



SHE WAS LOGGED IN AT 6:35 WITH “NERVOUSNESS AND ANXIETY,” but was then upstaged by more acute cases — a hernia at 6:56, lower-left quadrant pain at 7:06, gallstones at 8:50. She lay there on a gurney monitored by the nurse, who doles out beds in the emergency room based on need, not on time of arrival. It’s now after 9:00, and the woman is still waiting.

On the other side of the glass, her husband and her grandson stand at their posts; her son sits wedged in a corner, encumbered by the coat she was wearing when they brought her in. The three of them resist the comfort of the waiting room because from here they can watch her.

“How come my grandmother’s been waiting there so long?” Nelson Lopes stretches up to make his voice heard through the microphone embedded in the glass. The nurse on the other side answers him calmly, as if it weren’t a busy Friday night at Rhode Island Hospital.

Dissatisfied, perhaps, with her patient but noncommittal response, Nelson backs away from the glass and reports to his uncle, who is still in the corner

holding the black fur coat. As he shifts it in his arms it glistens, reflecting the sharp greenish light from the ceiling.

Hands in his pockets, Nelson’s grandfather takes his eyes off his wife as he, too, leaves his post. Silver head bowed, he paces a few deliberate steps and rests his hand, palm outward, on his hip. He goes outside for a smoke.

Nelson paces but does it in a thirteen-year-old kind of way. He skips back and forth across the carpet, crawls in next to his uncle, asks, again, about his grandmother. The nurse remarks on how good he is.

By 10:00 these steps have been repeated many times, as though choreographed. Each character takes a turn peering through the glass, moving to the corner, following the narrow rug past the doorway. At the right moment, the laser beam trained on the rug registers a presence and the automatic doors slide open like a curtain, letting a cool gust of air glide over all three of them.

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