

Mental Ward: Echoes of the Past

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Maintenance *K. Trap Jones* I have seen many things during my tenure at Bay Pines, but none of that would matter; none of that could have prepared me for what I saw that night. It was just a job, something to pay the bills. I did not envision the level of torment and sheer frustration that would bombard me. My emotions became entangled in a dismal display of self-pity, one that I am having difficulty unwinding. I found myself praying each night for the rise of the sun, as I fully believed that everything would return back to the level of sanity that I was accustomed to. A handy man; a maintenance man, whatever the job description listed was what I intended to be. I always had a keen eye for fixing broken things; from appliances to automobiles, it didn't matter. I could pretty much repair anything. Even as a child, I would break things on purpose just to fix it a few minutes later. Maintenance is not a wealthy career choice and it is extremely underrated, but it's what I liked to do. Following the dream carried me aimlessly throughout several apartment complexes, local businesses and whatnot, but the level of pay was never there; not until I saw the posting at Bay Pines. I fit the job description as if I had written it myself. The large asylum on the outskirts of town was well established and well known amongst the city. The vastness of the property and the amount of maintenance required would be a dream job for a person like me. With high confidence, I answered the job opening and with resume in hand I walked up the steps of the asylum. I felt as if I was in full control over my destiny. The position was a fate that I wanted to conquer. The dealer had handed out all of the cards and I was going all in. The warden greeted me in the foyer. A delightful, elderly man, he was overly gracious in his demeanor. It took a bit of time for me to get accustomed to his over the top excitement, but I adjusted accordingly. Following him through the halls towards his office, we passed several patients dressed in the typical white gown hospital attire. I thought nothing of their involuntary trembling or the scraping of the walls with their nails. I had to keep my eye on the prize of employment. "I appreciate the prompt response to the open position," he stated, walking quickly towards his office door. "The position certainly caught my eye. I have a great deal of maintenance experience," I replied, trying not to over indulge in my skill level. As the warden rattled his keys in order to fit one inside the door of his

office, a screaming patient barreled through the hall, chased by two guards. I observed the woman being tackled by the guards. Restraining her, the guards kept her from self-inflicting harm. Mumbling in tongues, her face shook horribly as her eyes revealed a sea of white. My throat clamored, my lips became dry, but my mind remained focused on the task at hand. "Good, good. We require immediate fulfillment of the position. In a place like this, the mind is not the only thing that breaks," he continued, chuckling at his own words. The office was nothing special; in fact it appeared much like a closet with no windows. Full book shelves stood floor to ceiling and a modest little desk was being suffocated by file folders and papers. "Let's take a look at your resume," the warden said, sitting back into a squeaky chair. Without hesitation, I handed over my work history and took control of the conversation. "As you can clearly see, my qualifications are all there. Maintenance and repairing broken items is my specialty. With over twenty years of experience, I am fully confident that I can tend to the needs of your company and the employees, and of course, patients," my tone was dead on, full of confidence and pride in my previous work experiences. "Good, good," the warden answered, barely glimpsing at my resume, "we need a new maintenance man that matches your qualifications." I felt like a piece of meat; a hollowed shell of a candidate. He was distracted by something. His attention was not what I was used to during a job interview, but I chose not to dwell in the notion. "If you don't mind me asking, what happened to the other maintenance man?" I asked, not sure why, but at the moment it felt like a good conversational piece. "Our previous maintenance man did not work well under the pressures of the asylum, but I am sure that you will meet the challenge at hand," he replied, shuffling through several files. "The asylum has a life of its own, some accept it; others do not." I wasn't exactly sure as to what he was talking about, but I nodded in agreement just to show that I was listening. "When do you need to fill the position?" I asked, pretty sure I already knew the answer. "Immediately, the list of broken items is compounding as we speak." I waited for the job offer, but instead was greeted with an eerie silence as he continued his search for something upon his desk. He was hard to read, was the offer assumed or was the interview over? I couldn't tell. To break the silence, I threw out another useless question. "How many patients does Bay Pines have?" "Nine hundred and ninety five, to be exact," he answered. "How are you around death?" His rebuttal question caught me off guard, forcing my mind to clamor for words. "I, I, I am good with death," I responded, thinking that I had just lost the job with my word choice. "Tolerance of death is an important requirement for the position. Within the walls of the asylum, death is patient #996," he explained, sliding over a piece of paper to me along with a pen. "Sign here and the job is yours." I glanced over the small texted paper; my excitement over achieving the job overshadowed the words that I should have read. My eyes went straight for the vacant line that awaited my signature. The warden noticed me quickly scanning the words as I signed. "Just a formality; there are many visions within the halls that will greet your eyes. This is just insurance that those visions are kept within and not shared with the outside world. Mental rehabilitation is often misunderstood. We like to try our best to avoid any potential confusion." "Understood," I promptly answered, not completely understanding what he stated. Handing the pen and form back to him, I gloated internally about my new job. Excitement swelled my eyes and moistened my tongue. "As part of the position, we do offer quarters with a bed as well as three meals per day. Little perks to help along the way," he proclaimed with a smile, handing me a work list of broken items. "Pay is bi-weekly. I'll have someone show you to your room." After shaking his hand and exiting the office, I was greeted by a large, burly man extending his hand. "Welcome aboard," the man kindly said. "Name is Tyler; head guard here at Bay Pines. Congratulations on the new job. Good, honest maintenance men with mental stamina are hard to come across. Let's first get you a uniform." Tyler led me down the hallway where our conversation continued. "How long have you been here?" I asked, probing for information about the asylum. "Oh, about five years or so." "How many employees does Bay Pines have?" "It fluctuates. At any given time, the number could be as high as fifty or as low as twenty-five," Tyler continued, walking through the hall. "Our turnover rate serves as a thorn in the side of the asylum." "Is the leaving voluntary?" Tyler smiles. "Since my stay here, you are the tenth maintenance man I have met." "Why do you think that is?" "This place is unlike anything you have seen; the sights and sounds can torment you if you allow it. This is no place for a

weak minded socialite seeking stability. The mental decay is often times difficult to deal with. Those who stick around have come to terms with their state of mental strength. Avoidance of drama and turmoil will lead to tenure free of dismay and disorder." Opening a cabinet, Tyler handed me a tightly folded shirt and pants similar to his attire. "Your name badge will arrive after you show you have the ability to stay," he says with a grin. "No reason in wasting resources on something that may not last." My gleaming eyes met his challenge without words. I would wear that uniform with pride, proving my worth amongst the staff. "Your room is down the hall to the right," he announced, gesturing through the crowd of patients. "I'll check in with you from time to time to see how you are adjusting. For now, I must tend to my chores." I watched as his white shirt blended effortlessly through the sea of patients crowding the hallway. Gripping my uniform tightly, I waded through the patients trying hard not to make eye contact with any of them. The varying demeanors made the hallway come alive with ramblings and shrieks of terror. I maintained my composure as I felt hands gripping my shirt. Calmly grabbing the wrist, I pulled the fingers away as I continued towards my room. With the door shut behind me, I took a deep breath to inhale the solitude of being alone, but the disgusting environment of the abode siphoned any such relief. The darkened room had no windows. A lone finicky light bulb hung from the ceiling, providing the only light. The ceiling was stained with water damage as excess water dripped to the floor, pooling upon the concrete. A rusty cot awaited me, which sat directly across from a decaying toilet. I knew the room smelled, but I chose to not breathe through my nose. Quick short breaths funneled past my lips in order to soothe my disapproving heart. I kept telling myself that it is a good paying job as I undressed and buttoned up my uniform. A loud bang sounded on the door and rattled my senses. The sharpness of the noise tightened every muscle in my body. Pulling open the door, I saw the eyes of a woman. Her lips curled, revealing her non-hygienic teeth. "They're coming; they always do," she mumbled uncontrollably, her eyes appearing distant. Without responding, I shut the door, but could still hear her speaking. I had to get a grip on my emotions. Staring at my reflection within a cracked mirror hanging on the wall, I was able to pacify my racing heart. It was only a job and it had not even started. With my work list in hand, I opened the door and was immediately greeted by several patients pleading with me for mercy. A thick skin was what I required. The warden was correct; I needed to overlook the stench of death and the visions of decay in order to succeed. Pushing my way through the crowd, I felt myself becoming mentally stronger, focusing on the first item on the list. I was there to repair things, not get emotionally entangled with the patients. The kitchen served as the starting point. A leaky gas pipe on a stove proved not to be a challenge, but my eyes needed to learn to stay focused on the task at hand. While replacing the tubing, my mind wandered around the kitchen and observed the thickened grime painting the walls a dark hue. Insects swarmed freely through the air, feasting on remnants of leftover food. Three meals a day? I was hoping that they did not get prepared within that particular kitchen. A worn out fuse within the boiler room was next on the list. The furnace burned brightly, casting a red haze within the lower level of the asylum. The ash stained the walls and ceiling, forging a blackened pit. Hiding my nose and mouth within the shirt collar, I protected my lungs from ingesting the thickened black air. After replacing the fuse, I turned to climb the stairs, but was startled at the sight of a male patient huddled within the shadows of the room. Fear climbed up my spine as my tools fell to the ground. I had to once again focus on my breathing patterns in order to calm my racing heart rate. I couldn't leave him down there; he appeared lost and confused. I placed my hand upon his shoulder to try to offer some sort of comfort, but he leapt up, pushing me back against the wall, gripping my throat. His tired, blood stained eyes had not slept in days. His face was covered in black ash, highlighting the abundant wrinkles within his skin. "We have to get out; we must escape," he blurted out, drool streaming from the corners of his mouth. "The night must not come." Keeping my composure, as I was legally an employee of the asylum, I thought it best to not go with my initial response of burying the claws of the hammer deep within his skull. Instead, I tried using words to ease his discomfort. "It's ok, it's ok, I'll take you out of here," I said in a calm manner. His smile indicated that he understood me, but I think that he thought my words meant that I would take him out of the asylum. I just wanted to get him back upstairs with the others. After leading him up the stairs, he filtered back within the sea of

patients. I was particularly happy never to see him again. Third on the list was a leaky faucet within room #451. I took the rear stairs and as I exited into the hallway I was greeted with something very surprising; no patients. It was quite calm and satisfying to not have to twist through outreaching hands. However, the brutal screams echoing through the hallway snapped me back to reality. I followed the screams passing door #425. They got louder and more painful the further down I went. Door #431 swung open as I stopped walking. Tyler exited the room, shutting the door behind him. His uniform shirt was drenched in red. Wiping excess blood from his hands, he caught my eye. "All in a day's work," he smiled, walking towards me. I knew I needed to mind my own business, so I ignored the blood and screams. "Do the patients roam freely all the time?" I asked, trying to change the subject and minimize the duration of the awkward situation. "Yes, we're an asylum not a prison. Social encounters are necessary in order to correct a troubled mind, but occasionally one will go rogue," he continued, nodding towards the door he came out of. "When that happens, I get the call to...how should I say, get the mind back on track." I had nothing else to add to the conversation; I didn't want to know any more than what he had already enlightened me about. Walking passed me, Tyler added one more statement. "Lock down in thirty minutes." I assumed he meant that all of the patients had to be in their rooms for the night. Quickly walking to room #451, I pushed open the door as the light from the hallway poured into the darkened room, splitting apart the shadows. I was relieved that the tenant was not there. Being alone was very gratifying as I repaired the leaky faucet by tightening the pipes and resealing the outside joints. It must have taken me a full thirty minutes to finish the task as a loud bell echoed throughout the room and hallway. The silence of the hall was destroyed by the wave of patients ascending the stairs seeking shelter within their rooms. Like a fish swimming upstream, I made my way back to the stairs and down to the lower level. An honest day's work, an honest day's pay. The sun sank down; remnants of the bright rays faded through the windows of the first floor. Making my way to my room, I saw the warden leaving. "How was your first day?" he asked, buttoning his coat. "Great, I got a lot accomplished," I replied, not mentioning any of my encounters with patients. "Good to hear, so I will hopefully see you in the morning." "You don't stay on the grounds?" I asked, curious as to why he was rushing. "No, no, no, I am only here when the sun is shining brightly. With the patients all asleep, the asylum needs no overseer," he replied with a stern voice. "Like I said, I hope to see you in the morning." I stood alone in the foyer as the warden locked the door behind him. The sun crept further as the shadows pushed the light out of the asylum. Everything was quiet; everything was at peace. There was no more chaos within the halls; no more turmoil butchering the atmosphere. I was alone; it was quite relaxing. Walking down the long hallway towards my room, I felt a presence, an inclination that I was being followed. Upon glancing backwards, I reassured myself that no one was there. Reaching for the door knob, I felt it again. Disturbances within a calm demeanor as if someone was standing right next me, invading my personal space. I was physically alone, but that did not stop my mind from trying to decipher the events. My eyes presented me visions that I could not comprehend. Looking down the hallway, I saw them, ghostly patients prying themselves from the stone walls. Hundreds of them moaned in agony as they scraped walls, desperately seeking release. I felt my hand trembling as it tried to grip the door knob. I was fixated on the walls and what I was witnessing. The hallway had come alive with the dead. The river of souls flowed towards me. Panic set in as my forearm muscles tightened, turning the knob. I could hear the moans spilling into my room from underneath the door. They were out there and I did not want to lay my eyes upon them anymore. Silence again fell within the asylum. Thinking that I was hallucinating, I decided to rest my tired eyes. The rusty springs of the cot only offered partial comfort, but my aching bones desired more attention. Falling asleep, I felt a cool breeze brushing my face. Soothing at first, the breeze went back and forth as if someone was fanning me. Opening my eyes, I saw the soles of a pair of shoes swinging before me. Startled, I rolled out of bed and saw the vision of an asylum worker who had hung himself. With a tightened noose around his neck, he swayed ever so slightly above my bed. Dressed in a uniform, his mouth was gaped open, his eyes widened in fear. Any belief in ghosts I had was immediately escalated at that particular moment. Behind me was another vision of a worker, his wrists cut to the bone. His body was slumped upon the floor within puddles of blood.

As I backed towards the door, I kept staring at the visions. In a sadistic repeat of history, I watched as the first worker strung the rope and clenched it around his neck before stepping off of the bed. His neck snapped instantly as his body involuntarily twitched. The other man carved a razor blade deep into his flesh as blood spurted from his wounds. I could feel their pain and agony; I could understand their torment and suffering. Their emotions filled the room. Like clockwork, they repeated their deaths again. With chaotic thoughts battering my insanity, I exited the room, but the hallway welcomed me with an abundance of death patterns, each unique in their own twisted ways. The ghosts paid no attention to me as I walked in a dazed state. Skulls were being smashed into walls; throats were being severed right before my eyes. Like a skipping vinyl record, the patterns repeated themselves over and over again. I was the only live person in the hallway, but that did not stop the asylum from feeling overcrowded with the dead. The torment spewing from the walls was overwhelming. I felt insanity hopping on my back for a free ride. Within the foyer, the death continued up the staircases throughout the entire building. There was death around every corner, behind every door; it was unavoidable. Ghosts tossed themselves from the second landing, smashing into the ground. A ghost armed with a knife slaughtered three victims, butchering them to death. Gunfire rang out from near the front door as I watched a man enter the asylum. He opened fire at whoever was unfortunate enough to be in the foyer at the time. Bullets shattered the heads of patients. With one bullet left, the man swallowed the barrel and fired. Further down the hallway leading to the kitchen, I saw a man dressed in a bloody apron wielding two cleavers. Madly swinging the blades, the man created ribbons of blood with every slice. I witnessed a guard getting attacked by several patients. They twisted his head until his neck gave way. Smashed in the back of their heads by an unknown object, the attackers collapsed and died alongside their victim. There was so much death; so much pain. My mind could not decipher it all. It tried, but failed. An overwhelming fear clouded my judgment and shielded my eyes. I felt dizzy and sought stability by sitting upon the floor. The solid foundation provided me with much needed support. The feeling of the cool concrete reassured me that I was still sane. I felt that I was being challenged; attacked from all sides. Cowering on the floor, I sunk into the fetal position, tears squeezing through my sealed eyes. The serpent of torment pulled me into a deep slumber. Jolted awake by Tyler, I shielded my eyes against the brightness of the sun leaking through the windows. "You know you have a room, right?" he stated with a smile. I quickly looked around after remembering the deadly visions that surrounded me. No ghosts; only patients laughing and smiling at my discomfort. "Welcome to Bay Pines," Tyler stated behind a grin. Through the front door, the warden walked in, keys in hand. "What a beautiful morning, gentlemen," he said, walking towards us. "I see the new maintenance man is still here. I kept the flyer just in case." "There were, there," I stuttered, not exactly sure as to what I was trying to say. "No reason to explain. The question is, are you capable of fulfilling the position? Do you have the flexibility and the willingness to adapt to change? Others have tried, but I can see that your mind is intact. It is capable of seeing through the madness, concentrating on the task at hand. These are important traits that I am seeking within the maintenance position." "Does this happen every night?" "Yes," Tyler interjected. "As the sun falls, the asylum awakens the souls of the dead. Those who lost their lives are embedded within the walls; mortar between the stones that construct this place. It is the essence of lunacy that highlights the production. Sometimes history is not meant to be unraveled and deciphered; we cannot understand everything, so why try?" "The question is, are you capable of maintaining sanity?" Tyler asked, wearing the same blood stained shirt. "I believe so," I responded with hesitation in my voice. "Belief is a warped sense of reality; belief is fiction without boundaries. It is not a question of believing, it is a question of achieving. Are you capable of achieving success within the asylum with the knowledge that you have gained?" the warden explained. "Let us see how you react. Here is a new work list. If you complete the tasks, then your actions will speak for you." I accepted the challenge in the warmth of the sun's rays, but knew that I would probably regret my decision with the rise of the moon. The warden smiled as I walked down the hallway, I could hear his voice following behind me. "Remember, the asylum requires properly functioning machinery in order to prosper. That includes all employees and patients. Like I said, death is patient #996." **Wake Jason Cordova** I looked up at the Superintendent, confused. I

had missed the last part of his introductory speech while lost in memories of a time past. It must have been evident upon my face for he frowned, sighed and repeated himself. "It gets a little strange around here, young man. The usual creaks and groans of an old building that should have been replaced years ago, the patients who think they are being chased by demons, devils and who knows what else... The weirdness of it all makes you see – and hear – things that you thought are impossible. Don't let your imagination get the best of you. Stay focused and on task and you'll do fine." "Sir, if I may?" I asked tentatively, speaking for the first time since I was ushered into his Spartan office. Aside from a picture of what I assumed were his children and a dying peace lily covered in dust, his desk was bare. The walls were naked as well and the carpet was an industrial gray. Much like the rest of the institution, it was worn, old and badly in need of a fresh face. "Go ahead," he said, folding his hands on his desk. "You said that the patients can be... restless," I tried, unable to find the proper word. "Wouldn't a, uh, sedative near the time they go to bed help them rest?" "Good thinking," the Superintendent nodded. "However, our resident senior psychologist – Doctor Bartholomew, who you probably won't see since he works days – prefers a more alternative form of therapy for our patients. He believes that masking the symptoms doesn't help them deal with their overall problems, or something like that. In any case, I listen to the board certified doctor and deal with the craziness that comes with running a mental ward full of men and women who can be a danger to themselves. Or worse, others. So no, we don't sedate them." "I was just wondering, sir." "It's not a problem at all. I think I've answered that question a few dozen times in the past six months from new hires." I glanced down, the beginnings of a question niggling away at the back of my mind. I decided not to ask, since I didn't want to risk this job. I was broke, living at home with my parents, and the proud owner of a creative writing degree from the local liberal arts college. Since I detested the food service industry, my options of employment after graduation had been limited. This was the first offer I had received, and with the state of the economy, I doubted I would see another one with as generous of a hiring package as this one. *Plus*, I reminded myself as the Superintendent pulled the W-2 forms from his desk for me to sign, *the job is supposedly cake. Just make sure nobody tries to get out during the night and that they don't hurt themselves or others.* That was it. No fuss, no worries about feeding them or anything. The day staff handled the minute-to-minute interactions with the patients, leaving me alone with my laptop. I would have all the time in the world to write my novel, at long last. I quickly filled out the forms, which promised that I would be taxed, taxed again and might get some back at some point in the future, and then signed the confidentiality agreement regarding patient information. That was tantamount to being hired, since patient privacy was the latest call to arms by rights advocacy groups. It was annoying, but necessary. If the patients didn't have any hope of privacy, why would they seek treatment? "All right, here's your master key for all the outer doors," the Superintendent slid a silver key across his desk to me. I picked it up and pocketed it, making a mental note to get a ring for it later. "You shouldn't need to use it, though, since Maurice is in charge of locking up at night." He then pulled a different key from his desk and, with a moment's hesitation, slid it across to me as well. "This is our inner master key, which gives you access to everything in the institution. Be careful with it. I only have four copies." I picked up the key and whistled softly. It was an ancient-looking skeleton key, a heavy iron piece with a large bit. Key wards were carved into the bit, grooves which allowed the key to open the locks. I inspected the large bow on the end and saw the initials *B.K.M.* engraved in the dark metal. I was fascinated by the key. *Stories could be written about this beast*, I thought. It was a weighty thing, and I decided that a bigger ring would be in order. I slid it into my breast pocket and looked at the Superintendent. "Well, let's get you out onto the floor and acquaint you with the other two night staff. Boyko and Maurice have been begging for a third person for days now, complaining about how their rummy game was all screwed up with only two players." "Ah," I muttered. I hated gin rummy. My grandmother played it religiously up to the day she died. After picking up my briefcase from the floor, we left the office and walked out into the dimly lit hallway. Most of the patients were already in their rooms for the night, with the remaining day shifters guiding their docile wards to their respective rooms. The day shift people looked me over curiously as we passed, their eyes heavy on my back. *Judging me, perhaps?* I wasn't sure, but I figured if it bothered me too much I could always ask Maurice or Boyko – *what a*

strange name, I thought – about it. We turned left and walked down another long hallway. I spent some time looking around, gathering my bearings so I wouldn't get lost later if I had to wander around after everyone else had left. The yellow paint on the walls was cracked and peeling, and the tiled floor looked like it could use a good waxing. Despite the wear and tear of the ward, however, it appeared to be relatively clean. We stopped at a small nurses station where two men, both elderly and not in the best of shape, were hunched over a table with a stack of playing cards before them. They were intent on their game and didn't see us approach. "Gentlemen," the Superintendent coughed slightly. The two older men looked up, mild confusion in their eyes before they recognized him. "This is Kevin. He's our new hire, and I'm starting him out on thirds. Kevin, this guy on the right is Boyko, the old curmudgeon on the left is Maurice." "I ain't no curmudgeon," Maurice grumbled as he stuck out his hand in my general direction. I shook it and was surprised. I tried not to wince; the old guy had one hell of a grip. Maurice let me go and jerked his thumb at the other man. "Boyko's the curmudgeon." I looked over the other man. They could have passed for brothers if not for the differing color of skin. While Maurice was the color of night – I could detect a hint of Hispanic in his accent, which was odd – Boyko was a sickly, pasty white that I long associated with men who didn't see a lot of daylight. Both men were bald, clean shaven and wore glasses. Their button down blue shirts were identical, and for a moment I wondered if they shopped together. "We don't have a uniform for the night crew," the Superintendent informed me. "But we do have a dress code. Collared shirts, slacks or khakis, comfortable shoes." I nodded. "Good thing I guessed right." "It wouldn't matter for your first week, really. Once you received a paycheck, I'd start to ask some rather pointed questions about your clothing. But since you seem to have everything already, I'm not going to worry about it. Now, my wife's at home and dinner is waiting for me. I'll leave you in the tender graces of these two men. Boyko, try not to scare off the help. It's hard to find someone willing to work nights here." Boyko made a non-committal grunt, which I took to be an assenting one. The Superintendent patted me on the back and glanced down at the briefcase I held in my hand. He nodded at it, acknowledging what I carried for the first time. "We don't have Wi-Fi. I hope that's okay." "Less distraction for me," I admitted. "I hope to get some writing done." "An excellent way to stay awake, if you ask me," he chuckled dryly. "I think of myself as a bit of a writer as well." "Oh? That's pretty cool," I said. Inwardly I rolled my eyes. With my degree – or because of it, I was never certain – someone else being a writer was something I heard all the time. "Damn it, Soop. You hired a guy who don't play gin rummy," Maurice grouched. "Sorry boys. Well, I'm off. Hope your first night here goes smoothly," he said and walked away. I watched him go for a moment before looking at the elderly men who were technically my superiors. After a minute of silently watching them, waiting for something, I coughed. "Got a cold?" Boyko grumbled, speaking for the first time. His voice was harsh, grating. I could tell in an instant that he wasn't going to like me much. "No. I was just wondering what I should be doing." "Lights out is at nine," Maurice began as he fiddled with the deck of cards. "Day shift leaves at nine-thirty, morning people come in around six. We're here from nine to six usually. You get one hour lunch break but the cafeteria is locked up after dinner. I'd recommend bringing a lunch box. I do a check on all outer doors around ten-ish, and you do a bed check at two. Just peek in their windows to see if they're in the room or not. I don't care if they're sleeping or jerking off, so long as they're in their room. We have four wings we're responsible for, with four more empty for now. There's a chart of all the occupied beds on that clipboard hanging on the wall over there. Use it. It has a map as well. Other than that, you can use the nurse's station up near the D Ward for your writing. Wall plugs over there. The fuses on this side are old and you could blow them out if you try to pull too much juice out of 'em. Any questions?" "Uh, no?" "Good. I'm forty in the hole on this bastard right now, and once I do a door check I'm making it all back. Anything comes up, come get us. Just remember the two o'clock bed check." "You're not gettin' anything back," Boyko grumbled and looked up at me with icy blue eyes. "Take the bed chart, newbie. It'll help." "Okay. Thanks," I said with feeling. "*De nada*," Maurice waved his hand dismissively. I took that for the signal for me to leave. I reached over, grabbed the bed chart from the wall and proceeded to follow the map to the station near the D Ward. After a wrong turn and a helpful young staff member I found the nurse's station. Maurice had been true to his word, as the desk had a comfortable chair with

multiple outlets for me to plug into. I set my briefcase down, pulled out my laptop and cranked it to life. The station was mostly bare, though a large clock dominated the wall to my left. The entire ward was silent, sleeping, despite the early hour. I smiled for the first time that evening. *This job is going to be a piece of cake.* *** Two hours later I was thoroughly into the prologue of my book, a story about a young boy fighting dragons, when I decided I needed to stretch my legs a bit. I glanced at the large clock on the wall and saw that it was only ten, meaning I had four more hours until bed check. The D Ward was silent, sparsely populated. The wing could easily hold over one hundred patients, but fifteen currently called it home. I leaned back in my chair and grabbed the clipboard, flipping through the pages until I came to D Ward. I scanned the names and saw that the occupants were all women. I looked down the hall and decided I would do a bed check now on my ward, then hit the others later at the scheduled time. None of the doors of the ward could open without me noticing, and there was no way I could miss anyone approaching the station. I hit "save" on the file on my laptop and stood, feeling my knees scream in protest after being idle for so long. Bed chart in hand, I began to walk down the hall to the first series of rooms. I peeked into the first room and saw the occupant lying still in her bed. A thin sliver of light from the outside allowed me to have a good view of the room. The walls were plain, padded for comfort and safety, though the upper walls were mildly dirty. The window, which had protective mesh covering it, was even dirtier. However, the sheets were clean and the floor looked okay. My earlier impression of the institution had been correct: worn, old and in need of some care, but a safe place nonetheless. I could see her breathing, so I checked her name off on the chart and moved on. Room after room, the same situation repeated itself. A few of the women were sleeping under their beds, their blankets pulled tightly around them, but that seemed harmless enough, so I let them remain there. I checked them off as I passed, and before long I was at the last occupied bed of the wing. I checked the name, looked inside the room, and saw the occupant sitting up in bed, staring at me. I blinked, surprised. I hadn't expected anyone to be awake, though intellectually I should have known better. I watched her for a second, her gaze level as she met my eyes. I smiled, feeling a bit awkward, and she smiled back. I shook myself and turned away, feeling a bit odd. She was beautiful, not the normal stressed-out appearance that the majority of the women in the wing wore. Her eyes were bright, unafraid, and not cowed or spacey. They had a hint of sadness in them which touched my heart. Even her hair looked as though it had been washed and brushed recently. She was the absolute picture of what I termed "not crazy". I walked back to my station, the patient's face burning in my mind. It was her smile, I decided after some thought. She had been happy to see me, which I hadn't expected. I thought that at a place like this everyone would be there against their will. Not for the first time was I forced to check my preconceived notions at the door. I sat back down in my chair and looked at the screen. The story, which had been flowing easily minutes before, seemed unimportant to me now. The hero wasn't as interesting as he'd originally been, and the story seemed too quaint and predictable. I frowned, deleted a paragraph and stared at the monitor. It wasn't good enough. I started typing, stopped, and cursed. I suddenly realized that my hero was becoming nothing more than a common fantasy trope, and I hated being predictable. I leaned back and closed my eyes, my mind on the book. *Was there a way to make him more original, something not straight out of every other book I'd read recently? How could I make him different than others?* I heard a soft noise from down the hall and my eyes snapped open. The hallway seemed slightly darker, and my monitor had gone to screensaver mode. I glanced at the clock on the wall and groaned in horror. It was after midnight. Somehow I had fallen asleep, the comfortable chair lulling me into relaxing too much. My first night and I had fallen asleep on watch. The noise returned, fainter than before. I struggled to identify it for a second before I recognized it as someone crying. I pulled myself out of the chair and grabbed my clipboard. I slowly walked down the hall, realizing instantly that the source of the sound was from the last room I had checked, the woman with the sad eyes. I approached it, uncertain as to what I should do. I knew that if there was a disturbance, I should go and get Boyko or Maurice. But... was this a disturbance? I was almost certain that crying in the dead of night was not too much of a disturbance, but I didn't want to be wrong. Not on my first night. I reached her door and looked in the small window. She sat there, looking back at me. Her eyes were still sad, but something was

wrong. I glanced around her room but saw nothing out of the ordinary. I looked back at her beautiful face and realized that her eyes were dry. She was looking at me, watching me. I opened my mouth to speak but stopped, unsure. Was I supposed to talk to them? Somehow, the Superintendent had left that part out during my admittedly brief orientation meeting. I decided against it. I had no idea what her deal was, or why she was even in the institution. She could be some whack-job killer or something. I didn't want to antagonize a potentially violent patient, no matter how pretty she was. I turned away. "Wait," she said. I stopped and looked back at her. She hadn't moved, hadn't changed her expression. "Yeah?" I asked, my throat dry. "What's your name?" "Uh, Kevin. Kevin James," I replied, feeling foolish. "Thank you." "Uh, welcome?" I waited for a moment longer but she seemed content. I hurried back to my desk and sat down. I felt a slight chill run down to the base of my spine. As beautiful as she was, there was something decidedly weird about her. I leaned back and frowned, bothered. Then it suddenly hit me. If she hadn't been the one crying, then who had? I stood back up, confused. The noise returned, louder than before, closer. It was in the D Ward, I was almost certain. Other than that, though, I had no idea who it was or where it was coming from. I scowled, my first night quickly turning into a pain in the ass. I grabbed my clipboard and started making rounds once more. Every occupant was asleep, unmoving, except for the woman at the end. She was still sitting there, still staring at me. It was beginning to creep me out a little, so I decided to ignore her as best as I could. I looked down the hallway where the rest of the empty rooms were. Perhaps a window was open and the breeze outside was making the crying noise? I figured it was a long shot but, without anything to pin it down on, I had to check. If I still couldn't find it, I'd go get Maurice. I figured I didn't want to deal with Boyko that often. I wandered down the hall and looked in the abandoned rooms. One by one I checked, the rooms haunting with their emptiness. As I moved further along, the quality of the rooms began to degrade. Some rooms were missing patches of padding, while others had water stains on the ceilings and dark, unidentifiable stains near the floor. The stainless steel cots were barren of mattresses, and the floors were covered in filth and waste. Trash was cluttered in the corner of one room, and something dark and unidentifiable was smeared all across the floor. I wiped my forehead, surprised to find myself sweating in spite of the cool night air. The rooms were secure, though, with no windows broken and no noise coming from them. I scowled, thoroughly pissed off, and turned back to head to my desk. I froze and felt a wave of icy terror run through my veins. *Oh God, no*, I thought, horrified. One of the doors was wide open. "Fuck me," I whispered and walked quickly back towards the room. I consulted my clipboard and saw that it was a middle-aged woman named Nancy Alvarez. I carefully approached the door, uncertain as to what I would find. I swallowed, steeled myself and peeked in. "Nancy?" I asked, my voice hoarse. No reply. I looked at the bed and saw the still form of the woman lying in bed. I looked up and saw that her window was wedged open slightly, allowing for a small breeze. I blinked and almost laughed at myself. One of the day people had undoubtedly forgotten to secure her door and the wind had pushed it open. I fished my skeleton key out of my breast pocket and closed the door, securing the latch. The lock clicked and I pocketed the key, satisfied. My heart rate slowed down as my natural calm returned. "Jesus," I muttered as I sat back down in my chair. The Superintendent had been right about the old place being spooky. My imagination as a writer was far more dangerous to me than I had anticipated, especially in a setting such as this. I checked the clock again and saw that it was closing in on one o'clock. I rubbed my eyes and yawned. Staying awake the first night was definitely going to be a challenge. I tapped my keyboard and the laptop rumbled to life. I scratched my chin as I stared back down the hallway, wondering if the creepy/beautiful woman was still awake. Something about the way she stared at me both drew me to her and scared the piss out of me as well. I made a mental note to not go down there again unless it was a matter of life or death. I looked at the screen and stopped cold. My heart lurched in my chest and my mouth was filled with ash. My story, the prologue which I had worked on for so long, wasn't there. Instead, my monitor was filled with gibberish. *The waking eyes of night are filled with sadness and delights. The waking eyes of night are filled with sadness and delights. The waking eyes of night are filled with sadness and delights. The waking eyes of night are filled with sadness and delights.* "What the fuck?" I closed the word program and reopened the last saved version of it. The novel

opened back up, the prologue on the screen, the words I had written hours before returned. I looked around the ward, suspicious. Was this Boyko or Maurice, messing with the new guy? I was becoming annoyed. I understood a little bit of hazing might be in order, but messing with my property was going too far. I closed the laptop and grabbed my clipboard. I would make my rounds now, then go talk to Maurice to see if they were really messing with me. If I was lucky, I'd catch them plotting how they were going to mess with me next. I walked quickly through the other three wings, doing my bed checks quickly. Most of the patients were asleep, though a few were sitting on their floors, rocking back and forth. However, none of them were attempting to hurt themselves, so I left them alone. After the last bed, I looked at my map. Boyko and Maurice were down the next hall, followed by a right turn. I followed the directions and in no time at all found the two curmudgeonly old men, still arguing about their game of cards. It appeared that Boyko was getting the upper hand in the game. "You cheatin', Boyko?" Maurice asked as I rounded the corner. The two men looked up at me and waved, their attitudes cheerful and good natured. Apparently Boyko was one of those guys who needed to be awake for a few hours before he was in any other mood than "horribly pissed off". "How's it going, Newbie?" Boyko asked me. "It's... okay, I guess," I admitted after a moment's thought. "The D Ward is creepy." "Yeah, they stick them crazy bitches down there," Maurice informed me. "Half of them are here because they went sixteen different ways of crazy and killed someone. I heard one of them actually cut her man's pecker off and used it in their dinner. Fucking crazies." "Damn," I whistled. I decided right then to not mention the open door to them. It'd probably cost me my job. "I did a bed check already because I was, ah, having problems staying awake." "Yeah, it takes some gettin' used to," Maurice chuckled. He waved his hand for me to join them. "It's why me and Boyko here play cards all night. Keeps us awake. Join us and lose some money?" "No thanks, I'm good," I smiled. "Wait, how do you lose money at gin rummy? You know, never mind. I just wanted to stop in and let you know that I'm still here." "Well, since you already did a bed check, we'll swing on by around five-thirty or so and check on you. Daytimers roll in at about fifteen till six, so we need to be functional when they do get here." I grinned. "So be awake, basically." "Yep. Be 'wake and everything'll be okay," Boyko nodded. I said thanks and went back to the D Ward, my mind wandering. It was obvious that neither man had left the station in quite a while, so they weren't messing with me. But *something* weird was going on in my ward. I thought back to the noise, the crying, the door being opened. I frowned and wondered if, perhaps, some vengeful spirit was at work or, worse still, a patient was out and completely screwing with my head. "No, stop it," I growled. The Superintendent had warned me about letting my imagination get the better of me. The institution was old, dating back to the early twenties. Any building like this one was bound to have some weird noises or spooky crap going on at any random time. It was just the nature of places which were very old with some darker history. Combined with a man who had an overactive imagination and it added up to a badly written TV episode on cable.

Echoes of the Past

In places where unspeakable atrocities occurred sometimes 'something' lingers, stuck between the worlds of the living and the dead. Those who believe in the grey area behind the veil will tell you that those places can become eternal cages that hold the souls of the deceased captive.

'Mental Ward: Echoes of the Past' is a collection of twelve such stories; tales of hauntings taking place in asylums. The places where the crazed, the insane, and sometimes the different were hidden away from society's view.

Follow the winding path crafted by the talented, and in some cases, twisted

imaginings of the storytellers who would taint your peaceful world with their echoes of the past.

*This book is a collection of similarly themed yet varying fictitious short stories from multiple authors.

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