

## Imagine that this Page is Empty

*by Nick Holdstock*

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# Imagine that this Page is Empty

## 1

It is completely white.

Imagine hearing these words as you stare at a space that cannot be marked or confused.

Imagine having total focus.

Now imagine Richard.

## 2

Richard is 35, tall and good-looking. He has brown eyes; he is always clean-shaven; he has your father's nose. Richard is without boyfriend, girlfriend, living family or friends. He is a singular, unconnected node in a large urban setting.

At this wonderful point in human history Richard doesn't need to leave his home at all. Food, medicine, alcohol, books, toiletries, music, prostitutes and hairdressers can all be paid to arrive at his door. If Richard had enough money he'd spend weeks, months within the

closed cube of his apartment on the top floor of an eroded Victorian tenement. From there his view is mostly safe. There is a rectangle of school, a square of park, diagonal lines of road. The school's beige stone recalls the walls of the children's ward where they took out his tonsils and gave him ice cream in return. This is not a bad memory. He had ice cream every day for a week. He does not know anyone who has died from tonsillitis.

The park is more problematic. From a height it reminds him of the birthday cake his mother decorated to look like a football pitch. That cake leads to other cakes, then no cakes, then far too many presents. But though this is a terrible association, it is not a surprise. After five years in that apartment the link has more form than substance. The bell it rings has been struck so often its chime is dutiful, dull.

### 3

White are the hallways and white are the walls, the ceilings, the grab rails, the little paper cups in the mostly white hands. White is not a good colour for a hospital. With the addition of blood, urine, pus,

phlegm, accreted skin cells, pain residuals, white too easily becomes Clinical Grey, Patient Pallor, some other shade that reminds. As Richard walks the corridors to his ward he keeps his eyes down. His left hand seeks reassurance from the abrasive edge of the medicine bottle in his jacket pocket. It snuggles against his index finger, its rough arrows eager to align so the cap can come off with a Pop! like the gun he had whose cork shot ghost after ghost until the schoolyard was soaked with invisible blood.

As Richard tends the first patient of the evening – a young woman with black eye make-up and an arm wound – he thinks of the pills, safe in their bottle, doubly safe in his jacket, safer still in his locker. The arm wound is self-inflicted. It is too precise. But Richard doesn't question the young woman. Talking leads to nowhere good. He cleans the wound in silence. He tries to remain absorbed in the task but her trowel-shaped chin recalls the chin of a grey-bearded man who kept muzzled boys locked in a cellar as if they were precious wine. As Richard sutures the wound – made by a knife like the one you use for cutting tomatoes – a puff of cold dust numbs his throat. So much fear and all those boys could do was twitch and grunt in the dark. Though Richard struggles to stay in the present he is tugged towards the top of

a flight of metal steps. Falling, he strikes the first step, sees Josef Fritzl, the Austrian man who kept his daughter in a cellar for 24 years during which he made her pregnant seven times. The second step is Wolfgang Priklopil, also an Austrian, who also kept a girl (though not his daughter) in a cellar for eight years. The next steps are Myra Hindley, Ian Brady, Dennis Nilsen, each name and crime another bump as he tumbles down in the dark.

The wound is closed but still he falls. 'You can go now,' he says. 'Keep the stitches dry for a few days.'

'Great. Thanks!' She seems delighted. Perhaps this has been a wonderful night for her.

Once the young woman has left the room Richard closes his eyes. The bottle is waiting, the pills are ready; but it is too soon. He is not an addict. He'll take one pill just before his break at 6 a.m. Two would be better, but then he can't work: his head and hands won't connect.

Breathing slowly, avoiding eyes, he goes to fetch the next patient. The faces don't care that there is a proper sequence, an order based on need: each of them is silently shouting that they should be next. There is hope, desire, anger, despair; each face is a set of steps.

Richard can ignore the men – the patient’s name is Edith – and anyone young because Edith is a name that belongs in a lavender-scented drawer lined with wrapping paper. Dried petals confetti down as he calls for her.

‘Here,’ says a young man (or older boy) whose hair has been mown to the scalp. He pats a brown coat on the seat by him. ‘She had to go to the toilet.’

‘Are you a relative?’

‘Sort of. We’re neighbours.’

The young man doesn’t have a regional accent. Nor does he sound posh. His voice doesn’t remind Richard of someone at school, a famous person, or one of his colleagues. The voice only carries words.

#### 4

Later, watching streaks of day, Richard tries to retrieve the young man’s face. Between him and the face there is a crowd of patients and relatives he must push aside. He recalls taking blood three times. He stitched a rosy cheek. He took a moth from an eyeball; glass from a buttock; gravel from a knee. He heard a prayer not addressed to him

and the brogue of the woman was enough to make him recall that a modern Western democracy still prohibits abortion. After that he fell fast. Instead of many faces there was only that of the nineteen-year-old girl who'd been brought in last month with a cross burnt onto her face with cigarette butts, probably a whole pack's worth, because it took fifteen burns to make the vertical line that ran from her forehead down her nose to the tip of her chin, and then about the same amount to go from ear to ear. This memory made him rush to the staff room, open his locker, hungrily swallow a pill. It quickly turned to smoke that billowed up from his stomach until his head was fogged. Although he still saw the girl's face, the coin-sized burns, these were only images; possibly made-up.

As Richard turns away from the window, the dawn, the brown eyes and small forehead of Edith's neighbour finally appear. He recalls the pleasingly neutral voice telling Edith that when he came to visit next day he'd bring her magazines. She was being kept in because her pulse was erratic and she seemed mildly confused. Richard could hardly look at her because she was just as much an outstretched leg as that Irish brogue. She was making him trip and tumble down thickly-carpeted stairs lined with portraits of his kind,

dead grandparents. Although the stairs were softer, they hurt just as much.

Instead Richard had kept his eyes on Keith, her companion. Keith had a long face with a pointed chin; his cheeks were slightly scooped. Either his nose had been broken or it was just crooked. Keith wasn't good-looking. Nonetheless, it was a face that held his interest.

Keith could not fail to miss this degree of attention 'Is something wrong?' he asked. He rubbed the side of his mouth. 'Is there food?'

'No,' said Richard then jerked his head away. He was asking for trouble. If he'd looked any longer he'd have started to fall.

## 5

He will walk home; the route is mostly safe. He must pass the swimming pool, which will make him think of his mother – in the guilty way you think of yours – but he'll manage, just as you manage. He'll think of snow, of gloss.

He is at his locker when the door swings open. He doesn't want to turn but he turns. Grace has arrived for her shift. Grace is a short thirtyish woman with auburn hair. Grace is liked by everyone. She is

why he works nights. In his presence she is a pillar of flame whose after-image burns his eyes. Richard doesn't know what he said or did to provoke such ardour. He has only been polite to her.

'Hello stranger!' she says. 'How was your night?'

'Busy.'

'Well, you should visit us on the day shift sometime. We're not exactly playing Scrabble!'

Her laugh is a gate opening and closing fast on her breath. She sways towards him. Although she should be starting work, Grace is in no hurry.

'You know, I've been thinking about switching to nights. That'd be much better for me. Otherwise I never get to see daylight, I just go from dark to dark.'

Again her throat opens and shuts. Her laugh belongs in a fairground. She is falling, and she loves to fall. He is the hand that pushes.

'Which means we'll be working together, won't that be great?'

'Yes. I have to go.'

She steps aside too slowly, or rather he is too fast. He brushes against her breast.

‘Oops,’ she says with great delight and then he’s out the staffroom, down the corridor, waiting for the lift that will never arrive. The stairs spiral him round and round, making him so giddy he misses the huge letter G for Ground Floor stencilled on the wall (just as you sometimes fail to notice that one of your dear, close friends is in awful pain). He ends up in the basement where the only door is locked.

Footsteps descend. Grace has followed. Soon he will be trapped.

Her steps continue. She is on the third floor, the second. Richard fumbles in his jacket and pulls out the medicine bottle. Swallowing the pill without water makes his throat spasm, he will surely choke, die in his own hospital. Then it’s in his throat, descending, transforming into smoke. When she arrives he’ll be engulfed in fluffy clouds of safety.

He waits.

A door opens.

Quiet follows.

He listens.

Nothing.

6

The barking dog remains itself; a limping man doesn't change. All they do is bulge the curtain between him and the world. In the pleasant haze of two pills each moment is an orphan. Stairs do not exist. Faces are not faces: they are breath-heavy balloons. Why shouldn't he look at the swimming pool? It is only a home for water in which no one need drown.

7

Home, he sleeps, is running through streets, chasing, being chased, a boy but also a man. Wise yet fleet of thought and foot, unafraid, unhesitating, Richard runs beneath bridges, leaps over holes, place succeeding place so quickly they are virtually one.

Experience shouldn't be serial. If we perceive A, then B, followed by C, it is only because our prisms split the unity of things. Instead of white, we see colour, then colour. Fragment; piece; shard.

## 8

Richard wakes in pale light that could be coming or going. It goes. He eats dinner that is breakfast – boiled eggs, toast, a raspberry yoghurt – then reads twenty pages from the *Memoirs of the Duc de Saint-Simon*. He bought the book in a charity shop because it was cheap and thick and the court of Louis XIV sounded removed enough from the present to be safe. The book's style is measured, dry. Though the memoirs contain many portraits of people, he is reminded of no one and nothing, not even the book itself. The pages he's already read might as well be blank.

## 9

People are leaving their jobs as he starts towards his. In summer he'd have to keep his eyes down, but in the winter dark the hurrying figures rarely achieve focus. Their faces light no fuse. They are a flock of muttering pigeons whose wings cannot push.

He's nearly at the hospital when something squashes underfoot. Fruit or a dropped sandwich. A hamburger. Cake. Looking down he

sees a long smudge haloed by black fluid. A hot dog, no, a sock, but there are jaws, an eye. The squirrel is mostly intact.

He stops and scrapes his shoe on the kerb. Despite the hardness of the stone he still feels the squirrel's little bones break.

Then he is teetering, mentally waving his arms, struggling to maintain balance. On the step beneath the squirrel squats a crow he met twenty-five years ago. He was on the way home from school when he saw the black shuttlecock of its feathers in the gutter. Both the crow's wings were broken, but it was alive.

Falling can be mercy: every step is different. But even after twenty-five years that crow refuses to blink. Richard does not remember dead cats or dogs, beloved pets, the tragedy of Bambi's mother's death. He cannot fall further. He remains the captive of that brilliant black eye. The crow wanted something, but he didn't know what. So he did nothing. He stood and watched the bird. Passing adults saw where he was looking but didn't stop. Eventually a bus arrived with a heavy solution.

The hospital entrance is choked with a group of patients enjoying cigarettes. When a black-haired woman among them makes an

anguished gasp everyone looks in her direction. She drags breath into her body, then starts to choke again. Knowing she's only laughing doesn't make the sound less awful. Her laugh follows Richard into the lift where faces demand attention. Although he tries to look past them, a voice leaps at him.

'Hi. Are you just starting work?'

Richard nods. He risks a glance. Keith raises a bag.

'I'm here to visit Edith. She needs her magazines.'

Keith's smile exposes two buck teeth his lips quickly conceal.

Richard knows he is staring. Keith probably thinks he is attracted to him and that is sort of how it feels, except it isn't sexual. Keith's face requires his interest the way the fishmonger's window makes him stop. The ice-supported silver heads have nothing to say.

After seven, eight seconds of staring at Keith's face Richard's mind remains blank. The crow has gone, the squirrel too. He feels no vertigo.

'Do you mind if I come and see Edith?' he asks.

'No problem.'

And there's nothing wrong with this request: it's part of his job.

In the lift Keith chatters about Edith, how she'll be missing her cat and favourite chair and the extra strong cups of tea you could stand a spoon in. All this should remind Richard of his own grandmother, how happily she smoked, how she gasped for breath. But the strange patchwork of Keith's face keeps such thoughts at bay. The lift stops. They exit.

As they walk down the corridor leading to Edith's ward Keith seems in a hurry, as if he thinks it's a race. He gets so far ahead his face is lost from view. A wave of hot fatigue sweeps through Richard. Horrors are imminent.

'Keith,' he says, to make him turn.

'Yes?'

'Nothing.'

Balance restored, they enter together. As they walk between the beds Richard inspects the patients' faces without fear. He has that same sense of invincibility you get after your third drink. You feel capable, funny, interesting. You know you are liked.

Edith looks much better. She is propped up in bed with folded arms and a sour expression. Her face flickers when she sees Keith, but

this smile doesn't linger. She quickly returns to her scowl.

Keith is still a few feet from her bed when she launches into her lament. She's being kept prisoner because although she feels fine they won't let her leave. She was dying of thirst but no one would give her a drink. She doesn't address these complaints to Richard, or seem to recognise him. He is not there for her which makes it easy for him to observe the diplomatic way Keith responds to this list of woes. He listens intently. He says he's sorry she's upset. He asks how he can help.

His patient approach would annoy you – you hate being patronised – but it works with Edith. The smoothing of her features echoes Richard's calm.

## 10

Of course there is no Richard, no Keith. The former is a diagnosis, the latter a cure.

## 11

Richard's twenty minutes late for work when he leaves Keith and

Edith. He goes downstairs to Emergency and no one is angry at him because they are too busy trying to help twelve children with second- and third-degree burns. Immediately Richard is cleaning wounds and bandaging. When not doing this he speaks to their parents in a reassuring tone that makes his voice feel like air escaping a puncture. But he doesn't think of the crow or squirrel; the children's tear-stained faces do not lead to stairs. He stays upright, in the present, doing his job well. When Richard leaves at 5 a.m. he is only tired.

## 12

A reprieve is not salvation. When Richard enters the staffroom the following evening Grace is burning bright.

'I've swapped with Graham,' she says, then beams. As if they'd dreamt of this outcome.

'Why?' he says and opens his locker. Even through its metal door the light from her is blinding.

'I just thought it would be better,' she says coyly.

And he can think of worse things than being her captive. He feels, as you often feel, that his way of being is wrong. Something has

to change, and not just drinking less coffee, eating better, taking more exercise. He wants to believe that with another person his thoughts could relax. But vertigo isn't a fear of heights; it's the terror of wanting to fall.

'I'll see you out there,' he says but doesn't make it to the door. She blocks the door with her body.

'I'm ready now,' she says, because them leaving the room together is a proof of something.

And so they begin. He, with a broken ankle, she with lacerations. Perhaps the shift won't be too bad. Although they must work in the same space, they have separate patients.

The first hour is no worse than usual. A Bradford accent reminds him of PE, the cruelty of the showers. A faded tattoo of a blue swallow is like the one on the wrist of a builder who punched him in the neck for laughing at Elvis's film career. Unpleasant memories, but they can be managed. He swallows a single, beautiful pill. He floats and stitches and washes and comforts and every now and then he catches Grace adoring him. He doesn't mind, so long as she keeps her distance. She doesn't. She keeps interrupting with a question, a

comment, all of which are individually fine, quite justifiable, but together are a dazzling series of flashes that make him want another pill because on the other side of her lights are steps named Mary, Cathy, Suzy, Gwen. All of them tried to fix him.

He is cleaning an infected toe when Grace pops her head into the cubicle to ask if he wants some fruit because she's brought in too many bananas. He wants to tell her, as nicely as possible, to leave him alone for the rest of their working lives. Instead he shakes his head, drains pus, then goes up to Edith's ward.

As soon as he enters he sees the curtain around Edith's bed. Perhaps her heart; a stroke.

When he reaches her bed he pauses but hears nothing. He thinks of Keith sitting with his head in his hands, then gently pulls back the screen. Edith has become an old man with papery skin and one eye who is lying on his back.

He closes the curtain, then finds a nurse. Edith has been discharged.

Edith lives in an East End council flat. If Keith is her literal neighbour, then his flat is to the left or right of hers. Richard thinks it's the one on the right because the one on the left is besieged by a collection of stone animals he cannot imagine Keith buying. Just to be sure, he knocks on the door, but there's no answer. He knocks on the other door. He waits. He just needs a glimpse of Keith.

No answer. He knocks on Edith's door, which he should have done first, because Keith is probably inside. He waits and yawns because he didn't sleep. After going back to the Emergency room he took a second pill, because it was that or push Grace into a wall. Luckily he didn't have anything skilled to do for the rest of his shift. Though he can barely remember. When he's this calm – he took a third pill on the way – there's no past or future, just an elastic now that offers immortality. (I don't know your specific fears; I'm sure you're scared of dying.)

He waits a long time. The cold is like mint. Safe and clean as snow.

When he knocks again it's without any particular hope that the

result will be different. Immediately there's a sound from inside that makes him think of a shoe being banged on a wall. Through the door's frosted glass window he sees an outline approach. The door opens six inches, seeks to open wider, is yanked back by its chain. Edith's eye inspects.

'Oh, it's you.'

She removes the chain. He hears her shuffle off. He pushes the door gently and enters. He can smell baked beans.

Edith is watching television from a huge green reclining armchair next to a table heaped with celebrity magazines. Half the TV screen is covered by a yellow sweater draped over the set. As he enters the room something flickers near the curtains.

'Silly Rupert,' she says.

He doesn't know what to say. All the lines he's prepared are for scenes with Keith. He has only professional words.

'How are you feeling Edith?'

'Tired. They put me on some new statins and now I can't sleep. Why don't you sit down?'

He heads for the other armchair.

‘Not there. The springs have gone. That’s just for Rupert.’

He can see nowhere else to sit. Edith shakes her head. ‘Move those,’ she says and indicates a mound of towels that are damp to the touch. Beneath them he finds a folding wooden chair.

She laughs. ‘You’d better sit lightly. It’s not very strong.’

He puts the towels on Rupert’s armchair, then tentatively sits. The chair protests, but holds. He asks if she’s seen Keith.

‘He’s not here. He’ll be back later. That’s if he doesn’t get killed on that bike of his. I’ve told him, it’s not safe. There are maniacs, and not just on the roads.’

Rupert stirs behind the curtains but remains concealed. Edith stares at Richard like a cake that has failed in the oven. He stands and gropes for words.

‘I should be going. I’m glad you’re feeling better.’

‘Aren’t you going to wait for Keith? I know that’s why you’re here.’

Richard sits. Edith’s mouth cracks; wrinkles eat her eyes.

‘Good,’ she says. ‘We can talk. Tell me about yourself.’

She might as well have handed him a knife and told him to stab himself. Whatever he says will open a door behind which steps descend. If his past contained one single, obvious trauma – a teacher with wandering hands, a father who withheld love – it might be avoided. True, his mother died of a heart attack while doing her lengths. But she was eighty-one, and apart from the drowning, did not suffer much. Though horrible, this is somehow ordinary. Many deaths are worse.

So neither he nor you can explain why sometimes breath is absent. How the heart becomes a fist trying to press its way out your chest. Yes, there are triggers, doors that lead to certain steps, but there are also days when his gaze, when your gaze is stuck to the floor. Your mouth cannot make words and yet nothing is obviously wrong. People love you. Your job is ok, you like your flat, you go on holidays, you've had sex within the last six months. You should be happy and yet, like Richard, sometimes all you want to do is lie face down on the floor, seeing, hearing nothing.

Maybe if Richard did this, pressed his face into her carpet, he could give Edith answers. He wants to. She is Keith's friend; her opinion matters. And so he risks some facts.

‘I’ve been working at the hospital for three years. Before that I worked in a hospital in Manchester.’

She nods, apparently satisfied.

‘I also live in Hackney, near the Marshes.’

Marshes as in bogs and mud. Marshes as in drowning.

‘It’s a good place. I don’t hear the other tenants.’

She drops her head to the left. ‘And what would be so bad about that? Don’t they have a right to make noise?’

‘Yes, of course. I just don’t want to hear them.’

‘Why not?’

‘It disturbs me.’

‘But they’re just people. They’re only doing normal things.’

‘Yes,’ he says, and nods vigorously, because Edith has to understand how much he agrees. Once she does, she will stop.

‘I don’t understand. Are you trying to pretend other people don’t exist? That doesn’t seem possible unless you go and live in the desert.’

She laughs. ‘So if you find people difficult how do you cope at

work? You must see a lot of us there.'

'True. But it's different. There isn't time to think.'

Which is maybe true, certainly plausible. You also need to be busy. So long as you can move from task to task, confidently grasping each like a baton, you are less likely to worry. So long as you are speaking or typing or chopping vegetables you feel in control. You don't replay a conversation, second-guess a look.

Edith moves her tongue in her mouth, then says. 'At least you don't feel like that about everyone. I can see you've taken a shine to Keith. I can't blame you. You're not the first.'

'What do you mean?'

'People find him intriguing. Men especially.'

'I think you've got the wrong idea.'

'Have I? You couldn't take your eyes off him in the hospital. I could have been bleeding to death for all you cared.'

And sometimes you've had enough. You're sick of people talking shit about you. They have no fucking idea what it's like to try and do your job and buy groceries and get on the bus while knowing you're about to shatter.

‘But you weren’t bleeding to death, were you?’

‘No, but it’s just as well.’

‘There was nothing wrong with you. You were wasting our time.

While you were making a fuss to get attention there were people in real pain who needed help.’

‘That’s not true. That’s unfair.’

‘Is it? Maybe *you* just wanted some attention from Keith.’

Edith shakes her head. He waits for her reply. After countless frustrations, so many bruising falls, it feels incredible to push back. Just as you, when you’ve had enough, ignore people’s calls. You do not ‘like’ their Facebook posts. You let their birthdays pass.

‘I don’t blame you. I’m guessing you don’t have children. Or anyone who cares. It’s just you and Rupert.’

Even though she’s sitting down, he can make Edith fall.

‘At your age something can happen any time. Without Keith you could be lying here days or weeks until someone notices the smell.’

Edith looks down. She sways.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ she says, which is a good question.

Richard could say his mind connects the wrong dots; you that anxiety thrives in your chest and gut.

But Edith doesn't deserve an answer. Nor does anyone else. They smile and laugh and text you but they do not care. You are on your own.

'I'm going now,' he says and slowly stands. He savours this triumph.

'You'll never see Keith again,' she spits. 'Not after I tell him.'

'Fuck off,' he says. 'Just fuck off.' Hoping that she, as his Ambassador, will convey this message to everyone else.

Then he's out the flat and in a buffeting wind that can fuck off as well. He walks quickly, with confidence, his feet loud on the concrete stairs. He leaves the council estate, walks through a park, enters a zone of warehouses and builder's yards. The air smells of bricks, sawdust, burning rubber; trees do not exist. He's lost but knows where he's going. South, perhaps southwest, or southeast, but south nonetheless.

He is in no hurry. He's a moving point of calm. This is how he and you should feel all the time. Focussed, beyond interruption, flowing from moment to moment, sometimes ascending, sometimes

going down, but smoothly. Slopes but never steps.

Not that the journey is easy. Over the next three hours there are challenges. A difficult chin, a troubling pair of glasses; a thick moustache recalls a neighbour who used to sunbathe naked. All these doors are shut with additional pills that hone the attention until you are the only solid shape in a world of outlines. These are enough to make vectors. The rest is chaos, confusion. You do not need to see people.

Down an alley, under a bridge, through a hedge that resists. Push onto the bank of the Thames. The landscape is de-peopled. Where once were vessels, cranes and dockhands, horses, funnels, rigging, now there are cubes of glass and steel that repeat an overcast sky. Water, glass, and clouds form a single sheet. Consider its emptiness. It is completely white. Stare into a space that cannot be marked or confused. Finally, this is total focus. Lower your eyes from here.



**Nick Holdstock** is the author of *The Casualties*, a novel, and several books about China.

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