REFLECTIONS

2005 Creative Writing Contest Honorable Mention

THE WAITING ROOM

"I got worried," he says and puts down his magazine. "Couldn't make it? The flu is going around and they're offering free shots. In the clinic upstairs where they take the blood."

"No, it's not that, I'm fine, just too much snow and the driveway's buried under, and these days I'm just sooo tired, you know? Too much city traffic."

"Saved you a spot."

I find a seat across from him, the only one left. The room is packed with people I know by face, sniffing into their Kleenexes. The Greek, matronly woman holds on to a preposterous brown wig that's always slipping off; she sits where she always does, hunched over in the only comfy chair in the corner. I smell feta cheese and spinach. Flour on their clothes. Her middle-aged daughter is with her—she always comes, at least every day in the last week I've been here. *Mama*, she says, and holds her hand. They're immigrants. Today her mother's eyes are red and puffy. None of us sit over there, even when they're late.

The room is just a large windowless rectangle in the basement with chairs lined against three white walls. End tables covered with tattered glossy magazines hold small woven baskets filled with saltines and graham crackers and peanut butter to dip them in. I can't eat this stuff. A few dusty paintings of sailboats donated by some family hang on each wall. In memory of David.

I sit to knit. Ten minutes he rambles. "Ain't life hell? I almost slept in, but I'm not used to it. Was in 'Nam, d'ya know? Morning marches everyday, up before the sun. My buddies died and I lived, now this. Damn, I was a healthy ox till they cut into me. Margaret's dead. Can't breathe now. Came here, don't trust the V.A. No family history either. And you?"

"No," I say slowly, "I'm the first. Never smoked."

He whistles low. "I'm sorry, kid. Hope I'm not rude."

It's okay.

"How's your baby?" He points to the pink and white cap in my lap. The two needles glint and click, scratch and clack. Yarn in and out, under and over. Double knitting. It's all I can do to steady my hands.

"I'm too scared to nurse her."

I don't know why I tell him this. I've been poked by every nurse's aide in this God-forsaken place and it doesn't matter anymore. An elderly black lady bundled up in her wool muffler nods at me from under her gray beret, a few chairs over. She must have what I got—she goes to the same room I do when she's called. Our eyes meet and she looks at her feet.

A young resident in a short white coat enters the front of the room by the fish tank and stands with a clipboard. Inside the 50 gallon, glass behemoth swim an assortment of green tails, red flippers, and shimmering blue scales, all blissfully unaware of the ocean. He's very tall, Asian, and wearing thick-rimmed, square glasses. He looks smart. He calls out a number: "415-95-03."

"That's all we are to them, a dog-tag," says the old man across from me. His face is crusty and half of his lower mandible is missing on the right, making it hard for him to speak. His neck is thin and tight, where they've stretched his skin to cover the defect of the surgery. Every few minutes he squirts his mouth with a water bottle.

A portly gentleman gets up and passes his overcoat. He's smiling and shakes hands. His gaunt wife in the fur coat folds his jacket neatly on her lap, placing his tweed fedora on top. Dr. Wei hands him a patient gown and points to the dressing room through the door on the other side of the room. The bald gentleman spins around; he's a newcomer.

"I thought only med students wore short coats," he jokes.

The old man with half-a-neck looks at me. It's the same question he asked me last week.

"They do, but this is the General. Once a student, always a student here, so they say." Dr. Wei is not the least bit embarrassed. He grins, but in his shrunken coat he looks like he should be scooping ice cream at a dairy parlor in a Norman Rockwell.

"Glad to know that you practicing physicians are still learning on me," says the gentleman. A light ripple of nervous smiles spread across the patients' faces. Except for the Greek woman made of feta cheese. She's holding her wig and she can't speak English.

"Very witty sir," says Dr. Wei. He walks over and holds open the door for the other man. Yesterday, we all heard the man telling his wife how lucky he was—because of his law partner Ronald, the department chair is coming down from his netherworld office to see him. If Dr. Levin cured Ronald, he'll cure me. "For a price," his wife in the fur coat had laughed.

"The government won't cover me if I'm not at the V.A.," the old man says to me. "I served my country."

Thank God, I'm getting time off. Adam can take care of the baby for three more weeks, then one week recovery, for fatigue, the doctor says. Done by February. Blue Cross will cover me while Adam keeps looking. Maybe Mom will come down from Maine. Adam won't mind, will he? We need milk, granola cereal. And diapers. I hope he did the wash.

A nurse wheels a patient into the room. We've all seen him before, last week. He's cachectic and staring at the far wall. Much worse today. Two prongs pierce his nostrils and the rubber tubing trails behind his wheelchair to a portable green oxygen tank. He's wheezing, gasping. He leans on his elbows and puffs under his hospital gown like a deflating balloon. The elderly black lady shifts in her chair and picks up a magazine. The Greek woman stops sobbing, sniffles and wipes her large nose. No one talks. Just the gasps of air, in and out. Over and under.

The nurse returns in a few minutes and wheels him out. It's in his lungs, I guess. The black lady puts down her magazine and eats a cracker.

Two white women in their sixties share complaints again. "Why does this take so long? The doctor never listens to me. I'm in pain. Yeah, he barely knows my name, just my meds." One is thin and cagey. Her hair lies limp over her shoulders. The fat one huffs. "My daughter ran off with a black man, never listened to me, now she's divorced with a 3-year-old boy; no, I've never even seen him. Can you believe it? Does she know about you now? She does, but she'll never come to my funeral ever, she's too stuck-up. Lives in LA. Oh, I thought my nephew was bad but my neighbor's son's the same way too, *oy vei*, he dropped out of school to become an artist. Lives at home. I bet he does drugs. I never liked them . . . if my son had done that . . ."

Both have a women's cancer, but it's not breast. The thin one had a hysterectomy. I know this because they were indignant about getting pelvic exams last week. That's when they first met.

Dr. Wei flips through the pages of his clipboard, again standing by the fish tank. "Patient 002-02-23."

The old man.

"002-02-23?"

"Why do they do that?" rasps the old man, getting up, "I can't remember and they know who I am!"

I slip off the scarf that covers my bald head. I'm next.

"For your sake. To maintain patient confidentiality," I tell him.

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—FROM FINAL JUDGE JACK COULEHAN—

This year's Honorable Mentions in prose go to "*The Waiting Room*" and "*A Bag of Humility*." Speaking of Dr. Chekhov, he was one of the first authors to write the kind of short story that "*The Waiting Room*" represents—a slice of life, seemingly with no plot. The narrator waits her turn in the doctor's waiting room. Though frightened and uncertain herself, she keenly observes the human drama all around her. These, after all, are her people.