

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

Mary Ellen Lives

THE WAITING ROOM

She sits on the floor of the upstairs bathroom, her back against the porcelain tub, knees hugged to her chest, feet poised before a green portable heater. She stares at the coils glowing within. It is winter. A draft of cold air leaks through the small window on the wall beside the toilet. The square of blackened mesh that covers the front of the heater and guards the element is dented from years of abuse. A scent of burning dust circulates through the room.

The sculpted rug beneath her feet is white. It matches the snow outside and the pedestal sink in front of her. The bathroom floor tiles are squares of black and white. They match the tiles that run horizontal along the walls of the bathroom, separating the white painted top from the white wainscoted bottom. She stares into the heater imagining spring. A runner on the track team, she dreams of high school meets on chilly mornings, of winning awards. She lets a boy in her speech class cheat off her tests and hopes he will ask her to the prom in May.

"Carmichael." The name being called brings her out of memory. "Tom Carmichael."

A man sitting in a paisley print armchair beside a potted plant puts his paper aside and stands. He is thin and walks to the nurse with cautioned steps. "How are you today?" the nurse asks. The door shuts behind them.

She looks up at the clock. She has only been in the waiting room twenty minutes. It seems much longer. "Geez," she says.

She doesn't mean to say it out loud, but the woman sitting across from her smiles. The woman has sallow skin and hollow cheeks. A scarf is tied around her head like a turban. She knows this woman has lost her hair and she feels guilty. She has thick, black hair streaked with silver. It's still damp from the gym shower. She has just come from her workout: yoga, light weights, treadmill. She does this every morning.

"Regular exercise is important," the doctor told her. "Keeps the blood flowing."

"Richardson." Another nurse stands holding open the door. An anti-septic infirmary smell invades the waiting room.

The door leads to a hallway, which branches off into other hallways, other doors. The nurses have to lead the patients to the right room for their treatments or they will get lost, wander into rooms not for them. It happened to her the first time she was there. The hematologists and oncologists are together in this building, an adjunct to the hospital. There for a whole blood transfusion, she accidentally walked into the chemotherapy room. A line of patients were hooked up to IV bags. Some had their eyes closed, their heads against the high backed tweedy lounge chairs. Some seemed intent on the framed watercolors that covered the walls, seasonal landscapes of flowers and fields, bright orange leaves and iced branches. Some stared at the ceiling. One younger man had on ear phones. A few gave her welcoming smiles. She hurried out.

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After that, she was careful not to fall behind the nurse, not to try to find her own way. These treatments were a new thing. Though her platelets had been out of balance since her forties, she hadn't needed transfusions or even medication. Her condition worsened after her sixtieth birthday. "That's fairly common in patients with Essential Thrombocytosis," the hematologist told her. "Why is it Essential?" she had asked.

"Fallon, Betsy Fallon." The first nurse is back with her clipboard. An elderly woman uses a cane to walk through the open door. "How are you today," the nurse asks. The door closes behind them.

She glances at the clock again: twenty-eight minutes. A book lies in her lap, *Steinbeck's Travels with Charley*. But she can not concentrate on the words. She glances out the long window beside the entryway. An overcast day with flat clouds. She thinks again of the upstairs bathroom in the house where she grew up. It was her special place as a teenager, a place of dreaming and hoping in winter when she could switch on the little green heater and stare into the coils. Downstairs her parents are watching TV, Ed Sullivan perhaps. She can hear them arguing.

Then she remembers finding the dirty magazines tucked between towels in the bathroom linen closet. Her oldest brother Tom had come home from the Army. Six years older than her, he'd been in college when drafted. Tom would have been sent to Vietnam so he enlisted and went to Germany instead.

The image is now clear in her mind: unreadable foreign language splashed in red letters across photos of naked woman, beefy and blond, bent in obscene poses. She is as shocked now as she was when they first ogled at her from their cheap, glossy pages smelling of soap. And she realizes for the second time that this bathroom is her brother's special place too, his place for hoping and dreaming. She laughs out loud at the absurdity. The woman, whose bald head is wrapped in a hand tied turban, is startled at the outburst. Then, unaccountably, the woman laughs too.

Outside the front window, it has started to snow.