



Part 6

Inside the Mount Mercy Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Plexiglas walls separated the reception area from the rest of the grand foyer. Smithback went up to the reception window, where a severe looking lady with iron grey hair pulled into a bun was working on a computer.

“I’m Roger Smithback,” he said. “Here to speak to the doctor in attendance about my... dear, departed great aunt Cornelia.”

As soon as he’d spoken, he realized he’d forgotten to mention a last name. Clearly, though, the woman knew who he was talking about, because her expression deepened in severity. She nodded, picked up her phone, and spoke briefly into it.

“Please wait over there,” she told him.

Smithback sat down in a tiny waiting area. There was nothing to read, no magazines or even pamphlets, and the chair was made of wood with no cushion, shabby and abominably uncomfortable. Some stiff portraits, heavy with dust, were hung high on the walls; whether they were of directors, donors, or doctors, Smithback could not be sure, but at least some of them looked odd enough to be inmates. About ten minutes later, an aide came out and, passing through a door in the Plexiglas wall, gestured for the reporter to follow him.

The trip through the main floor of the asylum was long and

labyrinthine, and it ended at a frosted-glass door which, when knocked upon, produced a voice that offered admittance. The doctor within sat behind a desk stacked with folders. The office, though it still held traces of former grandeur in the form of parquet floors and ornate moulding, was now reduced to the same shabby state as the rest of the facility. Although the doctor was young, he had a haggard look that was of a piece with the rest of the facility. He rose as Smithback came in, they briefly shook hands, and the doctor settled back down.

“How can I help you, Mr. Smithback?”

“I wanted to find out about my great aunt Cornelia Pendergast, who passed away here two years ago.”

“I’m afraid that HIPAA rules don’t allow me to discuss anything medical regarding your great aunt. I can only reference publicly available information.”

“I understand. I’d like to find out why she was here, how long, what she did here, and how she died.”

Obviously, the receptionist had given the doctor some warning: he had a folder open in front of him, which he now consulted. “She was accused of poisoning her family, found incompetent to stand trial, and was referred here.” He turned a page. “That was nineteen years ago. She spent seventeen years here before she passed. Cause of death was stroke.” He shut the folder. “And that’s really all I can tell you, Mr. Smithback.”

“Stroke? I mean, just a stroke, nothing else?”

“To be specific, it appeared to be a subarachnoid hemorrhage. The family declined an autopsy.”

“So she spent seventeen years here, in the same room.”

“No.” The doctor had evidently come across something in the folder that he found either interesting or revolting—it was hard to tell from his expression. “She was moved once, not long after her arrival.”

“Why?”

“Because she stole a tin of asafoetida from the old dispensary during a routine examination, and was later found attempting to...” The doctor abruptly looked up. “I told you: only publicly available information.”

“Are you saying she was moved because she required a greater degree of security?”

“Mr. Smithback, I’m extremely busy, and I’m sorry I can’t help you further. Now, if you’ll excuse me?”

“Help me further? Excuse *me*, but you haven’t helped at all. Given my relation to the deceased, I think I’m entitled to know *something*. What was the diagnosis?”

“Your relation, you say.” The doctor flipped through the pages. “Our former patient had very few living relatives when she was admitted, and even fewer when she died. I don’t see the name ‘Smithback’ among them here. Now: unless you come back with a HIPAA release, I really can’t provide any further information.” The harried doctor rose and gestured to the aide, who had remained in the room throughout the brief conversation.

Smithback, annoyed, nevertheless allowed the taciturn aide to now direct him out. He found his driver waiting for him at the bottom of the steps.

“Back to Queens,” said Smithback as he got into the limo.

As the driver began easing away from the hospital, Smithback remembered the big, sympathetic guard he'd met at the front gate. "Stop at the kiosk, will you?"

"Sure thing."

When they paused at the gate, the guard came out. "Everything go all right?"

"Not exactly. But you were very helpful. I just wanted to say thanks for your concern."

"No worries."

Smithback scrunched up his face. "Listen, I know this is a bit awkward, but... they wouldn't tell me anything. Not even what happened when she died. It might just be a guess on my part, but you seem to know something about her. I'm just so devastated..." He paused, leaning heavily on the sympathy card. "I'd just like to know about her last years. Was she lucid? What was she like—you know, that sort of thing. Nothing that would violate the rules, of course, but something to help me find closure...after this awful shock."

The guard looked down, and then up. "I used to be an aide, and, yes, I do know about her. Everybody did. She was one of the most...well, I guess you'd say *conspicuous* patients here. Not really in a good way, though." He hesitated awkwardly.

"What can you tell me? Even a few recollections, or anecdotes, would help."

The guard was still hesitating. "I don't want to upset you more."

"The most upsetting thing to me is not knowing how she spent her last years. Good *or* bad." He pretended to mull something over. "When do you get off work?"

"In about an hour."

"Could we meet for a drink? On me, of course. I'll send my driver around to where you live and we can meet somewhere nearby."

The hesitation slowly faded. "No harm in telling you what I know, I guess. Anyone deserves that much. But I'll only have half an hour, forty-five minutes free at most. The wife and I always watch the afternoon soaps."

"Understood."

"And please understand: you won't find it very comforting."

"Any information, no matter how disturbing, will help me achieve emotional resolution."

The guard went back inside his kiosk, which was lucky for Smithback, because mouthing the ridiculous *achieve emotional resolution* had just about made him break character. The guard scribbled something on a piece of paper, then stepped out again and handed it through the open window. It was an address in Queens.

"I'll pick you up at one," Smithback said, shaking the guard's hand.

The man nodded and the limo accelerated away, toward the bridge that led off Little Governor's Island.

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Photos top to bottom: The cover of BLOODLESS

Illustration by Chris Royal, check out his other images [here.](#)

The Oglethorpe House in Savannah, said to be haunted.

A tombstone in the Bonaventure Cemetery, Savannah. Photos by Douglas Preston



