

MILES OF CORRIDORS

BY ROCHI RAMPAL

Voice: I'll tell you something
I'll tell you a story. It's only short, in the grand scheme of things.
It won't last long, but it feels like an eternity.

Once, there was woman, once.
We could call her...Leung...or Penny, or Reeta...or Maeve...
She's a Gardener...a Dancer...a Reader...a Cook...
She's a Mum...Daughter...a sister...a Wife...
Apron string and purse string holder nose
wiper...shoulder for tears
Human pushchair...hair brusher...hand washer... tablet
dispenser
Bandage wrapper ...
Porter...consultant...hca... a
nurse...

And once,
Once upon a time, not too long ago, she'd stand outside her
front door, every evening at 7pm.
Home from work. Engine cooling, keys in her pocket. She'd wait
to go in.
And she'd wait and she'd wait.
She'd listen at the door to the noise inside.
The chatter, the cutlery and china.
She'd feel the warmth radiating from beneath the doorframe
A 40w bulb from a table lamp
The whirr of a fan oven
The love of her family
And she'd let the drizzle roll down her cheeks.
Whilst the teatime talk ambled on. Her people.
Oblivious and happy.

And this woman, I didn't know her well.

I'd never even heard the sound of her voice.
But I have felt the soft grip of her hand, the pad of her thumb -
She kept it simple.
Because this woman was terrified

If she could have, she would have told me about the hospital
staff room.
Full of guardian angels sitting in silence, occasionally finishing
one another's sentences.
Just.
Being.
Knowing exactly what each were thinking.
Knights in visors. Goddesses in scrubs
Fighters and victors wheeling obs machines and gurneys Racing
to war, battle cries and alarm bells.
But she didn't tell me these things. I only felt the swish of her
apron.
Because she was simply working. Relentlessly.
Doing her job.

And this woman,
If she could have paused for thought, she would have let me in
on ward secrets.
The porter who walks miles of corridors, daily. Consultant who
feels like a fish out of water, the student who doesn't know a
single member of her team.
If she could have said to me, "it'll be ok", her voice would have
sing-songed like a nightingale over the top of my obs beeps and
rhythm of my breath.
An orchestra of ventilators and reassurance
But I only felt the pad of her thumbs on the back of my hand She
left it at that.
Because she was exhausted

Where is this story going, we wonder?

Let me tell you.

I'll tell you something else.

If I'd lasted for longer, this woman would have told me of the novels she would have read, if only she'd had the brainspace, or she'd have described the hills she'd have walked, if only she'd had the energy, or the Netflix box sets she'd have watched, if only the concentration.

She would have gently murmured to me: 'How do I show you compassion through a welders mask?'

She would have confided that shift breaks were card games so as not to talk of unthinkable things

She would have said out loud: 'I want a hug'

She would have announced: 'this will change everything'. She would have cried that she's not in a bunker or treading a battlefield, she doesn't walk through lava, and she's doesn't sit on a pedestals

Because if she did, she'd be knocked off

She'd have shouted out "I'm a Gardener...a Dancer...a Reader...a Cook...

I'm a Mum...Daughter...a sister...a nurse..."

She'd have upped and left, took off her apron, thrown away the gloves. got in her car and driven home.

She'd have stood outside her front door, engine cooling.

The chatter, cutlery, china.

And she'd have stepped into the warmth on the other side of the doorframe.

Mucky PE kits and books bags and maths homework.

She'd have sunk into all of that and aced it, oblivious.

But she didn't. She brushed aside a strand of my hair, and
stroked my palm, and listened for my breath, and waited for me.

So let me tell you something.

This story, it's only short, but it feels like an eternity

Because it doesn't have an ending It
ebbs and flows.

Comes and goes.

Peaks and troughs.

And it doesn't stop.

it doesn't have an ending because
it ebbs and flows.

Comes and goes.

Peaks and troughs.

And it doesn't stop.

It.

Doesn't.

Stop.