

Waiting Room

by James Tipper

It seems like I've been here forever. How long it has been--how long I've been sitting here, drifting in and out of sleep, I don't know. What I do know is that nobody has cared to change the magazines in a very long time. I'm pretty sure that Tom Selleck is not the "Sexiest Man Alive" anymore.

"Wait a minute," I mumble down the front of my shirt, "How old is this thing anyway?"

I turn the magazine around in my hands. There doesn't seem to be a date--in fact, none of them have dates, but they're all dated. A fitness mag, dog-eared and greasy, touts the benefits of "Jazzercise" while still another poses the question "Is Oliver North looking for a way out?"

"Not since the eighties," I confirm to myself, astonished. "Cheap ass son of a..."

I've already flipped over most of the magazines to see if they had originally been mailed to The Doc, or to one of his nurses. Nothing. All of the posting labels have been peeled off. I'm not surprised. I'm just about fidgety enough to peel off my own skin, one layer at a time.

The weirdest thing is that I can't remember when I got here. That doesn't surprise me. I'm so tired. I may have been sleeping for hours--days, for all I know. And, I don't have my watch on. Funny, I always wear my watch, but then again, I haven't been myself lately. There's also no clock on the wall. I guess your time doesn't matter here.

I would ask the receptionist what is causing the incredibly rude delay, but she'd only think I'm passive-aggressive, looking to get to the top of the list to see The Doc. It must be the oldest trick in the book. She'll sigh and placate me with a lie, and I will accept whatever she says because I'm desperate. She knows it. I know it.

Still, it's been a long time, even for a doctor's office.

No, that's it. I'm going to ask, nonchalantly as possible, and hope she doesn't bite my head off. Who cares if she thinks I'm a noodle? Yes, I think I will. I really don't appreciate being made to wait, especially when I'm as sick as...

Well, I AM sick, terribly sick...but, I probably don't LOOK sick. That's the thing. She doesn't know if I am or not. She'll give me the ol' evil eye, the mistrustful glare, simply because I can't prove it to her. Isn't that always the case? I run a fever, puke my guts out, and then once I get to the doctor I look fine. Now they'll think I'm just a hypo, or worse--a junkie looking for some quick scrip. Either way, I'm giving them five more minutes, and then I'm going to demand some kind of explanation.

I'm bored, terribly bored. That's the worst part. I've read these moldering magazines a hundred times. It seems that way at least. No wonder I can't stay awake. It doesn't help that I'm alone. Not that I would strike up a conversation with someone else in a waiting room--I'm not really the type, but today I just might. Yet, no one else has appeared.

The whole time I've been sitting here, nobody has come in or out of either door. Neither the front door nor the one leading to The Doc has budged. I haven't heard anyone either. It's

quiet, perfectly quiet, as if I have cotton in my ears. I've even wiggled them with my finger to check, half-thinking I've gone deaf.

I hum a tune, although it couldn't really be considered a tune; it sounds more like the mumblings of a crazy person. I've stopped doing it now, at least I hope I have.

The room is not that big, probably twenty feet square, with only five chairs backed up against the ochre-colored walls. There's only one painting on the wall and it's as ugly as sin. It's a series of colored dots, like Jackson Pollack's smock must have looked if he ever wore one: purple, yellow, red, orange. It looks like nothing and everything. Pretentious crap if you ask me. I'm sure they paid too much for it. Money to burn, doctors have.

Across from where I sit is the receptionist's counter. A pair of frosted glass sliding windows is pushed to one side. All I can see is the top of the receptionist's head, her pile of brown hair turned away and hunched over her work--whatever that might be. The phone doesn't ring and she says nothing. I can't hear any typing either. No one comes to see her from the back and no one can be seen past where she sits. She just sits, hunched.

I thought she was asleep or maybe even dead for a minute, but every so often, if you listen really hard, you can hear her suck in a breath through her teeth. She may be crying. Maybe, but I don't think so. It sounds more like surprise. She could be reading something in her lap, something that shocks her on occasion. Whatever it is, it causes this faint blast of air to come from her, like an expulsion through gritted teeth. It's the only thing that breaks the silence.

God, are they ever going to call my name? I think it's time to ask this lady what the hell is going on.

Why am I nervous? This is ridiculous. Still, I'm certainly not looking forward to walking over there, talking to her again, being scolded like some schoolboy. I can recall talking to her once before. I think. Well, yes, I must have. It must have been when I first arrived. She was in a foul mood, from what I can remember, but my recollection is faint, strangely fuzzy.

Anyway, I said but one thing and one thing only--my name: Lawrence Aldridge. That, I do remember. She never looked up. She told me to sign in and to "have a seat", slowly and with exaggerated patience, like I was some kindergarten brat and she was my teacher instructing me on the ways of the adult world. And all the while she did not turn to face me, did not even deign to look over her shoulder. I stared at the back of her head as my vision swam and my fever pulsed through my head in a swirl of hot wind. I walked away miserably, through air like molasses, as if in a dream.

Then, she had hissed; that noise, a wet sibilance like a bubble of spit being sucked back into her mouth--a mouth probably wet and ringed with smeared lipstick from the sound of it. But that time the hiss sounded derisive. Intolerant. I thought she might've been either steeling herself for, or restraining herself from, leaping over the counter and wringing my neck like a dishrag.

She still hasn't moved though. I'm eyeing her now. Why should I be scared of her? But...I am. It's ridiculous. She's just a receptionist.

...a receptionist who does nothing, who doesn't move, who percolates like a coffee pot.

I'll wait. I'll give her five more minutes. I'm just so tired. I really don't want to deal with this. Maybe my fever is spiking again. Getting riled up will only make me feel worse. I should relax.

Suddenly, I'm startled awake. I fell asleep, but for how long? A wave of panic flutters through me like a swarm of hyped-up little gnats, tickling my nerves. How long have I missed work? When was the last time I called in? I paw at my pockets. No phone. Not surprised. No watch and no phone.

Wow, I must have been out of it when I left home. Then again, I would have to be to see a doctor. I don't care for doctors or hospitals,

I close my eyes again. I grab for a solid thought. When did it begin?

There had been a couple at my desk, youngish, mid-twenties, when the tickle in my throat started. I fought through it. On and on I went about the loan program we had to offer, and how they could get in at an unheard of, rock-bottom interest rate. I cleared my throat, but it didn't help much.

Soon, the tickle became a lump of hot coal in my windpipe. Within a half hour, it had become a pile of crumbled razor blades. The couple asked me if I was alright. I lied and told them I was fine. They looked skeptical. I needed this sale. I smiled in reassurance.

"First-time buyers are like fish in a pond," Ron Little had told me. "The slightest shadow or one wrong move and--POOF--like a trout feeding at the bank of a stream, they're gone."

Ron Little is the top-of-the-boards in sales at our branch. He just leased a Dodge Viper with the Chick Magnet option, no less. So who was I not to listen to his Jedi crap? Now that Beth left me, my own Viper could come in handy indeed. But Ron and I were tied for the month; with that couple's home loan--if I didn't blow it, spook them with my germs--I would have finally beaten him. Beaten the master.

So, I sucked it up, hung in there and flapped my gums until I thought my sore throat would just stop working and I would be left gaping like a sock puppet. By the time the couple signed for their 2/28 loan--a sucker deal if you ask me--I felt like the walking dead. But good ol' Ron Little had been left in the dust. I had done it, and with one day left in the month to spare--tomorrow happened to fall on Ron's day off. I had snatched the crown from the head of the King. That bonus money was as good as mine.

I shook the client's hand, a Mr. and Mrs. Kyle Seaver, and wished them well on their new home. And boy, are they going to need it. Mr. Kyle Seaver better sell a hell of a lot more espresso and scones by the time that rate adjusts. God speed, Mr. Seaver.

I didn't come in to work the next day. Instead, I spent the day trembling under my soaked blankets. I remember stumbling to the bathroom and fishing for the thermometer, but I couldn't find it. Beth had probably taken that too. She had packed anything she could get her hateful little hands around in her haste to be rid of me, and it was common for me to find out what was missing in the house only by happenstance. I'm sure I won't know the extent of the petty thievery for months.

What a bitch, taking the thermometer.

I shot air through my teeth and was ready to tip the drawer out and overturn it onto the tiled floor of the bathroom when I found it. Peevishly, I shook the mercury down and jammed it under my tongue.

Bad news. I muscled off the top of a jar of Tylenol and heard only a few precious capsules clattering in the bottom. Three to be exact. For some reason this infuriated me. Why would there be an odd number of Tylenol? Beth had taken only one at some point. She had left me with only one-and-a-half doses. A half-dose. A fucking half-dose.

I wasn't thinking right; I knew it. I had to calm down and start acting like a 34 year old man. I had to take care of myself and that meant not working up a lather while my brain was sautéing in its own juices. I limped to the bed. I pulled the covers to my chin, my thoughts a hot cyclone of self-pity and despair.

I slept, I slept for days.

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Hold everything. Enough with the daydreams--I swore I saw the door to The Doc move. I mean, the handle, I saw the handle move. I stare at it.

Hope lifts me briefly, lifts my back out of the chair. I blink hard. But, just like always, the door remains closed. The handle is as still as a sculpture. My spirits crash, my shoulders slump. The room is sepulchral and still. I blow out my breath, slow and steady. It rattles through my tight chest.

I could die of pneumonia while I'm sitting here. I could code. Then what? Would the receptionist even notice? Un-fucking-likely. She is not even looking at me. No one has even taken my vitals. No one knows how bad off I might be. They don't care.

I slump back in my chair and split my attention between the two doors, one to my right and one to my left. Waiting. Waiting. If only someone would come in. If only the phone would ring. If only that woman would type a letter. I have to prove to myself...

...that she isn't dead.

...that I'm not the only patient. Am I the only patient? I must be. Well, I can see why. Who would come back here after being subjected to this?

That's it. I get up and smooth my pants and shirt with my sweaty palms. My legs are rubbery and I totter on them briefly before the rush of blood clears from my head. I walk to the frosted glass window, still open to reveal the back of the receptionist's head. There is a little ledge with a clipboard and a stack of business cards. I pluck one of the cards from the Lucite holder and glare at it sharply. It reads:

Dr. A. Stan, M.D.

Chairman of Internal Medicine

"A" is for what? Is it Arthur? Andrew? Abdul? Asshole? Inconsiderate Asshole? I guess it doesn't matter to us peons. I'm to call him Doctor or Dr. Stan--that is, if he ever graces me with his presence. Beside the doctor's name is that familiar symbol: a winged staff wrapped with two snakes. I used to know the name of that symbol, it's Greek I think. Caddoosh...us? That's not it, but it's something close to that. I slip the card into my pocket.

A wet hiss comes from the direction of the receptionist. Still, she is turned away, hunched. She does not acknowledge that I am "hovering"--for that is what she would call it, undoubtedly.

I rap my knuckles softly on the counter and appraise the woman's back with narrowed eyes, looking for a reaction. Another gurgling hiss comes from her--that sucking sound. It's sharp and wet. Now, I'm pretty sure I know what it is: a nasty cold or some kind of allergy.

Ain't that a kick in the pants? There's irony for you. I might even laugh if I wasn't so murderously indignant. Is irony ever really funny? No, it is always a warning sign. Don't we always stick around to point it out and show how clever we are? What we should really do is run, run and not look back: the barber with a bowl cut, the toothless dentist.

There's another wet burst of air from her. Not inspiring. This doctor has got to be a quack. He's certainly a rude sonofabitch. This woman must be miserable. No wonder she...

...will bite my head off. She may be hungry.

Words fail and I snap my mouth closed. I turn my attention to the clipboard; it has but one name scrawled upon the sheet of paper gripped in its metal jaws: my own. I can't remember signing in. I must have been bad--bad with fever, I mean. The scrawl on the page does not stay within the lines. Instead, it slopes downwards towards the end of my name, like a drunkard's. Like a child's. Like I was barely able to heft the weight of the pencil at the time. It alarms me to see it there on the page, to see my name written with such disgrace. I shudder and swallow, forcing a lump down my shredded windpipe. A chill wracks me. The scrawl before me looks like the final effort of a dying man.

Lawrence Ald...ridge...

Something I hadn't noticed at first glance: the pencil line trails downwards, the lead pressed faintly to the page where two words are written in my hand at the very bottom of the page:

ASK HER

Fear floods my simmering blood in an ice bath. Suddenly, I would just rather run, take my chances. I squeeze shut my eyes and open them slowly. But, the words are still there.

Why did I write that? It IS my writing. I must have been out of my mind with fever. Why? It meant nothing then.

It means something now, doesn't it?

Ask her? Fine. I will. I will ask her. There is nothing to be afraid of.

My lips part and words croak from my furnace of a throat. My voice sounds miles away.

"Excuse me? I've been here a long time."

Silence.

Only a wet hiss answers.

I grip the counter before me and carefully peer over the ledge and through the open window. Her hunched shoulders are squared, her head down. I scan the little office: floor to ceiling file cabinets, a computer monitor--its screen black.

"Sit down, sir," she says.

I jump. My head jerks back. My heart hammers. The woman didn't move a muscle though. She did not look up at me or turn around. Her voice was cold, free of even the most bridled civility. It was pure intolerance, it was hateful.

"Take a seat, sir." she says again.

My mouth works feebly like a caught fish writhing on the deck of a boat. My balls shrink into my body. In that moment I was convinced that not only would she not care in the least if I walked out the door and never came back, but she didn't care whether I lived or died. In fact, it sounded like she had a pretty clear preference on that subject.

Her voice came again, measured and severe, as if she were training a dog.

"What's the hurry, sir?" she says.

She speaks into her lap, only her voice seemed to be...

...she is inside of you.

...coming from somewhere inside of my head. Her words are in my head, like a faint radio signal from some other world.

"He is a busy man, Mr. Aldridge," she continues in icy measure. "A very busy man. He knows you are here. He will not forget about you. You can count on that. You can take that to your bank and cash it. So, why don't you just take your fucking seat."

I am shaking now, shocked to the point of speechlessness. A moan leaks from my throat. My mouth works hopelessly, words forming and dying. I guess that is what happens when your worst fears are realized; it feels like this. My defenses are simply gone. I'm disarmed. I'm...

...very afraid.

...dizzy again. I have to sit down. Who am I kidding? They have me by the short hairs. I am sick, sick as a dog, maybe sicker than I have ever been. Where am I going to go? I need drugs. I need help. My legs buckle and I catch myself by slapping my palm on the ledge before the receptionist's window. She doesn't flinch. Slowly, and with a thick misery that feels like piss-warm syrup in my guts, I shuffle back across the room and take my seat. I cross my arms, hugging myself. I feel as if I were baking from the inside.

My thoughts spin out of control: I want to go home now. I don't even care if I die, I just don't want to die here. I need to go. I paw at my pockets. No keys. Wait...

I remember a little of what happened. I had called a pharmacy that made home deliveries the day before, and bolstered by a fresh dose of Tylenol, I had called a cab to take me to the emergency room. I was in no position to drive. Sure, I had friends--a couple at least. I'm sure one of them would have taken me, but I didn't want to be seen. I certainly didn't need a lecture on why I didn't get the Ape Flu vaccination like the rest of them. So, I forged ahead, alone. Straight to the emergency room I went.

Okay, this is where it gets fuzzy. I suppose the energy it took to make myself presentable, pull on some fresh clothes and confront the fluorescent lights of the E.R. had done me in. I don't remember much after that. I remember orange, plastic chairs. I can recall a silent basketball game on a television suspended from the ceiling.

I must have been in the E.R.'s waiting room for some time, but I don't remember waiting for the doctor once they had called my name. Then again, I never stayed awake for too long. Perhaps, I waited forever once they gave me a room. I must have curled up onto the crunchy paper of the examination table and rode the flow of lava in my mind into the throat of darkness.

I remember a man with a blue mask over his mouth. He was peering into my eyes, pulling the lids open with a cool, meaty finger.

"Lawrence?" asked the man.

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Are they calling my name? My eyes pop open. Dr. Stan's dreary little waiting room swims into focus. Thank God, finally they're calling my name.

I shimmy with my elbows to sit upright in the chair, my face lit with expectation. I blink and look at the door to The Doc, expecting to see a nurse holding a chart waiting for me to respond. But there is no one there. The door is closed. I flick my eyes to the receptionist across the room and through the partition. As always, she is motionless. I see nothing but the back of her brown hair. I tilt my head, listening. I do not hear my name, but I do hear music.

Faint and crackling, through the unseen overhead speakers, I hear music. Had it been there before? Of course it hadn't. I would have heard it. Someone has just turned it on. It's...

...coming from inside my head.

...distant, at the very edge of hearing:

Our house is a very, very fine house. With two cats in the yard...

My eyes, numb in their sockets, loll upwards to scan the corners of the ceiling. No speakers.

Life used to be so hard. Now everything is easy 'cause of you...

Then it is gone. Shut off. Wherever it had come from, it was gone now. Maybe the speakers were somewhere in the walls, or maybe my brain has finally poached in its own heat. I suppose that's the most likely explanation. Can a fever melt things inside of you?

Frantically, my eyes scan the room. I don't know how much longer I can last. My clothes are wet. I'm very cold now. A sound, ghostly and distant like a whale song, rises up from my miserable depths. I hug myself and rock. My vision swims and I find myself staring at the painting hanging to my right, the Pollock knock-off, the one with the crazy mess of colored dots and...letters. The dots made letters. Why hadn't I seen it before?

...it wasn't like that before. It has changed.

But, the two words are there now, plain as they can be, made of stippled orange, red and purple. My breath catches, a cold hand seems to wrap around my heart and squeeze. I mouth the words I see floating through the colored dots on the canvas...

ASK HER

My mind seems to be groaning, stuck in hot taffy, its gears seizing.

I mutter into the thick air, "But...that's what I wrote..."

I have to see the clipboard again.

I'll look at it one more time, then I'm going to leave. I don't care where I go, but I'm getting out of here. I grab the arms of my chair and lift my body to stand. My arms tremble with the weight, they tremble with fear. I'm panting now, like a dog left to bake in a hot car. That's it. I'll tell the woman to go to hell and then I'll leave. I falter. Why does the check-in counter look so far away?

Because it has moved.

My step is unsure and I lean over and brace myself, palms on my thighs. I take a deep breath, straighten up again and stagger towards the counter. I reach out for it and almost fall

forward. The counter is suddenly beneath my hand and I grip it tight. A weak sound of victory rattles from my throat. The woman pays me no attention. She is still turned away. I hear another wet hiss coming from her. And then, another.

I grab the clipboard and raise it to my face.

Lawrence Ald...ridge...

...and then the faint line falling to the bottom of the page where it says:

DO IT. ASK HER

"But, it didn't say 'do it' last time," I say aloud. My voice whines like a rusty hinge. "What's going on? It didn't say that! I know it didn't!"

Ask her? You bet your ass I will. Goddamn this! This is madness!

I scream: "What in hell is going on here!"

I stare at the back of her head.

A wet hiss answers me.

"DO YOU HEAR ME?" I scream, my knuckles white upon the counter. "What in hell is going on?"

"You're right," she says.

"Wha..." I say, weakly, confused. "What do you mean...?"

The chair creaks as she turns to face me. I scream. Her eyes are huge, blood-rimmed saucers.

Something is all wrong. Something is...

My mind struggles to comprehend what I'm seeing.

"Oh...no...God no..." I cry, cringing and backing away.

She has no eyelids. Bits of wispy fringe hang from where someone, or something, has torn her eyelids off. The tattered flesh flutters above ghastly wide sockets. The red-rimmed whites of her eyes are dotted with pulsing black pupils, like rotted fried eggs. Her face is dripping with some kind of clear liquid.

I see her reach down and grab something. Her lap is full of little bottles. She lifts one and staring at me with those unblinking eyes, squirts the contents of the bottle onto her cornea with a wet hiss.

"No..." the word trembles on my lips. I raise a hand.

She sees my fear. Her lips part in a hungry smile. Then, her static eyes, staring like a long dead fish, fix on me and she stands. Countless tiny plastic bottles of saline tumble from her lap. On the floor beside her, I see the box the little bottles came from. There are only two bottles left in the box. She sees me looking at them. She sticks out her lip in a burlesque pout, her shoulders shrugging "oh well". Her wet face glistens and her lunatic grin stretches wider.

Pleading, I repeat my question in the faintest whisper, my heart pounding at its cage: "What in hell is going on..."

"Hell, Mr. Aldridge," says the woman. She nabs one of the final saline bottles from the box, raises it to her face and with one blast, empties its contents into one staring red eye. She lets the spent bottle slip from her hand.

"Hell," she says again. "Hell is what is going on."

My fingers slip from the counter and I fall to my knees. The receptionist leans over the counter and stares down at me.

“He will see you now,” she says.

From somewhere behind me, I hear the groaning of hinges. Darkness falls over the place where I sit on the floor. I look up and scream.

The door that leads to the doctor has opened.