

The Children's Ward

It is the time of Polio, iron lungs, cold metal hospital beds with crude winding mechanisms, sad wheelchairs, too big for any child; a view of gloom through barred windows. I am admitted to the Children's Ward at Saint Vincent's Hospital, on Staten Island. The air, hollow, with strands of ammonia, bleach, shards of microcosmic dust, only made visible in rays of light that never appear; early Fall, 1958.

I climb into the backseat of our '53 pea green DeSoto, looking up at a gray, cloudless sky. The ceiling of Dutch elms lining our street, unthinkable, untouchable, the very skirt and fabric of Heaven, casting umbrage for whomever walks up City Boulevard... One is sheltered from harm by these interlacing hands, until the winter winds come at night. No one knows from whence they come, only that they do. Ancient winds, shearing gusts that swelled the sails of Revolutionary War ships, a hundred and eighty years earlier...

"The Colonists want fire? Give 'em the Hell of three-pound gallopers, you bloody Hessians!"

These same, tawdry, venomous winds find their way to City Boulevard at night, ripping and tearing at the Dutch elms, whose only defense is the lesson of

trees: *stoicism*. Be torn, be ripped, be blown to shreds and take it, for you are better than this!

The Summer previous, I am tormented in my little borrowed body by endless nosebleeds and something else which we have to see a doctor about. Red drips on all my white t-shirts, every one of Dad's cotton handkerchiefs... even the ones hiding scrunched dollar bills that fly, escaped sparrows, when he sneezes and tugs the handkerchief from his pocket; even those, stained with blood.

We take a Checker Cab, the fold-down back seats I love sitting in, to the old Board of Health building on a stark corner somewhere near the waterfront. The building looms, dark, ominous, with cement stairs and iron pipe railings... voices echo from within its burnt umber brick facade: a woman's belly laugh,

"Jesus, Edna! Your mouth! I'm a Christian girl, for God Sakes!" A child crying, a mother consoling, a doctor explaining.

"...What we do is hang your son's arm on the little hook on the wall, which allows gravity to straighten the break before we can set it." Bandages and broken arms, mercurochrome, iodine. I sit next to my mother on a hard

wooden bench, she instinctively holds my hands in her lap, brushing the hair off my forehead.

"We're next. The doctor is going to look in your nose and find the vein causing all the nosebleeds; then he cauterizes it, seals it up with heat. No reason you should be having so many nosebleeds."

I don't really hear her speaking, as my head is tilted back, Kleenex stuffed into both nostrils and a folded piece of tissue under my upper lip; Dad said,

"...there's a pressure point there that stops the bleeding." A white-haired nurse in a white uniform appears in the doorway.

"Selman? Mrs. Selman?"

My mother leads me into the office that is less than private. Another nurse twists out a cigarette butt with her white heels, a janitor with bulbous eyes, holding a filthy bucket and mop, stares at me; a secretary in a green dress, wearing a brooch with a ball point pen attached, takes note.

"Come this way, Please. The Doctor will be right with you."

Even with the numbing solution the nurse dabs me with beforehand, the red-hot needle the doctor uses to cauterize the weakened vein in my nose, is the

hot iron I once touched, the cut on my thumb when I tried to catch the souvenir knife at the Navajo Reservation in Arizona; Jim Bowie did it on TV. The stinging pain from when I fell, getting into our car, gashing my lip on the "*Body By Fisher*" sign on the rocker panel; I felt them all again, but didn't cry. I never cry. My father never cried; I had no idea how to.

"As for that other matter, Mrs. Selman..." I could clearly hear the doctor's voice,

"I would suggest surgery to remove it, as it could get infected... and we don't want that."

The object of discussion is a branchial cleft, as mother explains to me, in her World War II, Woman's Army Corps nurse's voice,

"What it is... is a vestigial gill, from when we swam underwater." I know she means well with her scientific explanation; but I have no idea we once swam underwater. I can barely reach for soap in the tub without drowning.

During the summer months, the nearly invisible incision at the base of my neck, oozes tiny droplets of lymph; it crusts over, itches, and begs me to scratch it with less than sterile fingers; this is the main concern.

A date for the operation is set for one month later, September 15, 1958. It is arranged that I would be admitted to the Children's Ward at Saint Vincent's Hospital where Doctor Rudolph Perkell would perform the surgery. My parents would take me there just after dinner, when I would be getting sleepy and it would then be easier to separate from them.

In the weeks leading up to the operation, the canopy of Dutch elms over City Boulevard seem to expand across the sky. Looking up, I can barely see a glimmer of sunlight through magnificently overarching branches of leaves, gently swaying in their Dutch ambiguity.

It is the day. I walk back from P.S. 45 holding my little brother, Hank's hand. We've been, once again, dressed identically, blue pants, white shirt, red sweater. We cross Bard Avenue, then walk to Forest, and turn at the corner of Our Savior Lutheran Church and up City Boulevard. As we do, a gust of wind erupts from nowhere; I sense something is wrong. Hank and I get closer to our house; our next door neighbor, Lilian Landaw is standing on our front steps, with one arm holding her baby, Irene, and her other arm around my mother, Ruthy's shoulders.

My heart is beating in my throat; Ruthy, white as a sheet, goes to us, hugs us tightly. Lilian is trying to relight her Chesterfield with a heavy Ronson Queen Anne table lighter she keeps in her apron.

"He's okay. He's okay. You have to be thankful, Ruth." Mom tells me that Dad will be coming home very late tonight because there was an accident on a train and people died. We later find out Dad was stranded in Elizabeth, New Jersey. His commuter train was the one scheduled right after the one that fell from a draw bridge into Newark Bay earlier that day. Two coach cars in addition to the engine on the ill-fated train plummeted into the murky waters of Newark Bay; all 40 passengers aboard drowned. Dad's train had to be towed back to Elizabeth; all phone lines were down, he had no way of calling. Finally, able to get to a phone, he called; Mom sobbed. He was alive; that's all that mattered, except that now my mother, distraught from nearly losing her husband in an horrific accident, has to bring me to Saint Vincent's Hospital, alone. Dinner is rushed, which means one thing: Ronzoni Spinach-flavored Wagon Wheel pasta and cottage cheese; for dessert, Mom adds cinnamon-sugar.

My little brown grip is packed: white underwear, t-shirt, red flannel shirt and jeans, extra pair of socks, blue flannel pajamas, white terry cloth robe, toothbrush, toothpaste, bar of soap and two comic books; Archie and Jughead

with a picture of Veronica nearly bursting out of her blouse; and the Classics Illustrated Comic of The Three Musketeers.

Mrs. Landaw, knowing how shaken my mother is, offers to drive us down Bard Avenue to Saint Vincent's in our DeSoto. I climb into the back seat, looking up at the Dutch elms through the rear view window. Mother is in the passenger seat, Lillian is driving, chain-smoking Chesterfields. She'll wait in the Hospital parking lot until I'm admitted, then drive mother home.

We pull up to the entrance of Saint Vincent's just as dusk is settling over West Brighton. In this twilight, the dark hospital looms in front of us, its doors open like arms reaching into my chest, drawing me in. Mrs. Landaw reaches over the front seat and tousles my hair.

"Have a great time, Matthew. We'll be waiting for you!"

A guard in a patrolman's uniform points us to a small room on the other side of the lobby. I take my first breath of hospital air that has shades of cooked peas, floor wax and rubbing alcohol. A tall woman in a purple dress forces a smile on her face as she stands at her metal desk and shows us into her cramped office; closing the door behind her. There is a fan on the desk and a stack of

folders. Mother sits on the wooden chair facing the woman. I sit on the chair just behind her, against the wall.

“Good evening, Mrs.... Selman. Did I pronounce that correctly? I’m Mrs. McCarthy, Patient Advocate for the Children’s Ward, here at Saint Vincent’s Hospital. This is your son, Matthew? She looks at the tiny gold watch on her wrist, making a note on a clipboard.

“The time is now 8:17 PM, which will be the official time of admittance.” She folds her hands, straightening her spine in her green vinyl swivel chair.

“Mrs. Selman... As stated in the official letter sent to you, dated August 22nd, Matthew will remain overnight for observation prior to day of surgery, which is scheduled for tomorrow afternoon at 4PM with Dr. Perkell. After which, he will be brought back to the Children’s Ward and remain in the ward an additional 24 hours for post-operative observation. Do you have any questions?” She turns to me, forcing a smile. “Very well.” Once again, she stands at her desk. *“Say goodnight to your mother, Matthew. I will bring you upstairs now.”*

Tears welling in her eyes, my mother puts her arms around me, kisses me on the cheek and whispers,

"I love you. Don't be scared. I'll see you with Daddy on Wednesday night. You'll be fine. I love you."

Mother keeps turning to wave goodbye to me as Mrs. McCarthy nods for me to follow her into one of the large service elevators.

"I assume you've had your dinner?"

"Yes, M'am."

"Good. Then we will go up to the Children's Ward where you will meet your roommates, Nicholas and Thomas."

When we reach the fifth floor, the doors open into a waiting area of distraught faces. Like a communal mask, concern and grief is everyone's face. Parents are leaning silently against one another. An elderly man, wiping tears from behind his eyeglasses. We turn and walk down a long, dimly lit hallway that echoes our every step; suddenly filled with a terrifying, unescapable banging, followed by intermittent hissing; steam escaping a radiator. I cannot imagine the monster I am about to face.

We walk past a room unlike anything I've ever seen. A wall of steel with round portholes and glass pressure gauges. Sticking out of each porthole is a

child's head. Some turn to me as I follow Mrs. McCarthy. The sound is deafening.

"Do not stare at the children in the iron lungs. You wouldn't want them staring at you, would you?"

"No, M'am."

Through a set of double doors with chicken-wire glass the world suddenly turns silent. Mrs. McCarthy stops at a wooden door with a viewing window and leads me into the Children's Ward.

"Nicholas? Thomas? You have a new roommate. His name is Matthew. Visiting hour is over, so you may read quietly for the next 20 minutes, then, lights out. Matthew, this is your cubby. You can put your bag under your bed. The bathroom is over there, if you need it. Please change into your pajamas and slippers, wash your hands, brush your teeth, and say your prayers."

Mrs. McCarthy leaves; I stare around the room. The floor is blue linoleum, the walls are light green stucco. There are 8 beds, 5 of them are stripped bare. Above each bed is a small wooden cross with a man in front of it; from what I can tell, he's bleeding badly. I stand still, holding my grip in one hand, my comic books in the other.

"What's your operation?" A voice asks. "Mine's a leaky heart valve. Nicky's got a collapsed lung."

Too embarrassed to say what it is, I make something up.

"I have a broken neck." This seems to satisfy the query. I'm about to add that it's not completely broken when Thomas speaks again.

"Hey. You know about the rain?" I shake my head *"no."*

"Don't worry. You will."

At this, both he and Nicky start laughing; I get a better view of them; both about my age. Nicky is in the bed opposite mine. His head and shoulders are bandaged. Thomas, whose bed is on the other side of the room, is lying flat on his back. On his chest is a metal frame with screws that seem to be pulling open his ribcage; both boys have use of their hands.

Later, after the floor nurse, Miss Lyles, flips off the overhead fluorescent fixture, the room is only lit by an eerie green Exit light above the door. I hear Nicky and Thomas saying their prayers. I don't know any prayers except the one we say before getting a snack in P.S. 45, so I say that one.

"Thank you for the food we eat, thank you for the world so sweet."

Thank you for the birds that sing. Thank you God, for everything.”

The room is silent, I can still hear the faint sounds of the iron lungs across the hallway. I try to keep my eyes open, but I am tired from the day. I fall asleep with my terrycloth robe still on.

About four hours later, in the dead of night, I feel something on my face, something wet, on my forehead and nose. I squint up into the faces of three elderly nuns in black and white habits who are leaning over me, mumbling prayers and dripping Holy water onto me. Too frightened to move, I pretend to close my eyes, thinking they'll go away or maybe it is a dream and I'll wake up. My hair and face are completely soaked as they continue praying...

*“Blessed is the Lord, who in Christ, the living water of salvation,
blessed and transformed us.*

*Grant that when we sprinkle this child with this water
we will be refreshed inwardly by the power of the Holy Spirit
and continue to walk in the new life we received at Baptism.*

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

They move on to Nicky's bed, saying the same prayers, and finally, Thomas' bed. When they leave. Thomas calls out.

“What’d we tell ya? That’s the rain you get every night here! But we got our own rain, right, Nicky?”

“Right!”

“Here, Matthew. Here’s our rain!”

With that warning, both Nicky and Thomas heave handfuls of m&m’s across the room onto my bed.

“Don’t let ‘em fall on the floor! Just open your mouth. Don’t let the sisters find out. No candy allowed!”

Nicky and Thomas each hold big two pound bags of m&m’s. I open my mouth and the next battery reaches the target. I frantically grab at them falling from the sky and eat handfuls, at least a hundred; the three of us, wet and miserable, giggling into the wee hours of the night.

The following morning, the shades in the room are violently lifted; sunlight streams into the ward. Mrs. Lyles, the floor nurse, about to leave her shift, comes in, sees the m&m’s on the floor and shakes her head.

“What’d I tell you fellas about this? Y’all better behave. If I don’t have a mind to say something to the sisters.”

Her voice, sweet and tender. She looks at me, smiles, shakes her head in mock anger at Thomas and Nicholas as she sweeps up the fallen evidence.

"Bad influence, those two."

Mrs. Lyles goes to each of our beds, lowers her head and makes a cross on her chest. She pats each of our feet, then leaves.

"Ya got any comic books?" Thomas asks in a slightly hoarse voice.

"Three Musketeers and Archie," I reply, also sounding groggy.

With unbridled excitement, Thomas shouts, *"Three Musketeers! Read that!"*

"There's Four Musketeers if you count D'artagnon," Nicholas pipes in, catching his breath.

"You want me to read it out loud?" I ask, innocently.

"Yeah!" says Thomas, bubbling with glee.

"Go ahead!" adds Nicholas. All eyes were on me as I read slowly and with some effort, sounding out the words that are hard.

“Running through the street, D’artagnan bumps into Porthos and becomes en-tang-led entangled in his cloak...”

Before I can read the next frame, Thomas recites,

“The fellow must be mad to run against people in this manner. I’ll chastise him if I ever get him out of my cloak!” Nicholas giggles and adds,

“Chastise Monsieur! The expression is strong, but I haven’t time to wait!”

Then, in unison, their voices topping one another, Nicholas and Thomas, shout through laughter,

“At One O’clock then, behind the Luxembourg!”

I’m dumbstruck, staring at them. Nicholas replies,

“We’ve both been here two months! We memorized The Three Musketeers and Joan of Arc!” Both Nicky and Thomas then shout, *“All for One and One for All!”*

A short while later, two husky orderlies in white coats, wheel Thomas’ bed out of the ward. When he rolls past me, he hands me his bag of m&m’s.

"Hide these for me, ok? Don't eat 'em!"

I am only given orange juice and water, no food for breakfast or lunch. In the afternoon, Nicholas is moved out of the ward; I remain alone until 3:45PM. The same orderlies, whose muscles look like Superman's, wheel my bed out of the ward and into a room with five doctors and nurses and a lamp that a nurse swings close to my head. Someone puts a shower cap on my hair. Another nurse shows me a rubber mask with a hose and says,

"I'm going to place this on your face. Just breathe naturally. Ok?"

I am unaware of the time. Once again it is midnight, the nuns are leaning over me, sprinkling Holy Water and saying their prayer. My mouth is dry, my neck, bandaged. As the nuns recite,

"...We ask this through Christ our Lord..."

I open my mouth to taste the Holy Water, barely able to turn my head enough to see that Thomas' and Nicholas' beds are empty. Instinctively, the eldest nun, wearing steel-rimmed glasses, whose skin looks transparent, like wax, smiles at me, touches my hand and whispers,

"They're with the angels, now, my child."

When I get back home, I can eat as much ice cream as I want. After a week, the bandage comes off; the following week, the stitches come out.

Something is different that Fall, as I walk up City Boulevard; winter winds howl their triumph as leaves are blown off the Dutch elms. A few years later, New York City will experience a blight that will kill every one of the Dutch elms on our block. Once in awhile, I buy some m&m's and while walking home, toss a handful into the air with my mouth open, seeing how many I can catch before becoming homesick for Heaven.