



## Waiting Room

*Thomas Waldron*

I'm in the waiting room at the hospital, and I'm probably not even supposed to be here because the virus is everywhere now, but my girlfriend has it, has had it for three weeks now and I don't know where else to be. The doctor is covered in protective gear and looks like a robot, and even being near him freaks me out. I try, but fail, to concentrate on what he's saying. I hear the words "fighting," "struggling," and "hoping" and all I can take away is that she's still alive.

I sit down in a freshly sanitized waiting room chair, but I'm antsy as hell. It's like someone's injected caffeine into my brain because my thoughts keep spiraling, and all I can think about is how sick she is. That and dying.

I think a lot about death. I wonder if it's true that your life flashes before you—but there is no one who can really tell us—after all, no one, absolutely no one, has ever made the return trip to share the news. I mean, if you came close to death, maybe there would be a quick newsreel of your greatest hits, but maybe not. Maybe when the Big One, the big, metaphysical Fuck You, the ultimate Last Moment arrives, it's just a director yelling "CUT!" or a warm, inviting fade to black. I try not to dwell on it, but I do anyway.

I'm afraid to let myself sleep at all, because my dreams are cracked and fractured like walking across a floor of broken dishes all night long, a montage of vivid but ridiculous images. Like the one last night when I bought a new condo where every room looked like an aquarium complete with floors filled with gravel and fish everywhere gasping in bags full of ice. "Yes," I mused, "I really like the outdoor kitchen," as if somehow that made up for the dying fish, the rocks piled in the bedroom, and the algae clinging to the transparent walls.

When I wake up, I have trouble erasing the memory of the dream. I *have* a condo. *WE* have a condo. Why am I dreaming about moving, about moving on as if she's already gone? I'm afraid to let myself sleep at all which means I fall asleep here in the waiting room or in front of the TV when I let myself go home to shower and change clothes. My neck hurts from sleeping sitting up all the time.

Emma. My girlfriend's name is Emma. I don't think I told you.

My sleeplessness does nothing to mute the rage I feel that she's sick. We dodged the COVID bullet for three years—washing our hands, wearing masks, missing our friends. When we finally had to go back to work or starve, we were so careful. We're young, we thought, we'll be OK, even when the death toll topped half a million people.

We'd sit close to each other watching the news as wave after wave swamped the country. Not us, we'd think, we're OK.

I feel the gloved hand caress my back and waken from another unexpected nap to see the dark eyes that I recognize as Jasmine, one of Emma's nurses.

"Is she OK?" I ask struggling to feel alert. "Any change?"

"She's the same. She was awake for about an hour. Resting now."

I can see that she is holding a note, and she hands me a pair of gloves so she can pass it on to me. It's the first note I've gotten from Emma in almost ten days. She wrote to me several times a day during the first week, always upbeat, always encouraging.

"I feel like I'm back in high school with you two. Passing notes."

I think Jasmine is smiling behind her mask, but I can't tell for sure as I pull on the gloves and take the note from her.

"Thanks, Jasmine. For everything."

She pats me on the leg. "Of course. I'll check back in an hour or so."

I unfold the note and see it is a poem. It's some lines from a poem that scrolled by at the end of the last movie we watched together before she got sick. I remember that she made me rewind the ending twice so she could write them down. I'm amazed that she could pull it from her memory.

*Let everything happen to you*

*Beauty and terror;*

*Just keep going,*

*No feeling is final.*

*Don't let yourself lose me.*

The words are written in a sickly scrawl, not her usual confident hand. I try not to cry, but tears are streaming down my face anyway. I'm pretty sure she just said goodbye.

