

The VA Hospital



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For us guys that trusted each other with our lives, a hospital visit was a loyalty check. This is my first encounter with medicine since I left active duty, and I'm nervous with the guilt of a traitor. I may break the unwritten pacts I made with my brothers, long ago, to be ready—no matter the illness or nightmare—for each other. I became a civilian, a veteran, months ago. I survived 2 years in Afghanistan without any scars. The close calls and bad memories go away when I choose, and I don't want any help controlling that. But I'm here because I have to be, to rightfully access health care as a veteran. My honor's price is high, but I feel I've already made the error by letting a price exist. In this VA hospital I'll be asked to admit every one of those little things I always sucked up. I never respected anyone who coddled their body at the expense of their mission.

In the waiting room, I am thick and cold. Preparations for this interrogation have been abandoned as I dread the humanity that may be in the conversation. Old men lay about like sunbathing seals and I feel ashamed to notice them. I can tell this place for them is part of a routine and a life, but I'm unable to accept what they already have. These men grew old here. They came home from Korea, Vietnam, Panama, Iraq, and were planted in pots in the lobbies, now rooted,

intubated, woven to the GSA-catalog-chairs and fed a nutritious bouquet of fluorescent glow and bleach aroma.

Faith in the good of VA treatment comes to me as weakly as the men who claim it in abundance. And these old men, whom I have never met before, are in this waiting room instead of on the streets, or in sagging beds and patched floral recliners. The government has planned the lives of these men from young ages, and now must have spreadsheets and schedules that anticipate timely deaths and efficient waiting-room turnover. It would not seem out of place for a man here to doff his denim jacket and button-covered embroidered hat, and then fade like an anchorless boat into fog.

The planted men do not notice me or let me see that they notice me. I smell of a different litter; I am pierced and bearded, reliant on tangible tokens of proof that the government owns me no more. I was born not in Kuwait, Korea, Vietnam, Germany nor Japan, but Afghanistan, and we are unfamiliar to each other for the moment. Their knowledge of my ilk is grown only by television, the worst liar among all the storytellers. I imagine the dusty feeling of having walked my path in their time, pained and aware of an earlier, more honored cohort. No honorable wars were fought after the greatest generation's. The veterans of police actions and foreign advisement and student rescues acknowledge me skeptically. I sit quietly and do nothing to interrupt the herd as it grazes on Fox News.

A numbing force saturates the interview room I sit in; the same as from my uniformed days. I'm well trained and so good at these interviews, I don't even think as I speak. I get bored in my head and inside it, I'm reviewing my grocery list, the bills I owe, the weekend

plans. I feel the boundaries and ceramic-gilded features of this elevated cave and envision myself beyond them, back in the natural world. I'm vaguely aware of the rewards she tempts me with. I deliver a weak and plausible confession to secure my safe exit.

We used to eat our young and our weak. If the men I left behind saw me here, it's my end. It's the way we know each other—strong—and I have betrayed their trust. I have no scratches. I see no wounds on my body. I am uninjured, undamaged, untraumatized, and manage every trouble in my life. Do not ask me again to insult the dead, the crippled, the ones who truly did give without being asked.

