

Emilee Boster

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Hartselle High School, Hartselle, AL

Educator: Dyroma Burroughs

Category: Short Story

The Emergency Room

It had already been hours. The bleak walls and protruding light made everyone either squint or cover their faces. The room was lined with chairs but only a few were occupied. A woman sat in a wheelchair with her son in the corner. A young girl sat with her mom in the other. A newly-wed couple sat watching the Dallas Cowboys's game.

An old man sat in his wheelchair with an oxygen tank attached if he were to need it. He was wrapped in a thick wool jacket and long dark pants. The man had his book in his lap and his phone in his coat pocket, the only things he needed. He had read 2 chapters of the book. It was one of those gigantic ones that everyone sees in bookstores and church libraries but no one ever reads. He would read it though. He would try to at least.

The woman sat staring at her phone, refreshing it periodically. They had looked at each other a few times, even spoken a few words. But no conversations yet. It had been 9 hours since they situated themselves into the Emergency Room chairs. They were not comfortable in any position but perhaps people were not supposed to spend 9 hours sitting in one. All the rooms were full. At least that's what the nurses had told the man and woman.

The man's phone buzzed a couple of times and he would read it, sigh, and respond in a quick choppy sentence lacking punctuation. The nurses kept coming through the doors, calling last names unknown to the man and woman.

"Do you need anything to drink?" The old man asked.

There was no vending machine in the Emergency Room and the woman was too tired to walk to a different wing of the hospital. Her arms were covered in a red scaly rash. She tried to not itch them.

"You have anything?" She asked him.

"My daughter keeps calling me." He said. "She's bringing me food. I told her not to worry, but I really am hungry. I can get her to bring you a drink. "

"Yes, please." She said with a smile. "I would love that."

The man peaked down into his bag and pulled out a hat. It was cold inside the hospital and his thin skin no longer retained heat. The nurse came out again and called a name. The man with his wife walked back into the room.

"Well, that's nice of ya daughter to check on ya." The woman said to the man. He looked up and shook his head.

"Yep. She's a good one—that's for sure. All upset that they won't let her in. I told her there was nothing she could do anyhow."

"At least she's checkin' on ya." There was a pause for a while. They listened to the hum of the lights above and the Cowboys's score.

"I don't understand it." She said. "All the rooms in a hospital and not a single one open. If I woulda known it would take this long, I wouldn'ta came. I woulda sat at home and prayed I wasn't havin' a heart attack."

"Yea. I'd heard about it all on the news. How they're overflowing with patients and all. But I didn't expect this. I go on dialysis tomorrow mornin'. At least I know I'll be in a room by then." He flipped open his phone and tapped a button. The screen projected 10:30 p.m.

"We might be sleeping here. I might as well get comfortable." She said. She wrapped her irritated arms with a jacket and closed her eyes for a few minutes. The man folded his book up, as if he was ever going to finish it. He was thankful he brought it, though. It helped pass the time. He pushed himself out of the wheelchair and walked, hunched over, to the front of the E.R. entrance. When he returned, he was carrying a bag of food. The woman was sitting up with her eyes open now. She had moved seats and was now sitting directly in front of him. He handed her a diet coke.

"Diet? Well, thank ya. You musta read my mind. It's my favorite."

"I used to drink them. But—not anymore. Doctor after doctor told me they weren't doing me any good."

The man unboxed his makeshift dinner. A salad with chicken in a plastic box. He slowly ate the salad piece by piece with a plastic fork. He set down the fork.

"You got any kids?" He asked.

"Oh, yeah," she said. "They're-uh-workin'. Over in California and Arizona. I hate it that they're so far away, but they love it there."

The man nodded and thought about this family. What he would do if they weren't around.

"If you don't mind me asking," he asked slowly. "Why are you here?" The light above his head flickered, and he took a bit of his salad.

"I have a weak heart, and it's been acting up on me recently. They wanna put me in for observation."

"Understandable. I'm sorry about that." There was a brief moment of silence and the lights hummed. "The doctor gave me a machine to check my numbers, and they were too low this morning. He said to come here, and they'd need to put me in a room."

"If you ever get a room." The woman interjected. "We may never get into a room. I think they're all book'd up. They look pretty busy back there."

"Yeah. I noticed that too. This is actually the first time I've been out of my house in months. My daughter brings me food. And I watch the TV, read books, and I watch church on the TV." He took another bite of his dinner. His daughter had told him months ago that they wouldn't be coming around his house anymore. "Look," she had said over the phone one Sunday afternoon. "The kids are starting school. Me and Jason are starting work. We can't risk being around you. We don't want to get you sick." The man understood, he truly did, but the days turned into weeks and the weeks into months. The house was empty, and he spent every day finding different projects to busy himself with.

"That's probably for the best though. I stayed outta work for a couple of months, but when the store opened again full time, I had to go back." The woman sighed as she said it. 15 years at the store. God, she thought. 15 years.

The man nodded. He didn't really know what to say. He didn't know if he was staying at home because he was scared to get sick or because his daughter told him not to or because he didn't have any reason to leave. He looked down at his salad and continued eating, thinking about the last few months and how much had changed. His phone rang.

"Yes," he said. "I feel fine. I'm going to be fine. They're just out of rooms but I'll get one soon. Yep... no. They're not going to let you in anyhow. Okay. I will. Bye." He stuffed his phone back into his coat pocket.

"Your daughter?"

"Yeah. She's always checking on me. Asking if she can just sit in here with me. I've told her the sign says no one can go back there. I'll be fine." He repeated himself but this time it was a whisper. "I'll be fine."

"It's too big of a risk, I guess. If someone comes with us, they'll be admitting themselves next week." The woman said. She set her diet coke on the ground. The E.R. secretary walked around with her clipboard full of paperwork for people to sign. They had signed it hours ago. The girl with her mom left. The young couple was released. The son pushed his mom in the wheelchair out of the waiting room. It was just the man and the woman and the hum of the lights left.