

Blood covers my hands and apron now, and my fingers threaten to slip against the metal handle of the scalpel. Continually in my mind, I recite the words: 'Hail Mary, Full of Grace, The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of death. Amen.' I am no longer Catholic, having converted to the wayward sect, but the words keep returning. My mother is still unaware and God willing will remain so; there is no need to send her to an early death. My grip tightens again, and I repeat my chorus of Hail Mary's. By now, I have lost track of all the patients and the time. They blend together; the latest crop of wounded... the fruits of Fredericksburg. A new joke is going around: 'Which is better, Burnside or a lame horse.' Everyone answers that they'd take the lame horse.

I strengthen my grip on the leg. I heard that the Irish Brigade alone lost more than half their men here at Fredericksburg. My two younger brothers and three of my cousins are in that unit. Unlike me, they can march and readily answered the call to preserve the Union. I did what I could do, though I still blush every time someone asks in which battle my leg was wounded. Blood seeps from the leg wound. It passes between my

fingers as I tie the severed arteries with mechanical precision bred from the experiences of the second Bull Run and Antietam.

Some poor southern woman's piano is ruined. It's white. She will never get the blood out of it, even if she would re-stain it. There will always be those darker blotches... the stains of blood. Taking thread from my adjutant, Cavan, I close the wound.

My right leg throbs, and I bite the interior of my mouth. I try to calculate the time I have before I will need my cane. Another soldier is laid on the piano... Mozart would have cried. My fingers feel the leg wound. There is very little that can be done. Once a Miniè ball enters the body, it shatters bones and tears through tendons and organs. All their faces run together just like their severed limbs, thrown with little thought into a pile now several feet high. The saw is picked up; my hands seem to work on their own, after all they have done this procedure countless time. I don't like to look at their faces, the faces of boys that will never be able to march again. I want to feel something when I look at them, but can't. Perhaps, I've just grown that cynical. But even I know that that is a lie. My saw meets resistance, grinding through what remains of the knee. Behind me, one of the lieutenants backs away. I can hear his throat catching.

I return to my task, working quietly. What is the loss of one leg? At times, I want to sever my right from my own body;

the one that pains... the one that causes me to limp, especially on colder mornings and in winters. It serves as a constant reminder that one day I might wake to find my body unable to move just as it had when I was a child.

I was five years old when death visited my neighborhood. My older sister would later tell me that when death came, it replaced the laughter of children with the quiet murmurings of their parents. Only a handful of us were actually infected, but that was enough for parents to keep their children at home, lest the healthy ones become like the few. Everything that has happened since that time has been linked to death's visit by the constant cadence of my cane.

My memories of October 1845 are crisp but fevered, jumping to and fro. In particular, I recall the contrast between light and darkness after watching the light creep across the floor as the darkness of my room retreated. I longed for the moments when that door would open. It would happen several times a day, allowing my mother's entrance. She was the only one to enter as my parents feared for my sister, who was not sick. It had been the routine for two days now, but on the third day the door opened one extra time.

The light's slow progress fascinated me, though it pained my eyes. The thought of turning my head away occurred to me, but my head like the rest of my body was guilty of mutiny. So I

simply watched the light approach. When it touched my bed sheets, I turned my eyes to the wall, where the light was softer. It connected with the crucifix that my mother had hung there. She was a staunch Irish Catholic, and still is, and believed that the crucifix alone would cure me or at least prevent my illness from spreading to my sister. She had brought that crucifix all the way from Ireland to the rugged mountains of Pennsylvania, and she cherished it as if it were a relic. Now it was one of the few decorations in the square room with its drab walls and oak floors, besides the daisies that rested on my nightstand.

The room was now bright, the door having reached its limit. I looked that way, expecting to see my mother, but instead saw a man, whom I vaguely recognized as Doctor Byrnes, the man who always sat in the back pew at Mass. He filled up the doorframe, vaguely reminding me of a black bear I had seen. He was bushy enough to be that bear. Behind him, my mother stood. Her hands were hidden within her apron, causing wrinkles to form.

I blinked my watering eyes. The man snorted, quickly closing the door before crossing the distance between us. My mother was left on the other side. He set a large, rectangular box on the floor beside my bed. Even ill, I was curious to know what the box was. The sound of a chair being dragged across the floor brought my attention back to the man.

"So, Daniel," Doctor Byrnes said. "I'm told you're a wee bit under the weather."

I blinked; even my young mind knew that what he said was gross understatement. If I had only been under the weather, my mother wouldn't have been so set on cleansing the room of evil spirits and my body would be able to move.

"Let's take a look, eh?" His fingers prodded me.

I merely winced. I couldn't move my body, but I still felt pain when someone touched me. My throat constricted, and I swallowed hard. It hurt too much to complain, so I simply followed his movements as he reached for the wooden chest. He flicked the latches and slowly lifted the hinged lid upwards, revealing the items within: numerous bottles containing different colored liquids, medical tools, strips of cloth, a bag, and two long-necked bottles simply labeled 'Whiskey'. My eyes lingered on those bottles.

"Oh, those." The doctor smiled as he removed a long object that was pointed at one end and one of the smaller bottles. "You never know when you might need whiskey. It's mighty damn useful, if you run out of laudanum.. and it warms you up on a cold day."

I remained quiet; I could only listen. I only watched him poke the sharp object into the bottle. He held the bottle upside down briefly before righting it and removing the pointy object. The sharp pointed glistened at its tip. Lowering it to my arm,

he spared me a brief wink. His left hand engulfed my smaller arm. Slowly, he lifted my arm; every inch sent tingles down my muscles. Closing my eyelids tightly, I prepared for the prick. Despite my efforts, the tears still poured out of the corners of my eyes. I wanted to remove my hand from his grasp, but it would not answer the call.

"It will take away the pain," His voice said, seeming distant. I could vaguely feel him massaging the spot. "Get some rest."

He placed the bottle and syringe back into place, in the process spilling the bag of what appeared to be yellow candies. He smiled, meeting my eyes. "Tell you what, Daniel, when you pull through this, I'll give you the whole lot." He shut the box.

He picked up the case, nodding to me. His feet treaded lightly against the wood floor. My blurry eyes watched the light reappear, causing the doctor's form to darken. The door quickly closed behind him. Soon after, I heard my mother's voice followed by the doctor's. They were hushed, but snippets of their conversation made it through the door.

"It's the same," the doctor's voice said. "Infantile paralysis... just like the other five children."

My mother's reply was too quiet.

"Give it four to seven days to pass. All there is to do right now is make him as comfortable as possible, and hope it doesn't spread to the chest muscles."

There was rustling followed by footsteps. It was comforting to hear others. Father's bagpipes could be heard as he probably entertained Carey. I missed how they used to be played every morning, calling us from sleep with the Marcha Procesional Dos Mato. I focused on the melody, allowing it to lull me to sleep.

After my first meeting with the doctor, he came every day just after my mother fed me broth for lunch and supper until sixth day of my illness. That day he had missed his lunch time appointment, and it seemed he would miss dinner as well. By this time, I had reached the worst point of the disease as my muscles trembled and my brow dampened with sweat. I remember my mother's pale face and the dark rings below her eyes as she wiped the sweat from my forehead. She had hummed soft notes, until my father knocked on the door.

"Bree," my father's baritone called, oddly subdued. "I need to talk to you."

My mother rose from the rocker, in which she usually sang songs to my sister and me especially after the miscarriages, and disappeared behind the door. "What's wrong?"

"John's passed on."

Nothing followed. John and I had just played the day before I had gotten sick. I briefly wondered where he had "passed on" to. Would he be coming back or had his family gone to Ohio. I still had one of his wooden soldier toys. It was in the box that kept my sister's and mine toys. John would miss it as it was one of the few toys he owned. My legs refuse to lift, and I must have fallen asleep.

When I awoke, I felt like I was drowning in the sweat that drenched my brow. But even that water could not douse the fire that burned within me. I wanted to push the covers away, but couldn't, so instead, I closed my eyes tightly. I imagined my body snapping as if it were a twig. It felt like it could as tremors shot through my legs, arms, and up my back. It had never hurt this bad before without anyone touching me.

Footsteps. My eyes opened, going to the door, anticipating its opening. The footsteps never reached it. I heard my mother's voice calling my sister's name, telling her to come help her in the kitchen. It was followed by the sound of retreating feet.

I gulped painfully. Had I been abandoned? I coughed, choking on my own saliva. It had to be getting late. I blinked rapidly. He still hadn't come. My breath became harsher, no one could hear me. Why wouldn't they come? His visits pushed away the pain, yet he hadn't come. I listened for several minutes only to hear silence. I was tired. I held my breath, the pain

lessened slightly. The breath was released. I gasped for air; my lungs ached. My vision blurred, filling with tears. I wanted to scream for my mother, but I could only manage a low moan that had no hope of penetrating the door.

Another wave of pain passed through my muscles, and I inhaled sharply. Whimpers escaped my mouth. It would have been so easy to allow the ripples to take me. I didn't want to be confined to this bed. I wanted to go through that door. I wanted to play in the light again; to feel the sun on my face. I wouldn't even mind the sunburns, and I would sit still when mother would apply the aloe. I wanted to play baseball, even if the older boys just smiled and shook their heads. I would help father in his smithy. My toes won't even move. Would I ever be able to go through that door again? I choked again. I needed to sit up. My eyes closed. My legs nagged me along with my chest. I wanted the pain to end. I was going to choke on my own saliva. I tried to cough.

I hadn't even noticed the light that crept along the floor until it covered the bedspread. My attention went to the door and the dark form surrounded by light. As far as my young mind was concerned that man was God.

Doctor Byrnes snorted, closing the door. "Going to take your leave, huh? We can't have that, now can we?"

I heard the box being set on to the floor before he carefully pulled me into a sitting position. A moan escaped my lips at his touch, but it was worth it; he could breath.

"Today's a real treat, my boy," He said. "You get the good stuff!" He opened the box with his free hand, and then removed one of the two bottles of whiskey he always kept in the case, a tradition I would later keep. "I don't share my whiskey with just anybody. But, I'm currently out of laudanum, so whiskey will have to do."

He removed the stopper and pressed the opening to my lips. The liquid passed into my mouth, burning as it continued down my throat.

"That should hit the spot, no?" His hand rubbed my back as he chuckled. "It should take the edge off the pain. I do believe that you're almost out of the woods now, because you're sweating the disease right now, and then you can begin the recovery stage. But I figure you'll do fine. You have that look about you, Danny... stubborn as a mule."

My chest was warm, and I could still taste remnants of the alcohol. I ran my tongue against my teeth, deciding that they felt weird just like my head. It brought contentment, especially as I lay against his chest. His heart beat was reassuring.

"Th-an," was all that came of my attempt to say thank-you.

"Just be sure you stick around," the doctor said. He rubbed my joints, doing his best to sooth.

He laid me back in the bed, and then he started to examine my legs. Like always, I watched him work except this time I had more interest. I wanted to be like him. If I could still walk after this, I was going to do it.

"Doctor MacKay?" My adjutant asks. Cavan sounds concerned. The boy worries too much for his own good.

I smile briefly at him, knowing that my face must look haggard.

"Dr. Wilkins is here to take your place."

Another one is placed on the piano. Beyond him, I see my superior, his sleeves pushed up to his elbows. It's about time that he comes out of his alcoholic induced stupor. He doesn't return my gaze, pointedly looking at the far wall. I place the scalpel that I am holding down on the piano. My hand eventually finds my cane, and then I grab my medical box that had once belonged to a certain Doctor C.E. Byrnes, who had given it to me upon my graduation.

I pull Cavan aside. "Make sure he keeps his loose hands away from any personal effects."

Cavan nods and hurries back to 'the operating table.' I meanwhile trudged out into the cooled night air, leaning heavily on my cane. Slight pain travels from my knee, but is nothing when compared to the pain he had experienced as a child. Gunfire and cannon can be heard echoing the distance, but it is the cries of the wounded that are much closer. They lay stretched out over several feet covered solely with blankets. Come morning those who survived the night would be transported to Washington or to a closer hospital.

I pause in front of tree. A young man, younger than myself, is prompted up against it. His face is drawn and pallid. His lips move repeatedly, yet no words exit. I limp over to him and notice how he clenches his stomach, and dread fills my chest. It is at moments like this that I hate being a doctor. I place my box next to him, causing him to open his eyes. Carefully, I try to sit next to him, but my descent is heavier than I would have like. I grunt as I push back against the tree.

"Doctor?" He asks. His eyes are desperate yet they know. The boy has already seen too much, and he is aware of the inevitable.

"It's an awfully beautiful night, don't you think Private?"

He nods.

"I think I have something that will make this night even better." I open my case and remove a bottle filled with an amber

colored liquid that is half empty. "Here." I say, lifting it to his mouth.

He accepts the whisky, some of it escaping at the corners of his lips. After he is done, I take a swig. The burn is always comforting. The boy is silent now, his chest lifting slightly. Life is unfair. I look at my bloodied hands and wonder where that boy who trailed after Doctor Byrnes went.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I'm sorry."

He no longer hears me. My right knee throbs, only this time I don't mind it. It is really a silly thing to worry about tomorrow. Life is such a fragile thing as it is. Grunting, I push up against the tree, cane in hand. I nod down to him. In my head the words 'Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of death' run through my mind as I walk away. The cadence of my cane is steady. It really is foolish to fret about a limp.