ARTHUR

The waiting room, which to some may seem quite large and to others relatively small, is a medium-sized rectangular room with cream walls, burnt-orange doors, and light-coloured bamboo flooring. It can, however, appear either rectangular or square, depending on both the perspective and emotional state of the person entering it. The floor can vary from dark polished timber to an uninteresting cheap beige linoleum, and the colour of the walls fluctuates, depending again on the individual, between off-white, old rose, and midnight blue. However, no matter their perspective regarding the size and colour of the room, everyone agrees that there are no windows and only two doors.

The room is entered from the end of a long and relatively wide corridor lit with overly bright fluorescent

lights; after entering the room, it can be seen that the entry door is positioned two-thirds to the left. Beyond this door and close to the left wall of the room there is a laminate reception desk that is not much more than a long table, with a black leather swivel chair behind it. Not everyone will perceive the table as being long or even laminate, and they may decide that it is constructed of some kind of timber, or plastic, or even opaque glass. At the same time, there will be those who claim that the chair is blue and padded while others might argue that it is definitely not a swivel chair.

There is nothing on the desk except for two neat piles of white A6 paper - one considerably larger than the other - and an expensive-looking black ballpoint pen with gold trim. The desk itself is behind, and slightly left of, two loosely formed rows of cheap aqua-coloured plastic chairs. No matter the many varying individual perceptions of the room, no one is able to ignore the fact that the chairs are both aqua and plastic, and that all the chairs are facing away from the entry door towards the front of the room. In the very centre of the front wall is the second door.

There is an irregular trickle of people entering through the first door: a couple of people, a break, another person; and then, after a much longer break when it might be easy to imagine that no one else will be coming, another person. Throughout the long afternoon, the pattern continues to

repeat itself with longer or shorter breaks and fewer or more people.

On entering the room, most people tend to look around with expressions varying from surprise or irritation to obvious deep concern, before, catching sight of the reception desk on their left, they move either hesitantly or resolutely in that direction.

The receptionist – an angular, unattractive woman in her fifties with short grey hair and red-lacquered nails – is fully engrossed either in her Personal Screen or in her knitting, and she shows not the least amount of interest in the person standing on the other side of her desk. Whether it could be called a positive or a negative trait, her disinterest is consistent, and everyone is treated with the same lack of emotion and communication. In most cases, she makes the person wait while she very slowly finishes the page she is reading on her PS or the row she is knitting. She then removes her eyes from her Personal Screen or places her knitting carefully on the desk, skims the letter handed to her by the person in front of her, writes the person's number on one of the pieces of paper on the desk, moves it to the smaller of the two piles, and points at the two rows of plastic chairs.

Most people, after a moment of bewildered uncertainty, cautiously make their way towards the uncomfortable-looking chairs and, choosing one, sit down. Some people hesitate before moving away from the desk,

looking as though they want to raise their voices to ask questions or to complain, but most of them think better of it, keep their mouths closed, and say nothing. Occasionally, someone does say something, but it is never to any avail, as, by that point, the receptionist has already retreated into her knitting or the words flickering on her screen and is no longer contactable. Apart from the occasional hushed conversation, the only sounds that can be heard are the regular, muted sound made by the large white electric clock on the wall behind the reception desk, the irritating clicking sound of the receptionist's knitting needles, and the infrequent sharp, discordant sound of chairs scraping on the floor as people try to find more comfortable positions.

While they wait.

And wait.

And wait.

Arthur - tall, mid-thirties, brown hair, blue eyes, intelligent-looking, well-dressed, and wearing steel-rimmed glasses - has chosen a chair at the end of the second row of eight or ten well-spaced chairs, furthest from the receptionist's desk. He did so, knowing that it would give him a view of practically everyone in the room, including the receptionist. He likes to at least *feel* that he is in

control, and sitting where he can see everyone gives him the only smidgen of control available to him in his present situation.

His perspective regarding the room is that it is a relatively large rectangle with a polished timber floor and white walls. The receptionist's desk is also made from timber, and the chair is definitely a swivel chair, and it is grey-blue.

While he is reflecting on the appearance of the room, he is still not sure why he is there. For Arthur, the word *waiting room* has always conjured up images of medical and dental surgeries, law companies, and school offices. He accepts the fact that police stations, as well as train and bus stations, also have waiting rooms, but these are not the images that he equates with the word. A waiting room for Arthur is a room that leads to another room, which is completely hidden from view; a room where something happens - the something for which one is waiting.

He has a deep fear and a distrust of anything connected with Building C, and he assumes that this is the case for most people: he cannot imagine that it would be otherwise. He has spent the last few hours asking himself why he would have been sent a letter requesting his presence there at a certain time on a certain date. The letter did not specify any reason for his being called to Building C, which Arthur finds extremely troubling. He racks his

brain, but he cannot remember having done or said anything inadvertently, and he certainly has not made any appointments that would require a waiting room. Or has he? The whole experience has made him more unsure of himself than usual. Perhaps he made a doctor's appointment, and then he forgot, or perhaps he *did* do something that he should not have done or said something that he should not have said. His brain is working overtime, trying to decipher the puzzle.

On the other hand, he is very aware that if he thinks too hard, too deeply, or too long, he may finally discover the answer, and this possibility also frightens him. He could probably cope with remembering that forgotten medical or dental appointment - he would be happy to know that the reason for the letter was so simple and ordinary - but does he really want to know that he has been called to the room for a completely different reason? He cannot make up his mind, so he vacillates between trying to work out why he has been called to Building C and trying to wipe the whole dilemma from his mind.

He is conscious of his inability to quickly and easily make up his mind about anything and everything, and he worries incessantly that he may make the wrong choice or

that he may say the wrong thing in the wrong situation at the wrong time. He knows that he has already made lots of wrong choices, though some of them have not been especially important, like choosing to walk down one street in preference to another and then discovering that the street of choice is a dead end; or, after much thought and deliberation, selecting the bag of apples with the rotten apple at the bottom. Some choices, however, have been life-changing: he still cannot understand why things went so wrong with Rowena all those years ago. In spite of, or perhaps because of, his indecision and worrying, Arthur spends a lot of time noticing things, both big and little things, probably more than most other people. He is quite sure that life must be much easier for everyone else.

It all began with the letter he received ten days ago. Letters are very past tense: no one writes letters any longer; in fact, there is no longer a postal service. Writing letters went out of vogue two or three decades back, and, now, any letter that arrives in any letterbox has been sent by Administration and has been delivered by the Administration's own delivery service. Initially, a good twenty years past and before the advent of the PS, Administration sent all important notifications to each person's phone

(which, it could be argued, was somewhat similar to the PS but without all the present features and extras). When people received these notifications many of them pressed the delete button without even so much as looking at what they were deleting, while others simply lost the notifications amid all the other communications - most of them reminders about the great job Administration was doing. Administration decided that a concrete message in the form of a physical letter probably made more sense. Perhaps when people were able to hold a letter in their hands they would be more aware of the importance of the notification; moreover, the letter was always tangible confirmation that the information had, in actual fact, been sent.

When Arthur retrieved the letter from his mustard-yellow letterbox - third row of ten, fifth from the right, one of the many letterboxes set into the wall at the front of his building - he did not have to wonder who had sent it. Letterboxes, like letters, were outdated and unnecessary, but Administration needed them to send official communications, so everyone had to have a letterbox. If people were honest, most of them wanted the letterboxes made redundant; no one felt comfortable with the thought that Administration was constantly looking over their shoulder, checking their every move, commenting on everything they had done, should have done, or should not have done.

As expected, the envelope was mid grey and rectangular - all official letters were placed in mid grey rectangular envelopes - and he held it gingerly in one hand as he walked to the lift. He would have liked to have been able to drop it into a waste disposal unit, if such a thing had been at hand, but if one had been available, and if he were to do such thing, how would he later explain his action to Administration? He wished that he had never received the letter: he did not want anything in his life to change. He desperately wanted everything to remain as it had been before he opened his letterbox. Not that everything was great, not by any means, but he had a gnawing feeling in his stomach that opening the letter would somehow draw a line between what had been - no matter whether it was good, bad, or indifferent - and what was about to be, and he was not sure that he really wanted to be pushed across such a line.

Back inside his small flat on the third floor of the relatively new orange concrete building that was more or less identical to the other orange or grey or white or yellow twenty- and thirty-storey buildings in his area, he had placed the envelope, unopened, on the bench above his kitchen table, pretending that it did not exist, that it never *had* existed. Had he dared, he would have thrown it away - he had a waste disposal unit beneath his kitchen sink - but to take such a step would signify that he both acknowledged and confirmed its existence and, armed

with such knowledge, he had then wilfully made a decision to obliterate the evidence. In spite of his dislike for the envelope, and whatever was inside of it, he was not brave enough to consider obliteration and all the possible consequences.

The envelope sat on the shelf for more than a week, glowering down on him while he ate breakfast and dinner and, on the weekend, lunch. If the envelope had been able to open itself, it probably would have done so. Arthur tried not to think of it, but his eyes would often wander to the shelf of their own accord, and finally he decided that he had no option: until he was prepared to confront that invisible, but very definite, line, his life was going to remain like a still from some film. In the end, his curiosity, mixed as it were with a sense of foreboding doom, got the better of him: he opened the letter.

Inside the mid-grey rectangular envelope there was one piece of reasonably stiff, pale grey paper with several lines of electronically printed text. At the bottom of the page there was a hard-to-read signature and an official-looking round stamp. As he stood in his kitchen with the paper in his hand, he did not doubt that he had already crossed the line between then and now and that his past had been relegated to some blurry place where memory was no longer reliable. Everything he could see in front of him suddenly took the form of a very large, out-of-focus question mark.

His eyes moved quickly over the text. He had to read it several times, because he knew that it was that invisible line between what was and what was about be: he was being told that he was to go to Building C on the sixteenth day of the month. He automatically looked at the calendar hanging on the wall near the door. A coldness descended over him as he realized that the day's date and the date on the letter were one and the same. He looked back at the letter, his eyes moving frantically along the lines of confident black characters parading against the soft grey background. 'Present yourself at reception on the thirty-sixth floor of Building C at 14.00 on the sixteenth day of this month. Bring nothing with you.'

There was no other information. The letter gave no indication as to why he had been called to Building C, one of the main government buildings, which housed departments as disparate as health and wellness, taxation, and criminal justice. It could be something as benign as a regular health check, or it could be something much more ominous.

Having finally crossed the line, he was anxious, angry, and annoyed, but as he sat at his kitchen table he knew that he had no choice. The alternative - not presenting himself at reception on the thirty-sixth floor of Building C at 14.00 - simply did not bear thinking about.

Arthur sighs deeply and crosses and then uncrosses his legs. He has been sitting on the hard, uncomfortable chair for almost two hours, and he desperately wants to be able to stand up and stretch himself. Even though every minute cell in his body is on the point of screaming, he does not want to do anything that would draw undue attention to himself. No one else is standing up and stretching.

If he had been anyone else other than himself he might have struck up a conversation with person on his left, a portly middle-aged man with a significant bald patch surrounded by thinning, grey hair; but Arthur is far too introverted to launch into unnecessary small talk with a stranger. Parallel with all of this physical and mental discomfort, he is thinking that it should be the receptionist's business to explain to him why he has been called to the waiting room in the first place, but that does not appear to be part of her job description.

When he first arrived he did ask her what the appointment was for. Was it a dental appointment he had somehow managed to forget or was it the yearly medical? Thinking back he was sure that his question was polite, low-key, and, given the situation, relatively pleasant, but the receptionist had merely looked straight through him and said nothing. When she made no reply he had wondered if perhaps she was hard of hearing, and he had

been on the point of repeating himself when she said coldly:

'That will be all, 7891-447; you may take a seat.'

It does not occur to him that other people may see the room differently, in the same way that it does not occur to him that some people may have a completely different understanding of both the letter and the reason why they have been called to the waiting room. Although it is not something that is currently at the forefront of his thought processes, he has always been aware that interpretations of anything can vary, depending on the person, the situation, and the perspective.

He has never liked waiting rooms, even though his dislike is probably not so much of the waiting room itself but of what is beyond the room: the thing for which one is waiting. His mind circles around childhood visits to the dentist, always in the company of his father. For some reason his mother is not part of the memory, though it was very likely she had been there, and he has simply forgotten. He has, however, not forgotten the waiting room itself: a stuffy square-shaped room with one small, rather grimy, window looking out on to a busy street three floors below. There had been a low, brown table in the

middle of the room, and in his memory it is always untidily covered with outdated, tired-looking magazines. Thinking back, he wonders if there may have been a time, perhaps early in the morning, when all the magazines were gathered into neat, evenly placed piles. While he is still thinking about the table and the piles of reading matter, his mind zooms in on the drooping green plant with the sickly yellow tinge, silently crying out for water as it stands in its huge white ceramic pot near the door; the five or six mismatched chairs; a dull, grey linoleum floor with several worn patches; and the off-white door leading to the dentist's surgery - the unavoidable reality for which everyone is waiting. There may have been a desk with a receptionist, but he can no longer remember it, as any such image has well and truly receded into a shadowy darkness where all unwanted images go to hide.

Although the desk and the dental receptionist may have completely disappeared, he can clearly see himself, sitting on the edge of the high-backed wooden chair, his hands held like blinkers on each side of his head as he moves it in an irregular circle, his eyes noting the table, the plant, the other chairs, the surgery door, and then the window, before making the same journey again but in the opposite direction. Without dwelling on the memory, he knows that it never took long before his father would reach across and, placing his hand firmly on his shoulder, say: 'That's quite enough now, son.'

There were nearly always other people in the waiting room: those who sat quietly, but anxiously, on the dissimilar chairs, and children whose eyes never left the fascinating, yet horrifying, almost-white door. Now, forcing his thoughts back over the years, he searches for words to describe the atmosphere in the room, and his mind decides that it was *tight*, *tense,* and *suffocating*. So many years later, he can still call to mind the traffic sounds from the street below, sounds that now twist and turn around the memory of *tight*, *tense,* and *suffocating.*

The atmosphere in his current waiting room is also tight, tense and suffocating.

While his mind is forcing him to relive the unpleasant, constricting atmosphere and the jarring sounds, he is fully aware that the obsessive-compulsive manner in which, as a child, he had observed everything and everyone in the waiting room had simply been his way of quelling the anxiety inside of him. The awareness brings him back to his present situation with a start: he is more than certain that he could benefit from some kind of ordered, repetitive brain activity to focus his thoughts and tone down the reality around him. He may have hoped that a mindless routine would help dampen his present anxiety, but moving his eyes up and down the two rows of aqua-coloured chairs and around the people seated on them is not helping, and he is unable to think of anything else he could do instead.