Laminex and Mirrors

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATE KENNEDY

Cate Kennedy was born in England, where her father was stationed through the Air Force, but grew up living in several different states in Australia. As a young adult, she attended the University of Canberra and the Australian National University. After college, she had jobs in various career fields, but notably taught creative writing and served as a community arts worker in Victoria, Australia. In her 30s, Kennedy moved to Mexico for two years to teach literacy in underserved communities through an Australian volunteer organization. She also worked as a freelance writer and for the Australian Customs Service, an experience which would later inspire her short story "Habit." Though Kennedy is primarily known for her short stories, she wrote nonfiction and poetry throughout her young adulthood. In 2002, she won the Vincent Buckley Poetry Prize, a literary award that provided her with the opportunity to teach in Ireland. Today, Kennedy lives in a remote region of northern Australia, and continues to write, publish, and participate in speaking engagements.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The readers are never provided with specific information about the time period in which "Laminex and Mirrors" is set, but the presence of modern technology and culture suggests that the story is set sometime in the late 20th or early 21st century. There are also indications in the narrative that Mr. Moreton, the elderly veteran who befriends the narrator, served in the military during World War II. Perhaps the most significant historical marker in the short story is Mr. Moreton's statement that he marched in the previous year on Anzac Day. Anzac (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) Day is a holiday held on April 25th of each year in Australia and New Zealand. The holiday, which began in 1916, initially commemorated the deaths of over 8,000 Australians and New Zealanders in their unsuccessful campaign in Gallipoli against the Ottoman Turks during World War I. However, Australians and New Zealanders soon began to use Anzac Day to commemorate all individuals who passed away while serving in the military, and continue to observe the holiday in the same way today.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like a House on Fire, Kennedy's 2012 collection which contains "Laminex and Mirrors," comes from the rich tradition of the realist short story. Though the roots of this popular English-language literary form can most easily be found in the work of Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe—and certainly later, in the work of Ernest Hemingway, Flannery O'Connor, and Raymond Carver—Kennedy's work has the most in common with her present-day contemporaries. Though these fiction writers have different national backgrounds and take up different subject matter, they are all known for constructing relatively simple narratives laden with observations about culture, politics, and interpersonal relationships; they are also known for writing in an accessible style devoid of intricate or abstract language. Some of the most well-known contemporary short story collections whose approach could be compared to Cate Kennedy's in *Like a House on Fire* are Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son* (1992), George Saunders' *Pastoralia* (2000), *In Persuasion Nation* (2006), and Alice Munro's *No Love Lost* (2003) and *Too Much Happiness* (2009).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Laminex and Mirrors"
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Literary realism
- **Setting:** Australia
- **Climax:** The narrator sneaks Mr. Moreton out of his hospital room.
- **Antagonist:** The matron
- **Point of View:** First-person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Write What You Know. Cate Kennedy has certainly established a successful career as an author, but she has also reported working as a tutor, waitress, life model, kitchenhand, and theater director. Many of these jobs provided her with source material for both her fiction and nonfiction writing.

Green Acres. After frequently moving across states and countries throughout her life, Cate Kennedy settled on a quiet farm in Victoria, Australia, in the early 2000s. In an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Kennedy explained the way in which her move has allowed her to experience and learn about the unique "voice" of rural Australia.

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator, the short story's unnamed protagonist, begins the narrative by describing her first day at her new job as a hospital cleaner. As she goes about her first cleaning tasks, she is surprised by the "glazed and unhurried" way in which her

coworkers navigate their own cleaning routines, noting that she, by contrast, is youthful, energetic, and eager to impress. After finishing her first assignments early, the narrator goes to ask her supervisor, Marie, for something else to do. Marie, who has been relaxing in the storeroom, assigns her to clean out the hospital's ash bins, a disgusting task that the narrator thinks is Marie's way of taking "revenge" on her for "working too briskly."

The narrator describes one of her coworkers, Dot, as a shy, helpful woman with a beehive hairdo. While cleaning the patients' rooms, the narrator meets an elderly veteran named Mr. Moreton. He asks her to take the money from his drawer and buy him a pack of **cigarettes**, a request which the hospital's matron has forbidden her to comply with. The narrator denies his request, a decision that she will repeat on a daily basis as Mr. Moreton continues to beg her for cigarettes. Despite the narrator's refusal, the two begin developing a friendship. One day, after witnessing the narrator chatting with Mr. Moreton, a nurse pulls her aside to tell her that she should not "fraternise" with the patients, especially if she is a cleaner. The narrator apologizes and continues her work, moving next to the area of the hospital dedicated to elective surgeries. She considers that, like the recovering elective surgery patients, she is "filling in [her] own allotment of time" at the hospital, but she will be on her way to Europe when she finally leaves.

At work one day, Dot—who sells household products, cosmetics, and jewelry from a catalogue as a side business—hands the narrator a catalogue and an order form "as if it's already a done deal." The narrator knows that Dot's husband, Len, doubts that she will ever succeed as a saleswoman or achieve the catalogue company's "Christmas gift bonus." Speaking of Christmas, the narrator has accepted Tony's offer to go to the office Christmas party with him because she was affected by the way he kindly comforted the insecure "nose job girls" as they emerged from surgery.

Mr. Moreton tells the narrator that he's been given "a few weeks or a month or two" to live, and that his family will be coming to visit him soon. When the narrator apologizes again for not bringing him a cigarette, explaining that getting fired would prevent her from traveling to Europe, Mr. Moreton is understanding and remarks that she doesn't seem like the type of person to spend a lifetime working at the hospital. When Mr. Moreton makes a comment about his approaching death, the narrator takes his hand, and Marie suddenly appears at the door. Marie furiously scolds the narrator for "lingering" in Mr. Moreton's room, and appears even angrier for the fact that the matron sought her out to tell her about it. Marie then punishes her by demanding that she clean the bathroom in the wing of the hospital that is slated to be demolished that week. The narrator tries to concentrate on the fact that she will be leaving at the end of the summer.

Later, Dot and Noeleen talk about Dot's catalogue products and refer to the narrator as "the scholar." They began using the nickname after Dot saw the narrator reading a book at the bus stop. The narrator finds the nickname annoying, but says that she changed her mind when she saw the poor condition of Dot's purse, and the careful way that the women handled change when Noeleen bought a product from Dot's catalogue. Taking the catalogue, the narrator orders enough items for Noeleen to achieve the Christmas gift bonus as well as the "Gold Seller" stickpin. The amount she spends will cost her two days' work at the hospital. She is looking forward to seeing the expression on Len's face when he finds out about Dot's achievement, but he proudly congratulates her instead, making the narrator realize that she made unfair assumptions about him.

Mr. Moreton tells the narrator that his daughter is visiting him tomorrow, and that she wouldn't be coming unless he was about to die soon. The next day, the narrator arrives at work early and sneaks into Mr. Moreton's room. She then takes him to the bathroom in the wing that she has just cleaned and lets him take a bath. Mr. Moreton enjoys the experience immensely. When the narrator takes him back to his room, his visible change in behavior, and the "recklessness" in voice in particular, motivates her to wheel him out of the hospital and give him a cigarette from her purse. He relishes the cigarette and enjoys the warm morning air. Watching him, the narrator remarks that he looks handsome, and thinks to herself that he looks like a different person entirely.

They hear the propped-open exit door close behind them, and the narrator imagines a plane to London taking off without her. Mr. Moreton realizes aloud that the narrator will lose her job, but the narrator responds that she "couldn't care less about the job," and that she will travel to Europe another time. The narrator and Mr. Moreton steel themselves as they move toward the entrance of the hospital. Mr. Moreton begins humming, then laughing, and then coughing. The narrator holds his hand until his coughing fit is over, and they begin moving forward again, laughing all the while. The narrator imagines her coworkers going about their routines without her, Marie making comments about her absence, and the matron waiting ominously for her at the nurse's station. But she calls her entrance with Mr. Moreton "a perfect moment," and says that they both contentedly believed that the path ahead of them "[would] stretch on forever."

CHARACTERS

Narrator – The unnamed narrator and protagonist is an Australian eighteen-year-old girl who has just taken a job as a hospital cleaner. The narrator plans to work at the hospital throughout the summer, and has calculated that that in three months, she will have enough money for a trip to Europe. At that point, she plans to quit her job. This plan allows the narrator to brush off some of the more unpleasant tasks (and

people) she encounters at her workplace, and focus on the fact that her life has a more positive trajectory than that of her working-class colleagues. Throughout the story, she remains confident that her job at the hospital is only temporary, and that soon she will be taking in the culture and sophistication of Paris and London. However, after spending more time with her coworkers Dot and Noeleen, two women who support each other and create joy in everyday moments, as well as Mr. Moreton, a kind hospital patient who is dying of cancer, the narrator experiences a change of heart. First, she spends two shifts' worth of money to support Dot's catalogue side business. Then, just before Mr. Moreton's daughter and grandchildren come to visit him, she breaks him out of his room and takes him to an old wing of the hospital so that he can have a private bath. Charmed by the happiness and human dignity this simple bath inspires in Mr. Moreton, she also decides to sneak him outside of the hospital and give him the **cigarette** he has been asking for since the two met. When the narrator learns that her transgression will soon be discovered, and that she will surely be fired as a result, she peacefully accepts her fate, wheeling Mr. Moreton through the front entrance of the hospital in a moment of pure joy and laughter.

Mr. Moreton – Mr. Moreton is an "old bloke, ex-Army" who is a patient at the hospital where the narrator works. Though he often jokes and laughs with the narrator, he appears melancholy in the environment of his hospital room. He rarely sleeps, hates his stifling oxygen mask, and appears to have lost his appetite for hospital food. Mr. Moreton is dying of lung cancer, but continues to ask the narrator to sneak him **cigarettes** on a daily basis, a request which she denies for fear of being fired. Eventually, Mr. Moreton informs the narrator that he has been given a matter of weeks to live, and that his daughter and grandchildren are planning to visit him now that they know he is close to death. During the climax of the short story, the narrator decides to sneak Mr. Moreton out of his hospital room and take him to the abandoned bathroom in the "Menzies wing" for a private bath. Seeing the way in which this small gesture transforms Mr. Moreton, making him appear younger, happier, and "like anyone's grandpa," the narrator takes him outside and finally gives him a cigarette. When the two get locked outside, Mr. Moreton worries that the narrator will lose her job because of him, but she tells him not to worry. As he hums "It's a Long Way to Tipperary," Mr. Moreton readies himself to enter the hospital, laughing, coughing, and then laughing again as he approaches the doors with the narrator.

Dot – Dot is one of the narrator's coworkers at the hospital and Len's wife. On her first day of work, the narrator remarks, "I've never met anyone like Dot, whose hair is backcombed into an actual beehive and who blinks hard with watery-eyed nervousness when anyone addresses her directly." Dot sells cleaning products and cosmetics from a catalogue to her coworkers. Though her husband doubts that she will be able to achieve the "Christmas bonus gift" awarded to top salespeople, Dot reaches this goal with the help of the narrator, who spends two shifts' salary on the catalogue products. Dot and her husband are overjoyed by her sales success. Though Dot is somewhat timid, she is kind and supportive. She frequently gives the narrator advice about how to save money and clean more effectively. Like Noeleen, Dot seems to not have much money to spare.

The Matron – The matron is an unnamed woman who holds a supervisory position in the hospital where the narrator works. Though she never speaks in the narrative, her presence and her policies loom large in the hospital hallways. The matron is particularly adamant that the narrator does not provide Mr. Moreton with his coveted **cigarettes**, and is also angered by the narrator's decision to "linger" in Mr. Moreton's room to chat with him—so much so, in fact, that she enlists Marie to punish the narrator for it. At the end of the short story, the narrator imagines the matron waiting for her at the nurse's station to punish (and likely fire) her for breaking Mr. Moreton out of his hospital room.

Marie – Marie is the head cleaner at the hospital. She serves as the narrator's supervisor, and often speaks to her in a cold, harsh manner. Though she is intent upon upholding the matron's policies, her own work ethic appears to be lacking. The narrator finds Marie reading with her feet up in the storeroom on her first day, and later appears annoyed by her hypocrisy when Marie angrily scolds the narrator for abandoning her work to chat with Mr. Moreton.

Noeleen – Noeleen is another of the narrator's hospital coworkers, a working-class woman who—like Dot—gives the narrator several pieces of cleaning advice throughout the narrative. She supports Dot's catalogue side business by purchasing body care items even though she does not appear to have a lot of money to spare. Like Dot, she has a friendly personality and appears comfortable with her daily routines at the hospital.

Len – Len is Dot's husband. He visits Dot on her morning break as he is coming home from his night shift at the printing works. Len doesn't "take [Dot's] home business seriously," and doubts that she will be able to achieve the "Christmas bonus gift" awarded to successful salespeople. Because of this, the narrator expects that he will be put in his place when he finds out that Dot has achieved and exceeded her sales goal. Instead, Len is "radiant with pride," and the narrator realizes she has made a mistake in making assumptions about him and his relationship with Dot.

Tony – Tony is a male nurse from South Africa who works at the hospital. The narrator explains that she has agreed to go to the hospital's staff Christmas party with him because she is moved by the way in which Tony comforts the post-operative "nose job girls" as they emerge from surgery.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

JOY AND DRUDGERY

Cate Kennedy's "Laminex and Mirrors" follows one summer in the life of an Australian teenager, the story's unnamed narrator, who takes a cleaning job at a local hospital. As the narrator goes about her daily work, she believes that her youth, energy, and exciting future plans sharply contrast with the grim atmosphere created by the hospital's strict routines and tired veteran staff. However, as the narrator learns more about her colleagues, as well as the patients whose rooms she is tasked with cleaning, she begins to understand that although hospitals seem bleak and austere, there is still joy to be found there—and that she can be the one to create it. As the story develops, the narrator ultimately decides that her role in helping others to experience joy in an environment punctuated by sickness and drudgery is more valuable to her than dreaming of a future she presumes will be happier than theirs.

When the narrator begins her work as a cleaner, she believes that her youthful enthusiasm—especially with regard to her work tasks and her relationships with others—is uncommon in the space of the hospital, and appears to think that her coworkers are less vibrant and friendly than she is. The narrator describes her fellow cleaners as "glazed and unhurried," while she describes herself as "eager-beavering [her] way through [her] allotted duties on this holiday job." The narrator's language here suggests that her enthusiasm is likely related to the fact that she knows her job at the hospital is only temporary, whereas her coworkers have become tired of their daily routines over time.

As the story unfolds, the hospital matron and Marie, the head cleaner, emerge as cold and authoritarian symbols of hospital policy, further suggesting that the hospital is a joyless place. Both women vehemently disapprove of the narrator's friendly relationship with the elderly hospital patient Mr. Moreton, which forms the emotional and symbolic center of the short story. Marie teaches the narrator that developing friendships with patients is unacceptable and punishes the narrator severely for her so-called transgression by demanding that she clean a bathroom slated for demolition—an entirely impractical task meant only to instill the narrator with the value of following the rules rigidly.

However, as the narrator spends more time at the hospital—and especially with her coworker Dot—she begins to have a change of heart. Dot sells jewelry and body care items from a catalogue to her fellow hospital staff, which the story implies is a way for Dot to make ends meet. However, Dot claims to not believe in the quality of these items, and her husband, Len, expresses doubts about her capacity as a saleswoman, thus underscoring the joylessness of her enterprise. Noticing Dot's old purse and the careful way in which she handles change, the narrator pities her coworker, realizing that money must be tight for her. The narrator takes her opportunity to spread joy by helping Dot achieve and exceed her Christmas bonus—the narrator buys so much from Dot's catalogue that it costs her two full days of work at the hospital. Besides delighting Dot, this act of kindness allows the narrator to witness how excited Len becomes for his wife as a result of the achievement. While this moment convinces the narrator of her own capacity to help others experience joy in the midst of less-than-ideal circumstances, it also shows her that perhaps Len and Dot's situation wasn't as bleak as she assumed: although both Len and Dot's lives are characterized by the drudgery of low-wage work, the couple experience a moment of pure happiness together that highlights that their lives are also filled with love, tenderness, and delight in the little things in life. As she watches the pair celebrate, the narrator learns that she has misjudged both Dot and Len's capacity to squeeze joy out of any circumstance.

Inspired by her experience with Dot and her husband, the narrator decides that assisting someone in need of a little happiness is more valuable to her than her trip to Europe, and thus decides to allow Mr. Moreton a morning of peace and small pleasures. Mr. Moreton, who is fighting a losing battle with lung cancer, has a gloomy life in the hospital: he feels generally stifled and uncomfortable in his hospital room, struggles to find the appetite to eat his bland hospital breakfasts, and has trouble sleeping. To remedy this, even just temporarily, the narrator sneaks Mr. Moreton out of his room and provides him with the opportunity to take a bath and smoke a **cigarette** outside. Though the narrator's decision is self-sacrificial, given that she will almost certainly lose her job as a result of her actions, the joy of the escape compounds, and Mr. Moreton's happiness spreads to the narrator as well.

Through her interactions with both Mr. Moreton and Dot, the narrator comes to see that joy can be found just about anywhere, and that she can be the one to spread such delight. As Mr. Moreton and the narrator enter the hospital, "smothering laughter," and meet their fate, the narrator thinks about her fellow staff members going about their daily routines at the hospital. She thinks in particular about the matron, who "will be waiting for us [...] in the no-man's-land of the hospital's thermostatically cool interior, its sterilised world of hard surfaces, wiped clean and blameless. Someone else's jurisdiction now." This sterile "no-man's-land" is clearly associated with a cold sense of obligation—"someone else's

jurisdiction"—and a lack of genuine human emotion. However, even as the matron epitomizes joylessness, it's clear that she hasn't won: though the narrator is moments away from losing her job and Mr. Moreton is weeks away from dying, the two are "content, just for this perfect moment, to believe we can go on humming, and that this path before us will stretch on forever." Even in the face of impending tragedy, the narrator and Mr. Moreton can find, spread, and savor joy.

WEALTH AND CLASS IDENTITY

The narrator of "Laminex and Mirrors," a young Australian woman who has just turned eighteen, has set her sights on traveling to Europe when the summer is over. She calculates that working at her new job as a hospital cleaner until that time will allow her to save up just enough money for her trip. Because the narrator considers her job temporary, she sees herself as different from and better than the working-class employees at the hospital, who are older and more permanent fixtures of the hospital's staff. However, after spending more time around her new colleagues, the narrator begins to understand that her method of associating identity with class status oversimplifies her peers and diminishes the value of their contributions.

At the beginning of the short story, Kennedy's narrator clearly defines herself apart from her new job duties. She also leans upon her confidence that she is not intended to remain a hospital cleaner to avoid staying present in the unpleasant situations that her work presents her with. "Laminex and mirrors, that's me," the narrator says by way of introducing herself, and then qualifies the statement: "Or at least that's meant to be me." The suggestion here is that though she thinks she is "meant" to be defined by her daily task—cleaning the laminate and mirror surfaces of the hospital—she does not see herself that way. Likewise, when the narrator is faced with an unpleasant task or interaction, she thinks about how she will soon be in London, and therefore distanced from the daily routines and connotations of low-wage work. While cleaning the rooms of patients who are recovering from elective surgeries, for example, the narrator remarks, "Like these girls, I'm filling in my own allotment of time here, except that when I leave, it'll be to buy that plane ticket to London, and be gone." In other words, the narrator's brief job as a hospital cleaner is a mere stepping stone on her way to bigger and better things.

Though the narrator disassociates her identity from her low-wage job, she is not the only one at the hospital to do so. Both her coworkers and a hospital patient evaluate her as someone who is not destined to remain a hospital cleaner, a phenomenon that initially appears to validate her class-based biases. Mr. Moreton, one of the patients whose rooms the narrator is charged with cleaning, remarks that he didn't perceive her job at the hospital as a permanent one. He says, "I didn't think you were the kind of girl looking for a lifetime career cleaning tables. Not that there's anything wrong with cleaning. It's all work, isn't?" Here, it is clear that although Mr. Moreton does not think the work of a hospital cleaner is unworthy of respect, he thinks that the narrator comports herself in a way that suggests that *she* might find the work unfulfilling. Similarly, after seeing her reading a novel for pleasure, the narrator's colleagues Dot and Noeleen begin jokingly calling her "the scholar," which the narrator initially finds annoying. Her frustrations stem from the fact that this teasing assumes that she is still in school rather than reading for pleasure, a habit that she assumes her coworkers cannot understand due to their working-class backgrounds.

After spending more time with her coworkers, the narrator begins to understand that the classist biases she had formed about them were misguided. As a result, she modifies both her perceptions and her behavior toward those around her. Though the narrator breezes through her first work tasks and finds her coworkers "glazed and unhurried," she soon begins to learn that they have a lot to teach her. Noeleen shows her how to use the floor polisher by "using her hips" to stabilize it, and Dot teaches her how to use newspaper to more easily clean the mirrors for which the short story is named. In this way, the narrator learns that they are not the incompetent, sluggish employees she first imagined them to be, but rather smart, capable women who handle their tasks with ease because of their experience.

When she witnesses the poor condition of Dot's purse, as well as the careful way in which her coworkers handle their coins, the narrator's perception of her coworkers begins to shift even further. She is no longer bothered by the way in which her fellow employees tease her about her education. She also spends two shifts' worth of salary on Dot's jewelry and body care merchandise so that Dot can obtain a "Christmas Gift Bonus" through the catalogue company. This act not only emphasizes that the narrator feels guilty about her previous arrogance, but it also is an equalizing moment between the two women, as the narrator uses her funds to elevate her coworker so that she can receive a bonus.

By getting to know her coworkers, the narrator learns that the line she has drawn between her identity—which includes a bright future and travel in Europe—and theirs, which sentences them to a lifetime of working-class drudgery, is too harsh, and does not reflect the complexities of human experience. Although at first her belief that her background makes her different than her peers is validated by both Mr. Moreton and her coworkers themselves, the narrator comes to see that she has a lot to learn from these women she assumed were beneath her.

DEATH AND DIGNITY

Cate Kennedy's short story "Laminex and Mirrors" features an Australian teenager who begins a friendship with a man named Mr. Moreton, an elderly veteran dying of lung cancer, as she navigates her first few days as a hospital cleaner. The teenager, who is also the unnamed narrator of the story, describes the hospital as a site heavy with the inevitability of death. Her descriptions of Mr. Moreton in particular demonstrate the grim and often demoralizing nature of end-of-life care. By tracing the narrator's exposure to this environment, and her ultimate response to the difficult circumstances her new friend must face, Kennedy argues for the importance of allowing those who are dying to experience agency and dignity in their final days.

Cate Kennedy's language in "Laminex and Mirrors" paints the narrator's new workplace as a sterile, cheerless place in which the terminally ill await their eventual deaths. Moreover, she employs Mr. Moreton's character to demonstrate the ways in which certain features of the hospital and its procedures contribute to feelings of melancholy and dehumanization in its patients. The narrator describes the sick patients plodding along the hospital corridors as "the slow, measured perambulation of those with an endless, unvarying stretch in front of them." Even the bathroom in an old wing of the hospital, which is slated for demolition (and thus, perhaps another suggestion of lifelessness), reminds the narrator that patients of that wing once spent a great deal of time listening to the sound of leaky taps, and "listen[ed] to that nocturnal dripping like a relentless echoing clock, marking their time left." Though a hospital is clearly intended to function as a site of recovery and healing, these moments draw a clear association between the hospital and the omnipresence of death.

While talking with the narrator, Mr. Moreton remarks that he is not sure if the matron of the hospital or his lung cancer will kill him first. He is joking in this scene, but his comment emphasizes that he finds the matron's policies—such as denying him the choice to smoke a **cigarette** or chat with a friendly hospital employee in the final days of his life—stifling and demeaning. When the narrator begins her job, she initially obeys the matron's policies, but after seeing Mr. Moreton's entire demeanor brighten after having his first bath in years, she is inspired to disobey them entirely. When she suggests to Mr. Moreton that he put on some aftershave before his family arrives at the hospital, he asks her to pass the bottle over to him, saying cheerfully, "Why not […] Pass it over here!" She notes that in that moment, "it's the recklessness in his voice that decides me." In asking Mr. Moreton if he'd like to put on some aftershave, the narrator gives Mr. Moreton a small moment of agency, which he laps up eagerly. The energy, zest, and "recklessness" in Mr. Moreton's voice shakes the narrator out of the routines and expectations of her job and reminds her of the importance of making her charges feel like they still have dignity and some semblance of independence even within the confines of the hospital walls.

When she begins to understand the way in which the environment of the hospital impacts employees and patients alike, the narrator decides that providing her new friend a single morning of autonomy and dignity is worth the risk. When she finally provides Mr. Moreton with his treasured cigarettes—which he has been asking for, unsuccessfully, every day—she symbolically asserts her decision to give him a moment of dignity as he approaches death. Though Mr. Moreton has lung cancer and smoking a cigarette—the culprit of his sickness—most certainly will not help, the narrator allows him to make that choice by himself. Furthermore, after bathing and clothing Mr. Moreton, the narrator observes that he looks handsome, and that he has become "like a different man with a cigarette in his hand." Mr. Moreton affirms this, remarking that he feels "bloody great." In breaking the rules to give Mr. Moreton a real bath in a bathtub—instead of forcing him to shower sitting in a plastic chair as is hospital protocol—the narrator treats Mr. Moreton with dignity, and essentially transforms the man with this small act.

The fact that a single morning brings about such a marked change in Mr. Moreton suggests the power of the narrator's commitment to treating her patients with respect and trying to give them some sense of agency over their lives. As the narrator takes Mr. Moreton back inside the hospital after "breaking him out" for a smoke, the pair appear temporarily transformed. Though their relationship was punctuated by moments of awkwardness before, and their escape characterized by moments of fear and anxiety, they greet their likely punishment with grace. Describing the way in which they enter the hospital's front doors, the narrator notes, "Mr. Moreton's shoulders go back and his chin lifts and we're clipping along now, left right left, there's no way I'm going to do him the disservice of skulking in, it's up and over the top for us." A sense of confidence as well as a sense of dignity is present in the characters' physical posture here, as well as the narrator's powerful claim that "there's no way" she will let Mr. Moreton down.

Though the narrator of "Laminex and Mirrors" begins her work as a hospital cleaner thinking only of when she will quit, she is quickly affected by the vulnerability and humanity of those she works with. She is also struck by evidence that the environment of a hospital does not always provide its patients what they need to feel respected or feel like themselves. Although the narrator is taught to adhere to policies that deprive Mr. Moreton of the ability to make his own choices and retain his dignity as he approaches death, she decides that she has the ability and the motivation to prioritize his dignity over those regulations.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE CIGARETTE

The cigarette that Mr. Moreton repeatedly requests from the narrator symbolizes the joy and dignity that the hospital's dehumanizing environment has deprived him of. The very first time the narrator cleans Mr. Moreton's hospital room, he begs her to violate hospital policy by using money from his drawer to purchase cigarettes and bring them to his room. The hospital's matron has told the narrator to expect this behavior from Mr. Moreton, and firmly instructed the narrator to deny the request. Though the narrator recognizes the irony of providing a man dying of lung cancer with the very object that sickened him to begin with, she tells him she "would if she [could]," and that she is simply too afraid that she will be fired if her superiors discover she has disobeyed their orders. Despite the narrator's refusal, Mr. Moreton continues to ask her to bring a cigarette each morning she cleans his room, remarking that given his deteriorating condition, "It's not as if they can hurt me now."

Though the narrator denies Mr. Moreton his cigarette throughout the short story, her experiences at the hospital—and particularly her friendships with Mr. Moreton and her coworkers—teach her the many ways in which people attempt to navigate the difficult conditions of their lives with small moments of joy, companionship, comfort, and dignity. Furthermore, in a more practical sense, she sees that Mr. Moreton is very close to death, and the experience of watching him suffer motivates her to see the cruelty and futility of denying him one small happiness. In the climax of the narrative, she decides to break Mr. Moreton out of his room and give him the opportunity to take a private bath. The positive effect of her gesture is so clearly visible in Mr. Moreton's reinvigorated mood and behavior that the narrator also decides to sneak him outside and give him his coveted cigarette. As he smokes, she observes him undergoing another subtle transformation. He suddenly appears handsome, contented, and "like a different man." In this way, though Mr. Moreton is clearly addicted to nicotine and enjoys the experience of smoking, the cigarette represents the many ways in which the hospital environment is capable of dehumanizing patients and alienating them from their former, healthier selves. The narrator's decision to give Mr. Moreton the cigarette, then, is symbolic of her decision to prioritize his joy and dignity over hospital procedures and the expectation that she constantly uphold them.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribe edition of *Like a House on Fire* published in 2012.

Laminex and Mirrors Quotes

"Matron's got to you, has she?"

"Sorry, but yes."

"Dunno what's gunna kill me first," he mutters. I give his breakfast tray an ineffectual rub. He hasn't touched his poached egg, and I can't blame him—it's sitting there like the eye of a giant squid. Mr. Moreton has an oxygen mask, but tells me he hates using it. "Feel like that thing's choking me," he says. "Like in the war."

Related Characters: Narrator, Mr. Moreton (speaker), The Matron

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36-37

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation occurs when the narrator first meets Mr. Moreton. He asks her to bring him a cigarette, and she refuses, citing the hospital's no-smoking policy and the Matron's strict regulations. Though Mr. Moreton's commentary here has a slightly teasing tone, the comparison he draws between his oxygen mask and the equipment he used during the war reveals that he is genuinely struggling in his current condition. The environment of the hospital, with its inedible food and authoritarian staff members like the Matron, seem to be contributing to his suffering. The narrator's response to this interaction is somewhat timid; she has only just met Mr. Moreton, and is trying to be a good employee by adhering to her boss' requirements. But the fact that she apologizes to Mr. Moreton, and uses the word "ineffectual" when she points to the unappetizing "eye of a giant squid" on his hospital tray, implies that she feels guilty about her inability to improve the small, grim features of Mr. Moreton's daily life at this point in time.

"I know you're a friendly girl," says one of the nurses in low, embarrassed tones when she stops me in the corridor a few minutes later, "but it's best not to fraternise too much with the patients. If you're a cleaner, I mean."

"Right," I say. "Sorry."

"Just do your work."

"Sorry, I will."

I trudge, my face burning, down towards the corridor of elective surgeries. It's OK, I tell myself. At the end of the summer holidays I will have saved enough for three months in Europe, where I will walk the streets of Paris and London, absorbing culture and life and fraternising with whoever I like.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Mr. Moreton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37-38

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs when a nurse pulls the narrator from Mr. Moreton's room to scold her for chatting with him. The presence of shame is evident in the demeanor of both the nurse and the narrator during this conversation. Kennedy describes the nurse's tone as "embarrassed," suggesting either that the nurse is nervous about the awkwardness of confronting the narrator, or that she is embarrassed on behalf of the narrator for committing such a punishable transgression. In turn, of course, the narrator is embarrassed for being reprimanded. No matter the nurse's intentions, her attitude is cold and even patronizing. She tells the narrator she is "a friendly girl," but then immediately shames her for "fraternising," a term associated with participating in illicit activity with an enemy. This word choice harshly pathologizes the narrator's sincere and casual attempt to treat Mr. Moreton like a human being, and the narrator is so upset as a result that she redirects her shame and anger into a kind of self-righteousness, insisting that soon, in Europe, no one can tell her who she can and cannot "fraternise" with. Her choice to use the nurse's exact words in this statement is particularly defiant, and foreshadows the narrator's acts of institutional rebellion to come.

Each idle post-op girl, surrounded by hothouse flowers, watches me with the same bored, incurious gaze as I move about their rooms, spraying and wiping. I pump mist over the immaculate mirrors, catching sight of my own reflection there—my unreconstructed nose and studiously neutral face. Like these girls, I'm filling in my own allotment of time here, except that when I leave, it'll be to buy that plane ticket to London, and be gone. My hand holding the yellow cloth rises and falls, cleaning pointlessly, searching for a splash of toothpaste or cup ring mark on the laminex's spotless, glossy surface.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator clearly does not hold a very high opinion of the patients in the elective surgery wing of the hospital, which she is tasked with cleaning in this scene. She depicts these particular patients as lazy, privileged, and self-interested, grouping them together by the characteristics she claims they all share. She says that they are "idle" and "incurious," surrounded by expensive flowers and able to recover in the most elegant, up-to-date rooms in the hospital.

The narrator appears annoyed in this scene, likely because she knows that is part of the hospital is private, and that the kind of patients who can afford cosmetic surgeries are often well-off. As a hospital cleaner who is spending the entire summer saving up for a vacation, the narrator is likely not as economically privileged as the elective surgery patients. Therefore, her assertion that the mirrors in the elective surgery rooms are "immaculate," and that cleaning them is "pointless," suggests that she finds the drudgery of cleaning even more taxing when she is required to wipe down the already clean and elegant accommodations of wealthy people. The narrator's distaste for these patients is put even further into relief by her attempts to see herself as different from them. Though she recognizes that both she and the elective surgery patients are obligated to stay in the hospital for the time being, she falls back upon her habit of associating her identity with her upcoming Europe trip to distinguish her exciting plans from their apparently miserable futures.

> His uniform's blue and mine's an ugly mauve, clearly designating our status in the hospital pecking order, but he's still asked me to the staff Christmas party. The other cleaners, when they hear this, behave as if it's a doctor-nurse romance from Mills & Boon. They speculate on what table we'll all sit on, what they'll wear, whether there'll be door prizes this year. When I say I'm not sure if I'll go, they look at me flabbergasted. "But it's *free*," Dot says," and there's a whole three-course meal!"
>
> "That nice young man asks you to go, I reckon you go," says Noeleen. "He's from overseas somewhere, isn't he? Play your cards right and you might get a trip OS!"

Related Characters: Noeleen, Dot, Narrator (speaker), Tony

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41-42

Explanation and Analysis

During this scene, the narrator discusses her upcoming date with Tony, a nurse who has asked to her attend the staff Christmas party with him. Through this interaction, Kennedy addresses the socioeconomic and career-based hierarchies present in the space of the hospital through the eyes of the narrator. First, the narrator demonstrates how even the color of the hospital staff's uniforms designates where employees stand in the hospital's "pecking order"; as a cleaner, she occupies the lowest level of this hierarchy. The contrast Kennedy draws between Tony's status as a nurse and the narrator's status as a cleaner is followed by the evident contrast between the narrator, an educated young person working temporarily over the summer, and her coworkers Dot and Noeleen, older women who appear to have worked at the hospital for a substantial amount of time.

This particular contrast is evident in the narrator's and her coworkers' different perspectives of the hospital's Christmas party. The narrator is reluctant to attend and shocks her coworkers by expressing her indifference aloud. They do not see any reason why she would pass up free food, entertainment, and the possibility of eventually traveling abroad with Tony (presumably for free, given that Noeleen says the narrator might "get a trip") for no good reason. The narrator does not seem to have considered all of these benefits of attending the party, which illustrates that she does not need to think about financial gain as frequently as her coworkers do. Noeleen's suggestion that she "play [her] cards right," for example, indicates that Noeleen might tend to think in terms of leveraging advantageous situations for maximum financial benefit, a habit that she likely developed out of financial necessity.

> "These things happen," he says. He surveys his empty hands bleakly. "I marched, last Anzac Day," he adds. "Hard to believe, isn't it?" He looks morosely out through the sealed window to the courtyard garden, where the five iceberg rosebushes struggle to survive their pruning.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Mr. Moreton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the narrator and Mr. Moreton are talking in his hospital room. Mr. Moreton reveals to the narrator that a doctor has given him just days—and perhaps a few weeks—to live. The resignation in Mr. Moreton's tone ("These things happen") is clear in this moment, and this tone, accompanied by his "bleak" review of his "empty hands" and "morose" glance at the courtyard garden indicates that he cannot quite maintain the good humor he exhibited earlier on in the story as the reality of his death becomes more apparent to him. Mr. Moreton refers to his participation in Anzac Day—an annual Australian and New Zealand holiday that commemorates veterans—in order to illustrate his surprise at how quickly he has become confined to a bed he will likely no longer have many opportunities to leave. Furthermore, the rosebushes outside clearly function as a symbol of Mr. Moreton, or perhaps patients like him, who are "struggling to survive." The prosperity of these roses is threatened by the environment of the hospital as well as its regulatory procedures (the symbolic "pruning" of the rosebushes).

> I'm remembering my directive about fraternising, but I hate standing here beside his bed, like some official. I sit down and peel off my glove, pick up his hand. It's like a bundle of twigs. That hand, I tell myself, held a rifle, tried to stop itself trembling with terror, worked all its life.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Mr. Moreton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the narrator responds to the news that Mr. Moreton has been given just a weeks to live by taking his hand. In a gesture characteristic of her character, the narrator is so moved by Mr. Moreton's vulnerability in this moment that she defies hospital policy (and specifically, the nurse's warning that she should not "fraternise" with patients as a hospital cleaner), by comforting her new friend instead of acting "like some official" as Marie or the Matron would. Kennedy's use of the phrase "bundle of twigs" to describe Mr. Moreton's hands emphasizes the man's fragility, but the narrator's line of thought here—which moves through a series of equally vulnerable and human moments that "that hand" has endured—signal that she has developed a sincere sense of respect for him. It is this respect that will bolster the narrator's decision to provide Mr. Moreton with joy and dignity later on in the narrative.

> Here's another mistake I make: I think Len will be chastened, satisfyingly disconcerted, forced to eat his words. When he hears, though, he is radiant with pride. As he congratulates his wife it strikes me for the first time that, with their odd shifts, this fifteen-minute tea-break is one of the few times the two of them see each other all day.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Len, Dot

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

This moment is one of a series of moments in the narrative in which the narrator's assumptions are proven unfair or incorrect. Here, the narrator is looking forward to seeing the look on Len's face when he discovers that he was wrong in assuming that his wife, Dot, would not meet her sales goal (she sells cleaning products and cosmetics to her coworkers from a catalogue). Though the narrator assumed that Len would not be supportive of Dot based on just a few pieces of information about him, it appears that it is she who is "forced to eat [her] words" when she discovers that he is "radiant[ly]" happy for his wife. This revelation leads to others, which is a pattern that continues throughout the story—suggesting that when the narrator begins to perceives others in a more complex and humane manner, her perspective widens by a kind of domino effect. In this way, her understanding that Len is perhaps not so unsupportive as he seems leads her to think about how Len visits Dot every day the minute he comes off of the night shift, and how clearly he prioritize the brief "fifteen-minute tea-break" in which he gets to see his wife.

> "Do you know," he says, "I haven't had a bath in I don't know how long. Used to having to sit on a plastic chair in the shower. Or stand there clutching those bloody grab rails. Haven't been like this for years."
>
> "Like what?" I say. My heart is jumping into the back of my throat.
>
> "Weightless," he says finally. "Completely weightless."

Related Characters: Narrator, Mr. Moreton (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Because readers have only had access to the events of a few days in Mr. Moreton's life, it might seem as though he has only recently been experiencing the debilitating aspects of illness and the aging process. However, in this scene, in which the narrator sneaks Mr. Moreton into the old wing of the hospital in order to provide him with a private bath, it becomes clear that he has likely been navigating these difficulties for years. Though bathing is a practical, daily habit, the experience of having to shower in a plastic chair has impacted Mr. Moreton's spirit over time, and so the experience of being able to bathe as he did for most of his life—alone and unassisted—allows him to feel a kind of happiness and autonomy that he describes as "weightlessness." Though the narrator is clearly frightened by idea that the two might be discovered, she is clearly invested in providing him with a momentary sense of the kind of dignity he has not experienced in a great deal of time.

As I put away his shaver in his toilet bag I see an unopened bottle of aftershave with a sticker saying *Happy Christmas, Grandad!* still on the box. I raise my eyebrows enquiringly.

"Why not," he says when he sees me holding it up. "Pass it over here!"

It's the recklessness in his voice that decides me. I help him change his pyjama top for the shirt and sweater he has hanging in his cupboard, and I hold out my hand to help him into his wheelchair again.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Mr. Moreton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the narrator and Mr. Moreton have returned from the bath that the narrator arranged for him in the old wing of the hospital. Mr. Moreton is now getting ready to see his daughter and grandchildren, who have come to see him before he passes away. The detail of the "Happy Christmas" sticker on the aftershave compounds the sadness and sentimentality of this event. And yet, when the narrator suggests that Mr. Moreton wear the aftershave, his "reckless" tone marks the vitality and confidence that the simple bath have inspired in him. Like Mr. Moreton's hand or Dot's purse, Mr. Moreton's tone here signals human vulnerability to the narrator, which she often responds to with concrete action throughout the short story. Here, too, she decides to finally provide Mr. Moreton with the opportunity to smoke outdoors, and risk her job in the process, simply because the tone of his voice struck an emotional chord in her. In this way, Kennedy continues to assert the surprising influence of even small moments of human connection.

"You look very nice," I say.

"Do I? I feel bloody great," he says, stretching with a contented yawn, and there's a little zephyr of morning breeze that washes over us, warm and fragrant with the faint scent of blossom, and I'm about to speak again when the propped-open door slides slowly shut behind us on its hinges. There is a terrible echoing click as it closes on its own deadlock, and I recognise the sound as soon as I hear it. It is the sound of a plane door closing without me, ready to taxi down a runway and take off for London.

Related Characters: Mr. Moreton, Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator finally provides Mr. Moreton with his treasured cigarette outside of the hospital, she witnesses him undergo a transformation that began when he took the private bath. He looks handsome and healthier to her, which she mentions here (and which he corroborates), and Kennedy's descriptions of the brief moments the two share outside paint the scene in an idyllic manner. There is the "zephyr of morning breeze," the "faint scent of blossom," and the narrator's knowledge that she allowed her friend to experience a bit of joy. All of the elements of this scene contrast greatly with the sterile environment of the hospital, where the friendship between the narrator and Mr. Moreton is not allowed to prosper, and where no "zephyr of morning breeze" could wash over the pair as they talked.

As the door behind them shuts, the sound functions like the snap of reality as it reminds them of their obligations. For the narrator in particular, it signals that she will likely lose her job. Despite the confidence she exhibits as she sneaks Mr. Moreton out of his hospital room, the images of the plane taking off and the unattended Christmas party are sad ones, and emphasize that the narrator has indeed made a great personal sacrifice by providing Mr. Moreton with an ideal morning.

Down in the kitchen the other cleaners will be pouring their cups of tea out of the urn now, Marie remarking coolly on my absence, and Matron will be waiting for us, I am certain, at the nurses' station, in the no-man's-land of the hospital's thermostatically cool interior, its sterilised world of hard surfaces, wiped clean and blameless. Someone else's jurisdiction now.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), The Matron, Marie, Noeleen, Dot, Mr. Moreton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes a moment and the end of the story, when the narrator approaches the lobby of the hospital with Mr. Moreton. She imagines her coworkers going about their daily routines, and pictures the Matron waiting to punish

her (and mostly likely fire her) for breaking Mr. Moreton out of his room. Though the narrator describes her coworkers as innocuously pouring cups of tea, she imagines Marie and the Matron antagonistic roles that coincide with their previous actions in the narrative; Marie unkindly points out that the narrator is missing, and the Matron looms over the nurses station, waiting to punish the narrator apparently as soon as she possibly can.

The narrator has described the hospital as cold and sterile before, but her unique use of the word "blameless" here to describe the environment that awaits her suggests that although the most authoritarian figures of the hospital's administration may strictly adhere to institutional policies, their moral codes might not be as clean as the building's sanitized surfaces. Rather, they appear only to concern themselves with that which is directly under their jurisdiction. In the last line of this passage, the narrator asserts that by defying her superiors, she gave up her own obligations, or "jurisdiction," and that they will now be passed along to someone else. It is a terse, confident statement that demonstrates the way in which the narrator has decided to greet the consequences of her actions with dignity.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LAMINEX AND MIRRORS

When the narrator arrives at her first day at her new job as a hospital cleaner, she is "solemnly handed gloves, a cloth, and a spray bottle." "Laminex and mirrors," she remarks, "that's me. Or at least that's meant to be me."

From the first scene of the short story, Cate Kennedy highlights several important features of the hospital environment. The person who gives the narrator her tools remains nameless and faceless, but is still described as "solemn," suggesting that a lack of enthusiasm and humanity is present in the interaction, and perhaps in the hospital as a whole. The narrator's suggestion that Laminex (an Australian laminate brand) and mirrors (both of which she is expected to clean as part of her job) are "meant to be [her]" suggests that she understands the way in which others might associate her identity with her job description.

As the narrator takes on her first cleaning tasks, she notices both the "slow, measured perambulation" of the patients and the efficient, but "glazed and unhurried" manner with which her fellow cleaners go about their own work. The narrator remarks that she does not understand her coworkers' attitude. She explains, "Not quite eighteen and fresh out of school, I'm saving money to go to London and I'm eager-beavering my way through my allotted duties on this holiday job."

The narrator's observations demonstrate that she sees herself as set apart from her coworkers. Because she sees them as "slow" and "glazed," and follows up these comments with the assertion that she is young, "fresh," and bound for Europe, it is clear that she perceives herself as more vibrant and full of potential than her peers, whom she depicts as tired, working-class folks who have become bored and lazy after years of routine. She makes these assumptions before she has even gotten to know her coworkers or learned what their lives are like. These assumptions therefore establish the narrator as somewhat arrogant, a characteristic that is bolstered by the fact that she has planned to leave her job before she even begins working.

The narrator finishes her first tasks early and looks for her supervisor, Marie, whom she finds with her feet up, reading the newspaper in the storeroom. Marie appears annoyed, and assigns the narrator to clean out the hospital's ash bins. The task is an unpleasant one, and the smell of the bins makes the narrator retch. She realizes that the task is probably Marie's attempt at taking "revenge" on her "for working too briskly."

The narrator's quick completion of her first work assignments supports her own statement that she is "eager-beavering [her] way" through her new job. Though Marie is the supervisor, her behavior—such as relaxing in the storeroom and appearing annoyed when the narrator asks for more work—implies that Marie is bored with or has a negative relationship to her job. This interaction therefore contributes to the narrator's developing belief that her hospital coworkers all have negative relationships to the work they do; for this reason, she sees Marie's decision to assign her to a repulsive task as a punishment for her failure to adopt the same attitude as her peers.

The narrator takes tea during her 7 a.m. break with her coworkers and describes her coworker Dot, "whose hair is backcombed into an actual beehive and who blinks hard with watery-eyed nervousness when anyone addresses her directly." The narrator then describes a moment in which Dot gives her advice about which toilet paper to buy (the tightly rolled kind, because it provides more toilet paper for a better value). The narrator briefly thanks her for the tip, and then continues with her morning cleaning tasks.

Dot's outdated hairdo, shy, nervous nature, and toilet paper budgeting tips makes her appear unfortunate and unsophisticated in the narrator's eyes. Though the narrator does not completely disregard Dot's advice about the toilet paper, she does not appear to truly consider or engage with the topic, suggesting that she does not find Dot's advice valuable or relevant to her. These observations and judgments are evidence of the narrator's habit of making assumptions about her coworkers based on their appearances and class backgrounds.

The narrator cleans a room occupied by a patient named Mr. Moreton, an elderly veteran dying of lung cancer. Mr. Moreton asks her to take some money out of a drawer in his bedside table and use it to buy him a pack of **cigarettes**. The narrator explains that the matron of the hospital warned her that this would happen, and forbid her from fulfilling the request. The narrator apologizes, but says she can't buy the cigarettes. Mr. Moreton realizes the matron has "gotten to her," and remarks, "Dunno what's gunna kill me first." The narrator notices Mr. Moreton's untouched breakfast, which she finds highly unappetizing, as well as his unused oxygen mask. Mr. Moreton explains that he does not like to use it because he feels like it is choking him and it reminds him of the war.

Though Mr. Moreton's charm and dry humor are made apparent here, the fact that he jokes that the hospital's strict regulations (embodied in the figure of the Matron) might kill him before his lung cancer does, and comments that his oxygen mask is just like the equipment he used in the army, reveals that he is truly struggling with the monotony of hospital life and the physical discomfort of his condition. The grim nature of Mr. Moreton's surroundings, exemplified by the inedible hospital food in front of him, make his ploy to obtain cigarettes seem like a relatively insignificant request in comparison with the magnitude of his pain.

The narrator develops a routine with Mr. Moreton. She cleans his room, and then she asks him how he is doing. He replies that he is not doing well, and then asks her to buy him a **cigarette** and take him out to "the verandah" so that he can smoke it. The narrator always declines, but stays to chat with him for a few moments. Once, after witnessing the narrator chatting with Mr. Moreton, a nurse tells her that "it's best not to best not to fraternise with the patients. If you're a cleaner, I mean." The narrator apologizes, embarrassed, and the nurse tells her to "Just do [her] work."

Mr. Moreton's repeated requests for a cigarette illustrate his desire to experience something pleasurable amidst the drudgery of daily life in his hospital room. The nurse's statement, "If you're a cleaner, I mean," emphasizes the class and career hierarchy established by the hospital's staff. By reminding the narrator of her position, the nurse is asserting that the narrator's actions (being too emotionally invested in a patient) are particularly inappropriate because of her low status in this hierarchy. Though the nurse has been provided with an opportunity to encourage the narrator she rejects it, choosing instead to treat the narrator with coldness. This decision coincides with the harsh, authoritarian behavior of both the hospital's matron and Marie, who appear to prioritize hospital policy above the satisfaction and dignity of their patients and employees.

The narrator has calculated that by the end of her summer job as a hospital cleaner, she'll be able to afford three months traveling around Europe, "where I will walk the streets of Paris and London, absorbing the culture and life and fraternising with whoever I like."

The narrator's tone is confident and even defiant in this passage. Though she continues to separate her identity from the hospital, and utilize her vacation plans to distance herself from unpleasant aspects of her job, the last line here—"fraternizing with whoever I like"—suggests that she is becoming increasingly frustrated with some of the hospital's regulations.

The narrator cleans the rooms of patients recovering from elective surgeries, where "bed after bed is filled with miserable girls." One of the girls tells the narrator that her parents paid for her nose surgery as a twenty-first birthday gift, but remarks that she wouldn't have done it if she had known how badly it would hurt. The narrator has been told that the hospital is "going private," and considers that soon every patient room will look like those in the wing for elective surgeries—that is, nicer, with "glistening white ensuite bathrooms."

Unlike Mr. Moreton, who struggles with the conditions of his hospitalization because he is suffering from a fatal illness that he did not choose, the patients in the elective surgeries wing are unhappy after receiving procedures that they chose for themselves. By pointing out that these patients receive more luxurious accommodations than the general population, but yet remain "miserable" after their surgeries, the narrator both points out their privilege and implies that it does not necessarily result in happiness.

The narrator thinks about the oldest public wing of the hospital, which contains a bathroom that will soon be demolished as part of the hospital's upcoming transformation from a public to a private institution. She imagines the patients who could hear the bathroom's taps dripping from their rooms, like a "relentless echoing clock, marking their time left." As she cleans more patients' rooms in the elective surgery area, the narrator remarks that each patient regards her "with the same bored, incurious gaze." The narrator then compares herself to these patients, noting that she has an "unreconstructed nose and studiously neutral face," and that though she is obligated to be in the hospital just like the girls are, she will get to travel to Europe when she leaves.

The contrast between the "glistening white" new rooms of the private elective surgeries wing and the old public wing of the hospital—which will soon be destroyed—reflects not only the hospital's apparent interest in profit but also symbolizes the way in which the hospital oversees the deaths of the elderly, who are often treated as obsolete members of society. The "relentless echoing clock marking their time left" suggests that most patients are eager to leave the hospital, but could certainly also refer to the way in which hospitals themselves remind patients of the limits that time places on their lives.

Dot gives the narrator another tip, this time about how she should clean windows with "Metho and newspaper" rather than commercial cleaning products. The narrator finds this odd because Dot sells her coworkers cleaning products from catalogues, but Dot explains, "It's the cosmetics I really believe in." During a work break, Dot hands the narrator one of her catalogues and an order form "as if it's already a done deal."

Dot demonstrates her practical wisdom again with cleaning advice . This time, the narrator seems more engaged in the conversation; her follow-up question reveals that she is becoming more invested in about learning about her coworkers, and Dot's answer suggests that Dot is likely selling the catalogue products in order to supplement her income rather than simply doing the side job as a hobby. Her assertive manner of giving the narrator the order form indicates that she has a degree of pride wrapped up in the enterprise of selling these products, perhaps for the very fact that she is doing so for economic reasons.

The narrator feels caught up "in the high beam of Dot's earnest gratitude" as she explains the catalogue ordering process. Dot has told the narrator that her husband, Len, doubts her ability to succeed as a saleswoman, as well as her chances of achieving the "Christmas bonus gift" that the catalogue company offers its salespeople after they reach a particular sales goal. The narrator has met Len because he stops by the hospital to see Dot when he gets off of his night shift at the local printing works.

The narrator's depiction of Dot as slightly pitiable earlier in the narrative informs this moment. Though the narrator does not say it outright, she seems to feel sorry for Dot, whose intensely "earnest gratitude" makes her efforts as a saleswoman appear somewhat desperate. The sad nature of the scene is compounded (in the narrator's eyes) by Dot's unsupportive working-class husband. In this way, though the narrator is becoming more aware of the complexities of her coworkers' identities, she still appears to be making assumptions based on a relatively small number of observations and interactions.

The narrator cleans the floor with a large, noisy hydraulic polisher, which she struggles to control. Her coworker Noeleen advises her to use her hips to manage the machine as it escapes from her grasp, an incident that causes them both to erupt in laughter. Noeleen's advice helps her to control the polisher.

This moment serves as another instance in which the narrator's early assumptions about her coworkers, particularly her assessment that they were "slow" and "glazed" as they went about their work, were incomplete and inaccurate. As "eager" as the narrator may have been at the start of her job, she still struggles at certain tasks, and requires the skills of those who have been working at the hospital for longer than she has. Not only does this incident underscore Noeleen's expertise, but it also shows that the narrator's growing respect for her peers goes hand-in-hand with her increasing ability to experience joy (here, Noeleen and the narrator's "eruption of laughter") and companionship in the environment of the hospital.

While working on the floor, the narrator smiles at a nurse named Tony as he passes by in the hallway. She notes that he has asked her to go with him to the staff Christmas party, and that her coworkers are excited by the drama of their nascent relationship. The narrator explains that when she was not sure if she would attend the party, her coworkers did not understand why (and were in fact shocked by her reluctance) because party is free and that a relationship with Tony, who is South African, might lead to a free trip overseas. Even though the narrator notes that she is already planning to go overseas herself, she is encouraged by her coworker's enthusiasm, and agrees to go the party with Tony because of the way he comforts "the sore and sorry nose job girls" as they emerge from surgery.

Readers are exposed to some of the socioeconomic differences between the narrator and her coworkers in the scene. The narrator's ambivalence about the party contrasts with her coworkers' excitement about the monetary benefits of a date with Tony. Though they are excited by the drama of an office romance, they are also much more aware of the benefits of free food, entertainment, and a potential trip abroad than the narrator is. At this point, it is clear that such awareness is tied to the fact that as women who likely earn a low hourly wage, Dot and Noeleen have to think about finances much more often than the narrator does. The narrator's response to her coworkers' comments, as well as her reaction to Tony's kindness, is characteristic of the way in which she is easily affected by the joy and sincerity of others throughout the narrative.

Mr. Moreton< continues to ask the narrator to bring him **cigarettes** on a daily basis. He informs the narrator that a specialist has given him "weeks or possibly a month or two" to live. He told the doctor that he received regulation issue cigarettes in the army, which the narrator agrees is ironic. Mr. Moreton also explains that his daughter and grandchildren are making the long journey to visit him. The narrator apologizes again for not bringing Mr. Moreton a cigarette, and explains that she does not want to get fired because she is saving up for her trip to Europe. Mr. Moreton replies, "I didn't think you were the kind of girl looking for a lifetime of cleaning tables. Not that there's anything wrong with cleaning."

Mr. Moreton's impending death becomes a much more present reality here. The emotional impact of the news—and the vulnerability required of Mr. Moreton to reveal it—makes the narrator feel even more guilty about her decision not to bring him a cigarette. At this point, this decision points to the fact that she is currently still prioritizing her dreams (the trip to Europe) over Mr. Moreton's comfort. Furthermore through Mr. Moreton's statement about what "kind of girl" the narrator is, Kennedy again revisits the notion that society tends to tie an individual's identity to their occupation. Even though Mr. Moreton claims there is nothing "wrong" with low-wage labor, he believes that the narrator seems like someone who can do better in life than cleaning a hospital.

Mr. Moreton says that he'd "kill for a smoke," and notes that "It's not as if they can hurt me now." The narrator considers the hospital's stance on "fraternising," but "[hates] standing here beside his bed, like some official." She takes Mr. Moreton's hand. Marie suddenly appears at the door and says that the matron has seen her "lingering" in Mr. Moreton's room. She is angry that the matron sought her out to speak to her about it. Marie coldly demands that the narrator clean the bathroom in the Menzies wing as punishment for her actions. Because the bathroom will be demolished the next week, the narrator is shocked by the request, but complies nonetheless. As she cleans, the narrator consoles herself by thinking, "I will look back on this and laugh [...] I don't owe these people anything."

Mr. Moreton's comment here is logical, but it is also imbued with a degree of sadness that the narrator, as someone who is impacted by moments of human connection, responds to immediately. Her desire to avoid standing "like some official" is a nod to people like the matron and Marie, who would want her to act professionally rather than empathetically during this interaction. But the narrator chooses to act empathetically nonetheless, and is punished not only because of her interactions with Mr. Moreton, but because Marie feels humiliated by the Matron. Marie's punishment thus reveals itself to be a selfish attempt at regaining her pride by hurting the narrator's. Both women know that cleaning the old bathroom is a useless enterprise, but that the narrator must comply with Marie's orders if she wants to keep her job.

Later, the narrator is hanging Christmas decorations on the hospital walls when Dot mentions that she is close to achieving her Christmas bonus, and Noeleen asks if she has "asked the scholar if she sees anything she likes." The narrator explains that her coworkers have given her this nickname after seeing her read a novel at the bus stop. Initially, the narrator is annoyed by the nickname, and is "impatient to be in a world [...] where reading a novel in public isn't a cause for comment." But she changes her mind once she observes the condition of Dot's worn gray purse as she gives Noeleen back some change for her catalogue purchase. She is also struck by the way in which both women carefully handle the coins.

Here, Dot and Noeleen demonstrate the same tendency to make assumptions about identity and social class that the narrator does throughout the story. From just one small moment (observing the narrator reading the novel) they glean that the narrator is a "scholarly" type. Though they are mostly using the label to tease her, the narrator interprets the teasing as another signal that she does not belong in the same kind of work environment as Dot and Noeleen. And yet, just as the narrator feels moved when witnessing Mr. Moreton's vulnerability and Tony's kindness, the brief instant in which she sees Dot's purse and her coworkers' careful exchange of cash alters her perspective, and makes her realize that her assumptions were marked by condescension and feelings of superiority.

The narrator takes Dot's catalogue and selects enough items for her to receive the Christmas gift bonus as well as the "Gold seller" stickpin. The purchases will cost her two shifts' salary, and Dot is rendered speechless. The narrator is excited to see the expression in Len's face when he finds out, but says that her excitement was "another mistake" she made. When he hears the news, Len congratulates his wife, "radiant with pride." When she sees Len and his wife smiling at each other, the narrator notes that she "got [her] money's worth, after all."

The narrator's decision to spend so much money on Dot after repeating her plans to save money for Europe so frequently in the story demonstrates just how profoundly the images of Dot's purse and manner of handling money have affected her. The fact that she calls her assumptions about Len "another mistake" suggests that she considers her earlier assessment of her coworkers and her workplace a "mistake" as well. The fact that Len and Dot's joy constitutes "getting her money's worth" for the narrator suggests that she does not immediately interpret her generosity as a sacrifice, but instead as a method by which to achieve the same kind of fulfillment she plans to search for in Europe.

The narrator attempts to avoid running into the matron as she completes her daily work tasks. When she arrives at Mr. Moreton's room, they begin to chat, and the narrator hates how she is keeping her voice low as she talks to him. Mr. Moreton tells her that his daughter is arriving with her children tomorrow, and explains that the visit has both good and bad connotations because "She wouldn't come unless I was on me last legs."

At this point in the story, the matron has very clearly become the narrative's antagonist. She represents the features of the hospital that are cold, authoritarian, and unforgiving. As the narrator increasingly begins to defy these parts of her workplace environment, it makes sense that she would increasingly want to avoid the character that most thoroughly embodies them. The narrator's choice to keep her voice low indicates that she is still, however, afraid of the matron and her rules. Mr. Moreton's confession intensifies the rising action of the narrative by reminding the narrator that he is close to death.

The narrator remarks that " it was easy" to come to work a half hour before her usual start time the next day. When she enters Mr. Moreton's room, he is surprised to see her so early. She tells him that important family visitors are arriving today, and asks him if he can get into his wheelchair. He does, and she wheels him to the Menzies wing, where she offers him a bath in the newly cleaned bathroom. Mr. Moreton enjoys the bath immensely. He tells her that he hasn't had a real bath in years, and has had to sit in a plastic chair in the shower to bathe. He says he feels weightless.

As the narrator puts her plan into action, her claim that the decision to enact it "was easy" shows that her principles have ceased to waver. Mr. Moreton's comments about the bath remind readers that although they have only been shown the events of a few days in his life, he has likely been experiencing some of the debilitating consequences of his illness for a long time. His choice of the word "weightless" is associated with both the happiness the narrator's gesture has brought him as well as the momentary sense of freedom that the private bath has allowed him to feel.

After Mr. Moreton is finished bathing, the narrator takes him back to his room. As he is shaving, he says that he "never wanted to live past seventy-five [...] 'till the day [he] turned seventy four." The narrator finds an opened bottle of aftershave in Mr. Moreton's bathroom, and when she offers it to him, he replies "Why not?" and asks her to pass it to him. The narrator says that it is the "recklessness in his voice that decides [her]." She helps him into his clothes, and then into his wheelchair again. She then wheels him outside of the hospital, thinking that she can't let him down now.

This conversation is the first explicit indication that readers receive that Mr. Moreton is afraid to die. Previously, he has treated the topic of his death with a jaded form of acceptance; but here, he shows the narrator that he has surprised even himself by wanting to live longer than he ever expected to want to. Once again, it Mr. Moreton's vulnerability, paired with evidence of the private bath's positive effect on his state of mind, that motivates the narrator to act.

The narrator hands Mr. Moreton a **cigarette** from her bag, and he grasps her hand as she lights it for him. He smokes the cigarette with relish, and the narrator thinks that "he's like a different man" as he does so. She tells him that he looks great, and he responds that he feels "bloody great." As the two are enjoying the warm morning breeze, they hear the door that the narrator has left propped open behind them click shut. At that moment, the narrator imagines a plane to London taking off without her, and thinks about how she will probably miss the staff Christmas party.

The notion that small moments can have a significant impact on someone's mood, perspective, or sense of self is very present in this scene, as Mr. Moreton appears transformed by the simple act of smoking a cigarette. In fact, the elation of this moment seems to transfer to the narrator as they enjoy the outdoors together. But the joy the characters share is instantly cut off by the sound of the door to the hospital shutting behind them, accompanied by images that indicate that the narrator will lose her job. Though the narrator was confident as she began her work day, these images are melancholy, implying that though her decision to break Mr. Moreton out of his hospital room was "easy," the prospect of losing her job is still painful to her.

When Mr. Moreton has finished his **cigarette**, the narrator takes him around the side of the hospital in search of another entrance. However, the doors are locked, and they realize that they will have to return through the hospital's front entrance. Mr. Moreton notes that the narrator will likely lose her job, and she replies, "I couldn't care less about the job." When he asks her what she will do about her trip to Europe, she says that she will go "a bit later" than she originally planned.

When the hospital doors lock behind the narrator and Mr. Moreton, the happy, almost dreamlike space outside the hospital—ungoverned by the institution's policies and procedures—seems to disappear. Reality takes its place, and though the narrator assures Mr. Moreton that she will simply postpone her trip, readers receive no indication that this is really her plan, and it seems unlikely that she will be able to save up the amount of money necessary for her trip in "a bit" of time. The narrator's statement then appears to function simply as an attempt to ease Mr. Moreton's worries.

As the narrator takes Mr. Moreton to the hospital's front entrance, "The woody, clean fragrance of his Christmas aftershave makes [her] want to cry." As they go through the entrance, Mr. Moreton's "shoulders go back and his head lifts" and she decides that "there's no way I am going to do him the disservice of skulking in."

The smell of Mr. Moreton's aftershave points back to when the narrator handed the aftershave to him, and his "reckless" response caused her to finally take him outside for a cigarette. Here, they will be faced with the consequences of their brief journey outside of the hospital, imbuing their final walk to the lobby with a feeling of and dread. But Mr. Moreton's physical gestures here are dignified rather than melancholic. He has experienced a moment of individual freedom outside, and is bringing that into the hospital with him. The narrator, who has been sensitive to the gestures and emotions of others throughout the novel, picks up on Mr. Moreton's cues here, but also follows his lead out of respect.

The narrator imagines her coworkers taking their morning break, as well as Marie's remarks about her disappearance. She also images the matron waiting for her and Mr. Moreton "in the no-man's-land of the hospital's thermostatically cool interior, its sterilised world of hard surfaces, wiped clean and blameless." Mr. Moreton begins humming "It's a Long Way to Tipperary," but the song "dissolves in a hoot of laughter then a coughing fit." The narrator takes his hand until he is finished coughing, and the two continue moving forward, laughing together. The narrator says that this is the moment she remembers best from the year she turned eighteen, and explains that she and Mr. Moreton are "content, just for this perfect moment, to believe we can go on humming, and that this path before us will stretch on forever."

The story comes full circle in this moment: the narrator begins her first day of work observing the hospital staff's routines, and spends what might be her last moments as a hospital cleaner imagining her coworkers going about these same daily tasks. The difference here is that she imagines the matron, a representation of the sterile and often dehumanizing "no-man's-land" of the hospital, waiting to punish her for the lessons she has learned about experiencing small moments of dignity and joy, as well as her own role in providing those moments for others. As the narrator and Mr. Moreton approach their fates with pride, it becomes clear that the narrator is prepared for the punishment that awaits her. Her final statement suggests that she does not regret her decision, and that the experience has maintained an important place in her memory for years after the fact.

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