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THE LAY OF THE LAND

It is 3:02 a.m. when the gray sedan pulls into the parking area just west of the hospital. John gets out, gives a quick look around the lot and then looks over towards the main entrance. There are two large sliding doors at the center of the entrance and automatic revolving doors on either side. The only other activity besides John's slow, quiet walk towards the entrance is a man in front of the leftmost door, near the curb. It looks like he is waiting for a ride.

John can see into the lobby. It is a large one-story edifice with glass walls on three sides. It extends out of the larger eight story building behind it. Even the roof of the lobby is made of glass. On the far side of the lobby there is a central corridor that goes straight through the building to the opposite side where the emergency room is located. There are four elevators, two on either side of the central corridor. The elevator doors are far enough into the corridor that they are out of view of the security guard who is manning the reception desk just to the left of the entrance to the central corridor. The reception desk faces out towards the lobby. During the day there would also be a receptionist, but from midnight to 5:00 a.m. it is left to the front desk security guard to handle incoming visitors. The lobby only has a few sleepy people sitting around on some high backed, leather upholstered chairs that are scattered about in groups around a few sturdy, low to the floor, rectangular tables.

John starts walking a little faster as he sees a taxi pulling up at the

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curb to pick up its waiting fare. John passes behind the cab and heads into the lobby through the revolving doors on the right. They start moving automatically as he enters. John has his phone out and starts texting as he walks towards the entrance to the central corridor. Out of the corner of his eye John sees the security guard looking his way, so he immediately plops himself down into a chair. He continues texting and sees the guard get back to viewing the monitor that is scrolling through the live feeds of the surveillance cameras placed around the hospital. The guard assumes that John is just waiting for someone.

The corridor to the elevators is only about 20 feet away from him, and once in the corridor John will be out of the view of the security guard. So now he just needs to wait for a moment when the guard gets distracted. John chooses a chair that faces northwest so he can see out the front of the lobby and also the reception desk if he turns a little to the right. After sitting for a few minutes John notices that the lobby is quite inviting. It isn't lit by white fluorescent bulbs, but rather by a softer, yellowish, warmer, incandescent light. If sitting inside, he figured you would also get a great view of the sun setting between the mountains off in the distance. Opportunity knocks. The security guard is answering a call and typing into a keyboard when his cell phone rings. As he stands up to reach into his pocket for the ringing cell phone, John is already up and stepping into the corridor.

John presses the up button for the two elevators on the north side of the corridor, and then hurries over and hits the up button for the elevators on the south side. He then steps to the center of the corridor to watch the elevator displays showing what floors the elevators are on. On the north side one elevator is already moving as the display goes from 5 to 4. The one next to it and farther back is on sublevel 3. On the south side the front elevator displays a 7 and the other a 3 turning into a 2. Two of the four elevators are already moving and more likely to have passengers on them, so the one coming up from sublevel 3 is the best bet, but it wouldn't arrive first. With that John stands directly in front of the elevator coming up from the sub level and as he waits three people get off the elevator behind him. As they exit the elevator and head towards the lobby he spins around and heads straight into the elevator they had just left. He sees a camera in the back left corner so again leans down into his cell phone and as he enters

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the elevator, he spins around to put his back to the camera and hits “3”, and then the “close doors” button. As they close, John can see the doors to the elevator that was coming up from sub level 3 open and it is crowded with two janitors and their cleaning equipment. John thinks to himself, “This worked out okay.”

At the third floor there is a nurse’s station. It is just a little to the right and on the opposite side of the corridor. There is no one there. John steps out of the elevator and looks right to see two nurses rolling some sort of diagnostic equipment into a patient’s room at the far end of the corridor. He looks left and the corridor is clear. He heads that way and then takes another left onto the corridor that runs parallel with the front of the building. John is looking for room 311. Room 305 is on his right, so he continues down until he arrives at 311. Instead of going in, John walks over to room 312 which is almost directly across from his destination. It is dark in room 312 and as John stands at its doorway, he pulls something out of his inside jacket pocket. It is a small mirror, about the size of a car rearview mirror. It is curved in a way that makes things look bigger. The mirror is mounted on a short post. At the other end of the post is a small flat disk, about the size of a half dollar coin, that the post can pivot on. The disk is magnetic, and John attaches it to the top of the door frame of room 312. He makes a small adjustment to the mirror and then steps backwards away from the mirror towards room 311, making sure the mirror is lined up correctly.

Room 311 has only one bed, and once inside John can see an older woman sleeping, with wires connecting her to various monitors that are beeping sounds and pulsing lights. There is an intravenous drip going into her right arm. John looks at his watch, 3:07. He flips up her chart to confirm that it is Rosemarie Anne Lincroft, and then walks to the head of the bed to see her up close. Her chart says she is 48 but she looks much, much older, very tired and very worn. Her battle with pancreatic cancer is coming to an end. John walks to the far side of the bed, close to the window. After a quick scan outside he unlocks the bottom of the window and it swings outward. He checks how far it will open, recloses it, then sits down in the chair next to Mrs. Lincroft. John shifts the chair slightly to allow for a clear line of sight with the mirror which shows the corridor

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he has just walked down. John leans back into the chair and focuses on the mirror.

Memories of his grandfather come rolling in as he thinks about visiting in the summers at grandpa's cabin in the mountains. They had great times. Grandpa Pete was in good shape, only in his late fifties back then, but he hiked up the side of a mountain like a man in his twenties. Fishing, hiking, camping, climbing, rappelling off steep cliffs, cooking over an outdoor fire were all great memories. John remembered them paddling upriver to their favorite fishing spots. His mind then wanders back to the times when they would float down that river with snorkels and watch the lives of the river's inhabitants unfold below them as the current slowly carried them along. Grandpa Pete told him that you needed to blend in, almost be a part of the river so that the animals would not be startled by your presence, and let you see them doing the things they naturally do. John remembered his grandfather repeating, "Let the river take you." It was always amazing, you could see the trout either hidden behind a submerged stone waiting for the current to bring something to eat, or else they would swim only ten to twelve inches down waiting for an insect to touch the surface. Then with a quick flash of their tail, they would dart up to retrieve their meal. Watching snakes swim across the river was fun, as their entire bodies would be just under the water with only their heads held above the surface. John's favorites were the snapper turtles slowly swimming along below him. They always seemed to notice his arrival and would quickly swim into the algae covered plants that grew along the bottom as he passed above them.

Movement in the mirror. John looks at his watch and sees that it is 3:45. A nurse just turned the corner from the central corridor and is heading down the hall stopping in every room to check on her patients, waking some up to deliver their medications. John waits another two minutes, then takes a glance outside, opens the window and lowers himself down to the roof of the lobby below. As he looks up, he sees the nurse pull the window shut above him. He proceeds a short way along the roof to the far end and swings down over the side. John hangs there for a second. His feet are a good 12 feet above the ground. He needs to push out a little to avoid landing on one of the rhododendron bushes that line the sides of the building, left and right of the lobby. John hears an ambulance, and

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as it heads around the back of the building towards the emergency room, John heads back to the car.

When he gets back to his hotel room John sets the alarm on his phone for 1:00 p.m., then falls onto the bed exhausted. The last thing he sees before falling off to sleep is the light of the rising sun just starting to make its way through the drawn cloth curtains.

John starts to dream. He is standing on some steps in front of a large stone cathedral in a big city. There are lots of people going in, all well-dressed. Next John is at the back of the church and he can smell burning candles mixed with the scent of burning frankincense. He thinks he might be at a funeral, but he looks up and sees a couple taking their vows at the altar. Then everything changes and he is at a birthday party with young children. It is at a beach house, but no smell of salt air, the house is on a large lake. It is a beautiful summer house, raised up off the beach. The exterior is white wooden planking with a large wooden deck at the back. Some children are doing crafts and playing games on the deck, and others are playing on the beach in bathing suits and party hats.

When the alarm goes off John gets up and heads straight into the bathroom for a shower. As he gets dressed, he turns on the television to catch the weather. He puts on casual clothes and adds a sweater. The local weather said sunny but cool throughout the day. He opens the curtains wide, not so much to let in the light, as to be able to see into the room upon his return.

The hotel is at the north end of town, right on the main street. It is a small town, mostly one-story buildings, spread out across a flat valley with rugged mountains to the east and the west. John figures that if he needs to stay another day he may head up and do some hiking. There is a row of small metal newspaper vending machines in front of the hotel office, and John looks through the plexiglass windows of each until he finds the one with the local paper. He would usually drive to a coffee shop, but the fresh air feels good, so he folds up the paper he just purchased, slips it under his arm, crosses over to the other side of the street and starts walking into town. John isn't much for breakfast, early or late in the day, but over the past few years he has surely come to love his coffee.

About three blocks into town John finds a little mom and pop diner. It is a store front seated between the local hardware store and drugstore.