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End room

Simon Gluskie is a PhD candidate at Deakin University whose research interests include simulation, surveillance and behavioural control. He writes on how existing and emerging technology enables and contributes to these aspects of contemporary life, creating new spaces and modes of human experience while hybridising the old. Simon's creative writing aims to explore these spaces, attempting to account for an end-user adrift somewhere between the virtual and actual.

I am lying in a hospital bed. Conversational noise surrounds me, the kind that movie subtitles label as *indistinct chatter*. The word rhubarb over and over again, staggered in time by the participants so that some “rhus” overlap the “barbs”. Three of the people contributing to this babble of human sound are nurses. They are wearing light green surgical scrubs, but no face coverings. Each nurse has a heavy application of make-up – bright red lipstick and eyeliner that curves down then arcs back up again in an ancient Cleopatra mode. Any skin blemishes are masked by foundation that serves to smooth their skin to a porcelain-like surface. I can't move, but there do not seem to be any restraints on my arms or legs. There is a needle in my arm held in place by a short piece of surgical tape. The ends are frayed by the haste with which the tape was torn from its dispenser. The needle is attached to an overly long drinking-straw type tube that leads up to a transparent bladder of a bag hanging on a coat rack. There are two coats and a bowler hat sharing the metal stand, presumably belonging to some of the staff that are milling about the room. The nurses have their hair done up in bee-hive shaped structures,

the domes at least one-and-a-half times the size of their drawn oval faces. There is a brunette, a blonde and a redhead, which is how I am able to tell them apart. They are all wearing high stilettoed shoes, the heels razor thin and propping up the feet so that the toes are almost perpendicular to the ground. This makes them resemble levitating ballerinas: poised with a suspended grace and readiness while an orchestral trill builds suspense in the audience. But who is the audience? What's the score here? A champagne cork pops and there is a gratuitous rise and fall in the pitch of the still indecipherable conversation. The man holding the bottle is short and unimpressive, but he is wearing a white coat that leads me to believe that he is some kind of doctor. He pours translucent topaz liquid into a slender champagne flute held by the redheaded nurse. The glass fills, but the short man does not stop pouring and it begins to overflow, splattering the nurse's feet as she continues to hold the glass level to receive the bottle's entire contents. She is easily three feet taller than the man, and directs her glossy magazine smile over his head and somewhere towards the empty back corner of the room.

Past the celebrating medical staff there is a police officer cooking a barbeque. He is in full riot gear – protective helmet and the transparent shell of a veil pulled down to screen his face and halt any spits of oil from the hotplate. There are tear gas canisters fastened to a utility belt that seems to have more utility qualities than belt qualities. His riot shield is propped up next to the barbeque, which gives the shape of the barbeque smoke a short little crook before it is pulled up towards the humming exhaust fan in the ceiling. He turns the pieces of meat on the grill with tongs in one hand while holding a nightstick idle in the other. The meat is arranged in three rows of four, the significance of which I am unable to deduce or determine.

The crowd's demeanour seems friendly, even without being able to understand what any of the single individuals are saying. There are small circles of men in tuxedo jackets with long tails. Bookish women with hastily tied buns wearing roller skates and kneepads. Black-suit-wearing androgenous mannequins that move and make gestures like living people would, though they have no facial features. All rhubarbing to each other around my hospital bed, but never directing their conversation towards me. There are helium balloons that have floated up to rest against the ceiling, the foil kind that have some sort of message written across them. Each time I begin reading, the letters change their ordering before I reach the end of the word. This forces me to go back to the beginning, only to find that the letters at the outset of the message have changed too. I give up on this hopeless endeavour rather quickly, instead watching the way the exhaust fan gently pulls the ribboned balloon tails toward its vents.

Beyond the heads of the people in the room, the barbequing police officer and the smattering of ceiling balloons, there is a neon sign. Its text is cursive, written in a glowing 1950s Cadillac pink, and reads: Gift Shop. There is a solitary store clerk standing behind the counter who is briefly visible when a group of revellers either lean forward to emphasise a point or double over laughing. These bouts of laughter are becoming more frequent as the short and unimpressive doctor has stopped pouring champagne and is now wheeling out tanks of nitrous

oxide from a storage room. The aluminium tanks have World War II era gas masks attached – probably collectors’ items to someone somewhere. After attaching their masks and breathing a few deep breaths, the crowd move through stages of giggles, cackles and all-out hysterical laughter. Gift shop girl taps a soft cigarette pack on the palm of her left hand, revealing a single stick that she raises to her mouth without removing it from the packet. Pulling the packet away, she lights the cigarette with a lighter that the gift shop has marked for sale before returning the immolation device to its technicolour display. Her hair is neat and black, cut in a straight line just below shoulder length. She looks bored and removed from everything that is unfolding on the other side of her counter. I watch her through the undulating frame of gas-mask-wearing mannequins, in all of their drug-induced contortions and mirth. She wears no makeup and receives no chemicals to dull or blunt the sharper edges, save the cigarette that she draws on absently, blowing a bluish haze out of the left side of her mouth.

The party is now in full swing. Two toga-wearing parking attendants have arrived fashionably late and proceed to start a conga line. The entire room joins in, all minus the unimpressive doctor who has collapsed by the far wall between three or four sideways resting nitrous tanks. The room is not all that large, and the head of the conga line quickly catches up with the rear. The lead parking attendant latches onto one of the stiletto-wearing nurses who is moving comparatively slowly due to her footwear, the limited vision provided by her gas mask, and the tank that she must continue to wheel and balance as the line becomes a circle. The bookish roller skaters are travelling at a rate of knots via the synergy created by the pairing of urethane wheels and frictionless linoleum flooring, causing the circumference of the conga circle to begin stretching in some parts and compress in others. No member of the circle wishes to be the cause of a breakage in the chain, and each pair of hands is dug deeper into the sides of the next dancer along. Participants in areas where momentum is being blocked begin using stored potential energy to catapult the more slowly moving figures forward and around, the structural integrity of the circle becoming more and more tenuous as linkages become more and more strained. The circle heaves to the left like a heavily laden truck skidding across an ice-covered highway, control relinquished in favour of speed and inertia.

The three bee-hived nurses are the first to lose their grip. They take a small step to the right in an attempt to remove themselves from harm’s way. The tinted black lenses of their gas masks reveal nothing of how they feel about being the first breakage in the chain. One of the girls on roller skates collides with a tank that is not pulled aside in time and flies headlong into the barbeque, scattering greasy chicken breast and hot coals along the floor. The policeman kneels behind his riot shield like an ancient Roman legionnaire, bracing for impact. One of the parking attendants slips on a piece of chicken and dives forward, colliding with the policeman’s shield. This sends the policeman into an intimidation mode that entails a rhythmic beating of his shield with his nightstick, accentuated by a kind of war-cry along the lines of “Hoo... Ha.” The gift shop girl lights another cigarette and closes her left eye slightly to stop smoke from trailing into it. She looks even more bored now as she opens the hinged door that allows her to walk

out from behind the counter and into the hospital room. She steps over a few exhausted bodies and around some still smouldering coals in her white sneakers, walking towards me and my point of observation.

“Enjoying the show?” she asks, moving behind my bed and out of my field of vision before I have an opportunity to respond.

Then I hear a noise that sounds like metal being detached from metal, and my bed begins to move. She wheels me around the solitary officer phalanx who is still tapping rhythms on his shield, although now it is more of a funk beat with an accent on the One. Next to the gift shop there is a pair of closed doors with a card scanner fastened to the wall. Gift shop girl reaches forward and swipes a card with a metallic strip through the slot in a practiced top to bottom motion. There is a beep, the click of a lock retracting, and then the doors begin to open from the centre, folding inwards towards the walls of the hallway beyond. The sound of the chaos in the previous room fades as the doors close behind us, immediately muffled and very soon silent, replaced by the still and cold air of the passage. I listen to the wheels of my bed rolling on the linoleum, wondering where the next set of doors might lead.