

The Wreck of Me

by Neil Serven

The technician at the blood lab said, "You're becoming a regular." She was a kid with Buddy Holly tortoiseshells and a streak in her hair the color of Easter grass.

When I didn't answer, she added, "Better knock it off."

"You're a hard habit to break," I said. My tongue was flaring.

Flirting with nurses was my father's thing. Waitresses, too, when he was healthy. When I try it sounds like a bad audition.

"Relax your arm," she said.

It's true I'm becoming a regular. Frequent enough now that I know to go straight to the lab window without stopping at reception. I park myself in the only seat in the waiting room where I can read the sports ticker off the TV and still hear when my name is called.

The order was for five vials, my new record. Finding the vein is a cinch, I'm tender flesh and she's a pro.

We don't know what this is. It started off with a pair of cankers inside my upper lip, ordinary enough, pressed like marbles against the gum. Then a rash began to develop on my hands and up my arms, and my tongue swelled up enough to thicken my speech. It was May and I had been working in the yard a lot, spreading wood chips for mulch. Mold might have set into the mulch pile, was the best I could guess.

But no allergy like that would cause my white blood cell count to drop to the floor, the doctor said. Aloud we wondered about lupus ("Hard to think it's lupus since it's so rare in males"), talking all around leukemia like it would insult the chef.

This guy was the closest I could find when my insurance changed over. He knows his stuff all right but was hiding in the supply closet when they handed out straight talk. I think my age makes him nervous.

The technician and I both silently watched the maroon stream into each tube, which she expertly switched out with one hand, one after another. My eyes wandered to whatever places you can look

without feeling like a violator when someone stands that close: her earlobes; her stained teeth; the dome of her clunky kid's wristwatch.

As the last tube filled, she reached to undo the rubber tie. Hole swabbed, wad of gauze and we were done. The full tubes lay parallel like fingers on the counter.

"Leave any in there for me?" I said. Her lip curled to a smirk.

Returning to the paperwork she checked off a couple of boxes with a flourish, then clicked her pen. "All set. Don't let me see you in here again, okay?"

"Yes ma'am." And then she was gone. My arm felt hollow.

It was my birthday. I was thirty-four. Something told me this was how it was going to be now. Pieces gradually frayed off, pinched and sampled until nothing useful remained. That was what they did to my father. They'll drain out the fluids, chop off the hair, cut out the viscera. Pluck out the eyes. Collect the teeth. Use the rest for the stew.

