

The Safest Place You've Ever Been

To get to the waiting room, patients parked at the building's rear and entered through a metal door with scabs of rust perforating its edges. Inside, arrows led them down a hall and into a room with fifteen chairs and a blaring television. A nurse stopped by every ten minutes to check for new arrivals, handing out clipboards stacked with forms and assigning numbers. So far the doctor had called #1 through #6, meaning it might be hours before she called #12 and #13.

#12 wore tight jeans and a hooded sweatshirt with a designer's name stitched across the breast. Her sunglasses lay on her lap. The television told her she had gonorrhea and that the bacteria was spreading through her blood to her fetus. #12 didn't think she was pregnant but she watched the screen anyway, and after twelve photographs of leaky penises and sixteen of deformed babies, she felt her stomach turn. The floor was white linoleum tile.

The clinic was a squat building on the west side, toward the end of a two-mile strip where the town devolved into red pine forest and red mud. Except for the twelve thousand university students, most of the town's residents were black, and #12 and #13 were the only white people in the waiting room. While #12's gaze alternated between her feet and the TV, #13 glared at the others as if challenging them.

He sat hunched with his elbows on his knees, chin in hand. The television told him he had chlamydia and that the infection was already turning to cancer. Because of this he was dying. He was sitting next to #12 and moved his arm so that it almost touched hers. He often took girls home from bars, and although #12 was somewhat plump and

minorly pretty, he was bored. He'd never heard of anyone picking up a girl in an STD clinic.

After the video looped and began over, #13 leaned toward #12.

I can get violent when I'm angry, he said. It's the worst thing about me.

When she didn't answer, he repeated it.

What? she asked, tugging at her hair.

Everyone in the room was silent, except the television, which told them they were sinners and because of this they had syphilis. A few chairs away, #8 and #9—a boy and girl draped in baggy clothes—clung to each other. The boy leaned toward the girl and whispered something to her. Then he kissed her on the forehead. Near the doorway, #7, an older woman in a leopard-print tube top, slept with her head back and mouth gaping.

#10 glanced up from the warped magazine on his lap. You're not the only one, he said, who can get violent.

Once I nailed a squirrel to a board, #13 said, and shot off its legs.

That's awful, #12 said. It isn't true.

It flopped around like a hairy fish, #13 answered.

#12 grinned.

#8 and #9 continued to whisper and the old woman let out a snore. The television said that condoms could never be trusted.

I wouldn't hit my wife, #10 said. She puts up with a lot of shit. I love her for that.

She sounds like a good woman, #13 said.

I'm sure she's a good woman, #12 said.

The television was telling them that they had herpes. You might have heard about how pleasurable sex is, the television said, but that isn't true. This is your only life and one bad decision—one transgression from the way things are supposed to be—and you will ruin that life.

The television chirped on. Everybody was listening and not listening.

The doctor finally took their tests and told them they would receive calls when the results were ready. As they left, #13 told #12 he would take her for barbecue. The restaurant, famous throughout the state, was not far from the university. #13 kept an eye on the rearview mirror to make sure #12 followed. Until that day, he'd forgotten the older boy who'd liked to show off by shooting legs off of roadkill.

#13 pulled his truck into the dirt lot and #12 stopped her car beside him. Pickups were parked at all angles and mangy dogs wandered

between them, scrounging for food. #13 motioned toward a small cabin that seemed to teeter on the brink of collapse, and as he ushered #12 through the door, she told him she'd never been there.

Above their table, the wood was warped from the grill's smoke and from cigarettes and cigars. A strange tarry mixture collected in the corners of the ceiling and crept down the walls. The smell of burning wood was strong. Around them people talked and laughed, and over that they could hear the chatter of two TVs bolted to the ceiling on either side of the room. Stuffed heads of badgers and deer and other animals stared vacantly. In one corner, taking up quite a bit of space, was the head of a yak.

#12 and #13 ordered sweet tea.

I can't believe you've never been here, he said.

Well, I haven't, #12 said.

You're really boring, #13 said.

I am not, #12 said.

Then what do you do? What are you majoring in?

I hang out with friends, #12 said. We go out. We stay in and watch movies. Or study. I'm a psych major.

The drinks came and they peeled the thin paper off their straws. The tea was very sweet.

This is how blacks drink it, #13 said without lowering his voice.

#12 thought she saw somebody stiffen in the booth behind. She rubbed her forehead with her fingertips.

The TV near the door told them they longed to experience Aruba's sandy beaches and cheap seafood. Wouldn't it be nice to have a tan?

We should go on vacation, #13 said.

Neither had any hope they would.

Psychology? #13 asked after a moment. That's not very practical.

It's interesting, #12 said.

But it isn't practical, #13 said. It's a really stupid major.

The waiter appeared and dropped a slab of ribs on their table. The meat lay sweating in a puddle of red sauce and grease. Here's your cow, he said. It was the restaurant's catch phrase. Near the kitchen, the TV claimed that a third world war was probably imminent.

Soon, there was an explosion of shouting near the front, and when the crowd parted one of the stray dogs bolted into the restaurant. The animal jumped on customers and knocked over food, leaving greasy footprints on tabletops. Its skeleton and small muscles were clearly visible. It was missing hair in splotches across its back and legs. A few

waiters tried to corner it, but it slipped through their hands. Half the customers grabbed at the dog, attempting to help, while others tossed bones for it to gnaw on.

When the dog jumped onto #12's lap, she laughed and tried to hug it. It squirmed free and stepped onto the table, dipping its nose into their barbecue. #13 pushed the dog to the floor and kicked it hard in the chest. The animal looked stunned. It didn't resist as a waiter hoisted it out the door.

A moment of silence followed. One of the televisions said, Call now to make more money than you ever dreamed possible. Happiness is only a five-minute call away.

#12 watched the screen. That's a lot of money, she said.

Some of the other customers began congratulating #13.

That was very sad, somebody said.

Then the noise of conversation clattered up and the waiter brought them a new basket, this time without the slogan.

After dinner #13 insisted that #12 bring him to her apartment, and she agreed because she wanted to show it off. It was one of ten units in a renovated plantation home on Turner Avenue. #12 loved the huge front porch with its four stately columns and the ornate friezes that decorated the second floor and roof. To the right of the main door, a plaque announced that it had been constructed in 1885.

Inside, the house was so haphazardly remodeled that some part of every unit shared at least an inch of wall or ceiling with half the others. The plaster was thin and badly insulated, and #12 could hear the mutterings of her neighbors. If they spoke loud enough, she could make out words. For a while she had been in the habit of crouching down and placing her ear against the wall, but she'd begun to feel ashamed of this, and to combat her curiosity #12 kept the television on. Now, she had grown comfortable with its never-ending babble. Above her bed she'd hung a crucifix, and although she told herself she was too busy to attend church, she still prayed every night before she slept. She had just purchased a new couch.

#12 opened a bottle of wine while #13 tore through a twelve-pack. He put his arm around her and caressed her shoulder, his fingers creeping toward her right breast. He switched off the television and led her to the bedroom.

I don't use condoms, #13 informed her.

For a second they stared helplessly at the bed.

Okay, #12 said.

You should really use one, a man's voice shouted.

What? #13 asked, staring at the crucifix.

The walls are a little thin, #12 told him. She went into the other room and turned the television back on. Condoms are unreliable, she said to no one in particular.

For the next few days, #12 and #13 rarely left the bedroom. To eat, they sat up with the sheets bunched around their waists and their shoulders propped against the headboard. At some point #13 admitted there probably was something she could do with her degree. She ran her hand over his chest and liked the way the hair reminded her of barbed wire. She liked his strength and the warmth of his skin. Outside, #12's cat moaned and moaned. He had not been fed for days.

Aren't I the best you ever had? #13 asked.

I haven't made a ranking, #12 said.

Sure you have, #13 said. It's okay.

The television was off again and they heard a couple having sex in the apartment above. The man never stopped talking, and it came through the plaster as a low mumble, pierced by the woman's intermittent squeals.

It sounds like a retard torturing puppies, #13 said.

#12 laughed, then rose to turn on the TV. Gravel crunched under a truck's tires in the driveway. Somewhere, someone was nailing in a hanger for a picture frame. The television insisted that they wanted a house in the suburbs and that they could afford it, even with bad credit. #12 returned to the bedroom. #13 wrapped his arm around her and she put her head on his chest. His heart was beating fast.

Outside, the cat began to cry again. In an apartment to their right a man said, What do I have to do to show you I love you? Somebody trudged up the driveway, stopped, then continued. Feed the damn cat, a woman's voice said.

Shut up, #13 yelled in the direction of the door. He bounced forward, his elbow knocking #12 above the ear.

I'll smash your face, #13 yelled. I'll shoot you through the damn intestine!

He was silent for a second.

You think everyone heard? he whispered.

Yes, she said, pulling him closer. And I'm sure they believed you.

Outside, the cat continued to moan. Is that Oliver? #12 asked.

Don't let him in, #13 warned. I'm allergic.

The television told them they were in pain, but a simple over-the-counter cream would ease that pain on contact. The television said hidden spirits were always watching and happiness was simply to accept that.

On the fifth day #12 and #13 woke at noon to the phone ringing. #12 answered and an ornery voice told her the results from her STD test were in. #13 received the same call on his cell phone a few minutes later. They dressed for the first time in almost a week and drove back to the edge of town. They held hands in #13's pickup truck and they held hands in the waiting room while the television assured them six different diseases were swimming in their blood. The waiting room was mostly empty except for an older man and another student. The TV told #12 and #13 that they had been given one simple task—to be good people—and they had failed. Finally, the nurse led them to separate examination rooms and they released their grip. Neither had noticed they were still holding hands.

Ten minutes later, the door to #12's room opened and #13 crept in. I can't wait any longer, he said. He slouched in the chair next to the door, then stood and began rummaging through drawers and cabinets. It was a normal examination room, with most of the interesting things like syringes and scalpels removed. In a frame screwed to the wall, above plastic models of the male and female reproductive systems, was a large photograph of a baby polar bear. The room had no smell. The lights were very bright.

A small flat-screen television hung in the corner and #12 was watching a talk show. On it, the host was interviewing the family of a serial killer.

The killer started when he was young, torturing animals, the host said in a somber voice.

That guy thinks he's an expert, #13 said.

#12 brushed her fingertips across her stomach. She wondered what kind of father #13 might make.

#13 noticed her moment of sadness. He found the tongue depressors, took one from the glass canister and placed it between his legs so it stuck out from his crotch. He wiggled and waved it back and forth. #12 laughed, then glanced away and began to read a poster on the wall that told her what to do and what not to do. She saw the picture of the polar bear. She saw the boxes of tissues. The rubber gloves and spotless sink.

This is the safest place I've ever been, she said.

The woman on television insisted there was a part of her that could never believe what people told her about her father. I forgave him, she said. The audience gasped.

I hate this show, #13 said. People are always crying.

I know, #12 said. It's stupid.

#13 put the depressor in his mouth.

The television went to commercial, insisting that healthy skin was the key to happiness. It said that only dutiful people could prevent the next terrorist attack.

You always do that, #13 said. You always pull your hair.

#12 glanced at her hand.

It makes you look like an idiot, he said.

#12 tried to picture what her future might be like. She did not see all the money she could dream of. She did not see a house in the suburbs. She did not see syphilis or gonorrhea or herpes. On television the serial killer's daughter maintained that people were always redeemable no matter what horrible things they'd done.

Do you love me? #13 asked her.

I think so, #12 said. It was the truth and it was a lie.

Good, he answered.

They turned their heads at a light rapping on the door. The doctor entered and when she saw the two of them, a look of confusion tremored across her face. The test results hung in her hand. The TV said that the man had never given a clue as to who he really was. Some people in the audience sobbed. Others seemed angry. The doctor shuffled over to the TV and turned it off. She pulled the tongue depressor out of #13's mouth and tossed it in the wastebasket.