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Dead House

Sabrina Boone

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Dead House

Sabrina Boone

Just before a performance, the lights are dimmed and the audience sits in absolute silence. Prior to the stage lights illuminating the first scene, there is a moment's hesitation—only enough to fuel anticipation of the coming play. If it's any longer than an instant, someone in the audience will laugh or cough, and the moment is ruined.

That moment of black silence is how depression holds on to you—but its hold doesn't conclude so cleanly.

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Luckily, I won the starring role in the season's tragedy.

It's a cattle call in the ER, deciding who will star in the coming performance. The director evaluating each entry is a tired old lady, rounding her final shift before going home to crash on her sofa and watch reruns of Law and Order.

“Did you try to kill yourself?”

I thought that to be the obvious criteria for landing this role.

The next day I receive my callback, and I'm transferred to the psychiatric ward. The curtain opens and the stage lights are blinding. I can't see the audience. A caricature of a bleeding heart opens the show, fills out my paperwork for the ward, teary-eyed about how “young and lost” I am to wind up in this place.

She shoves a needle in my arm to draw out what's left of me; spurts of thick, warm blood travel into a tube that the nurses take away.

When the stage lights are out of my eyes I can see members of the audience: the nursing staff, scrutinizing patients like painted demons wreaking havoc across the stage.

I wanted to kill myself, not you, damnit.

The villains of this tragedy are not so easily seen. They're kept backstage, working as backdrops. The playwright is a crooked old man with a broken neck, dangling from the rafters of an old motel. The story is scribbled on pieces of bath tissue and scattered across the flea-infested bed. Our stagehands are twitchy crack-addicts with open sores across their faces, half-suicidal, shuffling and filing the dilapidated

thoughts the can scrounge from our minds.

My fellow actors are worn out vagabonds, searching for play-houses of their own. They only hope to rule there, instead of this stage in which they are mere heaps of flesh moving for the pleasure of the audience.

I have the pleasure of a wonderful supporting cast, for they create the true framework of this narrative: the flesh surrounding this plot of self-carnage.

A middle-aged meth dealer is the main plot device, spelling out conflict for the audience to devour.

“Why are you here?” He asks. When I don’t answer, he continues. “Let me guess... did someone hurt you? Sexual abuse, right? Did I get it right? How old were you?”

It’s the climactic moment in which my backstory is exposed to the audience!

“I was thirteen.”

“Mine was when I was six. My uncle did it,” he laughed.

“But what good would killing yourself be?” he asked, after his laughter died down.

“I wanted to send him my best regards from Hell.”

Then the introduction of more relatable characters that form the groundwork of the plot.

A woman with bipolar depression tells me I remind her of her daughter and calls me “baby girl.”

Then, a man who spends his free time watching sports on television. He becomes my regular companion, sitting with me in the mornings while I read. He encourages me to feel better.

In one of our daily group sessions I learn that a few years prior he had beaten his son half to death with a baseball bat.

During visiting hours the audience is given a moment of comic relief to break the storyline.

“Goodness, it’s horrible that you have to live with these people!” “There are all manner of degenerates in here, aren’t there? Come on, sweetie. You’re nothing like them. You just don’t belong in here.”

Later, a pun is thrown into the script: “I feel like I’m losing my mind in here,” I say.

Cue the laugh track.

The end of the show is fast approaching when medications are forced into me like illegal steroids in a professional athlete. Another laugh track, please.

Wake up. “Vitals” check. Breakfast, meds, group time. Lunch. Meds, group time. Vitals. Dinner. Meds. Bedtime. Drugs are as common as bread on the dinner table.

“Stability” marks the falling actions of the plot. This is the word for the target I am supposed to reach in the development of this performance.

Finally, my release papers are signed and filed away. Congratulations! I am fit to return to society. I’m pushed offstage unceremoniously. The show is done.

I bow to the audience. It’s the final curtain call, but there’s no applause. It’s a dead house.