

“Room 216A”

A shivering short story

All was dark and I could see and hear nothing.

I did not remember falling asleep, but I must have done. I lacked any sensation, realizing I could neither reach out nor feel anything. I felt half-awake, just aware enough of my semi-conscious state for it to cause me consternation. I felt out of place, as if somehow I knew I was not at home. I had no idea where I was, no memory of leaving home and traveling somewhere else. But I was decidedly not home, no longer safe in my bed.

That, I knew, somehow, deep down.

I had no idea how my translocation to this place, wherever or whatever it was, had occurred or how long I had been in this place. Had I been unconscious here, possibly for hours? Days? Weeks? I could not tell.

I strained and racked my memory, desperate to remember. Last I could recall, I had finished off a night cap, turned off the gas logs and retired to my bed. I remember closing my eyes, feeling my mind drift off, the increasing depth of my breaths, the intervals between them becoming longer...had I possibly been drugged and kidnapped unknowingly in the middle of the night?

I had the vague impression of grogginess. The slightest feeling of lightheaded nausea ever so gradually filled me, the kind similar to that which accompanies waking too early after going to bed too late, or perhaps better described, hungover. I felt distressed. Panicked.

Yes, that was it. I'd been kidnapped. I knew it!

Some fiend, some sinister thief must have broken and entered my home undetected, drugged me, then born me away to whatever prison I was now in. But I felt even more unease as I tried to look about, attempted to make out any details I could of my surroundings, but failed. I saw nothing but darkness still.

And that was all I sensed, whatsoever, just an empty, dark void surrounding me, lonely and isolated and a light-headed, dazed, hungover feeling. I felt troubled deep down in my very being, having only these two feelings, one physical and the other emotional, for what felt like an eternity. I tried to call out but could not. It was as if I had no voice, no being. Nobody could hear me if I had been able to call. Nobody was there to hear me, anyway. I felt despair welling up within me. It was as if I had never existed at all.

Then, a tingling.

I began to become aware of my limbs and body again, and felt what I thought was a damp, cool breeze blowing on me that gave me the impression of being in a large, cavernous space. I tried yelling out again but was unsuccessful; this time I realized I could feel my throat. It was dry. I craved water.

I sat there in darkness for an immeasurable, what I pondered was possibly an infinite amount of time, alone, cold, and unable to see where I was or anything around me.

I reached out.

I could feel my surroundings all around my body with my fingers now. They grazed what felt like old fabric, perhaps felt, covering the stuffing of a cushion, on a seat upon which I was evidently sitting that had the texture of wood, I found, as I ran my fingers along it. Sliding my hands behind me down the backrest of the little chair and beneath the cushion, and eventually I discovered metal legs and bolts that anchored the seat to a cold, what felt like concrete, floor, and a short wall straight behind my seat made of the same cold stuff.

I felt my body, all over. I was wearing the bathrobe I'd gone to bed in, its soft fuzziness caressing my fingertips. I ran a hand over my stomach. There were no chords, no bindings. Nothing keeping me here. Yet, I was so petrified, so disoriented, I dared not get up or try to venture away from this chair I had found myself resting in. What if it were bolted to the side of some craggy cliff and I unwittingly stepped right over its edge into an unseen abyss upon rising?

It was so *odd*, I thought. I could not have been kidnapped. If such was indeed so, then my captor was quite odd, not chaining me up or restraining me in any apparent way. Yet here I sat, afraid, alone, and unwilling to budge.

I waved my hands all about in the dark there, searching for any other clues as to my surroundings. I found nothing but dank, dark air. Try as I might, I could not will myself to stand, to rise and try to ascertain where I was and find a way out. I was still quite groggy and felt dizzy, too, and did not wish to risk it.

Presently, I began to hear noises. Something soft in the dark, a whisper or whispers. It began as a hardly noticeable, faint, far-off sounding breeze, in regular increments, like distant snoring. Then it steadily grew and became more distinct, until straining my ears, I recognized the noise as voices. Human voices, whispering. They seemed to be getting closer and louder and all around me.

"Hello?" I croaked, and then jumped, startling myself. My voice was back! I cleared my throat several times, trying to get my parched throat to where it could speak more fluidly.

"Who's there? Can you hear me?" I managed to rasp, then bellowed.

No response.

Just the whispering, its light chattering coming to a crescendo so that I could make out words and partial sentences, some in my native tongue, others in languages foreign to me.

"Hello? HELLO?" I shouted again to no avail.

I became aware then of a growing light. It did not have a source that I could tell. The place I was trapped in was ever so slightly, ever so agonizingly deliberately becoming illuminated. It hurt my eyes (how long had I been in darkness?) and I squinted as my surroundings leisurely revealed themselves to my eyes.

I was in what appeared to be an indoor amphitheater with considerable, long concrete rows, once following another in increments like large steps, each of which contained rows of cushioned seats identical to the one on which I was sitting. The cushions were dark crimson I could now tell. The theater itself was tall and narrow, giving me a feeling of vertigo as I looked down to the bottom level, a gray,

cement semicircle of some considerable length which was the focal point of the audience. Behind it lay a massive gray curtain drawn across whatever lay on the stage or unseen territory beyond. Enclosing the concrete seats on all sides were curved walls made of gray, uneven, rough cement, some hundred feet or so all around, presumably extending at least partially behind the gray curtain, and I imagined wrapping around the exterior of what would be a stage beyond it.

The entire scene felt odd, eerie, and familiar.

Many of the seats around me were occupied by people who were whispering and looking all about. It was a diverse group, all sorts of people of all age, race, shape, and size. Some were wearing pajamas. Others were in normal, modern clothing, while some were wearing business attire, as if they had been going about their daily work routines and had suddenly found themselves whisked away and seated here in this strange sort of indoor lecture hall. I even saw a child, no more than two at most, sitting bobbing on the chair. It looked happy, bouncing up and down and clapping its hands.

Some of the other people looked frightened, others calm, others still angry. No one here seemed willing or capable of standing and removing themselves from this place, the ones old enough to have experienced adult autonomy locked in place by the same malevolent melancholy that prevented myself from being overly adventurous and seeking an exit.

It was at this juncture I realized I no longer felt sleepy-headed and concluded in my head that whatever I'd been drugged with had likely worn off. I tried and failed to stand, struggling against some invisible force that held me there in the sitting position, until I felt fatigued and let myself fall back against the backrest behind me. Would that I could but rise and make for one of the stairways that lay between rows of seats at certain intervals and look for a way out of here!

By now the room was fully illuminated and I could see my entire surroundings. Some of the people in that audience could see me too and attempted to communicate with me. None of them were successful, only managing faint, garbled whispers to me. I shouted at them, but evidently my shouts were whispers to their ears as well. A few there seemed entirely unaware of the others in the room with them.

One man haunted me. Eyes wide and darting all about, his head swinging wildly around this way and that, he wore a look of sheer terror. His mouth was wide open and he must have been shrieking in terror at the top of his lungs, but none of us there with him were able to hear his cries, and, despite his body language, could not rise to go comfort him, to calm him, to reassure him he was not here in this dank place alone. He simply flailed and yelled in a frantic, wild panic, unaware of anyone else, and frightened.

I do not know how long we sat there in the room, we plethora of people, confused, dazed, unable to correspond. After what felt like an aeon, suddenly down at the base of the concrete facility on the gray floor, a door in the uneven gray wall off to the audience's right-hand side I had previously not noticed (or perhaps had not even been there at all!) suddenly swung open. The door itself was arched and made of oak, with a circular iron knocker affixed to it. The door opened outward, revealing a dazzling, multi-colored, brilliant light, and out stepped what looked to be a young man. He was dressed simply in a long, white robe that ran down to his sandaled feet. He stepped forward and faced us, swinging the door shut behind him.

Looking upward, the man spread his arms wide, reaching his hands outward in a welcoming fashion, indicating he was addressing all us.

“Thank you all for your patience. You need not wait much longer; the curtain will be opening momentarily.” The man spoke, in a soft and soothing tenor.

This was all he said. Then, he bowed to us, turned, and made for the door.

And I saw them then. Two folded wings jutting out from his back. Like enormous eagles’ wings, but white as snow and with perfect feathers, or perhaps more accurately, *the* veritable, quintessential idea of feathers, so perfect and pristine were they.

This man had wings, and I saw them as he turned away from us there and walked back through that door. He walked over the threshold into the doored hole in the gray cement wall, turned, and, as he swung the door back shut slowly, I could have sworn that with that marvelous dancing, glimmering light bouncing off his face I saw him look at me, directly at me, meeting my eye, then he looked down at the floor frowning and shaking his head as if he were disappointed the moment before he closed that door.

I knew I must be dreaming then.

What I had seen, the creature standing there below addressing us all, I simply did not believe in. I knew it could not exist and therefore it did not, and I refused to believe that it did or that it could. This had to be a dream. Yes, that was it. This was a dream! It all made sense now.

Until what I convinced myself had to be a dream grew stranger still.

After only what must have been mere moments following the angelic person’s disappearance behind that door, the gray curtain moved. It opened ever so slightly, sliding partially to my left so that a bright, long line of white sliver light, the length of the curtain that stood remarkably high, all the way from the tall ceiling to the cold, concrete floor, shone through in just a mere slit from whatever lay beyond.

I looked up and examined the curtain closely for the first time.

It defied earthly physics, I found, seeming to levitate in the air, not suspended from anything at all, but hanging there nonetheless, stretching out considerably longer and wider than a motion picture screen, and now moving a tiny bit open, revealing a light from whatever opening it covered as if hanging from an invisible rail and having been pulled back slightly.

When the light shone out, the behavior of the people changed. So did mine.

Before me danced what I can only describe as ghosts. They were lifelike, real, moving human forms, yet there was something unreal about them. It was not unlike watching a movie reel, but rather than translucent moving pictures of people and places, I saw real people, perhaps *more* real than they had been when I’d known them, dancing before me with bright silvery outlines the same color as the light that emanated out from behind the curtain. They interacted with a far dimmer, gray, less distinct miniature version of myself.

The figures formed and moved in front of me, and I recognized them all: people in my life, friends, foes, family, coworkers. Even strangers. Everyone I had ever worked with or interacted with in

my life up to this moment, except for those in the chairs like I was. They moved in front of me and my mind took me back. I knew the situations; the interactions I had had with them in life that played out before me.

Those people and my dealings with them played out in front of me and I saw it all: fun times, good memories. Difficult, hard times. Sins. Some of these ghosts I had wronged tremendously in life. It was painful to watch.

It went on and on. I experienced elation, seeing relatives long since dead whom I loved, simultaneously with grief and guilt as these moving forms of people I'd known danced and flashed, acting out all of my interactions with them in my life. It became overwhelming. I could not stand it.

I tried to look away, but every time I did, the images would move with my stare. It was maddening. If I closed my eyes they were there, too, their silvery glow illuminating the darkness behind my eyelids. I managed to see out of the corner of my eyes that everyone else around me apparently was in the same predicament, though I could not see the ghosts that haunted them. Some were screaming, though I could not hear it, only see their bewildered expressions and open mouths. Some were covering their eyes, but I knew they could still see the horrors they'd done unfolding. Some still seemed at peace, or unperturbed whatsoever.

At length I concentrated hard and looked beyond these images to the gray curtain. A silhouette seemed to be fluttering before me. I focused, straining my mental faculties hard. The figure became more solid, more in focus. It was another man hovering there, with wings like the previous one, outstretched. He was watching me watch the events of my life, carefully observing while I relived them all. He wore a look of concern, like a fan rooting for me, or a coach standing on the sidelines of a game biting his nails hoping his team could pull off a play successfully. I felt an energy emanating from him and briefly thought that this being felt familiar, as if I had known it my whole life.

Then my concentration broke and I snapped back to the pictures.

I befriended a boy no one else seemed to like and picked on in grade school. Looking beyond the images, the angel seemed to become brighter, clearer, and more distinct. I looked back to the images and saw my teenage self-shoplifting, a deed for which I had never been apprehended. The angel became less distinct, blurring in my vision. The figure of the boy I'd befriended earlier shifted and was an adolescent. I was ganging up on him with the other boys. I was no longer his friend. I could not see the angel. I saw what I had not seen in life after this. I saw the boy's life unfold from that moment. He'd transferred schools. Had few friends, usually. But went to Church often. He'd studied hard, read his Bible, went off to seminary.

I realized my misdeeds had ended up helping someone, despite my best effort to make this poor individual suffer, make his life miserable at a certain juncture in life. I looked past his priestly silver outlined figure, the scene of his ordination unfolding before me, and I saw the angel again, a hopeful look on its face.

It went on and on like this and I watched in agony. To my horror there were far fewer good deeds, genuinely charitable, considerate things I'd done for others throughout my years. The events of my life kept flashing and finally followed a linear progression until they led up to the latest event (I could

remember it as soon as it flashed before me) that had happened right before I'd gone to have my nightcap then off to bed that night.

A woman who helped clean my house had come to me begging to stay the night there, having misfortune befall her and being displaced. I did not want her company under my roof and had angrily sent her and her dog away, out to brave the cold night and its falling snow. Then I'd gone to bed. I could not stand to look and tearfully covered my eyes and shut them tight. It didn't matter. I saw it all happen anyway. I saw the woman dead in a ditch next, her dog whining as cars raced past, desperately trying to get someone to stop and help his best friend.

"It's not my fault. It can't be." I said, closing my eyes tightly, my eyelids pinching out tears. I knew it was.

Then, it stopped.

The events of my life stopped flashing before my eyes. I raised my head. The angel was hovering directly before me now. I beheld his bright and beautiful countenance before me. Silvery tears streamed down his perfect cheeks. He looked at me with a profoundly somber frown, weeping for my evils. He hung his head and I saw silver liquid drip in drops that fell to the concrete floor, splashed, then dried, disappearing. Then all at once I heard a swishing sound and felt a cold wind brush against me and the creature had gone.

Glancing around, I realized everyone had fallen silent, no longer hearing the whispering chatter I had before. Some people looked to have deep resolve across their faces. Some were profoundly shaken. The ones who had been in trepidation seemed at peace now. I realized that one of the men there was my childhood friend who'd become the priest. He was up on his feet now and moving about, clad in black shirt and white priestly collar, and to my astonishment was comforting people. A woman was on the move, too. She came to me and I froze: it was my cleaner. She smiled at me and hugged me, then nodded after she'd pulled away and kept going, joining in like manner with the priest in comforting others. I watched her walking about. She picked up the child nearby and gently bounced it up and down in her arms. As she walked away the baby looked over her shoulder and smiled at me.

At some length from behind the gray curtain I heard soft voices cooing. Eventually I realized they were singing. I could not understand their words, but they sounded cherubic, gleeful, triumphant. The melodies the voices sang in harmony sounded soft and innocent, like young boys and girls singing together rhythmically. It was more beautiful than any earthly thing I had ever heard. Their singing grew louder and as it did, the scene around me grew brighter and brighter.

Looking upward, I saw it happen. The curtain slid back fully, and beyond it I beheld a brighter than bright silvery white light, more bright, more *light-like*, than anything I'd ever experienced before in life. The curtain pulled back from right to left and dissolved into thin air, leaving nothing but the gleaming, piercing celestial light billowing outward. It poured over the people and as it did, as it touched them, each of them became illuminated with the same silvery glow around their edges the people in my visions of my life playing before me earlier had done.

One by one, as that superb silver light illumed them, the people in the seats around me joined in the chorus being sung loudly and splendidly from that bright light beyond the curtain. I could hear the

other people with me in the auditorium clearly now. As they sang, they began to disappear, fading and growing increasingly transparent until they were no longer visible to me.

I was scared. I did not want to go to wherever they were going. I did not want to have happen to me what was happening to them. I did not want to lose what was me, to disappear.

“Take them, not me!” I thought, gripping the wooden armrests of the chair tightly.

Every single person in that auditorium disappeared, one after another. The child, still clutched safely in my cleaner’s arms, laughed as they both disappeared together. The singing grew to a climax, and then that gray curtain appeared again, seeming to unfurl out of nowhere, broadening and re-covering the gap from which the light poured. The singing stopped once the light was covered, and everything grew dim again.

I was all alone.

As gradually as I had become able to see that space in the growing light at first, it now dimmed more and more and finally I sat in total darkness again. I became aware once more of how cold and damp it was there. I sat up, strained, and struggled to get up, to move. I would find an exit. I would leave.

That’s what I needed. An exit.

An exit.

Please, an exit from this place.

A flickering red light strobed, bouncing off the walls and bewildering me. I had to squint, eyes darting around to try to ascertain what new thing was happening.

I saw the figure of a man standing on the concrete slab below. I jumped, startled.

Then, the red light quit its flicking and shone constant and illuminated the drab scene once more in a dull red orange. I looked over to my left and on the wall opposite from where the last, winged man had entered, there was another door. This one looked to be made of obsidian, glassy, reflective, dark. The source of the red light shone out from the door itself.

“EXIT.” The letters spelled in neon lettering that cut out sharply in the darkness.

I looked down below at the man who had appeared on the floor of the amphitheater. He stood tall, wearing a deep navy suit jacket and trousers with a red necktie. He smiled at me widely.

“Hello?” I let out in a weak rasp.

“Hello there. You asked for an exit, right?” the suited man called up to me.

“Y-yes. I suppose I did.” I sputtered.

“Well, come on then, and we’ll be off.”

“But-”

“But what?” he inquired.

"I can't move! I can't get up from here!"

"Oh!" the man proclaimed, "but you can!"

He laughed, a deep, hearty, laugh as if he genuinely found my predicament funny.

"They always think they can't get up," remarked the man in the suit, rolling his eyes, "but the thing is, they can. From the beginning. You see, the only thing stopping you from standing up and moving about is you." He said, chuckling to himself and shaking his head.

I tried to get up then and sure enough, I could. I rose to my feet. I glanced around, taking in the scenery again, the gray curtain, the rough cement walls, smooth, cold concrete floor, the rows of concrete steps with their wooden chairs and crimson felt covered seat pads.

Something dawned on me.

"I know this place." I said.

"Do you now?" asked the only other person there with me.

"Yeah. It's a room in my high school. Well, not a room, really, but a space we would use for study halls and so forth sometimes. It was the balcony area off to the side of the main auditorium. Had a huge gray room divider that would close it off from the rest of the area and they'd stick us in there sometimes. Room 216A, or something like that the label above the door to get to it said. Had detention in here a few times. Top seats always made me a bit queasy. When the divider was up."

"Huh." The man replied. "How about that. Interesting, this place always takes the most astounding forms for people."

"Well, what's it look like to you?" I demanded. "What do *you* see this place as? Come to think of it, what *is* this place, exactly?"

"Never mind that." The man said. "You wanted out, right? Come with me. I can make that happen."

He stretched out a hand to me, palm upward.

I thought about it. I thought about *everything*.

"I was so scared, you know, before," I remarked at length, "in the dark, with all the terrors I experienced playing out in front of me. Even when the curtain opened and the others disappeared. Yet I never felt my heart race. Never felt my stomach lurch."

I held my hand out in front of my face for a few moments.

"Just what I was afraid of." I said, worried. "I'm not even breathing. Bet you I haven't been this entire time."

"Don't worry about it. Just come with me." The suited man spoke to me, his beckoning hand still outstretched.

"I suspect I don't have a choice?" I asked him.

“Everyone’s got a choice. You can choose to stay here or come with me.”

I thought about it again. I had a sneaking suspicion if I stayed here it would be for a very long time, and I would not soon see anyone else again.

I shrugged.

“Alright, then.” I said. “I’ll come with you.”

I walked across the outstretched row of seats the one I’d sat in was part of and found a stairway going down between two rows, that had a metal handrail I hadn’t noticed before. The stairs led downward to the man at the bottom waiting for me. I walked down each step with a clunk.

When I arrived at the gray slab floor at the bottom, I reached out and took the man’s hand.

He smiled.

“Good.” He said. “Let’s get going, then.”

We turned and walked hand in hand to the obsidian door. He pushed it and it lurched open inward with a moaning creak, revealing a seemingly endless stone spiral staircase that went downward within, illuminated dimly in the glowing red-orange of an identical EXIT sign on the other side of the door that reflected off the walls inside.

I followed him, walking hand in hand down the staircase. We traversed it together, descending ever downward into deeper darkness. As we went, I caught the occasional twisting shadow on the wall, the increasingly dimming redness of the exit sign causing it to coil about and elongate. I glanced around for whatever object was casting this shadow.

I had an epiphany that the man I was walking next to had a long, serpentine tail jutting from a hole in the back of his business trousers. It was red and scaly and ended in a point. It twisted and flailed in tandem with the curving spiral of the staircase with each descending step we took. Looking at him, taking his whole figure in, his suit now appeared pitch black in the failing light.

We continued downward.

“Will I like it, where we’re going?” I asked him at length, my voice shaky.

“Doubtful. Few do. Although, in rare cases, there are those who seem to fit right in and even adore the place. Those are the ones even I find particularly troubling.” He replied. I thought I saw him shudder.

It was then that I heard it, welling up to us from out of the chilly chasm below, a series of sounds, hisses at first, growing into low wails. As we grew nearer our destination they became louder and louder. Shrieks of pain, despair, torment. I heard another noise, too, something I could only liken to a continuous, constant, unrelenting grinding of teeth.

I grew more aware of an increasing feeling of anguish growing in me. I glanced down at my hand, locked in the suited man’s, and considered wrenching it free for a moment and fleeing back up the stairway, trying desperately to escape. Try as I might I could find no courage, no resolve, no willpower, or motivation to overcome his clutch and make my hand pull away from his.

He looked down and his eyes passed over our interlocked hands. Then he raised his gaze to meet mine. He shot me a toothy grin and chuckled a deep, amused, guttural chuckle. I felt him reading my mind.

If my being had been capable of it, I believe a shiver would have shot down my spine then. But I was beyond such sensations by this point. All I could do was continue walking downward, hand in hand with him, to the place that my life and decisions had prepared for me.

So, I did.

THE END.