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Your main commentary should be focused on *compounds*. Other topics may also be addressed.

5 There was a row of black plastic chairs up the wall outside the ward where I sat for about twenty minutes before a thin, drawn-looking young Asian woman, in a house-doctor's white coat, came and wrote down my particulars. She asked me if I had any allergies and tied a dogtag with my name on it to my wrist. Then she led me to a small, two-bed bedroom. There was a man in striped pyjamas lying on one of the beds, with his face to the wall. I was about to protest that I had been promised a private room, when he turned over to look at us and I saw that he was black, probably Caribbean. Not wishing to appear racist, I swallowed my complaint. The house-doctor ordered me to take off my clothes and to put on those hospital nightgowns that open down the back, which was lying folded on top of the vacant bed.

10 She told me to remove my false teeth, glass eyes, artificial limbs or other such accessories I might be secreting on my own person, and then left me. I undressed and put on the gown, watched enviously by the Caribbean. He told me he had been admitted three days ago, for a hernia operation, and nobody had come near him since. He seemed to have dropped into some kind of black hole in the system.

15 I sat on the edge of the bed in my gown, feeling the draught up my legs. The Caribbean turned his face to the wall again and seemed to fall into a light sleep, groaning and whimpering to himself occasionally. The young Asian house-doctor came back into the room and checked the name on my dogtag against her notes as if she had never met me before. She asked me again if I had any allergies. I was rapidly losing faith in this hospital. "That man says he has been here three days and nobody has taken any notice of him", I said. "Well, at least he's had some sleep," said the house-doctor, "which is more than I've had for the last thirty-six hours."

20 She left the room again. Time passed very slowly. A low winter sun shone through the dusty window. I watched the shadow of the window-frame inch its way across the linotiled floor. Then a nurse and a porter pushing a stretcher on wheels came to fetch me to the

35 operating theatre. The porter was a young local man with a poker-player's pallid, impassive face and the nurse a buxom Irish girl whose starched uniform seemed a size too small for her, giving her a slightly tarty look. The porter tossed me the usual local greeting – "A' right?" – and told me to hop on the stretcher. I said, "I could walk, you know, in a dressing-gown. I'm not in actual pain." In fact I hadn't felt a single twinge in the knee for over a week, which is pretty typical of all such ailments: as soon as you decide to have treatment, the symptoms disappear. "No, you've got to be wheeled," he said. "Regulations." Carefully holding the flaps of my gown together like an Edwardian lady adjusting her bustle, I mounted the stretcher and lay down. The nurse asked me if I was nervous. "Should I be?" I asked. She giggled but made no comment. The porter checked the name on my dogtag.

40 "Passmore, yes. Right leg amputation, ennit?" "No!" I exclaimed, sitting up in alarm. "Just a minor knee operation." "He's only having you on," said the nurse. "Stop it, Tom". "Just pulling your leg," said Tom, deadpan. They covered me with a blanket and tucked it in, pinning my arms to my sides. "Stops you getting knocked as we go through the swing doors," Tom explained. The Caribbean woke up and raised himself on one elbow to watch me go. "So long," I said. I never saw him again.

45 You feel curiously helpless when you're lying on your back on a stretcher without a pillow under your head. You can't tell where you are or where you're going. All you can see is ceilings, and the ceilings of the General Hospital weren't a pretty sight: cracked plaster, flaking emulsion, cobwebs in corners and dead flies in the lighting fixtures. We seemed to be travelling through miles and miles of corridors. "Got to take the scenic route today," Tom remarked from behind my head. "Theatre lift's broke, ennit?" Have to take you down to the basement by the utilities lift and then across to the other wing, then up the other lift and back over again.

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