

SOCIAL WORK

"If you'd like to speak to someone
About his condition—his
Situation—"
Said the very pretty nurse as I emerged
From the aseptic room, "There's a social worker. I think
She can see you now.

"Oh—"
She added, smiling
At my awkwardness, "you can put
The booties
And gown in this bin. The gloves and mask
Go over here, in the trash."

The very pretty
Nurse returned to her paperwork behind the efficient
Octagonal
Desk, each side facing a window that displayed
A patient prone upon
A sterile bed
And breathing
Only with the muted mechanical wheeze
Of a ventilator. As I removed
My soft-shelled
Carapace, placing each fouled item in its proper
Receptacle, I asked her
If she'd been taking care of him
Since he arrived—had she
Been his nurse
The whole time?

"Your friend?" she said, looking
Up from her chart. "Yes. He's been here
Quite a long time now.
He's a doll, except when he—when we try—
But the social worker
Can tell you
All about that. The consulting room
Is just down that little

Corridor, second
Door to the left. The social worker said
She'd meet you
There."

The social worker was setting up temporary
Shop in the small office—
Just four walls
And a desk
With a chair on either side. "I'm so glad
You came to visit William,"
She said, pulling
A thick stack
Of files from her briefcase and offering me
The chair with arms. "You're only
The second
Visitor he's had. The nurse
Tells me
You didn't know where he was."

No one knew, I said, and then explained
That I meant no one
In the neighborhood. "Of course," she said.
"And how long
Have
You known William?"

"Only six weeks," I told her.

"Six weeks?" she said, her eyes becoming wary.
"You understand
That he's...?"

"Of course," I said, embarrassed. "That's right. I meant
I only knew him
For six weeks. I first met him
Three months ago—but he's been missing
For half
That time."