FLASH NONFICTION

Can you see?

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"Torn" by Suzette Dushi

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“There’s a man here who has changed his gender and he… erh, *she* says she has booked a test,” the nurse said into the phone, her voice low and her eyes dutifully fixed on the computer screen on her desk. They only strayed briefly to look at me, averting themselves again as soon as they could.

I sit at a bus stop outside Hvidovre hospital. A bus rolls slowly by. Stops. Waits. Its engine humming rhythmically. I don’t get on. I just stay on my bench, waiting for it to drive away.

A woman with a grey scarf sits on *my* bench, a lit cigarette in her hand, the smoke drifting lazily in the mild wind. Her chest barely covers the blue sign on the wall beside her depicting an x-ed out cigarette much like the one in her hand. She doesn’t look at the sign or the many other signs around her. She chooses not to see, or maybe she is unable to? Maybe she has chosen not to look at those signs for so long, she is blind to them — forever in ignorance until some stranger dares to point out their existence to her, and then the woman has to admit to herself that they were there all along. A surprised “Oh…” and a “sorry” if you’re lucky.

A woman with a stroller walks past me on her way into the hospital. Two blue eyes above a blue facemask drift slightly my way, jump back to the entrance in front of her. Her heels click decidedly on the pavement, and the sound intermingling with the humming of the bus composes a short symphony before she reaches one of the big glass doors. Almost the entire front of the hospital is glass — both floors. Unnecessarily towering windows permitting anyone to look through as if to show you that this is, in fact, a hospital. A hospital performing itself, the performance barely dimmed by a couple of curtains drawn on the top floor. Just to be safe, a big sign above the doors exclaims the obvious: “Hvidovre Hospital”.

I had come to the hospital to get a blood test. I had been here before, many times in fact, but this time was different. I had scanned my card, waited in line, talked to the woman at the reception. But the system was not prepared, and they couldn’t see me. I never had my test, because it wasn’t for me. It was for someone who is here but who doesn’t exist anymore. At least not officially.

The next bus rolls slowly by. Stops. Waits. People get out and walk towards the glass entrance, the patients inside so clearly visible from the outside. I wonder why some of the curtains are drawn. I wonder if someone has forgotten to pull them aside and let the light and the sight in. Are all the curtains closed at night? Probably not, but if they were, wouldn’t people get confused? If there was no performance to watch, they would have to just trust that sign above the glass doors. Trust what the hospital is telling them despite not being able to see for themselves. I can’t imagine them not being confused, because that is what they always are when I show them my sign.

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I had left the blood test department, wandered into the nearest bathroom. I called my doctor, but the line was closed for the day. I sat down on the floor, too low for the mirror above the sink to tell me what I already knew. My eyes stung, and I wiped them off with the toilet paper beside me, careful not to smear my mascara. Then I got up, ignored the mirror, left the bathroom, kept walking out through a big glass door, kept walking until I reached my bench.

A small tree stands beside the bus stop. Its bark is smooth and dark and its branches curl and twist in crude formations. There are no leaves on it, although a few buds do dress the crown. White and silky, they are almost in bloom. Tiny buds with flowers on the inside. I can’t see the flowers yet, but I still know that they are there.

Another bus rolls slowly by. Stops. Waits. I get on.

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