

toward him but Cris didn't budge. "You think we're the enemy," he said evenly. "Well, there are my keys. That ought to prove something. Take them. You're free to go. You've been free all along."

"Yeah," Kelsey drawled. "We don't want you around anyway." He poked his hand closer, offering the keys.

Beck suspiciously glared at them, then at Kelsey.

Now, Kelsey, Cris prayed, keep your mouth shut!

Beck's eyes shot to Cris, then back to the keys. It was sinking in! The chair in Beck's hand lowered tentatively. It was working! A tiny ball of elation was growing, crowding Cris' breath, the suspense suffocating. Cris knew Beck didn't want out. All his warped brain needed was the proof Cris was offering him—the keys, the token of freedom. Perhaps such proof would drown out the mad voice that drove him and strangle the delusions of the nightmare he lived in. It might be the solitary, slender beam of light by which he could be led back to the real world.

"Take them," Cris said.

"G'wan," Kelsey sneered. "Take 'em, you jerk!"

CRIS waited breathlessly as Beck lowered the chair to his side. After a pause, his other hand reached slowly, hesitantly for the keys. When he was about to take them, Kelsey snatched his hand away and hid the keys behind his back, his voice shrill with sudden, taunting laughter.

Beck's hand recoiled as if struck by a poisonous snake. His body straightened in a convulsive sudden movement as he took a step backward.

There was no other way out. Cris moved

fast. He had seen the massive forearm flex even before the chair began its upward swing for the death-blow.

He lunged at Kelsey, grabbed him by the shirt front, sent him sprawling out of the ward-aisle into the recess between two beds. Then automatically every muscle in his body tensed for the crash of the chair on his own back.

It seemed an eternity, and for a dazed moment he had the strange notion that it had already happened, that he was dead, or unconscious. The ward seemed to be spinning and the blood pounded in his head like a solid mass that wanted to escape.

Then the sound of Kelsey sobbing like a kid with a skinned knee reached him, and he heard the idiotic giggling of Higgins somewhere across the ward. Up ahead, the corpsman, regaining consciousness, was lifting himself weakly on his elbow.

Cris let go of the bed rail he had grasped to keep from falling. At his feet he saw the ring of keys Kelsey had dropped. He picked them up. Then he turned.

Beck was a giant, motionless statue. Even his eyes seemed frozen in his head. He was expressionless. He was holding the heavy chair with impossible ease away from his side, his arm outstretched and ready to swing.

Cris returned his stare. After a moment, he brought his hand forward, toward Beck, and opened it. Moving only his eyes, Beck looked down at the keys. He looked long at them, as if carefully studying them. Then he looked at Cris again.

Kelsey was sobbing, spasmodically, like a spoiled child. For a moment there was no other sound in the universe.

Cris lifted his hand closer to Beck, urging him silently to take the keys. Beck

didn't move. He seemed oblivious to the offering. But he wasn't. And Cris knew he wasn't. He continued to meet Beck's stare.

And then Beck lifted the chair, brought it up and held it at a level with Cris' face, held it as though it were a toy. But it was anything but that. Beck was wordlessly proclaiming that it was his weapon against the world. Then abruptly, with a backward sweep of his arm, he sent it hurtling behind him down the ward aisle. It crashed noisily against the wall, shocking Kelsey into silence.

After a moment, he walked slowly back to his bed. When Cris turned, Beck was seated in his bedside chair, his hands folded in his lap, his eyes silently studying the floor at his feet.

Cris helped Kelsey to his bed, left him incongruously grinning through a tear-streaked face.

His examination of the corpsman showed nothing serious, but he sent him off to have an X-ray made. Then he sat down wearily on the chart-room desk, pulled Beck's chart out of the rack, opened it to the progress-notes sheet and entered the date.

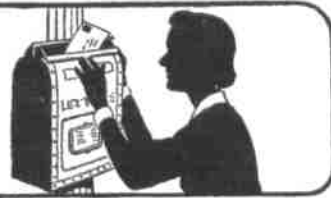
He studied the point of his pen a moment then wrote: "Patient somewhat agitated tonight." He glanced into the ward at Kelsey, Higgins, Kramer, Beck, and was struck by the deceiving innocence of the scene. Then he saw the chair flung by Beck lying at a crazy angle against the far wall, and the overwhelming pitiful truth of the place came into focus again. He finished his note. "Disturbance subsided spontaneously. Recourse to physical restraint or sedation not required."

He signed his name, slipped the chart back into its slot in the rack, and lit a cigarette.

★ THE END



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