

New Nonfiction from Tom Keating: “The Lobby”



I am careful with the coffee tray. It holds four coffees and one tea for my guys in the VA hospital lobby.

Everyone who comes to the VA hospital spends time sitting in the lobby, waiting for a meeting with a doctor, or a blood draw, whatever they need. All of us are in the lobby because our bodies paid the price for our service.

It is a large lobby, with many comfortable upholstered chairs

placed in the center of the lobby floor. VA clerks sit behind the long counter on the left, and the Eye and Ear clinic is on the right. Flags for all the services; Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and the new Space Force hang from the high ceiling. A large US flag hangs opposite the service flags. The doctor's offices and labs are behind the elevator cluster near the information desk. Occasionally a nurse in blue scrubs would appear from the doctor's offices and shout out the name of a patient for their appointment.

Everybody wears baseball caps proclaiming their branch of service or places where they served: Desert Storm, Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam. Vietnam Vets are the oldest guys now.

My group calls itself the Orange Brigade. You can tell by our baseball caps that we are all Vietnam War vets. We suffer from exposure to Agent Orange, the defoliant, hence the name of our group. We meet on Mondays as we wait for our appointments. The group started after we all met in the lobby one Monday for our appointments. We pulled together some chairs into a corner of the lobby and shared our Vietnam stories. We would wait for our name to be called and talk about the Red Sox, or the Bruins, and the state of the country. We started with ten in our group, but there are five of us now.

The brigade includes Gerry, a former Marine with Parkinsons, Jim, a six-foot five ex-paratrooper with cancer, Charlie, an Air Force vet with raging diabetes, and Shirley, a former Army nurse who has severe migraines. I'm an Army vet, too, the youngest in the group at sixty-seven with an ischemic heart. I make the coffee run to the café just off the lobby.

I bring the tray over to the group. Gerry's hand trembles when he reaches for his coffee, which is half-filled, so he doesn't spill.

"Thanks, Tim," he says. Gerry had to cut his law practice down to almost nothing when he became ill.

I give Jim his large black coffee and a chocolate-dipped donut.

“Mama’s milk,” he jokes. “Thanks, brother.” Jim played pro football before the Army drafted him, now he is thin and frail. When he came home, it was difficult for him to adjust. His career in law enforcement was cut short by his difficulties, including lots of brawls and drinking. Two marriages went bust as well.

Charlie grabs his large mocha coffee, and a honey glazed. He uses a wheelchair because his legs can’t support his obese body. Shirley nurses her tea and shakes her head at Charlie’s gorging.

“You want to go into a diabetic coma?” says Shirley.

Charlie shrugs at Shirley’s comment. “Hell, I’m dead already. The Air Force killed me. I flew in the planes that sprayed Agent Orange.” He took a bite of the donut. “When the VA diagnosed me, I was shocked. I had to take insulin shots. I couldn’t eat what I wanted, or drink what I wanted. That’s no way to live. Fuck it, I’m doing what I want.”

I sip my decaf and Splenda and say nothing. Everyone makes their own choices. When I returned from the war, I had it made. My fiancée had her Dad get me work at his advertising agency, and we married, raised two children, and were happy till my first heart attack at fifty.

Shirley nurses her tea and shakes her head. When she first joined the group, she spoke of her time in the war. “So many boys, so much hurt,” She left nursing after the war. She had a lengthy career in retail, and the success helped ease her pain.

A nurse comes out of the clinic office and shouts, “Wentworth, Gerald!” Gerry shouts “here!” and grabs his walker to stand up.

“Carry on, folks! See you guys next week.” Gerry straightens up, turns smartly with his walker and shaky legs over to the nurse.

Jim shakes his head and says, “Man, Jerry will be lucky to be here with us next week. He’s getting worse.” Charlie laughs, Shirley just sips her tea. It worried me that Gerry was worse, and in spite of his bravado, he knows it too.

Another nurse appears and shouts, “Brackett, Charles!”

Charlie nods to us, says, “See you guys’ next week,” and wheels off. He is slowly eating and drinking himself to death. Jim says aloud what we all were thinking,

“I bet Charlie aint gonna make to next week.” Shirley nods in agreement. We are quiet for a minute or two, then I ask Jim how he is doing, and he says,

“Middlin, boy, middlin. My belly hurts all the time, and they wanna cut out my intestines and put me on a bag. I don’t wanna do that, but I guess I have to.”

Shirley says, “do it, Jim. You can live longer with the bag.”

Before he could reply, the nurse comes out again, “Kearney, Timothy!” Raising my hand for the nurse, then offering it to Jim, I tell him.

“I WILL see you two next week!” I smile.

“For sure, brother, take care,” he says. We shake hands. I bump fists with Shirley who smiles up at me.

Walking toward the nurse I look back at our corner of the lobby. Jim, wincing at the pain in his stomach, is slumped in his chair. Shirley tries to comfort him. I stare at the two empty chairs, Charlie, and Jerry. The Orange Brigade body count is rising. I take a deep breath and follow the nurse.