

Waiting for Romanow: a play in 17 very similar acts

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Act I

A waiting room. Two chairs. A Reader's Digest. Morning.

Phlegmon, with a lapful of crumpled tissues, is searching through his many pockets for another tissue. Every few seconds, he sneezes into his hand. Each sneeze ends in a coughing fit. He empties his coat pockets and out fall a ball of string, some half-finished bottles of pills and several coins. He looks to the floor, spots the Reader's Digest and blows his nose into it. He places it on the floor again. Enter Vallecula.

PHLEGMON: Good morning, my malingering friend. I see that again you are dying faster than you like and are searching for the right pill.

Ignoring Phlegmon, Vallecula takes off his coat, hangs it on a book and sits down. He picks up the Reader's Digest from the floor, examines the cover and begins to leaf through it.

VALLECULA: Disgusting!

He drops the magazine on the floor and glares at Phlegmon's pile of crumpled tissues.

PHLEGMON: I would have warned you, but you clearly didn't want to talk. Life's like that.

VALLECULA: Like what?

PHLEGMON: Life.

VALLECULA: Just like that? Life?

PHLEGMON: Please. Stop it, nothing is like that.

VALLECULA: Like what? Oh this is ridiculous. If life is indeed like a magazine full of mucus, I want none of it.

PHLEGMON: What is it you want then? We had this conversation yesterday. You folded a *Maclean's* into a strainer because you thought you had a kidney stone. I think you said "If life is like a *Maclean's* full of ..."

VALLECULA: *(interrupting)*. Well, whatever it might be, I don't want to spend it here discussing origami with you. I want to see the doctor.

PHLEGMON: I have been waiting my whole life to see the doctor.

VALLECULA: Indeed.

PHLEGMON: It started when I was born. He offered me palliative care.

VALLECULA: Palliative care? At birth? Is it your brain that has been leaking out of your nose this whole time? You need a neurosurgeon, my dear man, not a GP.

PHLEGMON: I remember it as clear as yesterday. There I was, in my bassinet, not 3 days old and he says to my parents, "Madame, Monsieur, I have some sad news. Your baby is dying. Oh no, not right now. He is a perfectly healthy 3-day-old, but it is certain that he will die.

He will likely outlive all of us, but I feel it my duty to tell you he will not get out of this life alive. What is important is that we keep him comfortable. I suggest a combination of morphine and antibiotics."

VALLECULA: That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard. *(He looks around for a magazine and, forgetting, picks up the Reader's Digest again.)* Disgusting!

PHLEGMON: All in a day's work.

VALLECULA: Would you stop saying things like that? *(Glances at the clock)* How long have you been waiting?

PHLEGMON: I cannot remember the last time I was not waiting. In fact, I can't remember the last time we both were not waiting. Indeed, you leave only to pay the parking meter. Sometimes you are gone for an hour, sometimes for a day, but you always come back.

VALLECULA: The problem is, I must see the doctor. It is imperative. I am terribly ill. I fear the worst. My heart has slowed such that only my tachycardias keep me alive, and I keep from feeling my fevers only because of my low thyroid. All I need is a pill or two, and I will be on my way.

PHLEGMON: I seem to have a number of them. *(He rummages through his pockets and pulls dozens of pills from each.)* You can have one if you like. None seem to work for me. One makes me sneeze, the other cough. No matter how many medicines I stop taking, I always seem to find myself taking more.

VALLECULA: Well, who gives them to you? I cannot remember the last time we both were not waiting, and I have not seen a doctor. Only the nurse who pokes her head around the corner and herds us from examining room to examining room like cattle, then back to these blasted chairs.

PHLEGMON: The cupboards in the examining rooms are full of them. Small packages. They each are so convincing. Take this one, for instance ... *(Phlegmon pulls out a package insert.)* ... "Recommended for coughs. May cause sneezing." I can't seem to make out the rest. Anyway, this one did the trick for my cough. *(He begins to sneeze, grabs the Reader's Digest and sneezes into it.)* Medicine is the best medicine.

VALLECULA: Everyone knows that.

The nurse pokes her head around the corner.

NURSE: The doctor thanks you for your patience.

PHLEGMON: *(quizzically)*. But we are HIS patients. Does he thank us for us?

NURSE: Yes. Thank you. *(Her head disappears.)*

VALLECULA: (*looking at the Reader's Digest on the floor*).

I doubt he is particularly thankful.

The door opens and both men look up, expecting to see the Doctor. Both begin to stand and Vallecula pushes Phlegmon back into his chair. A blur of a white coat runs through, head deep in a chart.

VALLECULA and PHLEGMON: (*together*). Doctor!

The doctor vanishes. VALLECULA sits down.

PHLEGMON: Was that him?

VALLECULA: Clearly, thank goodness.

PHLEGMON: I should like to thank him for thanking us.

Really though, I don't see what all the fuss is about. He looks like you or me.

VALLECULA: That's the point, dear man. He looks like you and me, but he has the good grace to be neither of us.

The sound of a pager going off in the background. The slam of a door, a blur of a white coat with a head buried in a medical chart. They both rise up, Phlegmon pushes Vallecula back into his chair.

PHLEGMON and VALLECULA: (*together*). Doctor!

The door slams shut. The nurse pokes her head around the corner.

NURSE: The doctor was needed at the hospital. He will be back as soon as he can. He asked that you proceed to the examining rooms and disrobe. Examine yourselves and re-dress. Your exam results will be confidential of course. Please don't know them until the doctor has explained to you your findings. We pride ourselves on an ethical operation here.

PHLEGMON: What sort of ethical operation?

VALLECULA: Perhaps a graft of morals, or insertion of Teflon scruples. Maybe even a lateral Kantotomy. I have

a friend who is recovering from a Pufendorfoplasty.

PHLEGMON: But what if I reject these?

VALLECULA: A sure sign of disease. They'll be forced to operate.

PHLEGMON: Then I will comply.

VALLECULA: Better.

NURSE: (*annoyed*). Gentlemen? (*Her head disappears.*)

VALLECULA: (*sighs*). It's always so damn drafty in those rooms. And every magazine has been sneezed in. What time do you have?

PHLEGMON: (*looks at his watch, taps it, shakes it*). Time has stopped.

VALLECULA: I am in hell. Nevertheless, I must leave and pay the parking meter.

PHLEGMON: Will you come back?

VALLECULA: Of course.

PHLEGMON: What if the doctor cannot see us today?

VALLECULA: We wait until tomorrow.

PHLEGMON: And if not tomorrow?

VALLECULA: Then the tomorrow after that.

PHLEGMON: All this waiting cannot be good for one's sinuses.

Vallecula stands, puts on his coat, starts to go toward where the nurse last appeared, changes his mind and leaves through the door. Phlegmon begins to sneeze, looks at his lap full of tissues and the Reader's Digest, and sneezes into the crook of his arm.

Dr. Maskalyk is *CMAJ's* fifth Editorial Fellow and returns to Toronto in July 2003 to finish his fifth year of an emergency medicine residency. Dr. Cellarius practises family medicine in Toronto, Ont.

IgNobel (3): navel-gazing

This year's IgNobel judges honoured a study of belly-button lint.

Call it the "belly-button lint sign." If you're examining a patient and encounter an umbilicus that looks like the lint trap in your dryer, chances are the patient is male, middle-aged and hairy. It can also be a sign that the patient is putting on weight.

These are the findings of a massive survey of belly-button lint (BBL) conducted by Dr. Karl Kruszelnicki of the University of Sydney, who won the coveted IgNobel Prize for Interdisciplinary Research (see www.improbable.com).

A first in the world, the BBL survey was inspired by real questions called in to "Dr. Karl's" science ra-

dio show. "Why is my belly-button fluff blue, and why do I get it?"

It turns out that no one knew the answers, so the intrepid Aussie researchers rose to the challenge. In addition to a Web-based survey, researchers collected samples and asked participants to shave their belly hair to see if it stopped lint from collecting. Lint was examined under an electron microscope.

While the results were not entirely definitive, they did provide support for Dr. Kruszelnicki's working hypothesis. BBL is believed to be made from clothing fibres, as well as some hair and skin cells. Belly hair is believed to act "like a one-way ratchet mechanism," pulling fibres into the navel. In-

deed, many of the experimenters found that shaving around the navel stopped the accumulation of BBL.

The colour question remains unresolved. A lot of people notice that their BBL is blue, although they may not wear blue. Theories about the blue shift include the colour of laundry detergent, the colour of clothing dyes and the presence of urea in sweat. One respondent speculated that BBL begins to compost in the navel, turning different colours as it disintegrates.

A man named Graham Barker has collected his BBL since 1984, filling three large bottles and earning him a place in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. — Carolyn Brown, Ottawa, Ont.