

Deep Explore Short Story Excerpts

Excerpt from “Anticipation”

The room doesn't tolerate a door, but there are workarounds. Elaine crouches slightly and shifts sideways to step over the windowsill. She has to switch her entrance around every few weeks, also, to a different window—fortunately, there are four to choose from—and spend half an hour or so every visit peering casually but pointedly through the not-door window, so the room doesn't catch on too fast to the *idea* of a door and go rogue.

At the very least, the room is consistent when it does tolerate her: a solitary spare bedroom coming from nowhere and attached to nothing. It contains a neatly made bed, a tall dresser, and a desk facing two of the windows. There are no pictures on the walls. The floor is bare. It smells faintly of dust and lavender, which Elaine has traced to a sachet of dried flowers in the top drawer of the otherwise empty dresser. Since the lockout, a whole room is unusual, one tolerating entry even more so. The hospital remains, but sits impenetrable, windows dark and glossy as mirrors. In Elaine's mind, up until the room, their most exciting discovery was a reclining bicycle Jordan found three weeks prior. It didn't tolerate gravity, and was as apt to wobble into the air when she pumped the pedals as it was to shudder forward or backward. Jordan likes taking it out to the scrubby field up the hill behind the hospital to lurch through the switchgrass. She's still hunting for some pattern to how it moves.

The room tends to stay when Elaine doesn't think of entering or leaving, when she doesn't think of anything at all. The approach reminds of her aunt, a pilot and amateur astronomer, who taught her to see the Milky Way through the wash of city light pollution. On their backs in the yard, they let their vision adjust. Her aunt told her to let her eyes unfocus and roam, until she became aware of a pearly haze in her peripheral vision. When she tried to pin it down, it vanished. The first time she saw the room with its ugly, unbroken beige siding and approached it looking for a door, it disappeared almost immediately. She didn't expect to see it again. But then she was talking with Jordan that night, and the room came back. I'll be the first to admit I miss things, Jordan was saying. I used to think people put butter on toast to cool it down. And there was the room, simply and suddenly settled on the hospital patio where they sat beside the vending machine.

In the room, Elaine sits at the desk and settles a hand on its scratched surface. She can feel a stirring in the periphery today, disliking the intrusion. She stares out the window fixedly. A window, she thinks desperately. A window. A window. Like a drive-thru window—no, no, not like a

drive-thru window at all, she corrects quickly. Nothing passing through. Like a window on a train moving so fast that the landscape blurs beyond recognition.

There is a scrap of paper in the desk drawer. Elaine pulls it out and smooths it open. It is a fragment of a sentence, remnants of ink hinting at a torn off beginning and a torn off end. The remaining part reads *make it myself*. She flips it over. The other side reads *make it on my own*. She thinks about the difference between *yourself* and *on your own*. The room shudders. She returns her gaze to the window, willing her thoughts to loosen and slide sideways like her eyes trying to coax the stars into view. She doesn't think about entering or leaving, holding or releasing. It is a state of suspension, of anticipation. For what, she doesn't know. Up the grassy hill, she sees Jordan wobbling on the bicycle, rising higher and higher into the air.

I dreamed I had to find the perfect pear, Elaine says. But all of them were misshapen, like sweet potatoes. So you're sleeping, then? asks Jordan. I don't know, Elaine admits. The kettle begins to whistle, and the two of them sit waiting on the hospital patio.

The vending machine doesn't tolerate silence. Elaine and Jordan once stood shouting at it for nearly four hours, watching it slowly waver towards solidity, working through every topic they could muster, until Elaine couldn't generate an answer to Jordan's bellowed question, Do you remember the summer you lived in Fox Lake? and it vanished. Then Jordan actually fell quiet, open-mouthed without a follow-up for what should have been a very straightforward question, which sealed the disappearance, and they had to give the whole thing up and try again the next day. Elaine couldn't answer because she was having trouble pinning down things like *summer* and *Fox Lake*. After that they started using a dented electric kettle to summon the vending machine. The kettle wouldn't tolerate emptiness. They'd bring it to a boil and it would shriek and shriek without ever exhausting the water inside.

They extract a packet of Fritos from the vending machine when it materializes, yank the kettle free from the exterior wall socket, and hike up the hill. They settle atop the split-rail fence at the far side of the field and share the chips. The sun has set and the air is cool. Beyond the fence stretches more switchgrass, bobbing gently, as far as they can see. You want to try tonight? Jordan asks. Elaine frowns. Not particularly, she says. I'll stay away from the room, Jordan says. You don't even like the room, says Elaine. You said it smells like how getting your hair caught in a comb feels. Jordan says nothing. Fine, Elaine says, and she hops off the fence.

She takes a few steps forward through the grass. It prickles at her ankles. She tilts her head back. At the next step, she feels nausea start to rise, roiling her stomach. I don't feel so good, she says out loud. She stumbles backward and grips the edge of the fence to stay upright even as she feels her head drop toward her chest, and suddenly there is darkness. She hears the soft, innocuous tune of elevator music. She drifts in the dark, listening to the impersonal notes of a nameless song, until she registers that someone is saying her name, and resurfaces abruptly. Woah, she says. Woah. Her hearing returns before her vision, which takes a moment to clear.

She is lying face-up, back on the near side of the fence. Jordan leans against a fence post, staring out across the grass. Elaine turns towards her and the world spins threateningly. She feels an ache in the flat facet where her right collarbone articulates with her shoulder. She drops her head back to the dirt, massaging her arm. Next time, she says.

Excerpt from “Notes from the Basking Unit”

The next day, Ari opens the documentation portal to review the case. It is early in the morning, still dark beyond the basking unit, and she is back in the workroom, waiting to discuss the next restoration with Louise. She should be studying the upcoming canticle, planning seeker positioning, but she wants to see the prior day’s report again. She probably shouldn’t puzzle over it—there’s formal analysis for that—but she wants to. She needs to see her words. *The patient and suspension technician were relocated unexpectedly*, she reads. She shifts inside her stiff restoration uniform, remembering the rush of water. And there—*The patient went out wrapped like a present*, she reads. She did think that, didn’t she? The ribbons of light all around him. But she’s fairly certain she didn’t write it; it doesn’t fall anywhere near the recognized template. And there, at the end—*I was thinking recently about all the reasons why I’m not who I’d like to be*, the note reads. She squints at the words.

“Heads up.” Louise sloshes up the steps from the basking unit and tosses something small and shiny in Ari’s direction. Ari jerks up and manages to catch it before it skitters across the worktable. It turns out to be a hash brown, wrapped in foil.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” Louise settles in the seat next to her. “So did you get a chance to look at the canticle for this next case? I think it’s a great example of the utility of an initial lateral response.”

“Yeah,” Ari says. “I was thinking of trying to coax out something ulnar? But also—do you have a minute to maybe—”

Louise’s wrist comm blares and she crams the rest of her own hash brown into her mouth. “It’s our returnee from last week, canticle sixty. What complications are you most concerned about four days after that restoration?”

Ari jumps up to follow Louise down the steps to basking, where beyond the windows the sky is gray with dawn, the waters are silver and still, and she never returns to finish her halting question with *talk about yesterday*.

[...]

Ari starts a new report. She writes, *Hi Louise*. Then she deletes it. When she opens the documentation portal the next morning, a report in her name reads, *If you find a way, let me know*. She quickly closes the note. She has been working too many days in a row, clearly.

The new restoration handler is a model of efficiency. They are in and out of the chambers in a flash, dashing through the basking area in a blur. Ari can't really find time to eat, but she can't really find time to feel hungry, either. She certainly doesn't have time to ruminate on where Louise might be, or Terese—*Tammy*, she feels terrible about the slipperiness of her memory—or the floating man with his bruised chest.

She submits a restoration report following a routine case in chamber one, but when she goes to review it, it reads:

Hi Louise,

I've been moving so fast and so slow at the same time, I don't know which parts of myself to hold onto.

She doesn't know what to do. They continue through the week, notes she never meant to write.

Hi Louise,

I guess I'm not convinced I want to hear what I have to say.

Hi Louise,

I saw someone's partner gently wipe the corners of both her eyes with the cool towel on her forehead—the tenderness in that gesture. And the grim clumsiness of all of us standing there breaking bad news again and again.

By the next week, Ari starts writing them herself. If they're going to show up either way, she figures, she might as well feel marginally less crazy. Or if she is going crazy, she wants to do so from the driver's seat, in some strange way. With her own two hands.

Hi Louise,

I keep seeing all these people come and go. I think about all the necessary points separating here from there, and I get scared. Even in the beginning, even now. Every new place, I worry about the wrong things. I don't want it anymore.

Hi Louise,

Some things you just don't know when you need to.

Ari doesn't feel like she's doing this right, whatever *this* is. She feels wrung out and a little woozy. *This is how it went*, she thinks. *Water was rising and then it wasn't. Louise was there and then she wasn't.* Water is still churning behind her eyes, and she squeezes them shut, tighter and tighter, until it comes falling out.

Excerpt from “A Case Series of Necessary Detours”

The workroom is tucked away on one of the highest floors of the hospital, roughly level with the elevated train that rumbles past at irregular intervals. There isn't much inside. There is a handbook describing the interpretation of electroencephalograms, with a scribble of brain waves across the front cover. There are a number of model heads, a few with hair and painted features; one bald and transparent, like blown glass; and one made from styrofoam with detailed pen markings across the forehead and just one eye drawn on with uncanny realism. There is a half-empty water cooler and a dusty black backpack on an otherwise empty set of shelves.

The room is crowded now. Dara stands by the door, Ovie and Zack at the cooler. Jeff and Angel and Sofia sit beneath the head models. Riley sits with her back to the window, facing Denise.

You'll notice when it's working, says Denise. Okay, says Riley. What will I notice? Well, says Denise. The first thing most people notice is they can't tell anymore if their eyes are open or closed. Ah, says Riley.

Across the room, Sofia stretches her arms high, nearly brushing the styrofoam head. Riley settles back against the window and holds out first her left hand, which Denise fits into a glove, palm up. Then her right hand, fastened into a glove palm down. She rests her gloved hands atop her thighs. Denise unfolds a slender stand, extending its collapsed legs. Riley thinks of upside-down antennae, spindly limbs burrowing into the earth. She takes a deep breath.

Easy there, Denise says. Right, says Riley, and Denise twists the knob.

And what, so we can have—green couches, and cookies with coconut, and, and—mailboxes shaped like little barns? the patient demands. He is sitting up in his hospital bed, leaning forward. His black hair is in disarray. What? says Riley. And dishes to rest tea bags after steeping, Dara adds, helpfully. The patient nods in agreement. Riley can't shake the feeling that she has come from far away. Her hand rests on the patient's shoulder, and she can't quite remember why.

Once, in the beginning, I hopped a barge in Davenport, the patient says quietly. A thin, flexible tube runs into his right nostril, secured to the side of his face with tape. When was this? Riley asks. She guides him to sit forward a little further, begins to tap on his back. She still isn't sure of the reason for her hand on his shoulder, but neither Dara nor the patient object to this next step, so she continues.

Long time ago, for me, he says. We moved less than three miles an hour. Slower than a walking pace, I think. The *thunk* of her finger at his right lower lung lands dull and dissonant. We passed so many barns along that river, he continues. Burned-out and falling down, some. Some newly built. All side by side, for me. With that much time, you have to do something. I started to draw them. That's where I got the idea for the mailboxes. There are all sorts of ways to spend the day, Riley says. The patient nods again. We'll continue you on the stabilizer, she adds. The day could always look like something you've never seen before, the patient says. What do you do then?