

Wiggle Room by Christina Engela

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Wiggle Room

Imagine, if you will:

In a horror story there is no justice. There can't be, because a story where the evil villain gets their due in the end is too satisfying to the normal functioning mind.

No – in a horror story the villain gets away after having done some terrible thing, leaving the reader thrilled and horrified and the villain facing no consequences – being still at large and out there, lurking in the shadows of the mind. This offends the standard sensibility and leaves a story open ended, and not in a good way... Like a severed artery bleeding out, this is the real horror of it. This, dear reader, is one of those stories.

Cold. Wet. It was a clichéd dark and stormy night in a big city. A few street lights reflected in the water pooled in the streets, motionless except for the lashing rain and the wind wailing outside like a cold, hungry, homeless banshee, tearing at the hearts of children hiding in their beds. Our story begins here. It begins with a nurse.

Nosocomophobia – this is a little known word which is said to mean ‘a fear of hospitals’. Whether or not this fear is a rational or irrational one... well, dear reader – that will be for you to decide. Before you do, let's take a closer look at the setting of our delightfully dark and deliciously demented tale:

The hospital was old, having a history most people didn't know – and even those who thought they did, didn't know the whole story. It was an old, old story – nearly as old as the city herself – and the back cover of the book was still open, leaving the story unfinished – and leaving a doorway ajar for it to leak out and taint the world with its poison.

She walked down the corridors of the hospital, the rhythmic click of her high heels echoing eerily on the tiles and into the silent desolation of the wee hours of the night. Pale florescent lights made her pristine white nurse's uniform shine bright white – so white as to be almost obscene, like virgin snow or like something out of a clichéd commercial for fabric

whitener. Black curls, medium length, were tightly styled down with hairspray and restrained by pins. Her hands would've been white around the knuckles as they gripped the bedpan tightly, were they not already so deathly pale. She had dainty hands, long fingers. They seemed manicured in their appearance, smooth in their youthfulness, and spotless – well, except where a little blood had got under her carefully shaped finger nails. The contented smile set across her lips – her crisply outlined, full, painted lips – indicated that she didn't mind. In fact, that she enjoyed it.

The further she walked, the more the fixtures and fittings both electrical and medical – and the architecture – began to resemble a gothic nightmare. Spider webs clung to the walls, decorating the ancient wooden door frames, brass light switches and outdated light fittings. Dust coated the floors, long un-swept, except for the motion of her passing. Here, in the older part of this sprawling building, underground – where nobody was supposed to go anymore – where the lights were supposed to be off, shadows played on the walls. Strange whispers echoed faintly on the edge of hearing and faint movements that defied rational explanation danced just out of clear vision.

The old mortuary was a storeroom now – and had been for some decades, since the new section of the building had been built on. The faded and peeling walls were long obscured by stacks and mountains of stored furniture: desks, stacks of chairs, rows of cabinets, and piles boxes of discarded old equipment, with the odd worn out theater gown draped over them. Long disused, the bank of refrigerators stood empty – their battered old doors hanging forlornly open, telling the story of a journey traveled by so very many – who had apparently left the doors open behind them, as though extending a chilling invitation to the world on the other side. That other world didn't seem that far away in places like this. It was like it could be on the other side of the door, that wall – or even in this room.

A giant spider seemed to be standing in the center of the room, an ancient theater light thing with huge reflectors – some broken, but mostly still working. The light radiating from the reflectors spot-lit the dust bunnies and cobwebs that snaked across the rust and dust-covered steel. The Nurse walked towards it, almost gliding across the dusty floor, barely affecting the surface, carrying the bedpan – a look of anticipation on her crisp, perfect features.

James Booth's eyes flickered open. The lights were blinding. They were hot too, not like modern lights at all. They were blazing, almost singing him through the gaps in the broken lens covers. He struggled through the confusion. He remembered the car accident. It was night time, he was driving home alone – he remembered the dog running into the road ahead of him, swerving, the screeching of brakes, a tree on the side of the road – the awful jarring impact. He couldn't remember anything after that. Till now.

He couldn't move. Well, he could a little. He could – well, he could wiggle some. As much as his bonds would allow. Each arm was tied down beside him to something out of sight that didn't want to budge. The ropes around his wrists were tight. At least he thought they were ropes. For all he knew, they could have been nylon seat belts. Or duct tape.

His upper body felt naked, the skin on his back felt stuck to – what was that – vinyl? His feet were tied down too, and the bed he was on – if it was a bed at all, squeaked and rattled and rocked considerably as he struggled. He couldn't see much, despite the blinding light that surrounded him. That would be due to the blindfold – a rough piece of material that appeared to have been wound around his head to cover his eyes, and knotted. There was a gap, positioned just so that he could see a tiny amount through it with one eye. A body board and restraints were pretty much to be expected for such a collision, he knew. He'd watched enough medical emergency TV series to know that. But he had no neck brace – and he was pretty sure the blindfold wasn't standard issue! He cried out – in confusion, but mostly in terror – but some kind of hard thing that tasted like plastic or rubber had been forced into his mouth, stifling him. Definitely not standard issue!

His heart was racing, his breathing labored – and under the blindfold, his eyes were opened wide, searching. His ears, straining, heard his own breathing. What was that? Whimpering? *Pathetic!* He heard his inner macho cursing. *Fucking pathetic.*

Then he heard it. Faint. In the distance, growing gradually louder. Rhythmic. The sound of shoes clicking in the distance. Women's shoes!

"Hello?" He called in his head, even as his ears heard his own pathetic muffled cries. *"Help!"*

The clicking of the heels grew closer and closer, keeping the same detached and intimidating rhythm throughout his vain struggling, punctuated with the clanks and squeaks of the bed or bench he was strapped to. He broke into a sweat. Closer and closer they came, until they stopped somewhere near his feet. He ceased the pointless struggling to try to see the body attached to the shoes he'd heard. All he could make out was a white shape. Indistinct.

"Hello?" He called in his head again. *"What's she looking at? Don't just fucking stand there! Help me!"*

The shape moved round him distantly – maddeningly silent, as he watched through the gap in his blindfold and turned and tilted his head as best he could – his heart beat drumming in his ears. In the midst of this mind numbing terror, a tiny part of his brain managed to retain a quiet, level headed and analytical view of the whole thing – a small, shrinking reserve perhaps best described as something like 'the eye of the storm'.

Goosebumps rose all over his naked upper body, despite the warmth radiating back from the vinyl under him. He knew by now whoever it was at his bedside was probably female – a woman, from the sound of the shoes. She was wearing white, as far as he could see. The most puzzling and maddening – and terrifying part so far was that she hadn't said anything or done anything – other than to hover. Hovering meant trouble. Not saying anything meant trouble. Not helping meant trouble. He was in trouble.

She moved round to his head, until she was behind him where he could no longer see her, and stopped. His body was soaking wet with sweat, his muscles tense as he tugged ineffectually at his bonds. She wasn't going to help him, he realized – otherwise she already would have by now. The only thing that part of him wondered now was, how this was going to end.

He felt pressure on the blindfold, a tugging, and then the rough material was removed. The light was even more blinding now that he was getting a full dose of it. He blinked, squinting. Then he saw her, standing there, at the foot of his... bed – looking at him. The Nurse. It was then that he knew it was all over, or was going to be soon. It was all in the eyes. They were dark and black and soulless, framed perfectly against the white pallor of her expressionless face by their dark outline and long dark lashes and the dark curls of her head. They bored into him, unblinking, burning through his eyes and along his fraying synapses into his very soul!

He couldn't speak, even if his mouth hadn't been restrained. She didn't speak, even though she was clearly unimpaired from doing so. He surveyed her features. Her lips were red and full, framed in a soft smile, which under the circumstances he found himself at a loss to use any word other than vacant to describe. The lights made her look harsh and intimidating, like a *domme* – well, how he would have imagined a *domme* to look. He wasn't the submissive type.

James Booth watched, mesmerized as the Nurse tilted her head almost theatrically, and produced a shiny scalpel in one dainty hand. Seeing his numbed expression, she proceeded to reach out to his left ankle and began to cut his pants away from that point. James raised his head to watch her automaton-like mechanical movements as she calmly and smoothly sliced through the material, not so much as nicking his skin even once, despite his involuntary jerks. She appeared to be in no hurry.

He noticed with dismay and mounting embarrassment as she worked her way up the inside of his trouser leg, that he had wet himself – a great wet patch had soaked the fabric of his track pants and had smeared on the ancient vinyl beneath. This scenario was taking on a hint of erotic thriller with a taste of psychotic horror! Why did she want him naked? Was she going to eat him? Or was she going to actually eat him? His involuntary response immediately stifled and effectively cancelled by his intense resurgence of fear, and feeling even more naked than before, he watched helplessly as the Nurse removed the remains of the ruined garment – along with his underpants – and folded them into a neat bundle, before placing them precisely on top of an old gurney nearby, beside a shiny metal bedpan. James felt his Adams apple bobbing nervously up and down. She had kept her eyes on him the whole time. *Those eyes. Those. Terrible. Frightening. Black. Eyes.*

Are they contacts? Does it matter? What the hell is this? Was this a prank? He wasn't getting married. He was pretty damned sure he wasn't! He didn't have any close friends here. Enemies? He swallowed again drily. He supposed anyone could have enemies. He couldn't think of any at the time, though. Least of all any with the resources to pull this off! All he could hear above the deafening silence in the room was his raging heart beat and

breathing. An occasional grunt or moan rebounded from his plugged mouth and escaped through his throat.

What the fuck does she want with me? His thoughts ran in an impotent mad circle of expletives and questions that had no answers. *How do I get outta this? Help! Fuck!*

It is at times like this, that people tend to ask what they feel are the ‘important questions’, where they become introspective and consider existential matters. They become concerned with things like who, where, why etc. Did James Booth have enemies? Did he have friends? Was this a prank? If it was, it was being taken a little far! Some say, if they are around afterwards, that their ‘life flashed before their eyes’. It was currently what the people who had no ‘afterwards’ saw that occupied James Booth’s thoughts.

Was Mr. Booth a lawyer or a bank clerk or a loving husband or a doting father? Was he a hero cop? Was he an airline pilot or a university professor? Was he a pastor at the local Baptist church? Did he donate to charities? Was he kind to women, old people or animals? Was he a bigot, a rapist, a murderer – or was he a scam artist or a career criminal? Could he have been a generally nasty person who deserved this?

In a normal, ordinary every day story – say, one about butterflies and warm puppies – the reader celebrates the demise of the bad guy, the villain – and mourns the loss of the good guy... if there is really such a thing. They cheer when the bad guy takes a hit, and they cry when the hero falls – but isn’t the main difference between a hero and a villain often only *slightly* a little more than timing? Or perspective?

The typical readers of such humdrum tales – the sheep who accept the blue pill and swallow it with glee – would rejoice at the death of a bad person who did x, y, or z to deserve – at least in their minds – the fate they meet. To them it all makes sense – this is how it is supposed to go. It is right and proper for the bad guys to meet a nasty, sticky end – not so? No, dear reader – that would be far too mundane a scenario to apply here. And far too easy.

When dissecting a story, most people search for answers within the lines of pretty prose and philosophical ramblings. They look for meaning in the storyline, they look for the hand of Fate, the fingerprints of Destiny – sometimes for the shoeprints – or even, perhaps in his case – the tire-treads of Karma. They ask deep, meaningful emotive questions with – if ever answered correctly – life changing answers. *What was it all about? What was it for? Why is this happening to me?* And so on. Without meaning, life is pretty pointless, isn’t it? Without meaning, there is no point. They seek truth. But the question is: ‘What is the truth?’ The truth, dear reader, is for armchair philosophers and – possibly, for ministers of religion – who deal with the abstract concepts of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ – which are often difficult to define and can be highly subjective in and of themselves. Perhaps it’s best that we stick to facts in this case? And what are the facts?

James Booth was a man, a confused man – a naked man, in more ways than one – tied to a table in a deserted basement, facing... *her*.

The Nurse slowly tilted her head askance, still looking at him – seeming to savor every moment of his torment, and then slowly to the other. Her lips parted slowly, almost hypnotically – and mesmerized, he gawked as the teeth – if they could be called that at all, were revealed. Framed by those lush red lips, they were starkly gray and all of them sharp and vicious looking. Black gums dripping with equally black mucous clung to them, that looked more like flecks of running motor oil than either blood or saliva – or any other bodily fluid that came to mind – dripping slowly from the upper row of teeth, across the maw down to the lower. What could only have been a tongue – mottled brown and purple in the blinding light of the ancient theater lights, pointy and slime covered – flicked and wriggled in the darkness between them. It dramatically stroked the sharp tips of the teeth in a theatric fashion. The pungent reek of decay emanating from it hit him like a blast of hot desert air, reeking like very old, very ripe death. It was right then that what was left of James Booth's hopes sank to the cold hard concrete floor. He knew this was no mere human being – twisted or otherwise – and his repository of expletives completely and utterly failed him.

Then she... IT – closed its mouth and slowly turned and walked very deliberately to the gurney, stopping in front of the bedpan. Very quietly, with its back toward him, it put down the scalpel, reached into the bedpan and produced what looked like an old fashioned bone saw. This it placed onto the gurney, beside the bedpan and continued to produce more baffling and terrifying devices from its shiny fathomless depths.

Meanwhile, preparing himself for a rollercoaster ride into oblivion...and powerless to break free, James Booth's hands clamped around the edge of the base he lay upon, tightly, knuckles whitened. But wait... what was that? There was something small, loose, in the groove between the vinyl padded bed base and the corroded metal frame beneath his right hand. His eyes were locked onto the awful specter before him, which was producing mystery items from the depths of the bedpan like a magician pulling fluffy bunnies out of his magic hat, and lovingly caressing each one before putting it carefully beside the others. His fingers rubbed up against the thing, feeling for some kind of recognizable object that could help him get out of this terrifying predicament.

A sudden sharp stabbing pain in his index finger told him all he needed to know. Carefully, he maneuvered the rusty scalpel blade around, his fingers quivering with urgency, panic and abject terror – careful to not drop it on the floor, since that would seal his doom faster than a slip on a tightrope with no safety net. Getting a grip on the thing wasn't easy, as the droplets of his blood on the rusty surface made it slippery and difficult to hold with the finger tips on one hand. Very carefully, he began to wiggle his hand in maddeningly tiny movements, slicing away at the strap pinning down his right wrist to the bed – while he watched, spell bound, as the Nurse carried on examining each medical instrument – or instrument of torture with morbid distraction. As the antique restraint clamping his wrist to the bed began to fray and loosen, his hopes began to soar!

Come on! Come on! Wiggle wiggle. Almost through!

Just at that very moment, his right arm straining to cut away at the strap, his aching fingers fumbled the little blade and it slipped away! In frantic silence, he searched for it with his fingers. If it was out of reach - !

I'm fucked! I'm dead! This is it! He thought.

A moment later, thankfully, he found it again in the same little furrow between the frame and the padding. Trying very hard to not release the sigh of relief he really wanted to, he carefully gripped the blade again and resumed the tedious process of cutting. The last strands frayed away and parted with a very faint snap. The Nurse was still stroking a toy – something that looked like a chest spreader – back toward him. Very carefully, and as quickly as he could, he reached over with his aching numb right arm to pass the small blade to his still restrained left hand, before returning his right to the same position. The strap around his wrist, still tight, made it seem as though nothing had changed. Very carefully, he gripped the blade with the fingers of his left hand, cutting away at the strap. His mouth hurt – the ball gag thing was very definitely outstaying its welcome. *What kind of people wear these things for fun?* In the meantime, he'd lost focus on the Nurse – noting with sudden surprise that it wasn't at the gurney anymore. Where –

A sudden detection of the presence close by his right ear made him freeze. There was nothing metaphorical about the very real chill that ran up his spine. It was right there, leaning forward, craning over him, its face so close he could feel no warmth at all being reflected back at him. He listened very intently. He couldn't hear breathing! *Is it even alive? What is it?*

Those vacant black eyes moved – he couldn't see any irises or pupils – somehow the eyes reminded him of a rodent's – all solid color, black as night, but the surface of them moved towards him and held him in their gaze. This creature was however, a lot more menacing and scary than any rodent he'd kept as a childhood pet. *Wiggle wiggle. Just keep cutting.*

It sidled round the bed, high heels clicking faintly on the floor until it was at his right side, looking down at him like a microbe under a lens, squirming. Just keep cutting! Keep cutting! It slowly raised one hand, holding up what looked like something designed to saw through bone using two hands, before theatrically placing the cold metallic thing lightly on his chest, flat, and turning its head to enjoy his reaction.

Cut! Cut! Cut! Motherfucker! Mother-fucker! Moth-er-fuck-er! His frantic thoughts went as he surreptitiously sliced through the last strands holding his left wrist to the bed. He knew he would have to free his feet too, to have any realistic chance of escape – but one step at a time.

Considering how tired his wrists and fingers were from cutting, it surprised him how quickly and smoothly he was able to use them to seize his opportunity. The breastplate cutter was cold and heavy in his grasp, but when he grabbed it and swung it at his tormentor in one smooth movement, he was rewarded with the satisfying sensation of unbelievably sharp surgical steel slashing through clothing and the flesh beneath it!

The white figure stumbled backwards a few steps, making some unexpectedly chilling and ghastly wheezing noises. He sat up, and leaned forward to grapple with the bonds tying down his ankles. Now able to use his hands freely, he all but tore them loose in seconds! In the moments that followed, he struggled to his feet, dizzily lurching into the theater light assembly, sending the thing squeaking a few feet across the floor on its decrepit castors – looking like a surreal gothic nightmare. Light shifted, shadows moved, and – bone saw raised in his right hand – he whirled round and round trying to spot his adversary. The Nurse had vanished.

There was blood – of a sort – on the floor a few feet away, where he'd seen it stumble. A black, sticky looking ooze. But no creature. He paused to yank the god awful gag thing free, and threw it across the chamber with disgust. As the sound of the ball bouncing across the distant concrete floor faded away, something touched on the naked skin of his shoulder. Reacting immediately, he saw what it was. Black. Dripping. He looked up.

“What the - ” He breathed.

It was on the ceiling, mouth moving, grinning, not a voice or a whisper – more a raspy would-be voice – rising in deathly laughter. If he wasn't already so terrified, he would've screamed, but there was no time. The creature dropped on top of him, hands outstretched like claws, jaws open and yawning wide like a shark.

He side stepped as quickly as he could, the thing almost missing him as it descended – but dragging him down to the dusty floor by the legs. The saw was flung from his grip as he struck the floor, hard! Kicking out and twisting, he slipped free from its grasp, and then with bravery which surprised even him, he lunged forward and pounced on top of the creature, kneeling and punching it wherever he could get a shot in. He straddled the flailing hissing and squeaking thing beneath him, face-down, like it was a demon-possessed horse, ignoring swipes from its claws as it tried to tear the flesh from his bones. His fists became a blur of force and motion as he poured his anger, outrage, fear and hate into the task. His head whirled as – screaming – he gripped the now mussed up and tousled black curls with both hands – and began slamming that horrid face into the unforgiving floor. Black ooze marked the floor as he felt the skull beneath the nasty countenance crack and begin to give under his hands. He didn't stop until the white uniform – now completely smeared with grime, dust and black ooze and slime – went completely limp.

Exhausted, he sank back, sitting on his feet and on top of the still shapely rump of his fallen foe, breathing heavily, muscles quivering with relief, elation and disbelief. Feeling elated, he gave the aforementioned deceased rump a playful smack. Then he paused to think about what had just happened.

“What the fuck?” He breathed. Then, as the reality set in: *“What the fuck!”*

A movement caught his eye. Several fingers on its left hand were twitching, in what he thought were probably death throes. Wiping sweat from his face with one slime-smeared

hand, while reaching onto the floor behind him for the fallen bone saw with the other. He brought it down hard, cleanly severing the limb above the wrist with one blow.

Then, putting off the mounting urge to get the hell out of there as fast as his legs could carry him – momentarily absorbed in his morbid fascination, James Booth reached out towards its misshapen head, first moving the wisps of dead black hair out of the way with one hand, then after putting the blade down, with two. The Nurse's black hollow eyes were open, still staring vacantly, chillingly. The mouth was closed, full red lips impossibly intact and not bashed to smithereens as they should have been. Its face was smeared with the black blood it had been lying in that had pooled on the floor. The flesh was cold. Ice cold. *This is impossible!*

The thought ringing in his head like a church bell struck, the creature's head slowly began to move again. It turned toward him, expressionlessly, past the boundary of human anatomy – until it was facing back toward him at a complete 180 degrees! The jagged, sharp mouth opened and the thing began hissing and squeaking as the head lunged toward him!

Screaming, more from shock than anger, he raised the blade again, and brought the instrument down sharply on its neck, severing the repulsive thing's head completely. Still shaking, he struggled to his feet, dropped the weapon noisily on the floor and looked for the exit. Stumbling into the gurney, he ran past it, his bare feet making wet slapping noises on the floor, like raw, wet pieces of meat smacking the top of a butcher's block, trailing messy footprints behind him.

After he made it through the door and into the maze of underground corridors and rooms that spread beneath the old hospital, he ran and ran for all he was worth. Naked as he was, he didn't care. He felt free. Scared, shocked – but free. Triumphant too. Elated.

He didn't know what it was back there that had imprisoned him – or how it had caught him in the first place – and he still couldn't remember where he was and what he'd been doing *before*, but he was glad to be alive. Running felt good. And as the dark shadows of darkened doorways and openings flashed past in the near darkness, he didn't care how he was going to explain being naked and drenched in – whatever this was... or his bruised and swollen knuckles, to anyone who asked. Alone in the dark with his thoughts, running in the pale light from isolated and flickering light fittings, the only sound he could hear was his breathing and his pounding footsteps as they echoed into the void...

James Booth's eyes flickered open. The lights were blinding. They were hot too, not like modern lights at all. They were blazing, almost singing him through the gaps in the broken lens covers. He struggled through the confusion. He remembered the car accident. It was night time, he... *Wait*. There was something awfully familiar about this...

What do you think, dear reader? Did James Booth deserve to be in the situation in which he finds himself? What evil could he have done to deserve it? Or what good? Was he – or was he not – a 'good guy'? Perhaps he was neither? Perhaps a little of both, as we all are? In the end, either option is really quite irrelevant.

The fact is that any one of us could be a James Booth. *Any* one. And that – for me at least – is the essence of the horror *in* horror.

Here it is, dear reader, where we part ways and leave the horrible halls of this decrepit dungeon, which echoes with the resounding cries of the doomed, and the faint clicks of the heels of the damned... And while this endless night drags on, as it always does, the city slumbers its usual restless blissfully ignorant slumber – and if you listen very carefully, there is the faint sound of distant screaming.

Sweet dreams.

THE END

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Thanks!

Christina Engela

About the Author



Christina Engela is one of South Africa's most unique and skilled storytellers, having written 13 novellas in three science fiction series, and also several non-fiction titles. Best known for her realistic characterization and for casting fully-fleshed-out LGBT characters in leading roles, Christina brings her wealth of personal experience to each of her stories. With several new offerings already in the pipeline, including several standalone titles, 2020 is bound to be a busy year for her fans!

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