

I get there early, as I always do with everything. The entrance door is heavy and when I pull it open, a bell above jingles. The noise is pretty, but too loud for the silent waiting room, a small box lined with pastel upholstered chairs and vinyl flooring. Sterile. I feel out of place here.

I found this clinic online, just yesterday. My insurance provider recently changed, upheaving my network and forcing me to find a new specialist, which meant I needed a new referral, which meant finding someone accepting new patients and so on, and so on. Rats in a maze, all of us patients. Experiencing headache after headache, when the whole point is to feel better.

Dr. Huber's Dermatology Clinic South has no reviews online, but they accept walk-ins and they're in network. What more could one need?

At the check-in desk,

*Click-clack*

the receptionist remains to the side of the plexiglass. She keeps her face angled toward her computer screen, typing away on her keyboard. When I approach, she doesn't acknowledge me, instead opting to *tap tap* her pointer finger on the sign-in sheet. I grab the pen that's haphazardly tied to the counter and sign my name toward the bottom of the page. Like the signatures above mine, I have to run the pen along the page a few times before the ink releases. The sheet looks worn.

After I turn and sit in the farthest corner's seat, the receptionist retrieves the sign-in sheet, sliding it under her plexiglass shield.

"The doctor's running late," The receptionist says softly, I almost don't hear her at all.

I nod, then realize she can't see me. "Okay, thanks," I say back. I think about telling her that the pen's ink is running out, but figure someone else will do it. She doesn't seem like she'd care much anyway.

*Click-clack. Click-clack.*

There is no clock in the waiting room. Instead, a bulletin board next to the receptionist's window. Nothing stuck to it except thumbtacks. On the opposite wall, abstract blobs that could be an ocean tide, or maybe a mountain range. The canvases are unimpressive pieces, a collection void of identity and meant for clinical spaces. Rauschenberg would probably roll in his grave if he saw these.

Minutes, or maybe just seconds go by before the jingle of the entrance door sweeps in another patient. The door is slow to closing, allowing cold air to penetrate the small area. Goose bumps rise to the surface of my skin and I resist the urge to pick at them.

I reach for one of the magazines off the end table beside me, something, anything, to focus on until the goose bumps subside. My new priority is a Home and Garden periodical. A patient patient, a spotless kitchen.

Across the room, the receptionist *tap taps* the check-in clipboard. Silence, then more *Click-clack. Click-clack. Click-CLACK* at an increasing volume.

The waiting room isn't quiet, but I continue to focus on my magazine. I flip through the glossy pages, but none of the words are comprehensible and the photos all look the same. Then, I feel the seat next to me shift.

Dread prevents me from confirming something I already know. The other patient has chosen the seat directly beside me. Proof comes in the form of subtle shifts in the row of chairs as the stranger settles in. The air around me has changed. This stranger has infected it.

I take a big breath in, then expel it slowly through my mouth like I do in functional yoga class.

In the case of flight or fight, I am freeze. I can only shift my positioning away from the stranger, and I pretend I'm the only one in the room and I still have some semblance of personal space.

I don't, though. The receptionist's typing on her keyboard has still only grown louder. Deafening as it moves through the space. The noise hurts, pricking the backs of my eyes and assaulting my eardrums. And my goosebumps still haven't gone away. I'll have to ask Dr. Huber to refill my pain meds after he checks my sores, then I think about all the ways I can't pay for this.

*Click-clack. Click-clack. Click-CLACK. CLICK-CLACK.*

Because I've positioned my line of sight in the opposite direction of this uncivil stranger, I don't see their next move. Instead, I hear it. A dry scraping sound, somehow louder than the typing.

I could walk out. Suffering through the picking and the scratching and the infections in open wounds and long sleeves so my coworkers don't see is still less painful than the stranger sitting beside me, filing their fucking nails, and the typing that's now turned into an unbearable, endless broadcast. I try my best to sink into the pastel seat, ignore this room and imagine instead myself on an island, sitting in sand warmed by the sun, letting the sound of ocean waves cover me like a reliable blanket. A technique my therapist taught me but never works because I've never been to a beach and the ocean kind of freaks me out. Then I realize that the paintings on the wall are ocean tides, and they're moving. To and fro, inching closer to me. About to sweep

me up and I'll drown in the typing noise and the fingernail dust from the fingernail filing. All of it, too much. I stand, and immediately it all stops.

No typing, no filing.

No longer is the stranger in the seat beside me, they're at the end of the row, closest to the receptionist's desk. I avoid eye contact, but I can feel their gaze on me as they slide the file across their pinky nail once more. Slow, scratchy, harsh. I'm sitting again, my hands gripping the ends of the plastic arms. The stranger is next to me, laughing right into my ear like we're close friends and I've just said an inside joke.

I don't want to, and I'm not sure why, but I look over at the stranger for the first time since they've walked into the clinic's waiting room. They could be anyone, their face is so plain and their hair so medium. One of those people that your mind uses in dreams, a face that looks like a face but isn't recognizable beyond that. They could be anyone, but they didn't feel like anything except the filled outline of a human. I forget him or her, or rather, it, while I look at it. And it looks back at me with blank, black eyes. Then slides the file along the side of its thumbnail. The coarse file snags a bit of skin, and blood pricks at its paronychia. It laughs some more.

The image of its fingers sticks in my mind, as forceful as staring into the sun. I think about calling out for help, but not doing so because that feels pointless. The receptionist was busy typing, so busy she could only *tap tap* on the check-in sheet and the doctor, Dr. Huber, was running behind. If a doctor is running behind, that's a good thing, right? Maybe it means the doctor spends adequate time with his or her patients. Dr. Huber will help me. I must see him now, enough waiting.

I leap toward the door that leads to the patient rooms (how nice it'd be to finally be done waiting and finally be a patient, a patient to a doctor who will spend time with me) but I trip and land on the ground hard.

I swear I feel it clutching my ankle, but when I glance over my shoulder, the stranger is looming over me while scraping the file back and forth along its bloody nail. It opens its mouth, I presume to continue laughing at me, but instead

*Click-clack. Click-clack. Click-CLACK. CLICK-CLACK.CLICK-CLACKCLICKCLACK*

right

out of its black hole of a mouth. No longer an outline of a person, but a constellation of noises from terrible things like keyboards and nail files. Things not seen, but heard and felt and feared. I recognize it, all of it, even if I can't really see it. It's in the pastel chairs and the abstract art on the walls of this waiting room, and probably countless other waiting rooms around the world, and I'm in every single one with it. All of me feeling all of it.

I know I must get out of here, but how? My body refuses to listen to my brain when we tell it to get up, get to the door, get out. Where is the door, anyways? There are only four walls, dripping abstract ocean tide onto the linoleum floor. I flinch away so the seafoam blue can't touch me, can't get into my sores and cause another infection. I'm not sure insurance would cover treatment. It didn't last time.

"The doctor will see you now," The receptionist says from somewhere far away. From where, exactly, I'm not sure. I can't locate the receptionist's window, can't see the door to the patient rooms. Those things feel nonexistent now, if ever existing to begin with. Then, the

gleaming ocean water trickling down the walls and pooling on the floor soaks the back of my head and clothes. Cold and salty.

I feel the wet and I'm sitting in the pastel chair again. The abstract paintings are just that, dry and framed in plastic. The receptionist's window is across the room, steady *click-clack* on the keyboard, catty-cornered to the door to the patient rooms which is now slightly ajar. I have the Home and Garden magazine in my hands, somewhat crinkled from my tight grip. An inpatient patient, a crinkled up kitchen.

Beside me, the stranger files their nails. Its black eyes make contact with mine.

"The doctor will see you now," its jaw moves mechanically, hinging up and down in sync with the swipes of the nail file.

"The" *swipe* "doctor" *swipe* "will" *swipe* "see" *swipe* "you" *swipe* "now" *swipe* as the door to the patients room opens a smidge wider. Black invites me in, endless like the stranger's eyes, endless like living.

I walk toward the door, then I run toward it, but it stretches out and out and out. I'm a cartoon dog from my favorite childhood show, running toward a bone that's hanging from a stick tied to my collar, never reaching what I'm running toward. When I was a child, I thought the endless chase was hilarious, now I'm just exhausted.

Collapsing against the wall, blue waves crash over me and flood the area, now returned to a tiny container of a waiting room. The door is now propped open with a wooden peg wedged against the floor.

I can stand, though walking is difficult. Weighed down by my wet clothes, wading through the ocean swells, I finally reach it. The tide laps at the backs of my legs, urging me through the door, but I resist.

“Dr. Huber?”

No response. I pull the door open a little further, try to see something beyond the black. There is nothing discernible and the absence unsettles me. Somewhere inside the sound of the receptionist’s *click-clack. Click-clack. Click-CLACK* I hear a warning. Don’t go in there.

Before I can turn and make my way to the exit, the stranger is behind me. Its skin is coated in red. It’s blocked me in, creeping toward me so I have no where else to go but through the door and into the black. I can’t go in there. There are no patient rooms in the black and I am a patient.

The sights and sounds are too much again. Uncertainty and uncontrol, both plagues to my nervous system. For a second only, I allow myself to pick at the goosebumps on my arm. When I peel off a speck of skin, I feel relief. I think about asking the receptionist if Dr. Huber can talk to me out here, in the waiting room. No, I don’t feel relief. I can’t ask her that.

I brace myself to run past the stranger, the thing that is coated in blood and breathes down my neck like a terrible draft in a dusty house. It follows and torments, laughs at me and doesn’t relent. I reach toward the closest pastel chair nearby and fling it at the stranger with enough force to make it collide with its toothpick shins. This gives me enough time to dart around it, avoiding its grip as it reaches for me. Seafoam on the floor, I must be careful not to slip.

*Click-clack. Click-clack. Click-CLACK.*

*CLICK-CLACK.CLICK-CLACKCLICKCLACKCLICKCLACKCLICKCLACKCLICKCLACKCLIK  
CKCLACKCLICKCLACK—*

I make it to the exit door, under a jingle bell, in front of a heavy mahogany piece with a golden stained glass center window. The gold glowed, like wheat growing in never-ending rays of light, whispering as it collectively sways in the breeze.

“The doctor will see you now.”

It's behind me, talking into my ear. I do something I know I shouldn't, I look behind me. Just a glance, a habit of curiosity. The stranger is there, the shape of its hands cupping something, bringing it to the hole where a mouth should be. It blows. Nail dust covers me, settles onto my skin like makeup powder.

When I turn back around, I'm at the door to the patient rooms.

It's quiet. I hear what the wheat whispers.

I step through.

*Click-clack.*