than the measured repetition of a Nautilus machine. I check to see the restraints are secure. I am on edge with physically imposing clients. I have never been secure with my own physical capabilities. I am an oddly constructed man of narrow stooped shoulder, slightly bulging abdomen and spindly limbs. This guy could clearly eat me for lunch. Luckily he is asleep. I have some work I need to do.

I sit down in the chair, just outside the quiet room. I have to be able to see him breathing. Hours of spot checking the rise and fall of his chest. Over the years I've seen all shapes and sizes. I've seen pigeon chests, barrel chests, concave chests, well-endowed women's chests rising and falling like slowly bouncing melons. What interests me about this person is his face. He is clearly Boston Irish. The standard package: hard blue eyes, thinning blond hair, the weathered skin of a laborer, or someone has a taste for the libations and smokes. I have a sense of unease about him. Even though he is asleep I have a sense of a feral, probing intelligence. I feel like the prey before he is eaten by the predator. I probably read too much. Working nights can do it to you.

About an hour into my shift I am totally absorbed in my work; cloistered on the ward, straining to find phallic imagery in the work of Henry James. This arcane study is the "meat" of my thesis. It is something that I have been working on fitfully for years. I feel like a weasel, squirreled away in some remote forest den, greedily digging out bits and pieces of sexual innuendo from the highly refined and mannered work of James.

" Writing your memoirs, chief?"

The voice comes as a cold shock. It is thickly accented, with a strong emphasis on the "r's" It comes barreling out of the room, derailing my chain of thought, insisting on my attention, intent on confrontation.

"Cat got your tongue, pal?"

"School work," I reply.

I wonder what he is doing up. I remember that Sybil said he can have no more medication. Maybe I can convince him to go to sleep. I don't want an all night dialogue.

" You really should get some rest. You need it," I say.

"Yeah, and what makes you a friggin' expert. You a head shrink or something?"

"No, I am a mental health generalist," I reply.

The patient snickers to himself. I fumble through my bag. The Valium is gone. I must have dropped it somewhere. I wish they would turn the heat down. It is so damn hot!

I see Steve come down the hall, checking each room compulsively. He walks down the ward deliberately. He stops at each room, holding the flashlight like a ray gun, shooting a beam of white light at each bed as if to keep aliens at bay. He is a diminutive man of about 30, has thick blond hair, and a baby face. He looks like an overgrown choir boy. He is sucking on some breath mints. A necessity, if you make a pit spot at the local watering hole before work. He smiles at me:

" Looks like you are here for the whole evening, old boy. We got a sick call. Sybil asked me to tell you," he says.

At another time I might have been happy with these prospects. But this guy I was specialing gives me the creeps. I'll ignore him. I'll shut him off. I'll make his words meaningless vibrations from his throat. I'll maintain my composure, an airtight vacuum. I will be in CONTROL of the situation. I can use a smoke. No hope for that. They have given me the chair...seven hours sitting here, with a guerilla. I'll bury my head in the notes. I'm trapped...

" That nurse on the second shift. Now I call that philly a fine piece of work. I went out with a chippie like that in Charlestown. She had a body on her that would give a stiff a hard on. What's her name?"

" Clovis. Listen it's really important that you get some sleep. I really can't talk about other staff.," I answered.

" You got a girl, professor?"

"I don't think that's anything we should discuss....try to sleep." I reply.

" Even money you don't. I figure you for a guy who runs the first time they pull down their pants."

He laughs nefariously. I squirm in my seat. The damn heat, can't they turn it the fuck down. My throat is beginning to tighten. I can't concentrate.

" That none of your concern, I'm sure. Please focus on yourself, that's what you are here for."

He laughs again. He seemed to enjoy this interrogation. I continued to plead the fifth to no avail.

" How old are ya', bud?"

"Thirty Five. Are you satisfied. Please try to calm down. Please try to calm down."

" Working nights, living alone I bet. What do ya' do for kicks, stay inside and play with yourself," the patient sneers.

I reply: " My life is not your concern. I am going to stop this interaction."

" Stop This Interaction? You talk like you think your something. There ain't much difference between you and me. I'd say I probably should be in the chair watching you."

The time is two-thirty AM. It seems it will be five hours of torture. I am as much trapped as he. We are in the middle of a strange dance, and he is leading. I wish he could be quiet. Just shut up for a minute.

" Where do you live Mac?"

" A furnished room in town. Perhaps that fact will put you to sleep."

" Suicide suite, huh? Bet you have a few tumblers, shoot your wad, and say woe is me."

" My life is not your concern." I reply.

" Not that I give a shit. I just make it a hobby to figure out strange birds like you. Funny me down here and you up there. The only reason your ass ain't on the line is because of these four straps."

I will try to ignore him. I feel like a lab specimen, being dissected. I was trained to refocus the conversation to the patient. He is reducing my life to his pathetic vision. I work hard to keep things in their proper place. It is a precarious balance to maintain, yet I have achieved a fragile stasis. I now feel like a Blanche to this guy's Stanley.

" Me I am married, a few kids. I admit I hit the juice a little hard. We all have a few skeletons...know what I am saying. I don't regret much. I had a good time, bird dogging chicks, running with the boys playing the dogs at Wonderland."

" We are about the same age, ain't we prof. A billard ball has more hair than you. Got a face that would make Igor look good. You are going nowhere fast Jack."

He seems to have a genius for picking out more sore spots. His perception is fine-tuned, and with lazer accuracy he tears at me. It is a game to him, in which the stakes are higher for me. He has a need to get to me, a focus for his venom. I am his personal toilet bowl.

" More to life than those books you read friend. Working nights a long time?"

"Long enough." I say

" World goes by, and you sit in the dark. People make families, take vacations, maybe make some decent change. But you stay in the

dark. A cheap room, a hot plate, some old picture of some girl who forgot your ugly mug a long time ago...What a waste..."

" Just shut up. Just shut up!" I was losing my composure.

He smiles widely. He got a rise from me. It as if he smells blood. This is his personal march to the sea. He has momentum on his side.

" Did I piss you off pal. Good. Now we are cookin' with Crisco. That's what you need. To get good and mad."

" He continues: " I know guys like you. Educated, working shit jobs. Think they are better because they read a few books. Sort of keeps them going. They wind up in some fleabag. The big decision in their lives is whether to order the meatloaf or pot- roast in the local diner."

I think to myself. What was it five years ago. There was a girl. She used to say I was special. I loved her. She made demands on me. I walked our apartment like a caged animal. There wasn't any defining incident in our break up. Just a slow fade out, and then a note: You're a special person, but its over, Don't call." I never saw her again. I even looked for her for awhile. Not anymore, ancient history.

There was silence now. I looked up from my notes. He is smiling at me without warmth, without a trace of humor. It is a smile of a man who has the upper hand.

" So what is it Sherlock, you got something to hide?"

" I really must insist that you focus your energies on yourself. After all that's what you are here for."

My voice starts to quiver. This makes the patient perk up. He is

almost coiled like a cat ready to spring.

" The question is why are you here? They had to drag me here kicking and screaming. I got a wife and kids to go to after I blow. You are staring at your navel every night. I think you found a rock to crawl under friend."

A decade. A decade of long nights. A long string of darkness. My eyes squinting in the early morning sunlight. The morning commuters and I are always in furious opposition, moving in different directions. The day in progress. I come home everyday and fall asleep to the din of talk radio. Disembodied voices that intertwine with my sleep. The night shift has always been my soft cushion to the frenzy of the world.

I found my eyes swelling with tears. There is a pit in my stomach as empty as my life. I am swaying back and forth in my chair. I hold my sorry body with my thin inadequate arms. I don't know how long I stayed this way...

The patient is asleep. He has a contented look on his face, like a baby fed and tucked in. He sleeps soundly. It is 7AM.

" You are relieved now." Steve said at the end of this long shift.

I walk down the bright hall. The morning light has generously filtered through the sterile ward. The day shift is in progress. I walk by them like a ghost.

" Leon, what are you doing?!" a day nurse asked.

The foam mattress supports my limp body well. My arms and legs are outstretched waiting for the leather straps. The sun shines through the screens illuminating the room giving it a divine glow.

" I've been relieved now. I've been relieved."

The End.

Doug Holder works at McLean Hospital, a psychiatric hospital outside of Boston. He has written a chapbook of poetry about his experiences: " Poems of Boston and Just Beyond: From the Back Bay to the Back Ward." (alpha beat press-1998) He is the founder of the Ibbetson Street Press.

