

The Invigilator

Jane's in her sixties. She wears a polar fleece, is heavy-set, has a purple swipe through otherwise white hair. For this casual job, she's getting \$35 an hour. Her most senior colleague gets slightly more for such responsibilities as now announcing the end of reading time. Two hours of writing to come.

There's a flurry of paper, and pencils clattering as they slip from anxious hands. The exam hall, the miscellaneous Exhibition Building, is a cavernous space, nigh on impossible to heat. Jane looks to a clock that's shown on a central television screen. 15:10. She regards it as an adversary. Then moves unsteadily, one leg taking longer strides than the other. Her immediate task is to check student cards that have been left at the top of desks, to compare 'orientation week' photos with bowls of hair, half-faces that totally disregard her in favour of early questions. No problem. She vengefully adds a game where she imagines how life turns out for each of the students. A gaunt young man in a hoodie fails this exam, reconsiders a medical career, never finds a comfortable profession until retiring age. A meticulous girl (stationery straightened on the table, colour coded) gets mired in research, effectively *detained* in academic labs, and her oeuvre amounts to several dozen studies that all confirm a status quo. There are other students who've started calmly, confidently that *will* soon enough become doctors. They'll go on ski holidays, buy Range Rovers, donate to private schools. But also: they'll be highly attuned to 'disorder', they'll detach so as to not be haunted by occasional mistakes, lose the forest for the trees, skirt depression. Which leaves those who might, indeed, be ludicrously happy. They'll enduringly love their job, their families. They'll keep a fantastic sense of fulfillment, even when sliding across those MRI reports with the really terrible news.

Of course, Jane's in a mood. She's supervised three previous exams today – medical science is last – and *physiologically* she's begun yearning for home. She'd been hawkish in physics, somewhat committed in maths, but by this hour any attachment to the cause has long faded. She's

Now, Cornelius' turn. Pretend he starts at the very same place.

His reading time finishes, as per the announcement of the officiator, and he whips the booklet back to its cover. Spills his pencil. It bounces on the table and he plucks it. 'Basic Sciences', the front-page taunts. He can feel, already, a drop escaping underarm foliage, sliding down his flank. He squints for the first question, about the link between bisphosphonates and osteonecrosis. Multiple-choice. He's unsure of its answer, scratches an idea for later.

Next, a request for hallmarks of steroid-induced myopathy. And he *has* covered this topic enough in study. Probed a graduate about a similar question only a few weeks before. Hence, when even this data takes a moment to wander into his recall, he knows he's in trouble. He emphasises the weakness of proximal muscles and gets the hell out of there. There's someone in his study group seated directly ahead – straight to the task, inhuman, mechanistic – and from only this brief assessment Cornelius shifts from indifference to really *hating* the guy.

But he has to focus on only the questions, their answers, avoid getting sucked into any self-pity about his situation. Needs to consider: *A 32-year-old woman...65-year-old man...17-year-old girl presents with chest pain...an IgA deficiency...a thyroid nodule...a headache and high blood pressure. Rather than: A 24-year-old male arrives at a major hurdle exam, has a borderline psychotic episode and effectively cacks himself. What is the likely diagnosis?*

He doesn't notice five minutes escape soundlessly on the television clock. He feels a certainty, a dread, that one day a test such as this will trip him up, that the confident predictions of family, parents, girlfriend will be found out and he'll be re-evaluated. He'll weaken as a source of pride. The gushing commentary that's pursued him since high-school will dry up. But he's never much liked the 'bolt from the blue' tag, anyway. Despite others' urging, he's resisted mentioning 'social housing' and even 'migrant background' in recent interviews, doesn't want these having any hand in a hospital job. Thinks he'd probably sooner share his cousin's stupid story of

fatiguing. Has a dryness in her mouth, tight hips, sore feet. A dysregulated rumble in her stomach, even.

Finishing her business with the student cards, she instinctively checks her wrist. She's missing a silver watch, the one the bank gave her to mark retirement. Much had been made of the fact she'd finished a few months shy of the qualifying tenure, but was still judged *worthy*. She imagines the face of the watch flashing back from her wrist-bones, pictures '15:30'. And so gets a small shock to find the television attesting, quite accurately, that only ten minutes of exam time have passed. She's in one of those situations, of course, where time thickens, moves as treacle.

An hour and fifty minutes loom as *distance* she has to traverse and, in testament, she cautiously paces to a new spot, a slight square of sunlight. She can't prevent her shoe rubber from squelching on the floorboards. She's cold, but finds it improper to dive hands into the pockets of her fleece. In the sun, she allows herself contemplation of the building's decorative archways and mythologic paintings. Can't place any of the pallid oil figures, believes the Greco-Roman cast of characters have long outstayed their relevance. But the building itself she finds spectacular, and she judges it a place of personal significance. Heck, it was even a factor in Jane applying for this job.

Earliest relevant memory: she's a schoolgirl, walking past the Florentine dome on the way to a theatre excursion. A teacher dubs the building a 'white elephant' and Jane thinks – *still* thinks – that'd been a compliment. Then: boozy recollections of attending dances in the ballroom of a since-demolished annex, maybe on three occasions, in the 70s. Somewhere in this room, then, there's sure to be a ghost of herself, limber from elastic hips and anxious drinking. It's stepping too fast, perhaps, to be seen. Also, she remembers: taking photos in Carlton Gardens and the Exhibition Building's colonnade after her sister's wedding. Such a nice afternoon, she recalls, as to diminish her own fears about getting married. But sunshine, laughter, a flattering dress had

the day she'd first known Cornelius was destined for medicine – which says something. He'd been young, in that story. Eight or nine. His cousin studying for high-school biology, or whatever, while he tried to prise her away, offering to do it for her. She tested him with the word 'stirrup', one he'd truly never heard before. But he reflected briefly and realised he was getting a pulse in his ear. Then, the word 'gall bladder' took his hands just below his ribs. 'Mandible' clenched his jaw. 'Phalanges' agitated his fingers, toes. He was magically locating body parts, inexplicably *English-speaking* ones, tiny citizens inside himself that were just as well declaring, "Here I am!" There'd been four trials, he'd got them all right, then his cousin had rushed to share him with other family, and during the short delay the magic deserted him. Still, there'd been a glorious window. He doesn't like the hocus pocus of the story, plus can't really *remember* the incident. But he thinks of it occasionally, and wonders how much has been embellished by intervening years.

He notices a girl already going to the bathroom. Perhaps he'd be wise to do the same, for the purpose of prematurely clearing his head. Question eleven is about screening renal disease. He's torn between calculating creatinine clearance and estimating a person's glomerular filtration rate. His hand gets caught as it moves across the page, like it's a manifestation of the stutter he also sometimes gets when he's a decent level of nervous – usually at parties. He notes that his leg is quivering, as well. Wonders if this whole exam system isn't archaic, if there aren't better ways to evaluate his aptitude for medicine, and if, were he to continually fail at this hurdle, there'd be grounds for protest. It's the *momentousness* of exams that trips him up, the forking paths, the stark trajectories of pass and fail. Any emergency in a ward, he knows, for some reason, couldn't fluster him to this same extent.

It goes on like this, half his head absorbed on the broader 'life' consequences, the rest somewhat committed to what's occurring on the page. Anorexia, diabetes, ulnar neuropathy, z-scores. Still, he drifts

truly less effect than the simple fact it'd been Jane's older sister in the spotlight – and anything she managed came to feel surmountable. That softening of Jane's resolve had shortly been to the advantage of Colin. And almost forty years later, she exhausts herself worrying she's to his *disadvantage*, now.

In this way, several key incidents from Jane's life are swirled into a few minutes of thought. Keeping a body idling at the surface, she's really been trawling below. Soon, inevitably, there's a tug on her breathing tube. A student with her hand raised. Jane's closest, but another invigilator – male, septuagenarian, cardigan – might've guessed her reverie and has moved first.

Hopefully there's enough of an impression of Jane's pride, to this point, that it shouldn't surprise she moves to spite the man. She reaches the student quickest, even though her effort causes some dizziness. And the student is dressed like she's confronting a serious *physical* workout – sweat-wicking polyester, for instance – more than a university exam. She wants the toilet, with permission. Gets it. Moves for the bathroom much faster than would be possible for someone dressed academically. Jane's knee – the right one, once her better – pangs with basic envy. At least it appears she holds the superior *bladder*. She looks again to the TV clock, confirming only twenty minutes have gone. Perhaps the girl had been in a panic. Likely, she's gone to that bathroom to reset, or to retrieve the page of notes she last night shoved behind a hand-dryer.

But when Jane checks the girl's unguarded exam, there is, in fact, decent progress. She's several pages in. Has paused on a diagram of brain regions that want further labelling. Standing over the image, Jane ponders cranial bulges and furrows, those special grooves that apparently encase, enable, *amount to*, mental life. The image is fluid, artistic, could've been rendered by Da Vinci. Few ordinary folk would have the foggiest how to reference what she's looking at. Of course, for would-be doctors, future high priests of anatomy, it's a firm

between different floors of concentration. He rues time passing such that twenty minutes are gone, now, according to the dispassionate fuckwit clock. He thinks its particular time must be a mistake, some kind of social trick that he's the first to pick up on. Others in the high-ceilinged exam hall seem stressed, but aren't quite *perturbed* by the slippage in the way they ought to be. Perhaps Cornelius, with his anxiety, is *the most* frantic in these moments, and so swims fastest ahead. Time's pulling him harder the more he tries to resist, the more he wants it to stay.

He's stuck on a basic diagram of the brain, not particularly magnified, that he should know the pieces for. And yet he doesn't, on this day. He has an odd idea about circularity – rues that he's a forgetful human body receiving questions on human bodies, and that in a way he's only being tested on himself. Some of this could be as easy as a profile. Truly, many of the answers hide *inside* him, and yet won't reveal themselves to rescue a dire exam.

There's a bird gleefully bouncing through the rafters of the old examination hall. Cornelius forgets all the shitty things about being a bird (lack of arms, emphasis on worms, occasional power-line surges) in the brief flash he's jealous of it. There's a supervisor coming past (actual word, he recently learnt: 'invigilator'), and he looks up to her. He wants to prove that disaster about the time, to verify with another. She's got a purple streak through snowy hair – very undergraduate – and her body clings to the shape of a polar fleece. Her nametag: Jane.

"What's the time up there? Sorry."

His apology added because truly he can see the clock, he's fibbing about short-sightedness. "That's half an hour gone," she tells him, pointing at the screen. "And we're finishing at five."

He's glazed over, doesn't follow the fleece arm she extends to point.

She lingers, though. Tells him, very abruptly, "And that's the DLPFC." For a moment, he reacts like this advice might've come from a voice inside

expectation. What washes over Jane, from somewhere in her own grey matter, is an itching sadness. It's coloured mauve.

To escape, she redirects attention to the nearby drink bottle of a different student. It's possibly her job to confiscate the thing, for it being too opaque. This particular rule seems a little Draconian, though, and ultimately Jane doesn't understand it well enough to follow through. What's the potential of a drink bottle, anyway? She's forgotten. She tilts away and spots an Indian myna whirring among the building's high rafters. The hall is too big a space for such an inmate to matter. The bird-sounds are ill-defined, hardly distracting. It seems unlikely the myna shares Jane's own sense of confinement.

Eventually, 'toilet girl' comes back into the hall, swift as ever, talking intensely under her breath in a way that's probably very healthy yet remains culturally maligned. Jane relocates.

She's got other memories attached to this building, too. She occasionally came to sit in the gardens, and the Exhibition dome's shadow, during work lunch-breaks, wandering up from the CBD with ham and cheese sandwiches. To an extent, the architecture had always kept the effect of elevating her day, of making her feel like loans she'd just had a hand in approving, say, could well shape the world, ripple toward the positive. Through scandals, she'd never got *defensive* about the bank, but she used to stick up for her own role.

There are sadder memories of the Exhibition Building, also. More recent. Of how she treated it as her 'turnaround' point during short walks with Colin from St Vincent's. These were disorienting strolls, invariably, yet the blue hulk of the dome had been something of a handhold, a strand of reality, and it's lingered as a comfort since. On those afternoons, Colin had always proven supportive, and yet much of Jane's reserve energy had gone into finding his chinks, catching any flashes or flinches that revealed frustration, moments where *her* or *their* misfortune, in his mind, were briefly judged as solely *his* own. Could be as simple as a curt reply. Or a plaintive gaze down Gertrude Street. Jane

his own head. Then, by the time he recognises it really was from the invigilator, she seems to have thought better of her brief 'advice' and has drifted away. Her shoe rubber rips fast across the floorboards. Indeed, she had been pointing at a space on the exam that had evaded him. It was true help. He recognises immediately that she'd been correct and writes 'dorsolateral prefrontal cortex' like a secret. Home of attention, working memory, abstract rules, inhibition. Cornelius turns the page and speeds on. He moves through ensuing tasks like somebody empowered by reprieve. New lease on life, blah, blah, blah. A hemisphere of him, perhaps, reserved for the exam and its shrinking obstacles, the other turning over the question of that woman. Why had she aided him? How had she even come to know such a fact? Of course, she may have once been some kind of neuro-specialist, but that wasn't the *tone* she'd achieved. It was more as if she'd found an opportunity, she'd quickly seen a piece she knew from experience, and in a flash she'd *wanted* to show her knowledge. Something self-absorbed about it. 'Jane' is standing at the other end of the space, now, suppressing a yawn by stretching back her face. Whether that was a yawn borne of fatigue or nervousness, though, Cornelius can't quite say. He feels one, contagiously, coming over himself.

The hour-mark passes and he's writing a description of the passage of axillary nerves. Gets it done in sufficient detail, he feels. He's trying his very best to forget 'Jane'. There's a whole section on the carotid arteries, and this draws immediate attention to the pounding in his own head, the urgency. So much blood, up there, that his feet have gone cold. He has to stay connected to this exam as an abstraction, not as a scrutinised piece of tree-pulp that'll either have him earning *money* next year, or reattempting the same study, surrounded by the pong of failure. And yet, suddenly, he's happy with his progress when noting the remaining pages, his distance to the finish. He scratches his hair, shuffles in the seat, coughs.

never probed him on these. Never blurted – an action she can't avoid, occasionally – the contract. *In sickness and in health*. What an unfair line. Oft-rushed-over. When she's cruellest to herself, she thinks of releasing him.

She's settled again in a key corner of the exam hall. An hour *seems* to have passed – but she peeks at the clock and is told only half that amount. From this particular vantage, the long grid of plastic desks is limitless. Drunk slowly, it's an overwhelming view. All heads are down, more or less. She sees an identical posture, an identical *person*, to speak crudely, multiplied some two hundred times, and she wonders if these students were most often *born* with a medical temperament, or if it's surer honed by study. Either way, she identifies as somebody quite different. She fidgets with the sticker on her chest, the rectangle of officialdom that proves she's even allowed at this grand university ritual. Such is the slavish respect of these students for their medical college, she expects, that the whole thing could proceed without a hitch even if all invigilators were to disappear, evaporate. She imagines the student mass sitting unsupervised and quiet. No-one really considering cheating. All of them filing out of the Heritage-listed doors at the end, still without a word. Jane shivers, both from temperature and a small wave of irrelevance. She rubs her hands along fleecy sleeves, lays them again by her side. She reassures herself the world doesn't really depend on anyone. Apart from doctors, perhaps.

She's on a hamster wheel of bleak thinking. She's unlikely to be freed before the end of exam time, but this only gets closer when she's not looking at it, reflecting on it – like in a children's game. Meekly, she attempts distracting herself. Recycles ploys that, at night-time, have been virtually no help in calming her heart, getting her to sleep. She thinks about her clothes against skin, her wet intake of breath, the hidden touch of all light, the rafter-sounds from the myna. She reaches for the *furthest* thing she's able to hear, in the city distance. Boldly, she tries *accepting* the pain in her knees, without judgement. Or *accepting* the

He unspools on the relevance of certain chemotherapeutic agents. The impact of environmental particles on cardiovascular disease. The spikes in morning testosterone. The pathways of coagulation. But why is there *any* emphasis on handwriting? Are they all being assessed, as well, on an ability to scrawl patient notes, or a script? Ironic that only *after* this exam would he be technically allowed to dispatch himself what could've been good before it. Xanax, Valium. He flexes his hand. The pace is cruel. Glances at the clock haze with just half an hour to go.

Hard not to suppose this as the most important moment of his life. Each moment. The ultimate test of his character, *this* question on diagnosing multiple sclerosis. No, *this* one on folic acid absorption. His pen charging. Not faltering anymore, sure of itself. He sees other people drifting past, but whether they're arrogant or stricken students, whether they're invigilators such as the know-all, he doesn't glance up to check. Given another lifetime, he'd consider a doctoral thesis on 'the zone', what exactly it looks like, *appears* as, physiologically. He's warned of ten minutes remaining, by microphone. Fine. He only has to list disorders associated with amygdala disruption, and then to maybe go over the bits about myopathy and osteonecrosis. He permits himself a glance at his surrounds, just once, to note that no-one else seems to have finished. Even the robot from the study group. He doesn't know whether to find the general difficulty of the test more encouraging (for himself) or deflating (for the world).

But now he's got room to go over. Yes, his points about warfarin and steroid risks hadn't been exactly accurate. There's time to clear them up, blessed room in the cosmic schedule. And then none at all. They're finished, and from the mousy scratching, the delay of breath, many are eking out a final response. So the officiator – bit of a tosspot – must insist on pens down and all that. When Cornelius releases the pencil, he immediately feels better, like its shape, holding it, might've been the cause

judgement. Or *accepting* she isn't very good at such meditation, yet. All nice ideas, but they're never on their own. She aggressively anticipates food. She fantasises about walking back to Colin's car later, even though there'll be traffic, even though she won't be able to help scanning his behaviour for restlessness, agitation. She's still very glad she hadn't taken the train. Where everything, alternatively, moves too fast and she feels like she's rushing determinedly to catch up, to cling on to what others can do easily. Generally, she swears the rest of the world speeds up faster than she's slowing. She fears it might only be another five years before she's at a jaded, even more cynical version of herself, one that crosses roads dangerously, for instance, tired of waiting for better opportunities, just wobbling into an automobile tide and hoping it can all move around her.

In truth, she'd sought out this supervising job because she'd *wanted* an activity that dragged things out. After forced retirement, the hours began escaping her stupidly, like she wasn't there, like, if she refused to contribute *work*, it was only fair she received less of a day, one where a gifted Swarovski 'timepiece' declared 3PM at the place where 11AM had been, and 8PM stood-in for 4. With that watch, she's decided, her HR department of twenty-four years had awarded a curse. She doesn't wear it so much anymore (its expensiveness makes it hard to discard entirely), and yet its same pace has infiltrated *all* her idle hours – namely, those not yielding \$35.

The problem with Jane's new casual 'work', however, is that it's so Godawful boring it spins her too hard in the other direction – gives her a silly, restless flavour of time, which her internal clock overcomes as soon as she's home. Her plan, in short, has been too successful. At the least, her afternoons in the Exhibition Building are making her keener – or keen at all – to be back in the TV room with Colin. This despite their bang-average meals and the fact they're rarely watching stuff they haven't seen before. Eight hours of exams turn I&J fish fingers into buttery turbot, old episodes of *Grand Designs* into a first viewing of *The*

of his cynicism, anger. He gets more fellow-feeling. His appraisal of the guy from his study group softens. Cornelius speculates he may have eventually picked up some of that guy's energy. Perhaps he'd been advantaged like a drafting cyclist. Of course, he also recalls the invigilator. The purple stripe, the polar fleece – and she alters into less of a know-all. Becomes an angel, embarrassingly. It's someone else, though, who soon takes his paper. And brusquely, emphasising this is happily the end of the day for *them*, too, and that perhaps their standing-over so many exams, and surviving, has been also something of an achievement.

There are now a few minutes where Cornelius slows, sees light bulbs suspended like vitreous floaters, sees '*Carpe Diem*' painted into the dome (pre-cliché), and he wonders why they don't *make* buildings like this anymore. It's from a different period. Might med exams have been easier back then, given everyone *knew* less? Or were they bloated by old hogwash, to compensate? Aside from a nod in the direction of the robot, he avoids speaking with others around him, believing that post-exam exchanges always tend to be a source of regret, further frustration. Time quickens again as they're released. There was talk, among a few friends, of meeting at a nearby pub. He'd prefer a shower first, but will probably go. There's deodorant in the backpack he left in a cloakroom. He's outside and it's early evening, suddenly. Cool breeze, traffic on the surrounding streets, suits on the footpaths. He mulls over the only question he'd left unanswered. *A 63-year-old woman, with no apparent medical experience, makes an unprovoked, uninhibited outburst related to a question on a university exam, and she's taken as correct. What explains her behaviour?*

Part of him also wants to know why, exactly, he'd seemed so pitiable. He makes a very quick decision – spurred by his mellowed perspective, and an article he read recently on the world-bending power of 'gratitude'. He sits near the dormant fountain, meaning to thank 'Jane', despite the stupidity of this, despite the likelihood there's another exit that invigilators can leave

Sting. Jane's committed herself to three weeks of supervision. And she might've quit after the second shift, citing ill-health, if not for her fabled pride. Because of it, she's stuck gritting teeth in the present, giddy with boredom, ambling again, somewhat dragging a leg as random neurons make protest. In her mind, she's a mile away from her responsibilities. Their fault; they've been too infrequent to keep her attention.

But here, with half the exam left, her awkward route passes a young man. He's sweating heavily, yet not wearing clothes that take it well. His exam manner is terrible. He's got a name tag that says, 'Cornelius', and this could even be one of the words he's jabbering to himself. Panicked self-talk. He sees Jane and says, louder, "What's the time up there? Sorry." Jane tells him. And she's seeing the same bulbous Da Vinci diagram spread across his table. Mush, biologic slop, to someone who wouldn't recognise it. She gets her earlier rush of sadness. Mauve. Points to one of his unlabelled spaces (there are many of them), and she says, "That's the DLPFC." There's a flash of surprise on his face, and she can't tell what she's projecting on her own. She just walks away. With a little more than an hour to go.

from, a back-door for VIPs. He huddles on a stone rim, largely unnoticed, a crowd flowing past. He's reassured when he sees a few of Jane's contemporaries, sans *her*, coming out, looking gruff and apart from each other, resuming private adventures. He waits a while, although it turns very quiet and he's unsure how he'll ever catch her, now, or her *him*. They're on different tracks. She remains inside – probably stacking exams, fumbling with a phone, collecting her own backpack. Or, from a certain perspective, beginning at "your time starts now", she's only just arriving at Cornelius' desk. If he *had* to answer, if he was pressed, he'd say her knowledge of the brain came not from her former work but a personal experience of a tumour. In his soon-to-be professional opinion, it was her own disinhibited prefrontal cortex that had spectacularly declared, "Here I am!", and helped him away from defeat. It lends some credence to his cousin's old story, but he catches this as a silly thought. And he wonders if he's now only hanging around to *analyse* Jane some more. Cold, and feeling slightly foolish, he also moves on.