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Endless Jars of Hungry Mouths

By Rory Kranz

In the quiet of night, the hospital glows green. It's the bioluminescence, billions of tiny organisms painted on the walls, the ceiling, some even smeared on the handle I open to enter the nursery. Energy efficient, environment-saving, green-glowing bioluminescence. It fills the halls with a distinctly algae-like scent that I associate with the hospital even more than alcohol swabs or raw meat or powdery latex gloves.

They are arranged from youngest to oldest, and so I start with the newborns. First is the premature little thing brought in yesterday. She floats in the fluid of her container like a baby bird, limbs slight and curled in on each other. I imagine her name would be Adelaide, or Dolly—something delicate and old-fashioned.

I leave the wheelie cart in the center of the hall. It is not needed here. Instead, I unbutton the patch on my shirt and remove my breast. The pump attaches to the nipple and channels the

milk through a tube that feeds into the baby's mouth. I wait until the bar on the base of the pump fills green, then detach myself with a sucking, puckering sound. The baby's belly is slightly more round than it was before.

I don't bother to tuck myself away. When I first started here I did. I was embarrassed to expose myself. The eye of the security cam surveyed me from above the door and I imagined a youthful security guard with their nose pressed close to the screen, eyes all a-lusty at the sight of my bare chest. Now I know it is only Brev, who is too old and too tired and too desensitized to pay any attention.

There are ten more infants to go. The board insists that the infants be fed real authentic live-female breast milk. The older ones are formula fed but the rich patrons of the hospital tell us that true breast milk is healthiest, according to research. So when I started I signed a contract where I agreed to take a little blue pill every day that kept my breasts full and leaking. It was a pain, but not as much of a pain as trying to find another job.

I finish with the infants and move on to the toddlers. These ones are slightly more surreal. They float in their fluid containers just like the infants, but they have hair on their heads and their faces have developed enough to be distinguishable from one another. Floating nearest me is a dark-skinned male baby with lovely coils of hair wisping about his face. I can imagine his eyes opening, peering out at me through the glass wall. Almost involuntarily, I reach out and tap the glass. My heart stutters for a moment as the sound echoes down the hall. But the child does not react. Of course he wouldn't. None of them ever do.

I detach the formula bottle and move on to the next.

Twenty bottles later and I am onto the children. These one must be fed a sort of meat smoothie. The tube enters through their stomach instead of their mouth. I breathe through my mouth as I feed the raw meat slush into the funnel.

Occasionally I pass other nurses winding their way down an adjacent hall, but we are like ships in the night, as the saying goes. Unacknowledged, we go about our duties in the dark green glow of the hospital.

By 3AM I have made it to the adults. One of the wheels on the cart has developed an irritating squeak. I remind myself to let Brev know about it before clocking out.

The adults are perhaps the strangest of the lot. The hospital doesn't bother with clothes for modesty. As far as the board was concerned, funds were better spent loitering in their pockets than on silly things like clothes for patients who never got any visitors. And so they float, bare and exposed in their greenish tubs of fluid, skin puckered from their never-ending bath.

Even the oldest of them all is five years younger than I. That was when it began. Mothers screamed on television news as their newborns never opened their eyes, hearts beating, yet locked in an endless sleep. It was all of them. The poor kept them on life support until funds ran out, the rich created hospitals like this. Waiting for a cure to be found, for the mystery to be solved. And yet it had been thirty years and not one of them had woken up.

The pining scree of the cart peters out as I wheel it to a stop in the final section of the hall. Although the hall continues, the bioluminescence only goes as far as this. Beyond, the corridor fades into darkness where empty tubs of fluid lie in wait.

The last echoes of the faulty wheel gone, I freeze. There is another sound beneath the hum of the tubs and the quiet pulse of plumbing. A faint, ever so faint, tapping. As if the barest brush of a fingernail against glass. It comes from behind me.

I turn to the vats on the other side of the hall. Floating on the edge of the darkness is a man, blond and thin. His hand is outstretched towards the glass of his tube. I exhale slowly. Sometimes the currents in the vats do this. When the fresh fluid pumps through, the bodies inside can drift a bit. I've never seen one nudge against the glass, but it wasn't unheard of.

I approach the man's tube and walk around until I am facing him head-on. His eyes are a pale blue, matching the pallor of his skin. A tremor down my spine as I realize—his eyes. They are open and looking at me.

I am about to turn and sound the alarm, there is a red switch on the wall if ever this occasion arose, but the man's palm thuds against the glass and he shakes his head. His expression is impassive and watchful. Slowly, he points to the switch at the base of the chamber which adjusts the water level.

I glance at the red switch on the wall, then at the beady security cam a fair few yards away. At this distance, the footage was likely to be grainy at best, if not a blur of incomprehensible light and shadow. Regardless, I should sound the alarm. That would be the right thing to do, the thing that would keep me my job.

Fuck it. I press the switch on the tube and the water level jolts down, draining out the grate in the bottom with a horrible leeching, sucking noise. My mother always told me I had the curiosity of a hundred cats but without the dexterity to get outta trouble. She is dead now, long dead. But I can feel her shaking her head over my shoulder and saying in her fluttery southern tinged voice, *"You're a wicked one Maya Briggs. Never know how not to cross the line, or where the line is, for that matter. That devil on your shoulder must be mighty persuasive."*

The man's head emerges from the water, then his shoulders. He palms his hand against the glass once more and looks pointedly at the switch. I shut it off. He stays submerged from the chest down.