

OUTPATIENT

A rude awakening.

BY DAN STOUT

It was definitely a migraine. The agony clamped down on both temples, and the light from behind the curtain shot daggers through my eyelids. I twisted over to cover my head with a pillow and felt a sudden breeze up my backside.

I sat up, squinting, a hospital gown tugging at my throat. I had no idea what had happened to me. My last memory was of being in my lab, slipping on my sensor headdress and wiring it to the neural monitors.

Pushing the assistance buzzer, I rocked back and forth, trying to keep the migraine at bay. No nurse answered, and eventually I gave up. When I stood, I staggered, a stranger in my own body.

I stumbled out into the hall, relieved to see a familiar logo on the directional signs. I was still in St Anne's, the hub of my work, where Kim Stanley and I were pioneering Spatial Resonance Neurology — the expansion of the brain's network into the space around it, building awareness beyond our bodies.

The halls were jammed with patients looking just as confused as me. Apparently some were dealing with even worse headaches than I was, as they leaned against walls, gripping their temples or succumbing to the nausea and vomiting on the floor. The overwhelmed staff ran back and forth. No one paid me any attention.

I picked up a white technician's coat from a chair at the nurse's station. I'd had enough of my rear end being exposed. As I put it on, the collar flipped up. Even with a decade of practice I'd never quite figured out how to keep those things flat. I glanced around, one eye shut against the pain of my headache, and tried to figure out what was going on. So many people with signs of headache and nausea. *Gas leak?* There was no odour of

natural gas. *Carbon monoxide?* The hospital had CO detectors in every hall, but no alarms were

sounding. My cell phone would be in my office. I could call 911 and get outside.

Down one floor, having taken the stairs so I could bypass the yelling crowd at the elevator lobby, I reached my office. It had been

me, and I doubled over. Gasping, I made myself look back up at them.

Behind Kim and the woman, a teenage girl sat perched on a stool. She wore a hospital gown and squinted as if pained by the light. As I watched, she reached out and grabbed Kim's arm.

"It's me." The pleading note in her voice was heart-breaking. "It's Ellen."

There was a crash, and an obese man in a hospital gown stumbled through the doors. He showed clear signs of recent surgery.

"Kim," he said. "Something went wrong. I woke up in someone else's..." He trailed off as he stared at the woman next to Kim. "Oh, God," he said.

There was a spike of pain as my migraine raged back into full force. I raised a hand to massage my temple and saw the ID bracelet on my wrist, name and room number printed on treated plastic. My name was apparently Carol Jones.

Over my shoulder I could hear shuffling feet, a growing chorus of "Kim... please, Kim," as more and more

patients pressed into the lab. I did my best to ignore the occasional cry of "It's Ellen," as they made my stomach knot and the wave of nausea rise again.

To distract myself I tried to do some maths, remembering the range of our devices. I guessed at the population density of San Diego and tried to calculate just how many people would now flip up their collars and prefer their coffee with cream, just the way I liked it. I finally gave up, not really knowing if it mattered anymore. I covered my eyes, both from the harsh fluorescent glare of the lights and because I didn't want to look again at the too familiar woman standing next to Kim. Eyes shielded I rocked back and forth, trying futilely to hide from the migraine that I knew would only get worse. ■

Dan Stout loves to write about the things that terrify and inspire him. His fiction has appeared in *Plan B Magazine* and *Mad Scientist Journal*. Visit him at www.DanStout.com.



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