

Hang the Bag from the Beep Box

They're all lined up like the Gulag.

Fluorescent lights bring out every crease, pimple and vein.

"How about Chair Nine?"

Chair nine works fine. Because they're all the same:

Waxed brown, like a blob of epoxy shaped in the 1940's.

This is where you meet your beep box,

Next to the Visitor chair- empty, with unbendable legs.

Try to move it if you dare.

The legs sound off like a trumpet blowing into the linoleum floor.

I dump my zebra colored tweed tote from 10,000 Villages here. Has the villager seen an infusion room? My bag is filled with color by numbers, pencils and peppermint hand sanitizer.

The beep box waits.

Plugs, like a thick strip of licorice, droop in a clump on its side.

"Sometimes you just need to give it a good whack," says Nurse Patty.

In minutes, I'll be connected. They'll hang the bag.

I yank my ripped tissue thin shirt over my wrists. Now the throb is hidden. Go away, pulse.

The mix is concocted. Out come the freeze mitts. I will learn to turn book pages with these on my hands.

Nurse Hillary smiles. "Clap like a seal!"

But my fingers are stuffed inside, like pale, forgotten hot dogs from the freezer.

Hang the bag from the beep box.

Let's get it done.

I chant OCD gibberish distraction words "Bristol Myers Squibb. Frigate Frodo." My thoughts are hijacked in restless anticipation of the liquid, the drip.

"Imagine it healing you," someone advised.

But I don't.

Because two chairs down is a man pale as a Polar bear, shaking off chills. His teeth chatter like a plastic windup toy. They give him a blanket that looks soft as a razor. He says his throat itches.

Each nurse moves,

Hangs a bag from the beep box.

It's the tenth time I've brought the same book and read the same page.

The lady in Chair Seven says hers was caught early. "Not in the lymph nodes, thank God."

"Mine isn't in the lymph nodes, either," says the man in Chair Eight. "Can I drink a beer tonight?" he asks Colleen.

I take a selfie that will never go on social media.

"Let's get you accessed," says Colleen. Her eyeshadow glistens pink, gray and blue. "Little pinch," in the port, the taste of antiseptic leaking down my throat.

Fluids might get my heart rate down.

Hook 'em up to the beep box.

While you do that, I'll think about my lymph nodes because I'm not one of lucky ones.

"Name and date of birth?" My bracelet is peeling off. We laugh. I've washed my hands six times since I've been here. The bathroom wall has quotes on it waiting for their chance to inspire.

But I just stare at my hollowed-out eyes.

The pee shoots out in a wicked, wild stream because there's no more pubic hair to stifle the flow.

Just hang the bag from the beep box.

Then I can go home and write my three thousand words for pay day.

"Her pulse was a little high," says Nurse Karen.

"Yeah. It always is," says Nurse Patty.

I chant transcendental meditation in my brain and listen to the Tibetan singing bowl, the healing waterfall and the Gregorian chant.

In their calm, the chaos of my subconscious revolts. Because it knows the truth. There are no guarantees. No matter what you believe or what you are told.

My ice mitts smear frost on the swivel tray.

"Nice socks." They're green, stuffed with gel and frozen. "It's better than getting neuropathy," they say.

Should I pray?

Here comes the blood pressure machine.

Tachycardia reigns. But I can go home.

"Thank you!" I call out to no one in particular, my mask muffling the words.

I sling the zebra bag on my shoulder and stride away.

But the beep box remains.