

Echoes of Barkin

By

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Emma arrived a half an hour early for the viewing. It was always best to arrive before the client. It also allowed her to make sure that everything was presentable and that there were no unexpected surprises, like burst pipes or collapsed plaster. Although the property was maintained by an agency, it never hurt to check.

Emma picked up the print outs of the property that she had bought from the office and leaved through them one more time, just so that she could read the details one more time and compare the description to the actual property.

Stepping out of the small 4 x 4 that she had chosen as a company car, Emma sat on the bonnet and leafed through the papers. The house was even more imposing in the flesh than the description led one to believe. It was definitely impressive. A flight of stairs leading up to a set of large double doors, complete with stone archway and columns in the classic style. The rest of the building, while lacking the grandeur of the entrance, still managed to impose its distinctive authority on the onlooker.

This was a building that was designed for a purpose. The brickworks may need rendering in places, but the massive Victorian building spoke volumes about a level of care in construction that could no longer be found in modern buildings. Real stone lintels and surrounds could just be seen peaking from behind the hardboard covers that had been attached when the building was first abandoned. The covers were attached in such a way as to hide the iron bars. Even so, Emma knew they still existed behind the wooden covers. The grey slate roof still looked in tact and the cast iron guttering was a marvel to Victorian craftsmanship. The grounds themselves may have seen better days and the massive cast iron gates would need a little work to bring them back to their former glory. But overall the structure was sound and well built. She could see why a developer would want to consider this property. If she used her imagination she could see how attractive this structure could become once the eighty rooms were converted into desirable flats, each with a nice triple digit price tag and maintenance agreement. A very good investment. Especially if the investor wished to sell off the land attached to the property that came with the building. Ideal for future development. The only thing that she would change was the name across the door. "Barking Asylum."

Taking the keys from her bag, along with a powerful flashlight, she struggled to maintain her grip on everything she was carrying as she bent to find the right key that would open the door. Finally she found the right one and the chamber turned easily. Turning the handle she put her shoulder against the door and eased her way in. Once inside the door she took in her surroundings, turning on her torch and shining it around the interior. The entrance hall was massive and mostly surrounded in darkness. However, it gave the impression of a railway station as the torch picked out moulded wrought iron beams and white glazed

Victorian Bricks. A large teak desk dominated the centre of the room, behind which were a set of door, while a large imposing staircase curved its way up to the upper story. The stone floor still bore the remnants of carpet designed to welcome visitors and patients. However, there was a certain air of hospitalisation and functionality that could not be hidden by mere rugs.

Walking over to the desk her heels made a loud staccato clicking sound. She might have the option of a 4 x 4, sensible when one considered some of the locations that she had to meet clients. But once there she must be suited and booted. That meant uncomfortable heels, smart skirt and jacket. She placed the papers and her briefcase down, causing a small cloud of dust to swirl into the air, causing her to sneeze.

Her loud "Achoo" was accompanied by another sound. A bang. Turning around she noted that the door had shut. Shining the light around she noted that there was no obvious sign of water damage. She would explore more, but first she would just open the door, so that she could here the client when they arrived. Striding back over to the door she twisted the knob, only to find that it didn't open. This was no great surprise, given the clientele and so she withdrew her keys and, finding the key she had used earlier, inserted it into the lock and turned, only to here something click and, although the key turned nothing happened.

"Great," she exclaimed.

Fifteen minutes before the client arrives and she breaks the lock. Oh well, she will just have to find a side entrance and show the client in that way. Not as dramatic as she would have liked, but it would have to do. Returning to the desk she leafed through the papers until she found the floor plan. Placing the rest in her bag she picked up the torch and studied the layout. Fortunately there was a tradesman's entrance by the kitchens. It also looked like there was another one near to the cells. Deciding on her path, she set off. If she was quick, she could still make a good impression as she waited outside. Walking to the doors beside the counter, accompanied by the loud sound of clicking heels; she bumped her way into the area marked as Admissions on the sign above the door.

It was, as she had expected, a much more utilitarian place. The main entrance might have been designed to impress clients, but this area was the sort of no nonsense area that one would expect from a hospital. Linoleum flooring, white tiled walls and peeling paint. Dirt had robbed it of some of its clinical charm, but Emma could well imagine Hattie Jacques striding purposefully down these corridors, complete with starched hat and uniform, woolly black tights, sensible shoes and nurses watch, demanding that the younger nurses should make an effort to keep the place in order, while Barbara Windsor giggled and Kenneth Williams "Ooh Matroned" for all he was worth.

However her mirthful smile turned sour as she remembered the poor unfortunates who would have been processed for their stay here, perhaps being manhandled by orderlies as they ranted and protested.

Shining her flashlight she found the double doors she was looking for and headed over towards them. As she pushed the doors open and stepped through, a rat squeaked its protest and scurried away from her, causing Emma to jump into an abandoned gurney, parked on the other side of the door. She went over with a crash, landing in a heap on the other side of the trolley.

Squinting into the light she opened her eyes. Noise surrounded her and she blinked as she rubbed her sore head.

“Come on dear. It’s time for you to get ready.”

“Sorry,” Emma asked as a nurse leaned over and took her hand.

Blinking at this unexpected turn of events, Emma looked around. She was in the processing room, but it was clean and looked new. A nurse’s station was set up to one side and she could make out other people in uniform. The nurse wore the blue and white dress common to the 1950s, complete with white hat and hair pulled up in a bun and held in place with enough bobby pins to rivet a battleship.

“You need to come with me for your shower.”

Emma was confused. This couldn’t be happening.

The nurse, seeing her confusion, beckoned an orderly over and, taking an elbow each, helped her to stand and guided her towards a set of doors on the other side of the room. These led to a changing room, but instead of lockers, Emma noted that there was a counter that looked like it belonged in the post office, as it had a glass window and a hatch. She could make out rows and rows of cardboard boxes stacked on shelves behind the counter. One such box, which was empty, stood on the counter. It was open and the lid was on the counter next to it.

“Look, I don’t know what’s happening, but you have made a mistake. I don’t belong here,” Emma tried.

“I know dear, but you are going to be staying with us for a little while, just until the doctor can have a chat with you. Then we can decide what is best. But for now we need to give you a shower and get you ready for the night.”

“But you don’t understand. I am not a patient. I,”

Emma stopped what she was about to say. She was going to say that she was just here to show the property to a developer, but this was not the property. At least it was the property, but she must be hallucinating or this was a joke, but this looked real. More importantly, it felt real. She did not know what was happening, but anything she tried to explain would probably sound crazy.

“I know. It’s hard at first dear, but we will get you settled in and you can explain everything to the doctor in the morning,” the nurse said as she helped Emma out of her jacket and started to unbutton her blouse.

Emma weighed her options. There were two nurses and, she saw, an orderly behind the counter. She probably didn’t have a choice about getting undressed. She didn’t like her chances trying to barge her way outside and so she allowed herself to be undressed, the other nurse folding her clothes and placed them into the box, along with her bag, map and torch. Finally she was naked and tried to cover herself with her hands as she noted how

cold it was. She watched as the lid was placed on the box and pushed through the hatch to the waiting orderly to place on the shelf. As the box turned end on she noticed a large label attached to it.

“Emma Thompson, 94238”

Emma was shocked. How had her name gotten onto the box? She didn't have long to ponder this as the nurses guided her into the next room. It was a large tiled wet room, with a drain in the corner. The nurse told her to go and stand by the drain. Emma did as she was told. Turning around she was taken aback to see the other nurse holding a hosepipe and aiming it at her as she played with the nozzle.

“What. No,” she screamed as a blast of cold water hit her, nearly knocking her off of her feet.

She screamed and tried to cover herself, turning away from the vicious cold blast as she was soaked and scrubbed by sheer force. After an eternity the water stopped and the room was suddenly quiet, other than the drip of water running down the drain. Emma sobbed. This was a nightmare. What was happening?

The first nurse walked over to her, bringing a white towel from the bench. She wrapped it around the sobbing girl and started to dry her. Emma allowed herself to be manhandled as she was guided to another changing area.

“There, there dear, it's over now. Everybody has to get cleaned when they first arrive and it's part of the treatment. The doctor believes that, for minor cases this will help shock them back to reality. It works as well. Some patients have left here within a day or so after the water treatment. But come now, you can get dressed and warm yourself up.

Emma found herself in another changing room, this time with a set of clothes already laid out. A simple, light blue cotton dress, which came to just above the knee, a set of socks and a pair of white knickers. But these were not ordinary cotton knickers, they looked thicker than normal.

“What are they,” she asked.

“Well, until we know that you are alright, we like to play it safe. It's a cotton nappy and there are some rubber pants to go with it.”

“Play it safe? But I don't need a nappy, really I don't,” Emma protested, but it was no use. Both nurses had that look and body set about them that said that although they believed her in principle, this is what they did with patience and that was that.

Resigned, Emma didn't resist as the nurse held open the thick padded garment for her to step into, followed by the rubber pants. She placed her hands over her head as the nurses helped her with her dress, before she sat down and put on her socks. Looking down, Emma noted that her name was written on the garment, along with the number that she had seen earlier.

Her clothes were cheap and did nothing for her, but they were warmer than going naked and so Emma didn't complain as she struggled to come to terms with her situation and was led out of the room and into a long corridor. Again, with a nurse on each elbow, she was guided until she came to a set of thick double doors, that the second nurse opened with a key from her belt. This led to a small nurses station and another corridor. This corridor was lined with strong looking steel doors, with peepholes at eye level.

They led her down this corridor until she came to an open cell door. The cell, tiled in white, with lemon linoleum flooring contained a single iron bed. Straps hung ominously from the sides.

"Here you go dear, we just need to get you ready for bed."

Another nurse caught up with them as Emma took in the stark room. She carried a clipboard and a small paper cup.

"Here, this will help you sleep," the first nurse said as she took the cup and handed it to Emma.

"No, really, I don't need it, whatever it is."

"But you have to my dear. It is doctors orders."

"No, I don't need any of your pills, whatever your doctor says. I am not supposed to be here," Emma almost shouted as she began to panic.

The nurses looked at each other before moving into action, piling into the cell and overwhelming the protesting girl. She was now pinioned between two strong women who held onto an arm each, as the third approached with the cup. Emma tried to protest and knew what was coming. However, it was the unexpected pain as her nose was pinched that caused her to open her mouth, rather than any need for air. Before she could do anything else the cup was pushed at her mouth and the pills shot to the back of her throat. Almost too quick for her to see, the nurses hand shot out and covered her mouth. Dissuading the cup into a pocket the nurse then started to stroke Emma's throat until she at last gave into the inevitable and swallowed.

Satisfied that she had taken the pills, Emma was guided over to be bed and made to lie down. Padded leather straps were attached to her ankles and to her wrists, so that she lay with her arms at her sides. Other straps were bought across her knees, belly and chest.

Emma looked on in horror as one of the nurses bought a thick leather band towards her face.

"Look, no. I am all right. Really. I don't need mpphh," Emma tried to explain as the leather shaft built into the gag was shoved into her mouth and, tilting her head forwards and buckled the leather strap behind her head so that her lower face was now covered in a thick leather strap. Now she couldn't tell them what she wanted even though she now knew they wouldn't listen. A final strap was passed over her forehead, pinning her head to the bed.

Finally, the nurses left, locking the door with an ominous rattle of keys. She listened as she heard the footsteps diminish down the corridor. After a few minutes, controlled by the nurse's station she assumed, the lights went out.

She had only been here a couple of hours, but in that time she had lost her humanity and rights. She was no longer a person, but a patient. She was at the mercy of these nurses and whatever treatment the doctor prescribed. Until then she was strapped down onto a hard bed, wearing a painfully thin dress and a nappy. She was drugged and locked into a cold cell. She would have cried, but whatever they had given her began to take effect and she drifted off into a warm, happy place.

Emma woke up in a tangle of limbs with a sore head. Sitting up she looked around. That was a mistake and her throbbing head let her know that she should have taken more time. Reaching up she felt the warm blood in her scalp. Taking care she stood up and looked at the gurney that she had toppled over.

"That was weird," Emma thought to herself as she shuddered.

Just to make sure though, she retraced her steps. The hospital was as it should be. Old, peeling paint and without lights. Fortunately her flashlight still worked and so, picking up the rest of her stuff she headed for the exit. Looking at her watch she noted that she had only been unconscious for a few minutes. She still had time to get outside and meet her clients. But she wouldn't rush. That, as she had just discovered, could be very dangerous.