

# **Florence Essay Prize**

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## Mourning in the Waiting Room

Cream-colored walls form a backdrop to the pastel French-countryside paintings. The glare from the recessed lighting makes them seem surreal – almost garish. Elderly patients and their families sit in padded teal chairs around me, waiting for their names to be called. Most of them face a television mounted high on the wall. *The Today Show* informs us of political strife, a bombing on Times Square, and upcoming rain and snow -- cheery topics.

A rail-thin man in blue jeans, shiny black dress shoes, tan socks, blue dress shirt and black jacket holds one leathery hand in the other and studies them in his lap. He occasionally glances up at the TV or watches people come and go, but most of the time he sits, head bowed, wrinkled face relaxed. His features and large protruding ears could pass for an Abe Lincoln impersonator, except he's not tall enough. I'll call him Ralph. He looks like a Ralph. His thin, dark graying hair is unruly; it reminds me of a little boy who needs a comb. His head has been bent a long while now. I think he is asleep. Good night, Ralph. Sweet dreams.

Getting old sucks. The older I become, the more my world revolves around doctors and pills and procedures. That's all my parents talk about when I telephone them – which doctors they've seen this week, and what was done to them, and what appointments they have next week. Soon it will be the Baby Boomers like me filling up waiting rooms and funeral parlors. Are we ready for our own demise – for that shadow that follows us around all our lives to swallow us up and return us to the earth?

I need to be ready because I have a terminal illness. In fact, every human being on the planet is dying of it. It's called mortality. We all know that, but most of us choose to ignore or sugarcoat the truth. People prefer to say "he passed away" or "he kicked the bucket." Shakespeare's Mercutio wasn't fooled. He had his eyes wide open when Tybalt pierced him with the rapier.

"They've made worm's meat of me," he announced. That's telling it like it is.

I read in a book that the worst pain is what you anticipate -- which is why a nurse will sometimes dispense a shot to a child without warning. Perhaps if we didn't know death was lurking around the corner, we'd live in ignorant bliss. However, I believe we have an inkling of this truth from early on. Nature speaks the reality. Flowers die, bugs die, dogs die, grandfathers die, and I, too, will die.

Even though I am fairly comfortable with my own mortality, it is different when I am confronted with the demise of others.

Once, while on a trip to a nature center, I wandered past both stuffed and live animals on display. As I turned a corner, I noticed a large rat snake in a glass case. Fearful, but fascinated, I moved in for a closer look. The constrictor was clearly asleep. Its eyes were mere slits; its long body, motionless. As I shifted my focus, a blur of movement in the cage caught my attention. I gasped. A pink-eyed white mouse was calmly cleaning its paws; its whiskers twitching against the scaled coils. At any moment, the reptile could awaken, squeeze its life away, and swallow it whole. There was no escape. Watching the predator and its prey disturbed me. It's bad enough to be killed and eaten. It's

even worse to live with no hope of flight. Perhaps the tiny animal was unaware of its own peril, but I was prudent enough to quickly move on.

My 83-year-old father is now at ease with the nearness of death. He has outlived all his siblings, their spouses, and even a niece. Once he rarely spoke of dying, but now he brings up the topic fairly often.

“I hope I’ll live long enough to see you graduate,” he says when I visit. “I’m so proud of you,” he adds, patting my knee as I lean my head on his bony shoulder.

“I hope so, too,” I say; it’s all I can choke out before I turn my head. My throat aches and tears start in my eyes. I don’t want to think about it, but I’m beginning to ask myself, “Is this Dad’s last Christmas, his last birthday, the last time he will tell me how proud he is of me?” When I hug him goodbye, I hold on just a little longer than before, savoring the feel of his stubbly cheek against my own, and the smell of the gray hair at his temples.

Like the mouse in the glass cage, we never know when that final moment will come. Dad could live another decade or the phone could ring tonight and I could be planning his funeral tomorrow.

Recently, I entered the sanctuary of my church with my 17-year-old daughter for choir practice. The room was badly in need of a janitor’s services. Trash and flower petals littered the carpet.

“Was there a wedding here today?” I asked myself. “No, it is Tuesday—a funeral then.”

Glancing around, I saw used Kleenex on the floor and strewn on random pews all the way to the back. The place had apparently been packed. I remembered then that services for a popular high school senior had been held there just a few hours earlier.

Like the faint smell of roses, inconsolable grief seemed to linger in the air. I found myself staring at the front row, imagining the overwhelming heartbreak of her mother. Her child here one day and gone the next. I reached out and grabbed my daughter's hand and gave it a hard squeeze. The foretaste was frightening.

The cross hanging over the petal-strewn altar shifted my focus and my thoughts. Here, too, was a symbol of death. Even Jesus, the divine, was a human who faced the anticipation of his gory end. He was afraid too, and visions of pounding fists, piercing thorns, flying leather thongs, and splitting spikes drove him to sweat drops of blood and beg for a way out.

If Jesus could face all that – even death itself – I knew there was hope for me, for the grieving mother, and even for Ralph, nodding off in his chair, his hands still clenched in his lap.