

from padded rooms. Sullivan's countryside House was my place among the addled of mind. Now it and its less dangerously insane residents are gone. Funny how things can be not-gone in the morning and ash by evening.

Not-gone was yesterday, before the fire. It was yesterday that I woke early, stumbled down the stairs to the kitchen. John was cooking breakfast.

"Parish's finishing the book," he said, tossing his head toward the parlor.

Ms. Parish was the matron of Sullivan House and an obsessive scrapbooker—her camera, practically an extension of her arm, was lucky to get a few seconds rest between flashes. The only person she could show her work to (besides me, John, and the patients) was Dr. Keith, and she never failed to take advantage of his monthly visits from the Hospital. Today being one, I felt a pang of vicarious dread on the doctor's behalf. Her scrapbooks were dull to the point of indecency.

I grabbed a tray from the counter, correctly assuming that Ms. Parish would not have time to deliver breakfasts, and, halfway to the stairs, paused at the parlor door. Ms. Parish was within, her hair in disarray, smeared with paste and stuck all over with spare bits of snipped photographs.

"How about a few pictures of me and John this time?"

She hardly glanced up.

"I keep telling you, Arthur, I don't deliberately exclude you two. I just end up with more pictures of the patients than of my Orderlies."

It was her stock answer to the question we teased her with every month.

"You'd better hurry—Dr. Keith'll be here in a few hours."

"You're no help," she snapped. "Don't talk about how soon he'll be here, get ready!"

"I'm taking Cynthia breakfast now."

Ms. Parish looked up, fire in her eyes. "You're taking that tray to Cynthia? Look at it, Arthur!"

I did look, and was ashamed at what I saw. A poached egg sat in the tray's center, looking up at me reproachfully. Delivering such a breakfast to Cynthia, the woman who thought she was a poached egg and was understandably upset by cannibalism, would have been disastrous. I didn't deliver Cynthia's breakfast at all if I could help it, though this was less to do with the risk of serving her one of her own kind than the fact that she thought I was side of bacon and had tried to take bites out of me on more than one occasion. Apparently it was acceptable for different breakfast foods to consume one another. When I broached this subject with Ms. Parish, she only said, "Why not? It's only natural for an omelet to crave orange juice from time to time." I muttered that it was easy for her to say—Ms. Parish was cereal, and Cynthia did not like cereal.

Sometimes I questioned the judgment of whoever had deemed Cynthia less dangerously insane. Perhaps he had been cereal too.

"Please, Arthur, take a seat."

By late afternoon, Dr. Keith had survived his examination of the patients and, more impressively, Ms. Parish's latest scrapbook. Now it was time for staff examinations. He sat at the desk that had held the scrapbooking supplies. It was now stacked with familiar thick manila folders, one for each patient at the House.

"How have you been, Arthur?" asked Dr. Keith, adjusting his spectacles.

I told him I was well. Not everyone was lucky enough to live in a large house with his best friend, an overbearing but well-meaning matron, and a variety of less dangerously insane companions. I had good food, good work, and the freedom to go where I pleased—

"Except the attic."

"The attic?"

"It's where Ms. Parish keeps her personal things," I explained. Dr. Keith nodded his understanding and concluded the examination as he did every month:

"Stay sane, Arthur Seward."

I smiled. "And you."

Ms. Parish went next. I'm afraid it wasn't long before I pressed my ear to the parlor door; several times before I had overheard my employer telling Dr. Keith about my patience with our less dangerously insane, and compliments mean more when you know the person would never say them to your face.

"Arthur," she was saying, "... patient ... behaving wonderfully ..."

They were speaking quietly. Presently I made out Ms. Parish:

"Long enough?"

Then Dr. Keith:

"Maybe ten more minutes."

My initial pride was displaced by unease. This was not like Ms. Parish, this whatever-was-happening. It felt more like a conspiratorial meeting than a medical examination, and it smacked of secrets. Ms. Parish did not keep secrets from me and John. The idea was absurd. We ran the House together: the disciplined matron, her ever patient Orderly, and the ever patient Orderly's best friend. This was a brotherhood, a Triumvirate of Sanity, and there were no secrets within it.

Unless.

I went to the only place secrets might hide.

The drafty room atop the Forbidden Ladder was lit by a single flickering bulb, and nearly empty. A rack of moth-eaten clothes in one corner, a stack of faded portraits in another, a heavy wooden chest against the back wall. I moved toward the chest, hardly feeling the cold that clawed at chinks in the roof. Something colder pounded behind my eyes and at my temples, driving me on even as it warned me to turn back.

The chest—to my horror and my delight—was unlocked. I lifted the lid, ready to know if there were secrets in the House.

At least, I thought I was ready. I was wrong.

A SPAM manila folder sat at the top. This was odd; we kept the patient files in the cabinet downstairs. I dusted it off, held it to the light. Like all our other files, there was a name printed at the top: *Arthur Seward*.

I opened the folder. The topmost paper was a record of sorts, identical to those of the patients. It listed my father, mother, and older brother, told how they had perished in the first of the fires.

*But where, I wondered, is Nancy?* My younger sister had burned as surely as they had.

The next section was the one that, in Cynthia's file, read simply "poached egg."

*Condition: Suffers from delusions. Violent if confronted with them, but docile otherwise. Caretaker should let delusions play out uninterrupted.*

I tossed the file away. Delusions? How ridiculous. Dr. Keith had confirmed my sanity not half an hour before.