

Containment

There is a secret we each keep. The condition we have agreed upon that provides adequate control.

The building I work in is cement painted white with tall walls at least two feet thick. I enter through a door that brings me into a small chamber with another door. Inside the second door is a room that is small and narrow with white suits folded and placed on shelves. The entire room is white, and there are no windows. One single fluorescent strip runs across the center of the room. There are two rows of shelves to my right with identical suits, and a row of white steel tipped boots size 10. There is the shower room to the right of the shelves, but I am turning in circles. The shower room is lined entirely in white tiles with only the shower head and a large stack of soap bars. Straight ahead is the door that opens onto the hallway leading to the core of the building. This is where I spend my days working.

It is September; I have eight teeth left. Four upper front teeth, four bottom front.

I have this dream that keeps recurring. I am standing in the center of an ancient town square. In the corner of the square there is an old woman washing clothes—white

clothes. She's on her knees, bent over the basin, both hands twisting the water out. But it is not water. Her face is cast in shadow. I cannot see her. I'm asleep. My eyes are closed. Her knuckles are large. One hand turns forward, the other resists, I hear the liquid pour back in on itself.

My wife has been crying a great deal, not in front of me, but I see that the rims of her eyes are red. It started after my fourth molar fell out. Before that she believed it was merely bad teeth. Maybe I did too. I am thirty-three years old, my father is still alive and my grandfather- though they have eaten nothing but dirt all their lives. My wife said she didn't need jam on the table, "We should go back to our small town, to our families. Fancy food is not worth so much."

What is done is done.

I have not gone to the doctor, but I know I'm dying. I will die as the lion. I will have a cemetery stone. I will not be buried in an unmarked dirt grave where the wooden marker has decayed with the seasons before my bones.

I have been here for three years. My title is the Controller. I have a serious job, and I have taken it with the utmost sincerity and diligence required. Before this I had jobs without titles. I was nothing. I was not even a goat chewing grass in a field, because I had nothing to chew. You may think I have paid a high price, but my every decision has been carefully weighed. I have made the best decisions at every turn. My daughter Petra is well educated. Her hands are smooth, like they have been bathed in warm milk and oil every night. Her hair is dark black and falls to her waist. She reads to me every night and she is only twelve. She reads better than me. My wife and I have decided not to tell Petra about my teeth. I smile carefully so that I only expose the front.

I have practiced this in the mirror at night before bed. It is difficult, I feel a bit like a rabbit, the way my lips twitch. My cheeks have sunk a bit without the other teeth, but it gives me a distinguished look. I have taken to giving a closed mouth grin with a slight nod of my head and a raise of my brows in my greeting with neighbors.

On Sundays, I get up early in the morning and jog seven miles. I have done this every Sunday for three years, my muscles are lean and sinewy. I know my neighbors watch. They watch me carefully and I show them I am strong and unharmed and that the food on my table is ample in the slight plumpness of my daughter and wife. I know they whisper in fear, they think I am a walking death. No one has survived this job for more than two years. But they were old men, the ones before. They thought they had nothing to lose. They sent the money to far away villages, they lived alone. I throw a lunch every Sunday afternoon and invite my neighbors in rotation, four each week. My wife cooks all Saturday, lamb and beef, pickled mango and carrot and olives. Four loaves of steaming fresh bread and six types of jam. Jam is hard to get here, we have a short summer and few berries. Jam is imported by a plane, to a truck then to another smaller truck and finally it comes here, only to us. I wear a fine dark suit and brown shoes, they look like they are made in Italy. They are that nice. I used to talk quite a bit and laugh a great deal, but not so much now. It is difficult to laugh and not open the mouth.

There are rumors in this small town that I think I am too good for everyone. "The fancy things have gone to his head." My wife hears them speaking in the Saturday markets when she is choosing the meats. "He doesn't smile with us." That can't be helped. I see myself as the Controller. Inside my house. In this town. For what happens

to me is what will happen to them. The building I work in is sixty miles away.

Contamination cannot be contained within steel walls. This isn't mentioned when the offer for the job is laid out and in all the paperwork I needed to sign. I was offered more than the old men. I was offered twice the money and twice the rooms in this town. I was, after all, twice as young and that was worth double. I would not need to be replaced as soon.

After two years, there was really no sign. Nothing significant other than a loose molar which I thought was a cavity due to all the jam I was eating. I was the invincible lion. No longer the goat. Everyone in town knew me by name, but referred to me by title, and they nodded with high regard and a bit of superstition. "Good morning Controller." And I would respond, "Good morning, how is your family?" I felt powerful and sometimes power makes me feel invincible, it is after all an easy job, I barely do anything during the day. I work in building 815. What I clean is invisible. I clean rooms and objects believed to have been contaminated and I scrub them down. When my shift is over I scrub myself down. How I wash. On the wall of the shower room in a plastic sheet are written the four steps. I have added a fifth. I take off the boots, head guard and suit in a room. The gloves are thrown away every day into a special container that is removed once a week. The clothes I wear inside stay there.

1. Wet skin, apply soap.
2. Work up a good lather—keep wet. Lather for 3 minutes
3. Rinse with tepid water
4. Repeat
5. Clip nails; check nails, neck and wrists

Adequate controls and procedures are a key component to survival here, just as staying wet while washing is important. Sealed containers, closed systems, monitor all objects and keep them confined. What I know is I must not grow lazy or sloppy. There is no room for flaws. I am meticulous; I have been hired to be exact.

Before this job I worked with my father. There was a small army station 10 miles walk from the village I grew up in. There were only a few men stationed there. My father and I walked there everyday. We mopped the floors, we emptied the garbage. They never spoke to us. We came at night and left early in the morning before they arrived and if for some reason we overlapped, we were like air they walked through. My father, I love him, but he has no ambition. He was already gray like the mouse. I cleaned the chairs, began to polish the shiny objects and wipe down the windows, no door handle had a fingerprint, no tea cup a stain. With a single rag and water and soap, desk drawers and walls were rubbed vigorously. I wiped every speck of their existence away each night. To slowly eliminate their presence as they had done with me. "It is enough!" my father would say with a brusque sweep of his voice clipping my ear. I would answer, my own voice grown deep, slamming my words into the washed walls defying the dirt, "It is not enough!" We walked home in the early morning light, but I could not hear the birds, my father watched them and called to them in whistles. He loved the walk. That is when I began to run. I ran those miles and left him behind. One morning as I was leaving the building with my father, one of the older men whose belly was round, said he knew of a job that would pay me well for my meticulous cleaning. He had been offered it himself but felt he was too old to move so far. He mentioned that I would be cleaning a material that was dangerous, but that I would live like a king. It sounded too good, he

told me of a table in a room covered in cloth with plates of food that could be mine, my wife, and my daughter's. It was a lot to me, we lived in two rooms with my father my mother and no cloth on our table; eating always thin soup with potato. Without a glance at my father, I said, "Yes! How do I apply?"

I met Sameer, Controller 8 when he was 59, an age he never went beyond. "God has bargained us, we are his chip." He said this to me. I am not a religious man. He was here to show me my duties, the procedures. I did not see his toenails till the end. They were as thin as paper and opaque. We are measured. That is part of the procedure. We are all the same height. It is a uniformity of convenience, there are only these suits. We wash them, we hem them, the slightest tear is a serious matter. Only our feet have differed, and that only by a single size. When I began I was 160 pounds and 5'10". The weight is standard, and though we each have eaten more in one week in this job than we did in a month before, we do not gain. The restrictions of confining and containing the contamination include our arrival and departure from the sight. No objects from home must come in, and no objects from within must go home. To be safe there is a four mile radius, I must leave my car at the edge of this radius. They gave me this car and it is a shiny maroon color, very expensive looking, I keep it shiny and am happy to park it four miles from the building, I walk the final distance, which keeps me fit and invigorated. The trees are dead near to the building but I can see fresh green moss growing on the fallen trunks, and the air feels fresh and crisp, with a tiny hint of metallic.

The old woman has tied each wrung-out cloth in twine and laid it on the stone square. The pile is growing. I pick up three bundles. I yell to me in the dream "Do not touch" Not with bare hands. They are wrung of white blood.

I received the code to the building by phone the night before I began. I had already slept one week in my new apartment. Cotton sheets on our beds. My wife and I in our own room, my daughter in hers. The shelves were filled with books bound in gold trim. They supplied everything. I had a dining room with a white lace cloth draped over a long table and ceramic dishes painted with blue designs, a thick green rug with images of animals woven into its trim on wooden floors. A window that looked out onto the main street and a park with grass and flower beds. It was the season of dahlias. My work building exists in the far periphery, in the exclusion zone as I said before, sixty miles. My wife and I sat smiling staring at each other over the steaming food, when the phone suddenly rang. It was Sameer, his voice was deep, it resonated like wood struck by a hammer, "When you arrive at the door there is a box with a lid, lift this lid, punch in the letters "CONTAINED." He spelled out each letter, asked if I was writing it down and emphasized the final d, I have to admit I felt offended, did he believe I couldn't spell? And even if this were the case, I still felt that d sharply punctuated into the buzz of the phone. Then Sameer was gone, he hung up. Without a greeting. Without explanation.

I woke early, fearing that I might be fired if late. What had qualified me for this apartment? It was a question I asked myself, and that moved in the fingers of my wife's hand as we lay in bed that night. With her small grip, the list began: "Who is this man? Will he be your boss? Is he the man who has given us these things? What will you do?" I slipped my hand and hers behind her neck and smiled broadly as I leaned in, pressing my breath into her ear, full of the confidence and grandness of my apartment. "It is enough." Enough to know the white cotton sheets pressed against my skin and her skin.

The next morning I rose early, and took a brisk walk around the block. I ate a quick breakfast while my wife and daughter slept, and then drove my new maroon car with leather seats out to the site, there is a straight road out of the town that goes north. There is nothing on this road and no one, other than the controllers drives this road. As I drive closer, I notice a quietness unusual to forests, no animals, no bird sounds and the trees at first look burnt, and then all I can see is fallen dead trees. Whatever happened it happened in the past but the forest has not recovered. I would be lying if I didn't say that the hair on my body stood up, prickled a bit at the surrounding area. I parked the car at the first fence. An old white sign with black letters, "Nothing beyond this point, except for designated workers." I walked the four miles just as the sun rose. I entered the first door and then the second. There was a faint, but clear smell of metal in the air, an absence of dust.

Sameer stood waiting for me entirely covered in the white suit, I could not see his eyes, he motioned with his body for me to put the suit on. We walked the chambers, and together with a white cloth, a ceramic bucket of water and soap we washed the walls, the desk, the floors. Standing in a line along the wall were long thin empty containers side by side like bookcases without shelves or books. They went the length of the wall and stood only a couple of inches taller and wider than us. These we cleaned, the bucket of tepid water growing cold. It was only later that I saw the pattern in the gaps. He was as thorough as I. Dipping the cloth in and wiping clean every white corner. There was no dust on these shelves, no dust anywhere. Only the sound of the bucket of water and the circular movement of my hand, my motion an isolated wind.

There is a Controller's desk, and a chart, which I fill. I monitor with a small hand-held device, like a calculator, but it punches numbers itself that I record and report—reflecting how successful the cleaning has been. In one of the drawers of the desk, I recently discovered a book of entries, words not numbers, of Controller 1. It contains entries of all my predecessors. It is contaminated so will never leave building 815. I have begun making my own entries. I am controller 9. Certain sensations. Certain bodily changes. I have no hair on my toes. Controller 3 lost the hair on his face in May, bled from his pores in the palm of his hand on Tuesday. Stopped shaving entirely. I have entered: Hair on head intact. Back tooth on the right upper side fell out in December on a Friday. Controller 8 grew tired of washing between the shifts. He grew tired. He called them one day, using the white phone, and said he was finished. But it took time to find his replacement. "Waited two months for you, they told me you were young," he said to me. We are not the same; it happens differently for each, our deterioration is individual and unique.

For five days we worked together. He never left the building, he did not remove his helmet. On the sixth morning, the day was warm and the sun was sharp, I walked into the shadowless room with the fluorescent light buzzing. Looking forward to Sameer's company, he would quietly joke about small things as he showed me what to do, and I found it comforting. I didn't know how long we would work together, where he would go to retire, he hadn't spoke of his family much, or of his future, so I was surprised to find one of the white shelves lying flat on the ground, I thought it had fallen but it was too carefully placed, inside lay Sameer, naked. There was no hair on his body, his skin was pale, the color of white paper, his eyes open, staring at me blue like the

sky. His toenails like skin themselves. Written in ink on his chest was the map to the hole behind the building where I was to bury him. A hole he had already dug. A hole I would fill in. Procedure written down his left leg. Containment written on his right.

The procedure. I buried Controller eight, and Controller ten will bury me. Each object we clean is scanned, its numbers reported. There is a day when my skin will absorb a number too high, and I will not be able to leave the building. I will not go home to my wife. I will not die in my bed, in her arms with steaming pork on my table. I am thorough in my washing and have lasted longer than any controller before me. The containment of information is essential; this is a closed system. When my numbers reach too high, a buzzer will go off and the door will lock down.