

Exchange

by Julia Solis

1.

At the far end of the hospital corridor, past rows of locked and numbered doors, the flashlight's beam picks a decrepit staircase out of the darkness. The approaching footsteps, at first shy and uncertain, become more forceful as they move down the stairs. Two tunnels intersect down here; they are even colder and darker than the hallway above. An icy breeze comes from the right, a passage of such length that the flashlight fails to illuminate anything beyond a dense mist. This is an unexpected shift in atmospheric conditions, which must mean that whatever lies at the other end is the most fascinating area of this labyrinth. Perhaps it is an old storage area or pathology lab, holding the sort of secret otherwise encountered only in a newly found tomb. But this secret is something I will never uncover. Somewhere along that most intriguing passage, I always wake up.

It is not uncommon, apparently, to dream about walking through abandoned buildings and strange basements, stumbling through blind hallways that tempt and threaten simultaneously. Maybe, as some psychologists have written, it is true that these mysterious locations correspond to psychic spaces that beckon to be rediscovered into consciousness. But in the search for what lies at the end of the hallway, it is not a submersion into the self that makes the journey so compelling. It is something more along the lines of trying to make a connection with another being, whose internal configuration somehow resonates with mine.

2.

The silhouette of the abandoned asylum looms darkly against the horizon. In this urban area the night sky glimmers in a yellow hue, which all the more emphasizes that there is not a single light inside this building. There is only a hint of many windows, gables and spires jutting out at unlikely locations. It is a most tremendous present, just waiting to be unwrapped.

The door of an outlying building stands open and my companion and I step inside. Separately we make our way through the empty rooms, joining up again at intersections and stairs. Inside the tunnels we walk together more closely, relying on two flashlights to see what lies ahead. Over the years the process of entering derelict mental hospitals has become so familiar, in fact so necessary, that the musty air emanating from the front door signals a welcome home.

3.

Perhaps abandoned hospitals also dream of lost corridors. They are not so unlike some people, after all. Whether person or hospital, each is initially nurtured, developed, interacted with. People appear and make their mark, some lingering longer than others before they vanish again.

Then, gradually, the sense of abandonment sets in. A disappointment, at first, of being left alone, of having to let go of certain functions that were built into the original plan. But soon there begins a shedding, a welcome release. The surface layers, those meant to handle contact with others, peel away as the essence beneath starts to appear. There is a certain purity about such a declaration of the true self. And before the malnourished scaffold inevitably weakens and disintegrates, there can be a blossoming into something very powerful. In the case of Danvers, the dark queen among asylums, this blossoming has an extraordinary beauty.

4.

It is the fairy tale aspect of this place that initially impresses me the most. My first visit to these hospital grounds, in the company of two friends, precedes the asylum's proliferation in various media; so far I have seen little more than paintings on old postcards. When we emerge onto the main hospital road, the Kirkbride building suddenly rises before us, bathed in orange sunset light. Here it is: the Danvers State Hospital in all its crazy glory.

Surely this structure is an elaborate joke: no one could expect a mental patient to find sanity inside this gothic nightmare, which far exceeds anything approximated in horror movies. It is a building out of a fantasy, playful and severe, gorgeous and deeply sinister. But no matter how great my admiration, we do not linger in the road.

5.

The solitude is never complete. People will always leave an imprint, some much more so than others. The abandoned rooms of the asylum hold many remains. Scratched walls, disturbed furniture, soiled clothes, a burnt doll – some items appear with an inherent violence, with the crassness of fresh wounds. Other artifacts are cradled almost tenderly: a ruffled sheet, a rosary, a hairbrush. The remnants of the patients littering the abandoned rooms are the memories of the hospital. Whereas the spaces met in dreams may evaporate without resolution, the hospital's records of inhabitation are gratifyingly real.

The hospital clings to traces of its history, teasing with a wealth of forgotten stories. The deeper the glimpse at this private composition, the more intimate our exchange. Yet it is clear that no matter how temptingly it displays its clues, no amount of speculation can reanimate its memories. The asylum alone holds the key to its past.

6.

We approach an outlying building, planning to enter the Kirkbride structure through the tunnels. An open door invites us inside. Moments later we have dived from the pleasant sunset scenery into a windowless basement, which appears to be a storage room.

It's a grand mess. Shelves with boxes and jars line the walls; toppled stacks of patient records sprawl around cases of medical paraphernalia. A door in the rear appears to lead to the tunnels. But we are captivated by the contents of this room.

When glass crunches beneath my boots, I discover that I'm about to step into a pile of microscope slides. These slides, scattered in a wet, dank mess on the floor, contain samples of human tissues. They are labeled *stomach, pituitary, spleen*. The room, it turns out, also holds larger slides, which preserve delicate slices of brains.

I bend down and examine the slides with bare fingers. I am picking through the damp mound of broken glass until the realization that these samples were collected during autopsies begins to nag at me. I am catching myself in the act of digging through a wet mess of body tissues from the dead patients of Danvers.

It is a horrible realization. Finding pieces of the dead inside the pitch-black hull of an abandoned asylum: what could epitomize sheer horror more than this? I stop, revolted by my own fingers. But I know that horror is merely what precedes the recognition that you are confronted with naked reality: it is a beginning, not an end. There is much more to it that I must grope towards.

I try to picture the room filled with all the patients whose molecules lie before me. Impossible to tell how many, or which faded tombstone number in the notoriously neglected Danvers cemetery corresponds to which slide. Even their anonymity is broken up, the final remnants discarded, scattered like the last leaves from a dying tree. This disdain for the patients' identity, it could be argued, might be their greatest violation yet.

But this pile of slides is no longer a conscious act of disrespect. There is a larger organic process at work. When the feeling of horror passes, I recognize a beauty here. Like so many other things in these buildings, these pieces have simply been swept up by a larger force: that of the hospital coming into its own. The hospital has absorbed its patients; the tissues meld together, blending like voices in a requiem.

And I too have absorbed remnants of the people that have passed through my life. Can I distinguish the body parts that line the undercurrent of my unconscious? In the very basement of my psyche, the memories of others have disintegrated similarly and simply gotten lost. I may recognize a face here, a spoken sentence there. But beneath that is a darkness; a pile of forgotten, randomly assembled relics, just as the one I am bent over now.

I will never reach the end of the dark passage inside. But here, at Danvers, I now feel something resonate. I can't quite explain the sensation, except to say that I feel as if I'm suddenly standing on the brink of life.

7.

It is not just I who has entered the hospital. Sometimes, for just a moment, it inhabits me as well.