

# PROMETHEAN

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The City College

## THE ACTIVITY OF WAITING

by ELIZABETH ENGLAND

Two children are sitting on a couch in the waiting room of their mother's doctor's office. They have been told to be quiet, to find something to play with since their toys were left in the car, which is now locked.

Would you like a magazine? A woman behind a clear plastic wall is tapping her finger and staring at one of the children, the boy, whose sister is poking his leg with her longest finger nail.

She wants you, Maggie says to her brother, who has found an old set of directions for a train set in his pocket. The paper has been in Hamilton's jeans (and washed and dried) since December, seven months ago, which is when he received the gift. What are you reading?

Nothing.

It must be something. Maggie is looking at the wrinkled piece of paper which her brother holds closer to him each time she bends over to see it.

It's nothing, I swear it.

She wants you. Maggie points to the lady, who has put on red lipstick and brushed her hair since the children arrived.

Hamilton looks at the woman then points at his chest. The woman nods and Hamilton shakes his head.

She can't possibly mean me, he says to his sister. This is a girl's doctor.

Maggie looks at the lady behind the glass who is rolling her eyes and pointing at Hamilton. When Maggie points at her chest just as Hamilton did, the lady shakes her head and practically breaks the plastic as she jabs her finger at Hamilton.

She definitely wants you, Maggie says, shrugging her shoulders at the woman.

I'll go over to her, but if she tries to make me go into the doctor's office, come get me, ok?

Maggie nods and asks her brother for the train set directions to read while he's away. He says she wouldn't understand them, but when her lower lip starts to shake, he throws the paper

at her, telling her not to lose them. She crosses her heart and smiles at him.

When he walks across the room to the lady, Hamilton's hands are in his pockets, his eyes look at the carpeting, which is pale green with pieces of blue in it. He stands in front of the plastic until the lady slides the window open and asks him to come in.

Why?

Because I want to give you something.

No.

No?

You could give it to me here, please.

I can't because you have to choose which one you want and the bag is in here.

I don't think so, thank you.

You don't think so what?

I'll stay right here, thank you, with my sister.

Is that your sister? The woman is pointing to Maggie who is picking dead leaves off of a violet plant. She has gathered all the leaves into a pile and is stuffing them into her skirt pocket.

Yes, she's a thief.

Oh, the lady says.

And a liar.

Oh, the lady says again. What does she lie about?

Everything. Especially her name.

What is her name?

Maggie.

And your name.

Hamilton.

And you're Mrs. Breeze's children?

Mr. Breeze's, too.

Excuse me?

We belong to both of them. Mr. and Mrs. Breeze.

Well, of course, you do. Why don't you come in here and pick out a lollipop for you and Maggie?

I can't have candy because I have a hole in my tooth. Hamilton opens his mouth and points to his back teeth. What kind?

What kind of what? The lady folds back the wrapper of



a candy bar, wiping the sides of her mouth with two fingers. Her cheeks hang almost down to her neck.

Lollipops. I can have them because they're not real candy, like chocolate. What kind do you have?

There are lots of flavors.

Not flavors. What brand? We have certain ones. Both of us throw up the second they go into our mouths. My sister throws up all over the place. I usually make it to the restroom.

Oh. These aren't those kind. Here, look. The lady holds a bag of multi-colored lollipops up in the air so Hamilton can see the candies as well as the long pink nails that are gripping the bag.

I'd like a green one and a red one for my sister.

Are you sure she likes red? The lady is smiling at Hamilton, her eyebrows are so skinny that they look like gray worms.

She loves it, but if you ask her, she'll say she hates it. Because she's a liar.

Yes, you said that.

Well, it's the truth.

I'm certain it is. The lady puts the bag on her lap and asks Hamilton if he'd like a magazine to which he says no, thank you, he hates to read.

And your sister?

She'll tell you she hates it, but she loves it.

Is that because she lies? The lady is smiling again.

Hamilton walks back to his sister who has taken at least twenty leaves off of the violet plant that is sitting on the yellow table, the same table that is in his dentist's office.

There are bits of brown and green leaves on Maggie's lips. When she sees Hamilton walking towards her, she wipes her mouth and turns around in her chair.

How many of those did you eat? Hamilton asks her.

None.

How many? Hamilton is standing in front of his sister, her feet at least twelve inches off the floor.

Maggie looks down into her skirt pocket which is bulging with leaves. See. They're all here.

I think you should go to the bathroom.

I don't have to, his sister says.

To wash up, I mean. Before she comes out and sees your face like that.

Hamilton picks up his sister who, though shorter, weighs nearly as much as he does. He brings her to the lady behind the plastic and asks for the restroom key.

Does she need help? The lady asks.

No, thank you, Maggie says, her arms around her brother's neck, one leg dragging on the floor.

When they get to the ladies' room, Maggie refuses to go in without Hamilton, who looks around before opening the door that says "Ladies" in gold letters.

I think I have to go, Maggie says.

Hamilton is looking at his teeth in the mirror. He can't see the cavity which his dentist needs to drill into his skull to find. The drilling will take place next week.

We're in the bathroom. Wash your face. Hamilton says, still stretching his lip so he can see the black hole that his mother promised him would eat all his other teeth unless he let the dentist drill his skull open.

Don't look, Maggie says, lifting her skirt and pulling at her tights while walking to one of the three stalls in the room.

Do you think he'll miss and get my brain?

Who?

The dentist, Hamilton says, running his tongue over all of his teeth which have no fillings in them.

Maybe. But it won't hurt.

Who says?

Everybody.

Everybody who?

I need help.

I think it's going to kill.

Hamilton, I need some help reaching.

Hamilton is standing on his tiptoes looking at his face which is so long that it almost doesn't fit in the mirror. He tries to pin his ears back so they lay flat against his head. Each time he holds them down and lets go, they bounce up.

Hamilton asks his sister: Do you think the drilling will change the way I look? Like maybe my ears will stay down or something.

I need you in here.

He didn't say anything about the pain. About what it feels like when he misses and hits my jaw bone. Hamilton runs a



finger over his jaw. When he sees dirt in his fingernail, he uses his teeth to clean it.

Please, Maggie says, her voice cracking.

What?

I can't reach.

Reach what? Hamilton says, standing outside her stall.

The paper. It's too far away.

Close your eyes, then. Hamilton gets toilet paper from the stall next door and hands it to his sister who is sitting on the toilet with her eyes closed. She squeezes her eyes so hard that there are wrinkles all over her face.

Here, Hamilton says, sticking the paper in her hand.

Thank you. Maybe he'll have one of those hanging clowns like at the doctor's office. They tell you to stare at it and the shots never hurt.

I didn't see any clowns there.

By the time they return to the waiting room, there are four new ladies sitting down, some reading, some staring at each other. There is also a new lady behind the plastic who isn't smiling.

Excuse me, Hamilton asks her. Has Mrs. Breeze left the doctor's office?

What? The lady doesn't look at Hamilton who is still sliding his tongue around his tooth as he talks.

Mrs. Breeze, my mother, is she here?

I can't understand you, the lady says, staring at Hamilton.

My mother, Hamilton says slowly. Where is she?

Now, how would I know?

Hamilton turns to Maggie, who has let go of his hand and is now talking to a lady with blonde hair. Her skirt is so short that Hamilton has to bend over to make sure she's dressed. Maggie is offering the lady a leaf.

She was with the doctor, Hamilton says, tapping on the plastic at the lady who is eating a sandwich, ham with mustard, and reading a paper.

Well, then, that's where she is, the lady says with a yellow wad of food in her mouth.

It's not polite to talk with your mouth full, Hamilton says and walks over to Maggie, grabbing her hand. Excuse me, he says to the blonde lady and leads Maggie outside to the parking

lot where he sees their mother leaning against the side of the blue station wagon car. Her hat is on, but she is holding her leather gloves.

No one knew where you were, Hamilton says to his mother who unlocks all the car's doors with one switch and gets into the driver's seat. She looks in the rearview mirror, puts on lipstick, rubs her lips together. She tips her hat forward so that the orange feather points backwards.

I asked the lady behind the plastic and everything, Hamilton says, getting into the backseat next to his sister. Nobody had even *heard* of you, for that matter. He reaches over and fastens his sister's seat belt.

Their mother starts the car, turning around to back out of the parking space.

It was as if you didn't exist, Hamilton says, feeling in his pockets for his train directions. Do you have them, he asks Maggie.

What?

My directions to the train set.

No, I gave them back to you.

You didn't and you know it.

I did, Mama, tell him I did, Maggie says. I did so.

Even the ladies waiting for the doctor had never seen you, Hamilton says. Were you waiting long? Maggie had to use the bathroom and then poof, you were gone. Where are my directions?

You lost them, Maggie says.

And then, I thought of the dentist drill and my skull, Hamilton says, leaning forward, his chin on the edge of the front seat. Do you think they'll hit my brain? I mean, by mistake.

I gave them to you before we went to the bathroom.

You didn't.

I did, Mama, tell him I did, Maggie says, taking a leaf out of her pocket and eating it.

Hamilton sees her and shakes his head, wiping her mouth with his hand.

We're in a rush now, their mother says. We were on schedule and now we have to hurry.

For a second, only a second, we thought you had left us, Hamilton says.

I didn't think that, Maggie says.  
We both did. Hamilton looks at Maggie.  
Where did I tell you to stay?  
We were there until Maggie had to go.  
I did not.  
She did.

I thought I said the waiting room. There is a brown ball of lint on their mother's jacket that Hamilton stares at until they go over a bump and it falls to the seat.

That's where we were until Maggie had to use the bathroom.

A simple five-minute checkup is what I thought I said.

You did. And then when we came out, you had vanished.

Their mother reaches down and turns on the radio, a classical station that Hamilton normally turns off as soon as their mother gets out of the car to get gas or pick up the dry cleaning.

Well, at least we found you, Hamilton says.

Their mother puts the noise in the back speakers as well as the front so the whole car is throbbing with violins and other instruments whose sound makes Hamilton sit back in his seat, his hands over his ears, his tongue running over and over his back molar.