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A COWARD IN THE WAITING ROOM

by

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There was a sterility about the room. The walls and the ceiling and the floors were all painted a non-descript gray. It was quite large as rooms go. There were about thirty of forty chairs lined up along the walls. There was an entrance door on one side of the room ... an exit door at the other. The room was about half filled with individuals who were waiting. At the exit door were two chairs with two attendants sitting impassively beside a small table with a phone on it. No one knew exactly why they were there. There was talk. Hushed speculative tones among those who were waiting. Maybe they're going to send us to school. Maybe they're going to operate and experiment on us. Torture us for their pleasure. Fear of the unknown was etched upon most of their faces. Jeremy Slate--as he liked to refer to himself--looked at them with a twisted smirk of contempt slashed across his lips. Cowards, he thought. All of them.

The silence and hushed tones were being randomly broken by the soft tones of the phone ringing. When that happened the younger attendant always picked it up. He never spoke a word. He listened ... and after he finished listening he silently handed the phone to his older partner. When the partner finished listening he put the phone back into its cradle and both attendants rose and walked over to one of the persons who were waiting. They reached down to either side of that person and escorted him or her to the door. This time it was a woman. She looked terrified. The walk across the room seemed eternal. She struggled ... resisting her destination. As they got closer her struggles bordered on panic.

When they got to the door and began to open it a harsh white light seeped through the opening crack. The woman could not hold herself back anymore. She began screaming at the top of her lungs as she was escorted inside. Fear pervaded the room. As the door closed behind her the screams began to fade till finally the door clicked shut and the room was silent once again.

The entrance door opened and a new person came in. He seemed totally disoriented. He looked around and found a seat ...trying to acclimate himself to his new surroundings. The whisperings began again. The attendants paid no attention. Their expressions were impassive. They had no emotion. Someone asked the newcomer if he knew why he was there. He shook his head. No. Did anyone know why they were there? The silence was palpable. If one inhaled one could smell fear. Jeremy Slate could no longer restrain himself. He leaped up. He flailed his arms. He tore at his hair in frustration. He pulled his ears ...bit his tongue ...danced the jig of the frenzied hornets. He was crazed. He was a madman. He could not contain himself. Cowards. Wimps. Milquetoasts. The lot of you. Sniveling whiny snails. Slugs of humanity. They're trying to scare you. What do you think is behind that door? He caught a smirk from one of those waiting. Hey mister. What are you grinning at? Want to take it outside ...let me know. He shook his fist at his mocker. The attendants said nothing. Jeremy turned to them. Any of you two want a piece of me? No reaction? Hmmph. I thought so. He glared at them daring them to glare back. He then sat down and once again silence and fear reigned supreme.

And the whispering began again. Maybe they take us into that room to roast us and serve us for dinner. Yeah. Like suckling pigs. Shove an apple in our mouths and barbeque us on a spit over and flaming fire. Or maybe it's nothing. They want to buy us new clothes. I don't know about you but the ones I'm wearing are getting a bit frayed around the edges. Some of them brightened up. That was surely what it was. New clothes. Or maybe a haircut. A permanent for me. I'll take a manicure if you please. Do you do pedicures my good fellow? A shave perhaps. Not too close. Sensitive skin and all that. And giggles began to pervade the room. Even Jeremy Slate allowed a faint smile to cross his lips. Levity was clearly the order of the day. Somebody asked a riddle. Not really very challenging. Why did the chicken cross the road? It was an old one. A child's silliness. And soon the room was roaring with laughter. Inanity gave them relief. They were all having a fine time. Who cared about that stupid old door and those stupid attendants. Somebody pulled out a harmonica. Oh Suzanna ... oh don't you cry for me. Care to dance m'lady? The gentleman bowed low. The pretty young thing got up and curtsied and the harmonica player picked up the tempo and he took her about the waist and the phone rang and the younger attendant picked it up and listened. The harmonica stopped playing. The dancers sat back in their seats. The room became somber. The older attendant took the phone and listened. And they got up and walked to the newcomer who had just walked in. Why me, he said. I just got here. They took him by his arms. No. why me? He tried to wrench loose. He yanked and twisted and almost tore his arms out of their shoulder sockets. As they got closer to the door and it opened and the light began to shine through he began screaming and pulling and shoving as the attendants forced him through and the door closed ...his screams fading as the door once again clicked shut.

Silence. Jeremy Slate stared balefully beneath lowered brows. Hah. The vision in his mind's eye was as clear as if it had happened only moments ago. He stood up ... began walking about the room. His voice had the purring cough of a male lion preparing to show dominance. We were in a park, he said. He glared at them. Me and a friend of mine. He was a wimp ... like the lot of you. We were minding our own business when the gang approached us. Seven or eight of them. There was trouble in the air ... let me tell you. My friend was cowering. He feared his fate. Not me. I doubled up my fists. The gang noticed ... let me tell you. I stepped forward. In chorus they stepped back. Then one of them took a swing at me. He missed and I swung back. I was a machine. I swung my fists to the left ... to the right. I cracked one of them across the jaw. I went after another one of them. They pulled back ... they pushed forward. I was tireless. I kept swinging. I got another one on the mouth. He started bleeding. Ah ... said one of them. Let's let him go. He's okay. Yeah. You're okay pal. We're gonna let you go. We don't wanna hurt no good guys. And they started backing away. One of them still wiping his bleeding lip. The guy with the jaw was still rubbing it. Jeremy glared at one of the persons in the room. You show them you're not afraid ... they'll back off. Jeremy stalked over to the attendant. He nosed to nosed the older one. Hey mister. Am I right or what? Hey. Mister. You hear me? Silence. The attendant stared straight ahead. Yeah. That's right. Keep yer yap shut if you know what's good for you. Jeremy strutted back to his chair. The entrance door opened and two newcomers came in. They all stared at them. They kept their eyes lowered. The harmonica player picked up his instrument and began blowing softly.

Somebody pulled out a chess set from who knew where. Sometimes things appeared in the room as if by magic. As if the room had a presence of its own and knew when something was needed to break the tension. Game anyone? This from one of the young ladies. She was pretty. Brown haired ... curly and poofy. You play chess? One of the men seemed stunned. Never knew a woman who played chess, he said. She glared at him. Only difference between male and female is in their sexuality, she said. For the rest we're all the same. You might want to remember that in case you ever grow up. There was a titter in the room. She pointed with her chin toward the door. If they don't kill you first that is. Jeremy Slate grinned. He liked gutsy people. Made no never mind to him if they were men or women. I'll play, he said. She turned to look at him. There was a hardness to his eyes but a softness to his grin. She swung the chess set around and opened Pawn to King 4. Jeremy countered with pawn to Queen Bishop 4. The room became dead silent. It looked like the opening to a Sicilian defense. As I was going to Saint Ives, Jeremy said when it was his turn again. You met a man with seven wives, she said while castling. And the phone rang. And the play stopped. And a sandy-haired fellow clearly older than the others was led away. He did not scream. He did not resist. He had been waiting for what seemed an eternity in that bleak room and it was clear to all that in his own way he was glad the waiting was over. But then ... as the door opened and the light glared through ... he began to wail though his cries were quickly smothered by the rapidly closing door. He's no different than the rest of you, Jeremy muttered.

The appetite for the game was gone. Jeremy looked into the girl's eyes. He saw what he saw. He smirked. Hah, he said. Fear turns people into cowards. You have no fear, she

said? No. He was emphatic. Ain't afraid. Never was. Never will be. I don't let fear creep into my guts. How do you keep it out, she said? I'll tell you how, he said. And he told her and the rest of them in that waiting room about that time he was driving his car. Rushing along a bit you might say. Minding my own business. Thinking about what I had to do. Left lane. Cars going my way. Cars going the opposite way. And then there's a red light on the other side. Car stops. Car behind the stopped car crashes into stopped car. Bursts into flames. Driver passes out behind the wheel. I don't think. I stop my car. Jump out. Run over to the car in flames. Yank open the door. It's a lady in there. Out cold. I grab her. Pull her out. Tug her onto the grass to safety. By now there's others there. I pay them no never mind. Get back in my car and drive off. She's safe is all that counts. As to fear ... none. Zippo. Rien. Nada. Want to know why? No time to think. Simple. Easy peasy. I learned something. Thinking is the killer. You want to fight fear ... don't think. Keep your mind a blank. When they come for you ... you make your mind a blank. Fear can't get in if there's no space for it to crawl through. You got a name, he said to the chess lady? She shook her head. I'll call you Linda, said Jeremy. She nodded. Nice name, she said. I'm going to call myself Jeremy, said Jeremy.

Hey Jeremy. This from someone a few seats away who had been listening in. This story of yours. Good one. Make believe? Is this something you've done? Is this something you wished you had done? Is this something you think you're going to do? Is this a dream? What is it Jeremy?

Jeremy Slate got up. This guy needed a talking to. What difference if I imagine or not? We are who we are ... and when we imagine we become that who we imagined. But then the phone rang. And the room froze. And the attendants rose. The young one looked at Slate. Made a gun with his fingers. Pointed it at Jeremy. Released the thumb trigger. Pow. Blew smoke from the barrel. Jeremy grinned ... stood up. C'mon Mister. Anytime. He pulled out his sub-machine gun and yuyuyuyuyu ... bullets scattered through both attendants ... decimating them ... sending them to oblivion. The young attendant put the gun back and the two of them walked over to the man who had questioned Jeremy. They took him by the arms and led him to the door. Keep your mind blank, said Jeremy. And the man tried ... but as the door opened and the light began to stream through ... the man wrenched and pulled and tugged and started screaming and crying noooo ...and then the door clicked shut. And again the room fell into silence.

The entrance door opened. Two newcomers entered. They took their seats. Spoke to no one. All eyes were lowered. One of the older ones in the room—nobody seemed to last very long—looked at Jeremy. Chess, he said. Jeremy shook his head. I only play with her. He pointed with his chin. Afraid, said the old-timer? Hey, said Jeremy. You see me trying to create friendships here? Afraid, wise guy? Come on over here. Try me. See what happens. I'll show you afraid. And when they come for you, said the old timer? Slate shrugged. They can whistle Dixie if they think I'm going to show them fear. How about you? And the room became quiet again. And Jeremy winked at Linda. Chess? Some other time tough guy, she said. Jeremy grinned. They're going to come for me too, he said. But when they do I'm not going out sniveling and crying like the rest of them cowards do.

Is that door an entrance to here or an exit from there? This ... from an orange-haired stranger in the waiting room who had not yet spoken. His chin pointed to the door from which they had all entered into the Waiting Rom. And that door with the light. Is that an exit from here ...or entrance to there? And if the latter ...where is there? And if the former ... where was there? These were questions that had hung silent but unspoken in the room from the beginning. What difference does it make, said a bushy-eyebrowed guy? Clarity gives us knowledge, said orange-hair. Makes no difference either way, said bushy-brow. Think about it. And they thought. And waited for some sort of answer. And again the room was silent. And the phone had not yet rung again.

Do you think maybe we'll meet again one day, said Linda. Jeremy shrugged. Maybe in the next room. Maybe for a game of chess. Linda grinned. I'll whip your ass. Jeremy shrugged with a hint of pleasure at the repartee. Linda was fun. Maybe. Who knows? I hope we do meet again, said Linda. Jeremy stood up and walked over to her a kissed her lightly on the lips. Me too, he said.

Hey wise-guy, said orange-hair. Got anymore fairy tales for us? But before Jeremy could answer the phone rang ... jarring the momentary equanimity that had settled over the room thanks to the distracting conversations. And the attendants stood up ... and the young one glared at Jeremy ... and Jeremy glared back ... and they then went a grabbed a complete stranger in the room who had not uttered a word clearLY hoping that taking refuge in silence would afford him the inconspicuousness he so yearned. No no, he yelled. Not me. You have the wrong one. I'm not here. I'm invisible. No. No. Noooo ...screaming and yelling and crying and wrenching and twisting his body as the let him to the door and opened it while the light burst through and they guided him in ... noooo ... n.... And the room was silent again.

Take courage, said Jeremy to Linda. And I'll tell you a story of a deed I did. Real or imaginary, said orange-hair? Does it matter, said Jeremy? And orange-hair was silent for he as well as the others were beginning to like his distractions. And Jeremy winked at Linda. And they liked that too.

It was a warm day at the beach, said Jeremy. I was alone ... sitting in a chair when I suddenly heard screaming in the water. She was blond. Her arms were flailing. The life-guard was talking to some people on the beach. Was she faking? Was she playing around? I looked left and right. Nobody was noticing. I don't know what kicked my senses to a state of alertness. I jumped up and ran into the water toward her. As I got closer I saw panic in her eyes. She went under and bobbed up again. I grabbed her around the waist. The current was tugging at us something fierce. I started back in. It was a good thing the water was not too high. We fell to our knees. I held on tight and began crawling to shore. At one point ... though I was exhausted ... I knew we were safe. One of the life-guards must have seen us. You okay, he said to the girl? She is now pal, I said. No thanks to you. The life-guard looked embarrassed. I handed the sputtering coughing girl over to him and left. I had done what I had done and I was now done. I saw the girl glance over at me. She tried a weak smile between retching. I smiled back and left and never saw her again. I guess that makes you a hero, said someone in the room. Jeremy shrugged his

habitual shrug. That question has always lingered with me, he said. Is heroics an act of bravery ... or it an accident of circumstance? Any answers? Maybe a little bit of both, said Linda.

Is that story true or imagined, said orange-hair? Bushy-brow told him to shut up. Jeremy hoisted his shoulders. Does it matter, he said? Not to me, said Linda. Me neither, said bushy-brow. Orange-hair was sullen. Oh is the little baby feeling sad, chorused in the rest of the inhabitants as if with one voice. The entrance door opened. A stream of newcomers entered. A dwarf lady. A tall man. A gray-haired woman. An old fellow. There were a few others. Everybody stared at them as they silently took their seats ... bewilderment etched in all their faces. What is this place, said the gray-haired woman? But they had no answer. And then the phone rang. And the gray-haired woman who had only been in the room for a minute watched as the attendants picked up the phone and then walked over to her and lifted her by her arms and half pulled and half dragged her across the room and the other door opened and the white light shone through and she suddenly realized she didn't know what was going to happen to her and she screamed and cried and twisted and wrenched as the attendants guided her in through the light and then the door clicked shut and the room was silent again.

Is that door and exit or an entrance, echoed the thoughts of orange-hair by a voice from the group of newcomers. That question was already asked, said Bushy-brow. Maybe there are more chairs in that one ... just like this one, said another. And we spend the rest of eternity going from room to room ... sitting in chairs ... waiting for a door to open so we can exit. Or enter. Except that this one has no white light. And we weren't screaming and crying when we came into this one. And Jeremy looked at Linda but her eyes were lowered. They all had something to think about. What was this room they were in, Jeremy wondered. It's a waiting room of some sort. This ... from the dwarf-lady. They all looked at her. And the barrage began. What are we waiting for then? Why doesn't somebody tell us what we're waiting for? What was there before we came into this room? Does anyone remember what happened before we came into this room? The dwarf-lady shrugged. Questions are easy, she said. How about answers, said Jeremy. Are they easy too? The dwarf-lady grinned and shook her head. No. Answers are never easy. Do you have any answers, said Jeremy? Her face grew serious. She looked at the floor. Only questions, she whispered. I don't know what becomes of us. Someone suggested sitting by the entrance door and peeking out when it opened to let newcomers in. So you can see what you can see. Bushy-brow thought it was a good idea and moved his seat.

Nothing becomes of us, said someone in the room. How is that possible, said orange-hair. How is this possible, said the stranger? Maybe that door is a destination, said Linda pointing with her chin toward the two attendants. To where, said the stranger? To oblivion, said the dwarf-lady. Maybe it's an exit then, said Linda. From where, said the stranger again? From here, said Linda. Then why are we here, said the stranger? Questions are always stronger than answers, said the dwarf-lady. Unless the answers are true, said Jeremy. Tell us another story, said orange-hair. Pointless speculation bores me. Jeremy looked over at the attendants wondering if he had enough time before the phone rang. Who would be next? He then leaned back in his chair. Hot summer day, he said.

Driving along minding my own business. Listening to some music. He shrugged. Not paying no never-mind to the rest of the world. Then up ahead there's this young girl. Maybe twenty. Maybe twenty-one. She looks frantic. She has a baby in her arms. She's waving at the cars. Nobody stops. I get closer. She's pleading at me with her eyes. I pull over. Get out of my car. Can I help, I say? Plop. She drops the baby in my arms. Just like that. Here. He's over-heating. I don't know what to do. Fix him. I look at the kid. He's looks okay. He's got a little sweat on is forehead and above he upper lip. His cheeks are red and damp. I look in the car. There's a baby seat in there. The windows are up. No air conditioning. I give him back. He's okay. I grab a towel from the back seat. Slide the window down a bit ... wedge the towel in ... shut the window. I grin at this kid who's not much older than his mother as far as I can see. It was too hot, I tell her. You head east ... sun crosses the southern sky ... beats down relentlessly on the kid. The towel will make a shade. You'll be okay. She thanks me a thousand times ... then gets in her car with her kid and drives off. Yeah, said orange-hair. And everybody lived happily ever after ... right. And the phone rang. And one of the attendants picked it up. And then they walked over and grabbed Linda. Nooo, she screams. Jeremy tells her to keep her mind blank. Don't think. Don't let fear crawl in. She tries but ends up screaming as they drag her and open the door and the white light shines through and Linda's screaming and crying no no and then click. And the light was gone. And the room was silent. Even orange-hair said nothing. Everyone knew Jeremy liked her. More than liked her in fact. It's not going happen to me, he mutters. That's sure as hell. He turns to the attendants and glares at them. You hear me, he says? Their faces remain blank.

They're taking her to nowhere, said Jeremy more to himself than to the others. Nobody contradicted him. The doors are like those spots in your eyes ... floating from the upper left side to the lower right and then starting over again when you switch your gaze ... never going anywhere but always there. And the white light, said the stranger. What about the white light? Not knowing the answer to one thing doesn't mean the other thing is wrong, said Jeremy. And the door we came in from, said someone else. What was behind that door? Does anyone remember? This whole thing is a lie. A dream. An illusion, said Jeremy. Horse manure, said Bushy-brow. Jeremy turned to him. And you ... you know? Bushy-brow shrugged. Don't need your criticism, he said. Jeremy grinned a tight sardonic grin. If you don't want criticism, he said ... then say nothing and be nothing and do nothing. And who are you, said Bushy-brow. It's not who I am, said Jeremy. It's who I was. Again silence reigned. Jeremy Slate had brought up new possibilities. An unknown whisper crossed the room. And who were you, the whisperer said. And now even the attendants who till now had remained stoically impassive began to show interest.

Jeremy stood up. His voice roared across the room. I was Attila the Hun and I was Genghis Khan and I was Alexander the Great. I was Nero and I was Caligula and I was Vlad Dracula. He grinned and sat back in his chair and crossed his arms with an indisputable air of self-satisfaction. How can you be them if you do the things you say you do, said the whisperer? Jeremy shrugged. Sometimes I am I what I say, he said. And sometimes I am what I do. The Whisperer spread his hands out ... palms up. In here we are all the same. We contribute equally. One mind. One body. Nothing more. Nothing less. You forget the threes, said Jeremy. All things come in threes. One mind. One body.

Plus dreams. And then there were the deeds. Drowning girl. Girl with baby. Girl in burning car. Bah. You made those up, said Orange-hair. How about past, present, and future, said Jeremy. Did I make that up too? How about red, yellow, and blue? Three primary colors. And beginning, middle, and end? The threes are endless.

Maybe they know where that leads, said Bushy-brow, nodding toward the attendants. Or they don't. They never speak. It's a mistake to think that because they don't say they don't know, said Jeremy. Do those that know always tell?

And what about this here place, said Orange-hair? Where are the threes here? That door ... that door ... and here, said Jeremy. There was excitement building in the room. Was there an answer about to emerge? Life, birth, death, said Bushy-brow. But which is this, said the Whisperer? Maybe it's life, said Jeremy. Or death, said a new voice in the room. And the other two doors, said someone new? And there was silence. Doesn't really matter, said Jeremy? We're here. We were there. And we're all going there. All of us, said the Whisperer. How come most of us don't have names, said another new voice. I don't know, Jeremy suddenly said. I thought it was Jeremy ... but now I'm not sure. And that girl, said the Whisperer. You called her Linda. Jeremy shook his head. No. I said I would call her Linda. She didn't know her name. And I said I would call myself Jeremy, said Jeremy. Jeremy Slate in fact. I like the ring of it. But the reality is that I don't think I really know my name either.

So, said Orange-hair. Are you a brave man or a coward? Those stories you tell. Are those to camouflage your true nature?

We are different people for different occasions, said Jeremy. Today's truths are tomorrow's lies. Today heroes are tomorrow's cowards.

And you? You are what?

I can not tell you what I am. Only what I am not. And I am not a coward.

Orange-hair smirked. Does the coward seek heroics because of his fear of fear? Or does the hero seek heroics because he fears cowardice? And either way ... aren't both the hero and the coward cowards?

Bah, said Jeremy. By that reasoning the educated man seeks learning because he fears ignorance and the ignorant man also seeks education because he fears ignorance and hence they are both ignorant.

There was a noise at the entrance door. It began to open. Bushy-brow leaned as far forward as he could as a new stream of people marched in. He craned his neck. He tipped the chair as far as he could, all the while careful not to tip it. And then as the door began to close he snapped his head back in. They were all waiting. Well, said one. Black said Bushy-brow. All black. Not a thing to see. Nothing. Emptiness. Zero. Black on this side. White on that, said Jeremy. Something new to ponder, said Orange-hair. Thanks.

And once again silence reigned supreme in the Waiting Room as each inhabitant pondered this most recent conundrum. It appeared that those who tended to consider themselves ignorant were quite happy that they were not alone in their ignorance and those who considered themselves educated suddenly found themselves doubting the veracity of their often and secret self-congratulatory stance in life. Even the attendants

seemed entranced by the conversation ... so much so in fact that when the phone rang next they let it ring till it stopped of its own accord. Clearly they wanted to hear more for they too--as they secretly took joy over the fragmented moments of power they held over the Waiting Room's inhabitants—began to wonder if they had power because they had power or if they had power because they only thought they had power while all the while they were powerless.

And then the Whisperer spoke. Jeremy, he said. The question now arises as to whether you're going to be going through that other door screaming and crying or whether you're going to march through with your back straight and your eyes fearless? And they all ... Orange-hair and Bushy-Brow and the Whisperer himself as well the other inhabitants and the two attendants leaned forward in their chairs waiting to see what Jeremy Slate--who did not really know his own name--would say. And suddenly the philosophy of cowardice and education and power and what they were became meaningless. There was no analogy and connection. There just was. And as Jeremy finished stating that if they thought--pointing his chin at the attendants--that they were going to scare him ... they had another think coming ... the phone rang. And a fear struck the hearts of all for they knew another one of them was going to go through that door. And the attendants got up. And Jeremy watched with a fierce rebelliousness in his eyes as they began to approach him. And as they took his arms he tried to wrench free. But they were stronger than he thought they were. And he pulled and wrenched again. And they began to drag him. And he yelled at them and pulled and wrenched and twisted and yelled and screamed and twisted and cried and cried while the door opened and the white light shone through and the attendants guided him through the door ... his cries filling the room and then ... suddenly ... there was silence as the door slid shut and Jeremy was gone.

But he was still screaming and yelling ... and the doctor was slapping on his butt and the nurse was putting him in a swaddling blanket ... placing him on his mother's breast ... here is your newborn child Mrs. Slate ... while his mother was saying sh sh Jeremy ... be quiet now ... you have nothing to be afraid of ... and he suddenly felt safe as he nestled against her breast ... and she said dream of all the great things you're going to do in your life Jeremy ... my Jeremy ... my brave little Jeremy ... coming into this world all alone ... birth is never easy is it my little man? And his mother continued. One day my brave heroic little Jeremy ... when you're a little older ... I will tell you tales all of the great deeds you will one day perform. And heard the lady in the bed next to his mother who had just given birth to her newborn child say ... sh sh my little Linda. Welcome to your new world. And the doctor said, Nurse. There's a third one coming. And Jeremy closed his eyes and thought of the three's and wondered about the color of the newcomer's hair ... or what shaped eyebrows the newcomer would have ... not knowing what or why he was thinking what he was thinking ... and he smiled to himself ... and he was happy.

THE END