

Winning the Battle

"I heard a fly buzz – when I died..."

Emily Dickinson

The radio offered no help. Kevin tried practically every music station Sirius offered, cycling through the decades of rock, eventually settling on the heavy-metal-infused beat of the '80s. It didn't help. Even with Twisted Sister blasting from his car stereo, he swerved more than once onto the shoulder of the freeway, catching himself just before hitting the guardrail.

Kevin Jarmon was drained. So drained he had to slap himself to stay awake, fighting a battle he very nearly lost at the last stoplight. He was so drained he missed his driveway and had to back the car up when he finally realized he had driven three houses too far. So drained he almost forgot to open the garage door until he was close enough to ram it, the white door eerily echoing the white walls of the hospital he had just left.

More than anything else, he wanted to shut his eyes against the jarring glare of the early morning sun. He wanted to shut his eyes against the horde of demons he believed the world had loosed upon him. But, in spite of what he wanted, he kept his eyes open, at least long enough to pilot his small sedan into the empty two-car garage, stopping a good six inches from the back wall.

He managed a small, self-satisfied smile when he released his grip on the steering wheel and remembered to turn off the engine. Just yesterday morning, he had succumbed, falling asleep with his hands still clutching the wheel. When he awoke an hour later, he could barely uncurl his fingers or feel his legs. He was determined not to repeat that mistake. He felt a slight sliver of triumph when he opened the car door and stepped out onto the concrete floor. It was a very minor victory perhaps, but a victory nonetheless.

Moving slumped over, as though he was ninety years old instead of thirty, he staggered

through the door that led into the kitchen. He dropped his keys and stethoscope onto the counter and sank like a boulder into the nearest chair. His eyes began to droop; he willed them to stay open. He didn't want to fall asleep in the old wooden chair any more than he had wanted to fall asleep in the car.

Not that he could actually do more than doze anyway. Every muscle in his body ached with fatigue. But his mind was on overdrive, racing like a pinball from one disjointed thought to another, bouncing off bumpers, bells and buzzers sounding as the steel ball kept rolling, rolling in a desperate attempt to simply stay in the game, to stay alive when the odds seemed stacked against him.

As a charge nurse in a hospital in which there was never so much as a momentary lull in the war on disease and human misery, he had had his share of shifts from hell. However, these twelve hour nights he had been working lately were like being in hell. In fact, sometimes he thought they should rename the hospital Hell's Infirmary. And he was there, dancing with the devil, sixty to seventy hours a week, compliments of yet another staffing crisis.

His leg muscles began to cramp, and he stood up quickly to mitigate the pain. He didn't want to stand up, but he knew he had to. It was either stand or crumple to the floor in writhing agony. He poured himself a glass of orange juice and drank it while leaning against the refrigerator, silently praying that the muscles in his right calf would behave themselves just this once.

When the cold juice hit his empty stomach, he convulsed and remembered that he hadn't eaten more than a small bag of Fritos and a stale bagel since yesterday afternoon. He didn't feel hungry, but instinct and experience told him he should eat something before he lay down for the day.

He fixed himself a bowl of Wheaties overflowing with milk. While he ate, still leaning against the refrigerator, he thought about the last thirteen (or was it fourteen?) hours and the many skirmishes he had overseen. Ten admissions, including two gunshot wounds and a drug overdose. And, as if that wasn't enough, he had participated in a cardiac arrest in the ICU and two rapid response calls on the orthopedic floor, one which progressed to an arrest.

In the quiet of his kitchen, he slowed the events down in his mind in an attempt to reconstruct them piece by piece. The cardiac arrest, the gunshot wounds, and the drug overdose escalated into more than skirmishes. They were full scale battles waged against the dark forces of death. And death was beginning to gain the upper hand.

Droplets of milk formed in the corners of his mouth, trickled down the sides of his jaw, and dripped onto his navy blue scrub shirt. He didn't bother to wipe away the residue. What was a little milk compared to the small spots of human flotsam that already dotted his uniform?

He choked down the last bite of cereal and placed his bowl and spoon in the sink to be rinsed later, perhaps after he ate dinner—if he ate dinner. The Wheaties had done nothing to settle his stomach, but he was too tired to fix anything more substantial. He needed to save what precious little energy he had left for stripping off his dirty scrubs and getting into bed. He definitely didn't want to fall asleep standing up. He had made that mistake before too. In the distance, he thought he heard a fly buzz. He dismissed it as unimportant.

Shedding his shirt and pants as he went, Kevin made the short walk to the bedroom he shared with his wife, Betsy. When he entered the large room with the window that conveniently faced north, he saw that the bed was made and Betsy's white translucent nightgown was neatly folded on the corner of her dresser. He glanced at the pillow and saw that she hadn't left him a note like she sometimes did.

He shook off the disappointment like he tried to shake off the memories of the shift he had just experienced. Maybe she got up late, he thought; maybe she got busy and forgot. It's no big deal. He turned away from the bed and rubbed his eyes.

Because of their bizarre and often conflicting schedules, he hadn't actually seen his wife for three days. It had been longer than that since he'd slept with her and even longer since they had had sex.

He thought he should be grateful that she seemed to be understanding of the demands his profession sometimes exacted. He had heard of other spouses who weren't. He also knew couples whose relationship had disintegrated due to the stress of being apart, of working different shifts and developing different priorities. It was an occupational hazard.

But they weren't like these other couples, Kevin often told himself. He and Betsy knew full well what they were getting into when they married two years ago and were determined to stick together, betting that once she was finished with her master's degree and he could go on days, their life would stabilize and the precious time spent together would be the norm instead of a rare luxury. Why endanger the future they were building as a couple simply because they were having to make unpleasant sacrifices now?

That was the illusion that he carried with him to work, no good-bye kiss still warm on his lips; the illusion he lay down with each morning in an empty bed, Betsy's female scent lingering in the air and on the sheets, reminding him of what he was missing.

Thinking he should text her (even though she hadn't left him a note), he retrieved his cell phone from his scrub pants and swiped across Betsy's pretty face with her blue eyes gazing out and a broad smile just for him. The little android keyboard appeared and he began to type:
Another bad night, but got home safe. Hope you're having a good day. I love you and miss you.

He read over what he had typed, then pressed send. He would not wait for a reply because he knew she was busy with her fifth grade students and probably wouldn't look at her phone until noon at the earliest.

He set the phone down on the nightstand and went into the bathroom. There he relieved himself and washed his face and hands, hoping to rinse away the taint of all the patients he had touched during the night. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror over the sink and shuddered. His eyes were bloodshot with small but discernible creases in the skin underneath. He could see a few flecks of gray in his short brown hair, and he realized he was gazing at the reflection of a man rapidly growing old. He shrugged off the vision, turned out the light, and left the bathroom.

He pulled the shade down over the window and approached the bed, its light blue cotton sheets inviting him to lie down, to burrow himself like a mole under the covers. Forget the war, even for a few hours. He stood very still next to the empty bed and closed his eyes. He tried to imagine Betsy lying on the other side, her arms reaching for him, her naked body eager and waiting.

He opened his eyes and shook the image from his head. He couldn't remember the last time she had reached for him like that. Was it days, weeks, months? It had been too long, and he realized he was fighting yet another battle he was going to lose if he wasn't careful with his feelings.

The empty bed no longer called to him as the fragile image of his young wife shattered into a thousand pieces only to re-form as the face of Taylor Peterson, the twenty-two-year-old drug overdose the paramedics had rushed into the ED at eleven-thirty last night, another apparent victim of the opioid crisis. Her boyfriend had found her stretched out on the bathroom floor,

unconscious and unresponsive. The paramedics had administered naloxone and gotten her stabilized. However, the young woman had aspirated and was now on a ventilator in the ICU fighting her own private war.

Kevin tried to shrug away this unwelcome image but somehow couldn't. He thought about his life with Betsy and felt lonely and bitter, and yet oddly fortunate at the same time. After all, what were a few days of separation compared to the tragedy of loss, of death? Those were personal battles he had yet to face.

He thought about Taylor's boyfriend—Chris, he remembered—struggling to stay calm as the young man stood helplessly at the bedside, watching all the impersonal mechanics of medicine and not understanding any of it. He thought about the other families he had tried in vain to comfort, to reassure. But the words echoed back to him, sounding like so much meaningless bullshit. For an instant, he even thought about the demons he tried to chase away without success.

Now, these demons were assaulting him in full force, and he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep, at least not in the bed, all comfortable and warm and alive, untouched but not unaware. He snatched up his phone and retreated to the small den at the back of the house.

He opened the sliding glass door to let in some fresh cool late spring air. Then he sank into his recliner and put his feet up. And while he was mindlessly scrolling through the latest Facebook posts, his eyes glazed over and his eyelids drooped. The phone slipped from his limp hand. His head lolled to the side, cushioned by a small pillow.

His brain moved quickly through the first three stages of sleep. However, he never quite made it to REM. Somewhere in his brain, just as it was making the transition into stage four, he became vaguely aware of something tickling his face. Unconsciously, he raised his left hand and

made a half-hearted swat at his left cheek, and the tickling stopped. The left hand dropped back to his chest.

However, a few seconds later, the tickling began again, this time accompanied by a low buzzing sound. The left hand moved once more. The tickling stopped but not the buzzing, which now seemed like it was inside his head. His eyes sprang open, and he made a more vigorous swat at his face, dislodging what appeared to be a large housefly.

Now fully awake, he grimaced. He hated flies. He had hated them for as long as he could remember. They were dirty and nasty—agents of the Devil, his mother had called them. His lips curled into a tight snarl. It wasn't enough he had to fight the Devil at that damn hospital, the Devil had followed him home and was determined to renew the battle, confront him on his own turf.

Kevin could feel his heart begin to pound in his chest; his eyes widened and his respiratory rate increased as adrenaline surged through his body. Fight or flight, he suddenly remembered from his class on the autonomic nervous system. He spotted the fly casually resting on a lampshade, rubbing its legs together, staring at him, taunting him. This is one battle I won't run away from, he thought, as he sized up his adversary.

Slowly and carefully, Kevin lowered the foot of the recliner and eased out onto the carpeted floor, his eyes never leaving the fly. He moved stealthily toward the magazine rack next to an end table. When he reached the rack, he extracted a copy of *Time Magazine* and rolled it up into a tight cylinder. No time to find the fly swatter, he thought.

Moving like a soldier attempting to sneak up on the enemy, Kevin made painfully slow progress toward the lampshade, the rolled-up magazine clutched tightly in his right hand.

However, when he got to within striking distance, the fly sensed the danger and flew off. Kevin followed it with his eyes as it circled the room, finally landing on the back of the sofa.

This time, he moved a little faster, retracting his right arm as he went. When he reached the sofa, he swung hard at the fly but missed the mark by at least two inches. Once again, the fly took off, buzzing its attacker as it flew.

Kevin could feel his rage mounting. The Devil was teasing him, taunting him, laughing at him, as if to say, “Give it up, you fool, you can’t beat me, you will never beat me. I own you.” Suddenly, all he could see was the face of the Devil imprinted onto the fly; all he could hear were the Devil’s words, spitting themselves at him: “Give it up, give it up! I own you! I’ve even slept with your wife.”

He was tired, exhausted. A part of him was ready to quit, to concede the battle to the tiny black devil with the translucent wings that were always fluttering. He wanted more than anything to get back in his recliner, close his eyes, and let the hospital and all the chaos that was his life simply drift away like a raft being slowly carried out to sea. He began to relax his grip on the magazine.

But when the fly buzzed him again, he felt a sudden tidal surge of adrenaline, and his sympathetic nervous system went on red alert. Fight or flight, he thought once more. There is no other option. He lifted his right arm, clutched the magazine tighter, and made a mindless swing at the fly, missing the mark by a wide margin.

The fly moved in an ever-widening circle, and Kevin pursued it, wildly swatting at the air as fast as he could move his arm, not allowing the fly to land. One swat knocked a small picture off an end table. Another swat hit the lamp, denting the shade. He paid no attention to the swath

of destruction he was creating. His only objective was to destroy the Devil in the form of the fly, to win this battle.

For at least five minutes, Kevin Jarmon danced around the room in his sweat-soaked underwear, battling what he considered to be the dark forces of evil. Finally, just as he didn't think he could lift his arm anymore, just when he was ready to collapse onto the carpeted floor, he spotted his adversary resting on the screen door that led to the backyard. He took a deep breath and somehow managed to raise his right arm one last time. Moment of truth, he thought.

The fly saw him approach and spread its wings. But this time, Kevin was ready. One swat through the air and the fly dropped to the floor. Kevin looked down at his enemy and saw that it was still alive, only dazed, perhaps wondering just how it could have possibly been bested by an exhausted man battling it armed with only a rolled-up magazine.

For several seconds, the two adversaries glared at each other. Then Kevin bent down, retracted his arm, and prepared to deliver the final death blow. But just at the last second, he pulled his stroke. His grip on the magazine loosened. "No," he said. "There's been enough death already." He opened the screen door and flicked the unresisting fly onto the patio. With the fly now safely outside, he slammed the door shut and watched his foe right itself and fly off, its faint buzzing fading in the daylight.

He laughed like a maniac as the fly disappeared into the backyard. He had won this battle. But he knew the war would go on. In the end, it has to. He laughed again. "See you tonight, you bastard," he shouted after the fly.

He scanned the room, noted the damage. It was a battlefield, and battlefields are never pretty or pristine. He resolved to clean it up later. He dropped the magazine onto the floor, sank into his recliner, put his feet up, and was asleep in less than a minute.