

Outpatient

by Roz Warren

The waiting room is crowded. Mothers watch fidgety children, couples sit together on drab sofas, adult children talk in soothing voices to elderly parents. Everyone in the waiting room has someone with them. Luisa has come alone.

"New patient?" the receptionist asks. Luisa nods.

The receptionist hands her a clipboard that holds a form. "You'll have to fill this out," she says. When Luisa returns it a few moments later the receptionist looks it over. "You haven't filled in your occupation," she says.

"Hypnotist," says Luisa.

"Oh?" The receptionist meets Luisa's eyes. They're unusual eyes. Clear blue, almost violet. They often remind people of deep bodies of water.

"It's the family business," says Luisa. "Both my parents were hypnotists. As were two of my grandparents."

"How lovely," says the receptionist.

"The doctor will see me right away," says Luisa, still looking into the receptionist's eyes. She enunciates each word slowly and carefully.

"But we call people in the order they arrive."

"I arrived first," says Luisa.

"You arrived first," agrees the receptionist.

Luisa has barely glanced at Time Magazine's special Olympics issue when a nurse calls her name. She follows the nurse down a corridor to a small examining room. The nurse hands her the usual skimpy garment, telling Luisa to remove her clothes and put it on. When the nurse leaves, Luisa strips, puts the thing on and sits down on the edge of the examination table. Its cool. Almost immediately, she has goose bumps.

Luisa doesn't look great in the drab shapeless garment but she looks better than most. She is of an indeterminate age. Certainly past forty. She could be described as "well preserved."

She is tall and strong-looking and has longish red hair. Not beautiful but striking. The nurse comes back in and smiles when she notices that Luisa's fingernails and toenails are painted cherry blossom pink.

"Stand on the scale," she instructs. Luisa gets on the scale and the nurse adjusts the indicator back and forth, minutely, until it finally rests on 130.

"One hundred thirty," she says.

Luisa turns to look at her. "What about my eyes?" she asks.

"Hmm?" the nurse says, writing. She looks up and meets Luisa's eyes. "Oh!" she says. She gazes at Luisa for a moment.

"They're such a nice color," she says.

"Really?" asks Luisa. "Tell the truth."

"They're a little weird."

"Scary?" asks Luisa.

"Nope." The nurse smiles. "I like them."

Luisa smiles. "I weigh 157," she says. The nurse glances down at her clipboard and frowns. She erases the 130 and writes 157.

"But I carry it well," says Luisa. "Don't I?"

"You certainly do," says the nurse. "Now I have to take your blood pressure." She straps the armband on, pumps it up, and looks at it. "One hundred ten over sixty," she says.

"One twenty over seventy." Luisa says. The nurse gazes at her blankly. "I'm sorry," says Luisa. "But these silly games are quite harmless and they're crucial if I'm to stay in practice. I'll stop if it disturbs you."

The nurse smiles. "It doesn't disturb me." She writes one hundred twenty over seventy on Luisa's chart. "I think it's interesting."

"What happens now?" Luisa asks.

"You wait for Doctor Heller."

"I probably don't even need Doctor Heller," Says Luisa. "I'm sure I've got bronchitis. Everyone in my family has bronchitis."

Everyone on my block has bronchitis. But I can't just write myself out a prescription for antibiotics can I?"

"No," says the nurse. "You can't."

"What's Doctor Heller like?" Luisa asks.

"He's very nice."

"Tell the truth."

"He's an arrogant jerk," says the nurse. The she looks startled and they both burst out laughing.

"But he's a very competent doctor," the nurse says. "He can diagnose your bronchitis as well as the next doc."

"Thanks for putting up with me," says Luisa. "You will feel happy for the rest of the day. You will walk around thinking life is a piece of cake."

"I certainly look forward to that," says the nurse.

Luisa snaps her fingers. The nurse blinks, then moves quickly to the door. "Doctor Heller will be right with you," she says as she leaves. She has left the clipboard with Luisa's chart on the table and Luisa quickly changes her weight and blood pressure to the correct numbers.

Time passes. Ten minutes. Twenty minutes. Noting happens. The nurse has left her with the impression that the doctor would be right in. Clearly, he won't be. There is nothing to distract her. She should have brought the magazine with her. She imagines parading out into the waiting room dressed as she is to retrieve her copy of Time. She decides against it.

She looks around the room. It's a generic examination room. No windows. No pictures or photos. Nothing interesting or unusual to hold her attention. Luisa hasn't much interest in things anyway. Things rarely hold surprises; people do.

Another twenty minutes pass. Luisa is beginning to think they've forgotten all about her. She's starting to feel woozy. It angers her. Sitting here half dressed is the last thing she needs.

She knows that in examining rooms up and down this hallway sick people sit in skimpy garments waiting for the doctor. It's more convenient for him this way. She tries to calm herself. This

treatment isn't life-threatening, she tells herself. It may be dehumanizing and demoralizing but it won't kill you. They only do it this way because they can get away with it.

Finally, the door opens and a big man in a white coat breezes in. He's in his mid-thirties, large and bearded. He looks like a lumberjack. His blue eyes are intelligent but not particularly kind. He moves in a rush.

"Well Luisa," he says loudly, glancing down at the clipboard, "I'm Doctor Heller. What's the trouble?"

"Sorry to keep you waiting," says Luisa.

"Hmmm?" he says, scanning her chart.

"I said I was sorry to keep you waiting."

He looks up at her. "Symptoms?" he asks.

"Fever," she says. "Sore throat. Has cough. I think I have bronchitis."

"I'm the doctor," he says, making notations on her chart. He places his stethoscope on her back. "Cough!" he barks.

Luisa coughs as he moves his stethoscope about her back and then her chest. His movements are all precise and quick and his touch is firm and cold. He looks into the distance, concentrating. He doesn't look at her.

"It began two weeks ago," Luisa says. "I woke up with a bad sore throat. Three days later I began running a slight fever." She stops.

He isn't listening.

"How much harm have you caused your patients by not listening to them?" she asks quietly.

"Hmm?" He takes a thermometer from a drawer. "Open," he says, angling the thermometer toward her mouth. Luisa pushes it away.

"Listen to me!" she says.

He stops and looks at her, his eyes dark and angry. Their eyes meet. It's a struggle. But Luisa is angry.

"You will slow down and give me a good thorough examination," she says, finally. "You will take your time, pay

attention and explain the reason for each procedure. You will listen to me when I speak. Not only am I older than you and deserving of your respect for no other reason, but I live in this body. I may know something about it that can help you."

The doctor gazes at her unblinking.

"I'm not just a body with an illness," says Luisa. "I'm a person. You care about my feelings."

"I care about your feelings," he says. He sounds doubtful.

But he continues the examination at a much slower, kinder pace and Luisa is surprised at how good he is. His cold hands even seem to warm up slightly. But it's clear that he's fighting the impulse to race through the exam and get on to the next patient.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" she asks.

"I have so many patients. I hate to keep them waiting."

"You don't care about that. Tell the truth."

"You've got a fabulous body," he says. "I love older women with big breasts."

"Not about that," she laughs. "Why are you in such a hurry?"

"This way I stay in control."

"What if you aren't in control?"

"I have to be in control."

"Why?"

"I'm the doctor."

"And you're the doctor because you have to stay in control," says Luisa. "Right?"

"Yes," he says. "I do like your eyes. They're..."

"What?"

"Calming."

He finishes the examination. "You have bronchitis," he says.

"I'm writing you a prescription for 500mg of ampicillin."

"What would make you listen to your patients?" she asks.

"What would make you care?"

"Nothing," he says. He is writing the prescription. "Take this four times daily with plenty of water." He hands it to her and turns towards the door.

"Wait," she says.

He stops. "Take your clothes off," she says. He turns and stares into her eyes. He begins to unbutton his shirt.

As he removes his clothing, Luisa puts hers back on. By the time he's naked, she's fully clothed. He stands there looking very pale. He has goose bumps. She hands him the hospital garment. He puts it on.

"You will sit here and wait," she says, "until the nurse comes looking for you. You'll see what it's like."

He sits down on the edge of the examination table and sighs.

She pauses at the door. "When the nurse comes you'll forget about me."

"I'll forget about you." He sounds happy about that.

"But you'll never forget the next half hour."

As Luisa leaves the room she sees the nurse heading toward her with a clipboard. "Doctor Heller is in the examining room," she tells the nurse. "He asked not to be disturbed for at least a half hour. But he wanted you to explain to the patients who are waiting that there'll be a delay. And to apologize."

"That's new," says the nurse.

"That's right," says Luisa. She meets the nurse's eyes.

"Have an interesting day," she says.

