

**Bourne**  
**toWrite...**  
creative writing  
workshops

## Silence

by Ivor John

Sitting down in the small side room he picked up the little rucksack, which contained his sandwiches. There was a cheap, plain coffee table, the type you could imagine buying at Ikea. Round the sides of the room were low padded chairs. It could have been any staffroom anywhere. A small metal sink in the corner, the draining board precariously piled with dirty mugs and plates. Some had been bought with names on, perhaps from children's visits to seaside gifts shops.

He rinsed out one of the dirty mugs, 'Happy 50th Birthday Dad ' printed on the side in a garish cerise font. It wasn't his, but it was cleanest he saw in the pile. He pulled off the disposable apron he was wearing and through it along with his thin rubber gloves into a pedal bin. Sitting down at the coffee table he picked the cellophane wrapping from a triangular plastic package of tuna, salad and mayo sandwiches. A meal deal he had bought at Tesco Express as he had walked to work. The chairs were too high for the low table to be comfortable so he balanced a packet of crisps on his lap.

He didn't bother to push the door shut while he ate his sandwiches. He had long since got over being upset by the view. A row of seven square fridge doors, three high, where twenty-one corpses could be stored. Standing separately slightly away from the main fridges another similar bank of six fridges. These had red doors and unlike the others, were secured with an electronic combination lock. Rather unlike the others though, these were deep freezers, where bodies could be stored, frozen, for years if necessary. It is in case they may be required for court or sometimes if they are not identified.

Beside the banks of fridges, two large red swing doors allowed access to the dissection room. Three stainless steel tables fill the large white tiled room. On the shelves behind each table are the tools used to carry out the post mortem examinations, a small circular saw that looks much like a power drill, various saws, scalpels a set of stainless steel shears designed to cut through ribs to remove the rib cage. All look remarkably ordinary considering their gruesome purpose. They could be mounted on hooks in any garage, for carrying out mundane DIY tasks.

Dissections were normally done in the morning. There was rarely any urgency in this. Not like upstairs on the wards. No drama and no need to rush. He or one of the other mortuary technicians would prepare the dissections, the routine parts of autopsies, ready for the pathologists who would come down from their office and inspect what they needed to. Asking every so often for samples to be taken, which would be placed into polythene tubes and labeled or poured into small glass vials.

The doctor had gone now, they were always done by midday, nearly always. He had hosed down the tables. Stitched up the corpses. A crude sail stitch running from their throat to their genitals. More care was taken with their appearance above the collar. In case relatives visited them later.

Looking at the clock on the wall, the undertakers would be here soon, in their white vans or private ambulances, to collect their bodies. 'I couldn't do their job,' he thought.

Beside the fridges was a body the porters had brought down late in the morning. A man in his fifties. 'Bloody porters they should label it up.' He looked at the body, the face frozen in an anxious expression. He went to get the gurney to put him into a vacant fridge. An electric trolley which could be operated with an up or down switch to line the metal stretcher up with the space in the fridge. He looked again at the expression. He tried to avoid thinking too much about the people, who they were, it made it more difficult. But he was intrigued. He wondered what he had died of.

'Myocardial infarct,' he thought, 'or maybe a coronary embolism, he's the right age, could be hypoglycemia but I can't smell pear drops'. He was often right, he had seen enough now to have a pretty good idea. Sometimes he thought, when it was quiet, he thought he could hear their souls speak to him. Or was it the silence? Silence he discovered, is something you can hear.