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## Waiting

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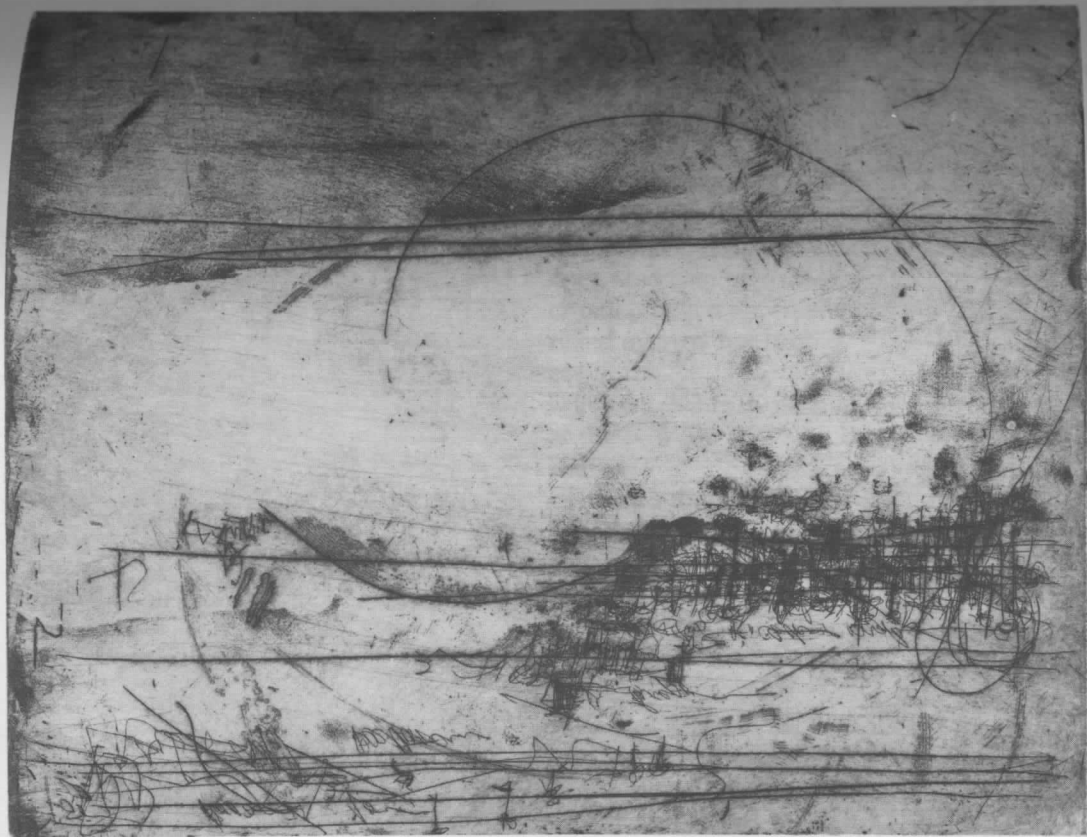
# WAITING

Cynthia Hohn

He was tired. He was so tired he didn't even attempt to open his eyes. He knew it was morning. The cart of breakfast trays was rolling noisily through the corridor and women were calling cheerful, child-voiced Hellos and Goodmornings somewhere along the rows of rooms. And he knew what the room looked like, so there was no practical reason to open his eyes. He lay flat on his back, watching the swirling dark and light move across his eyelids. It seemed to him a remarkable phenomenon that the human eye never stopped seeing. Even when his eyes were shut he watched the oil slick patterns guide across his field of vision. He had never noticed this before; he had simply gone to sleep at 12:45 every night. But that was during a time when sleep was something he dreamed about, wished for, during his precious spare moments of the day, and something that

spread quickly over him at night in a delicious, self-indulgent way. Now, the situation was different; his time seemed eternal instead of something escaping like a handful of warm water. Ah yes, that was the main difference between then and now. But he had not lost his great appreciation for that wonderful state of unconsciousness. Sleep was a goal which he still strove for. Granted, he needed it differently then than he needed it now.

His bones rested their fragile weight against the mattress. He felt very small underneath the sterile crispness of the sheets and the heavy wool blanket that covered him. He wanted so much to sleep again. His eyes were closed, his body relaxed. He was more than ready for sleep, but the depressing circumstances were that he had just awakened, and there was that chart which showed percentages of food consumed per meal per patient. There was probably also some demerit system; a personality analysis being formulated from this data. Breakfast was being served, and the record of whether or not he ate it meant whether the nurses would scold him or continue to tease him with their mother-like coos of sympathy. He had grown quite impatient, almost angry with those women. Why couldn't they just leave him be? He could tell by their sudden bursts of teeth as they entered the room that they didn't want to deal with him. He pressed his head further into the pillow and rocked it slowly from side to side. He was wishing he could lock the door. He was wishing so hard it nearly became a prayer, but he didn't say amen at the end of his



emitted a click to announce to the room that it had made it through another hour. Time was dragging. He wanted sleep. He began practicing his muscle relaxing exercise, and 85 percent effective method devised by Dr. Markis as a definite cure for insomina. Toes relax, feet relax, feel heavy; ankles, calves relax, feel heavy against the mattress; knees, thighs relax, heavy, sinking deep into the bed. A calm, powerful voice within his head shouted the commands. When he reached his shoulders, his entire body jerked. It was an internal sort of slipping, falling sensation, nothing that could actually be perceived by a doctor or nurse. Simultaneously frightening, exhilarating and relieving, he let this feeling slice through his concentration. Finally, there was nothing and he waited.

A hissing sound interrupted the smooth blankness of his mind. As it grew louder he identified the noise. It was the sound of rushing water moving through the pipes between the bedroom walls. It reassured him that she'd be up shortly. She was leaning against the aqua Formica countertop which bordered the sink. The kitchen was below the bedroom so he could practically feel her every movement through the thinness of the plaster, paint and wood that separated them. He lay beneath the dark violet bedspread like a horizontal cadet at attention. The overhead light was shining directly into his eyes; it was painful after such a long day. The light seemed to shoot through his eyes and pierce straight through his head until it hit the far side of his skull with its frozen intensity. But, he always waited for her with the light

on, and she'd be only a few seconds longer. He readjusted himself against the two pillows behind his back and tried to focus on something else to relieve his mind of the light. His eyes chose the highboy dresser across the room. He studied its structure, calculating how its maker had constructed it. He could see the tiny circular plugs of wood which had been used instead of nails or screws. There were two such marks near the edges of each of the six drawers. The thin, crescent-shaped handles for each drawer were brass. The middle of each handle gleamed, but the edges of the handles, which had remained untouched even after years of use, were a dull green. On top of the smooth, polished wood of the dresser was his wallet. He considered this worn slip of brown leather as much a part of his person as his left hand. It was with him every day for eighteen years and rested each night on the dresser when he put on his pajamas for bed, patiently waiting for the next morning. It was comforting to see it there, lying flat and inert on the corner of the highboy. He never carried any important demoninations in it. He wasn't sure why, and as he listened for the sound of dishes to cease, he considered this useless question.

There was a brief pause in the clattering of the dinner plates as she picked up each piece to be dried. Occasionally, a slight, high-pitched squeak filtered through the floor of the room from a dish that was almost dry and didn't need the few extra vigorous rubs of the red-checkered kitchen cloth. He smiled to himself at the strange quality of the sound. But overall, the thought of her leaning against the counter,

monologue. He'd meet Him soon enough in person. He hoped they'd get along, he had never been a "religious man", but he was a kind, personal sort of guy so the chances were pretty good. And it was rare that he experienced a true sense of hate towards his fellow beings, even though he had been indisputably wronged many a time.

For example, last night at 1:45 precisely he had been awakened by the racket of the Irish pub directly across the street from his window, O'Laery's or O'Lowry's or something. It was closing time and an entire fleet of long-nosed, loud-mouthed, men stumbled out onto the street. They were singing something, probably obscene, and laughing between verses in slow, exaggerated wheezes. When they finally dispersed and the street was silent again, he had to lie awake by himself, probably the only person in the section who was not asleep at that hour. Then, he had to try to convince his body that the excitement was over and it was time to get back to sleep. At first he was angry that he had been awakened, but after a few hours of staring at the screen of semi-blackness in front of him, he began to enjoy the engulfing privacy of the room. He was able to think and occasionally on such nights he actually felt content. It was like eating a Thanksgiving dinner when he had slipped a few pounds underweight, which was a problem, that, unfortunately, vanished somewhere between his thirtieth and fortieth birthdays.

During these times he was able to think about his past in a sort of detached, analytical manner. It was as if he were

watching another man make his way awkwardly through the exact experiences he had already been through. This sort of thinking was something he had begun looking forward to. It was much more exciting than reading or watching television. But twice the nurses had interrupted it, which was a real show of insensitivity. Since they were trained and paid to be sensitive, one would tend to believe they'd have a bit more perception than a drunk Irishman.

Another cart was pushed past his door, the trays rattling with an irritating loudness. He recognized the heavy-heeled vibrations that accompanied the echoed rolling of the aluminum cart. Within ten minutes it would stop in front of his door. His eyes were still closed, and he thought he might just keep them closed when the stuffed uniform invaded. He wanted to know what she would do. He'd love to hear her scream. If he stayed completely still and stiff when she went to shake his shoulders, her fat hands would slowly stop the morning shaking process, and that's when she'd scream. Thus, there wasn't any reason for him to open his eyes; in fact it was much more beneficial to keep them shut. He'd be able to hear what the old bag sounded like when she screamed, or he might be passed by for breakfast (drawback: demerits), or he might actually slip into another episode of his past. Any one of these would be fine.

The thudding of the heels pounded out their monotonous rhythm as they entered the room next door to his — six or seven minutes, he thought, as he lay staring at the backs of his eyelids, waiting. The digital clock on the nightstand

scrubbing away at the few extra drops of water on the silverware and dishes worried him. It was too much work for a woman her age to keep up with all her chores. Yet, she wouldn't hear of him spending money on a dishwasher or sharing her work. It was her job.

His body was finally relaxing slowly, as he listened to the sporadic squeaks. The light seemed to grow less intense, and his head appreciated the lessening tension. The highboy stood solemnly straight, almost touching the edge of the dark gold curtains which he had ceremoniously drawn just after he brushed his teeth. The frosted glass encasement of the overhead light appeared strangely ominous from its central position on the ceiling. He blinked at it, trying to focus through the tired dryness of his eyes. It was almost as if it were a prop in some Bogart movie. The air was thick with smoke, and the one light in the room hung at a slight angle. The set was quiet. Soon Bogart himself would pass underneath the light and the lisped monologue between Bogart, and the woman in the gray dress would begin. She'd never actually speak; rather she'd be staring across the room, her long dark legs crossed tightly against each other until she rose from the thin wooden chair and left the room. Bogart, becoming involved in the emotional intensity of the scene, would forget his cue and never turn to watch her walk off the set until it was too late and the cameras had already stopped rolling.

The staccato tick, tick, tick, tick of the black and silver alarm clock his wife had given him last Christmas shot the air

with a sense of urgency. It teased him in an irritating way since his eyes couldn't focus on its shiny dark face. Finally, the black shade of his eyelids started slipping downwards until only a thin, wavering slit of light was left to represent the bedroom. His feet were cold. The lump they created in the bedspread wiggled slowly back and forth, then side to side, as he rubbed them carefully against each other. It was like rubbing two pieces of paper together, smooth and cold. The only thing he was accomplishing was becoming more acutely aware of how icy his feet were and how exhausted his body was. He could feel his entire body growing limp with the physical exertion of trying to warm his feet. He decided the amount of energy he was using was ridiculous and rolled over, giving in to the dent in the middle of the mattress. He felt for his wife's body, whose feet were hopefully warmer than his own. First he reached out with his arms, then his legs and numb feet. Then, with a sudden panic of new energy his swollen eyelids popped open, exposing the delicate reddening veins against their glassy, white background. He sat up straight-backed, hurriedly throwing back the soft semi-warmth of the covers. For a second he thought he heard the faint, familiar squeaking of dishes being dried, but the over-sympathetic coos from next door penetrated his room and drowned any other sound.

He struggled to raise his body higher against the thin Styrofoam pillow. He was so tired from waiting up, his body seemed to lack any strength. He tried to slide his body close to the left side of the mattress to make it easier to get out of

bed. He thought it strange that he was so tired this morning. His body felt so weak he didn't know if he could actually make it through the entire fourteen hours before he could sleep again. His muscles were more relaxed than he had ever thought humanly possible. For a moment he was afraid if they became any more relaxed they might dissolve into liquid. He was amused by the creativity of this idea. But, his thoughts were interrupted by a soft thumping sound. It confused him until he recognized that it was simply the rhythmic drips of the rust and chlorine stained sink which had broken the stillness of the room and his concentration. As he focused on this sound, he became aware that it was accompanied by familiar trodding footsteps. Nurse Ryan and her famous white shoes entered his room. She carried a aluminum tray of Farina and a glass of a dark, syrupy juice. The glass jiggled spastically against the circular depression in the tray which had been created especially for it. He could not comprehend why she was in his room. It wasn't time to get up. He was waiting for his wife and his feet were still cold. But her huge voice boomed anyway: "Good morning, Mr. LaRosa, and how are we?" At this cue his eyes forced themselves open automatically and his lips quickly formed a smile. Then he began nodding in answer to her questions. First nod, he was feeling just fine. Second nod, he loved Farina and milk. Third and fourth, yes, prune juice was a great way to start the morning. Fifth, sixth and seventh — his neck muscles were becoming tense and tired and he knew this whole act would be impossible to keep up much

longer. But she kept firing away, and his wife would be up any moment. He had been waiting so long now, and this white blur was not going to interfere. He was going to have to ask her politely, yet firmly, to leave the room. They could go over these trivialities some other time. He raised his hand from between the sheets and waved its flat palm at the loud, undefined space of whiteness that seemed to hover over him. The noise stopped and he told her in a respectful manner that he was waiting for his wife. The blur was still; no voice came from it. The poor old woman, he thought sadly, maybe she was going deaf.

She just stood there, huge, looking down at him. But, after a while her voice came again, this time a quiet, secretive sort of tone. She was saying she understood, but that a grown man, like himself . . .

Yes, he agreed with a nod, he was a grown man.

. . . should be able to remember that Mrs. LaRosa had passed away twenty-one years ago.

Twenty-one years ago, he thought, that was a very long time to live alone. He turned this statement over and over in his mind. He figured it must be extremely difficult to deal with such a loss, but he was much too tired to ponder such thoughts, and it was time for his Farina.