Deanna Holford: First Place Creative
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Untitled

The eight-foot thick walls do not completely muffle the repetitive atomic explosions that propel us further and further into space. Cabin fever gleams from every man's eyes, and each eruption is like another drip in this water torture. Two months ago we were just bored and cranky, and every minute felt like an hour. Eventually we split up. I can not listen to their goddamn stories anymore, or look at their sweaty faces. Their red eyes remind me of the planet we are tumbling towards.

The room with all the pillows and cots and lamps bolted to the tables is my territory. I jammed the door shut. Sometimes I wonder where the rest sleep. I also wonder what will happen once my crate of food runs dry. I carve math problems into the wall with a knife and solve them. It passes time.

Orion is so quiet - except for the ship's beating heart. It disturbs me that only a few feet of insulation and metal separate me from the black, heavy universe. A window can drive a man crazy in space. I pretend the four corners of my cot are the entire world. My galaxy ends with the walls. And I do not know what the other men are doing.

A stink is seeping from between the floor and the door. Do the toilets in each room need to be emptied into space again? Or are the scientists in great need of their deodorant sticks, which are locked in with me? The atomic eruptions are a clock ticking, counting down the time I have left. We don't have day and night on Orion, but we can count the seconds drain away one by one. I slowly eat my last box of cereal and think of survival stories about people eating their leather shoes. I have a gourmet menu of paper, cotton, carpet, wax, and wood. I can eat the scientist's cots. I can lick their deodorant like candy. I graduated from Cambridge, damnit, and I should be able to think of something - anything! - to soften this situation.

I plan to trade a bag of personal items for food in the kitchen. My knife is in hand - just in case. Venturing into the hallway, a reeking smell hits me like a humid day. Most of the lights are off but I can see that all of the doors in sight are wide open. Walking softly, I pass empty rooms. I should not have assumed that each man locked himself into a solitary room like I had that angry, inhuman night.

My heart churns adrenaline. Shadows make me jump. I am aware of every noise and object, and I am breathing so heavily that surely I will be detected. Yet no one enters my path. I discover the lights in the kitchen are off.

The refrigerator is open and empty - yellow, humming, and warm. Orion's explosions melt into one note. I desperately scan the room. Sitting in the corner, obscured by a chair, is man with knees pressed against his well-fed stomach. He is not looking at me.
I follow his eyes up to the ceiling high above. Oh, what can I say in response to that scene of meat hooks and maggots and mutilation? I can not move. I did not speak for a long time.

"Where are their legs, Tom?" But I knew where they had gone.