

Holy Cross Hospital--Day 2

They have me tied down to this bed, blinding white sheets wrapped across my body. I feel like a tortured slave, each one of my limbs bound to the bed rail. But I can't complain too much. I'm the one who suggested they tie me down. "I'll rip this thing right outta me," I screamed when I came to after the operation. They had sewed a tube into my chest, beneath my left armpit. "First chance I get, it's gone." So, they put the ropes to me. Imagine that. Someone finally listened to what a fifteen-year-old had to say. Modern medicine at its finest.

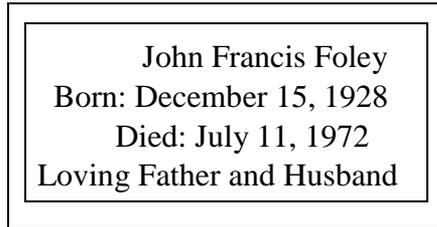
I look kinda like Jesus on the cross with my arms stretched to my sides and all, cept I got a mattress beneath my back instead of a chunk of wood, and my legs are spread wide almost to a half-splits position, rather than danglin straight down like the son of man. But Jesus never had no tube runnin out the side of his chest. We both know that. The tube is drainin blood from my left lung. Now I know this might sound weird, but I actually like watchin my blood swim through that tube. I especially like when the chunks of phlegm-looking, bloody goobers wrestle their way through. I can see it all. The tube is made of a clear, flexible, plastic material and it's about a half-inch in diameter. Diameter--now there's a nice word. I learned all about that in geometry class this year. Talk about a class that'll put you to sleep. Geometry's the one. Sometimes the fluid races through that tube, other times it drags along like a lowly snail. But everything that goes through that tube is comin from me, from deep inside me--deep where my dreams hide.

I can't tell ya nothin 'bout my first day here. I was out cold when my buddies put me in a car and drove me in. That's why I started with Day 2. I'll tell ya this, though. My side is still killin me. In fact, my whole body is killin me. That's what a knife in the back will do to ya. But I'm out of danger now. Least that's what the doctors are sayin. They say I'm gonna make it. Still, I have to stay in this Intensive Care Unit just in case, they say, just in case.

There aint much to do in a hospital bed cept look around and think, and I'm getting tired of lookin around. There's six beds in here but only two are bein put to use. There's an old guy right across from me but he aint much to look at. His pencil face is covered over with whisker stubble and he's got an oxygen mask covering his mouth and nose. The rest of him is all covered over in sheets, just like me. He's alert though. He's been watchin me since I came to. His eyes squint to see around that oxygen mask. The old guy's not giving me a mean stare, though. Nope. His stare is caring, so I just stare right back at him. We haven't exchanged any chit-chat yet, but I feel like we're transferring words through some higher form of communication. That's the truth. It's either that, or it's the painkillers they're givin me. The old man is happy, he relays, and he knows his time is near its end. He just wants to hang on to say goodbye to his son and his granddaughter. Then, he's ready to board a non-stop 747 for heaven.

Did you know that there are forty-eight 2-foot by 4-foot ceiling tiles in this room? That's right, forty-eight. And you can see a few sprinkler heads stickin out through some of those ceiling tiles, including one that's right over my bed. I sure as chicken shit hope they don't have any fires while I'm here, cuz I don't feel much like takin a shower just yet. My room has eight windows in it, two of which don't have screens. I can do without the walls. Puke-yellow over cinder block doesn't do much for me. Definitely not somethin I'd have in my room back home. I share that room with my two older brothers and I know they wouldn't go for that color neither. My mom should be here soon. The nurses said she almost had a heart attack when she first saw me yesterday. I was still out cold so I didn't catch any of it. They said she busted out cryin all over my bed. And that was odd. Real odd. Tears don't come easy for my mom. She's a good lady; and she's strong, real strong inside. Kinda the opposite of my dad. He's been dead for three years now. Part of me wants to miss him, but part of me don't. But still, with all this time on my tied-up hands, I can't control my thoughts, and lots of those thoughts send me bee-lining towards my father. I never cried

at his funeral. I was proud of that at the time, but I'm not any more. I can see his grave stone. Even from here, I see it plain as day. It's carved into some unerasable part of my memory.



There. Now, you can see it too. My dad's marker is flat, barely a step above a pauper's stone. Mom drives me and my brothers and sisters out to the cemetery every Father's Day. The last time I saw Dad's stone, chunks of grass crept far across its edges. What was once a perfect 24" by 12" rectangle had become egg-shaped by those creeping blades of grass. I thought about tearin the grass from the edges but didn't. I just looked at Mom's face. It was as lifeless as Dad's stone. My little sister, Donna, started cryin. Mom pulled her in for a hug. Donna wrapped her skinny arms around Mom's waist and buried her round face in Mom's chest. I wanted out of there. I was tired of lookin at that stone. I saw enough of it already in my dreams. So I looked up into the bird-less, blue-white sky and found the sun. I opened my eyes wide, and let the sun's sniping rays do their best. I counted to five, slowly; but that wasn't good enough. I could still see. So I opened my eyes wider and counted--even slower--to ten. Then I closed my eyes and watched the sun dancing a jig inside my lids. When I opened my eyes and again looked at my father's grave stone, it was gone. Snap! Just like that. In its place was a red, glowin ball of fire.

Popp's Tavern

My Mom's hands are on my back. She never wakes me with a violent shake. She always massages the muscles on my rail-thin frame for minutes at a time before sayin a single word. I am half-asleep but somewhere in my dreams I feel my mother's warm hands caressing the wee muscles about my shoulders, my spine, my lower back.

She starts her song. It's always the same morning song. She sings it slowly and softly, each word rolling from her red lips,

“Sweet dreams are ending, the time is here,
Part your wings Angels, and give me my dear.
He's the one I love, yes, indeed, it is he,
So please hand him over, so he can go pee.”

I am awake now. I roll over and smile at my mom. She's sittin on the edge of my bed. She smiles back and plants a kiss on my cheek.

"You gotta get moving, Dennis." Her smile disappears as she nods her head towards the kitchen. "He's waiting on you. I let you sleep in a little longer this morning."

"What time is it, Ma?"

"'Bout twenty past Eleven."

"Jeepers, Ma," I screech as I jump from my bed. I look over at the bunk beds next to the closet. My older brothers, Johnny and Tim, are still both asleep, with Johnny on the top bunk and Tim on the bottom. I run to the dresser, toss on some pants and a T-shirt, and slide into my low-cut Cons. I sprint out the door and into the kitchen, where I apply the brakes. My father is waiting for me, standing tall and lean like an arrow.

"C'mon," my father barks. "Let's go." He sticks a lit cigarette between his lips and walks out the back door.

"Sorry Dad." He says nothing. We walk across the porch painted 100 layers of gray with time and start down the stairs. "One sec,

Dad." I jog back to the porch, grab my baseball and my brother Tim's mitt. My father glares at me. I follow him as he moves uneasily down the remaining steps.

We have a two-and-a-half block walk to Popp's Tavern. It's at 80th and Racine. We start slowly down Throop Street. I toss the ball up into the air as we walk, catching it each time with my brother's mitt. Sometimes, I throw the ball so high, I wonder if the burning sun might open its mouth and swallow the ball whole. It never does. As we walk, bungalows with stained glass windows line both sides of the street like tiny pawns in a chess match. My own apartment is a three-flat. We pass a couple of those. In my neighborhood, each block has at least two three-flats on it. And most blocks have some six-flats and eight-flats too. We don't own our apartment. We rent the second-floor unit. My dad likes second floor units. He don't care much for first floor flats. "Too many people can get atcha from the first floor." He cares even less for third floor units. "I'll be damned if I'm gonna carry all this crap up all them stairs." So, whenever we move, which is often, my father makes certain we're always sandwiched between two other families.

Fred Popp opens the door to his tavern at 11:00 am on Saturdays. My dad likes to be there as it opens. We're usually there, too. I'm normally up at 7:30 a.m. on Saturday mornings so I can watch my favorite cartoons before I leave for the tavern with my dad. Last night, though, I stayed up late with Johnny and Tim and watched *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*, with Jimmy Stewart. What a movie! That's why I'm so late gettin started today. I know Dad's a little sore at me but he'll get over it, as soon as he has a beer in his hand.

We pass St. Sabina's on our walk. That's where I go to school. I'm in the first grade and Sister Conleth is my teacher. She's pretty nice, for a nun. She's young and she doesn't beat your hands up with the ruler like the older nuns always do. I like St. Sabina's. A lot. I have lots of friends there. Whole bunches of 'em. Last year, most of my school friends were white. Now, almost all of my school friends

are black. And that's just fine with me. Right next to the school is the church, itself, and it's huge. It reaches way up into the sky and is made of creamy-colored bricks, kinda like the cone part of an ice cream cone. Blue stained-glass windows stare at you from all over the church. My mom loves those windows. She can't walk past the church without starin at 'em. She says they're "watchful eyes that canvass the community." I don't quite get what that means, but I sure like the way it sounds.

When we make it to 79th Street, my father stops and lights another cigarette. Clouds of smoke swirl past his blond head and float away like lost dreams. We only have one more block to go. He moves even slower now. He beat polio as a kid, only his pencil-thin legs don't work so good any more. He's 36 years-old but I betcha I could beat him in a race.

The front door's open when we get to Popp's Tavern and the Hamm's sign above the door is swingin with the wind. My father takes his place at his stool. That's right, "his" stool. He's a regular at Popp's and all the regulars mark their stools. Mom says Dad and the other regulars are like dogs that way. I jump up on the stool beside my dad and look around. Mr. Dunleavy, Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Sheehy are already in the bar. They give my dad a wave. He waves back. None of them brought their kids today. When they do, we kids usually get into some good wrestling matches. None of us kids mind rollin around the bar floor in the beer puddles and dirt. The bar men love it. It's like they're bettin on the winner. I look around some more. Mr. Lassandrello isn't here. Good. No problems today.

Fred Popp sets a bottle of Old Style, an empty 8-ounce shorty glass, and a shot of whiskey in front of my dad. It's V.O. whiskey. I know my letters from school and that's the kinda whiskey my dad likes.

"Thanks, Fred." My father downs the shot. He pours his beer into the shorty and looks at me. I smile a stupid smile and twist back and forth on my stool. "Hey Fred, you forgot the kid." My father's no longer mad at me.

"Right," Mr. Popp says. He grabs a small bottle of Pepsi from the cooler, cracks off the cap and sets it in front of me. Mr. Popp places both hands on the bar top and stoops down to my eye level. "How's young Master Dennis doing today, Sir?" he says in a Fancy-Dan kinda voice. My dad chuckles lightly and finishes his shorty. Mr. Popp watches my dad fill his glass with golden fluid. "Can I do it to 'im, Jack?" My dad slurps more from the shorty. "Can I?" Mr. Popp again asks. My father nods his head. Mr. Popp stands straight up, a wide smile on his face. He's tall and skinny and the white apron he's wearin over his white shirt matches the white of his teeth and makes him look like a huge glow-in-the-dark toy. I know what's comin. We play this game every Saturday. Sometimes, Mr. Popp asks for my dad's permission and sometimes he don't. Mr. Popp digs his right index-finger into his right eye and plucks it from its socket. He sets the glass eye on the bar top next to me. "Don't go getting into any trouble now, Master Dennis. I'll be watching you." I can stare at that fake eyeball all day long. I know it isn't real. What I can't do, though, is look at the empty eye socket on Mr. Popp's face. I looked at it once, just once. It was red and raw and kinda dark, like someone stuffed some half-cooked hamburger meat in there. I threw-up when I looked that time, to the delight of my dad and the other bar men. I learned to wait until Mr. Popp had enough time to slip the black patch over his eye. I usually count to 25. Sometimes my dad whispers, "He put the patch on." Today, I count to 25 and when I look up, Mr. Popp is standing in front of Mr. Dunleavy and the patch is in place.

"The Pirate." That's what my mom calls Mr. Popp. She doesn't care much for him. "The Pirate steals the food from the mouths of the young," she says, "and turns it into whiskey for their fathers to drink and forget." I've been coming to Popp's Tavern with my dad for about a year now. I know why I'm here. I'm young but I'm not as dumb as you might think. Actually, my mom told me why I hafta go with my dad. "Just stay with him, be with him, and that way he won't forget any of us." I'm a permanent reminder for my dad that he has a wife and six kids who need things, like food, at home. I

am here to remind him that he better have some money in his pocket when we leave Mr. Popp.

Whenever Mom asks me what goes on at Popp's, I always lie. "Nothin," I tell her and then keep on lyin by tellin her that I don't like the place much at all. Truth is, those are major lies cuz I like everything about Popp's Tavern.

Mr. Popp's place always smells like stale beer no matter how many times he drags his old, gray-haired mop across the wooden floor. I love that smell. The mirror behind the bar goes on forever. Wherever I'm at in the bar, I can always find my freckled face starin back at me. I like to watch smoke fly outta the mouths of the drinking men and climb to the tin ceiling where it hangs like a bunch of dirty clouds. You should see Mr. Popp clean the shorty glasses and shot glasses. He runs hot water through 'em, shoves a towel inside 'em and smushes the towel around 'til the glasses are both dry and clean. It only takes Mr. Popp five seconds to clean and dry a glass. I timed him before. Once the glasses are clean, Mr. Popp sets 'em back on the bar top where they stand in line and wait their turn to be used again.

Now I know I'm a munchkin but still I feel like one of the guys when I'm at Popp's. The other men always make a point to say hello to me, pinch my cheek, pat me on the back, or say somethin about my flaming hair. My dad lets me drink Pepsi 'til my belly's set to burst, I get to play the bowling ball machine, and I get to see a few good fights, too. The best was when Mr. Sheehy and Mr. Everett got into it. Mr. Everett's a little guy with a pointy, red beard. He looks like the Lucky Charms leprechaun. And Mr. Sheehy's as big as John Wayne. Anyway, Mr. Sheehy was poundin the stuffins outta Mr. Everett. He knocked him to the floor at least three times. Mr. Everett wouldn't quit, though. He kept wipin the blood from his mouth and comin back for more. When he was on the ground the last time, Mr. Sheehy said, in his thick brogue, "Listen you little squirt, just stay down there like the dog ya are." The bar men all laughed. Mr. Sheehy took his eyes offa Mr. Everett and laughed with all the others. That was a big mistake. From his knees, Mr.

Everett slammed his fist into Mr. Sheehy's crotch. "Ooohh," all the bar men said at the same time. Goliath grabbed his marbles and fell with a thud to the floor. He stayed there a good, long while, fixing himself in all the right places. An hour later, the two men were drinking together, and Mr. Sheehy even thanked Mr. Everett for sockin him in the spot. He said, "Actually, Everett, it should be me Missus who should be thankin ya. You've found an effective means of birth control for the Irish." I didn't quite know what that meant either. But I do know that enemies don't stay enemies very long at Popp's. Mostly, though, I like being at Popp's 'cuz I get to be with my dad, all by myself. Most times he doesn't say much to me, but sometimes he answers my questions. He talks to me about the Cubs a bunch. He likes all the Chicago teams but the Cubs are definitely his favorite. He's not much help when I hit him with my homework questions though. "Ask your mother," is what he says then. Either way, I really don't care. I just wanna be with him. I like watching my dad wipe the beer foam from his mouth after taking a long gulp from his shorty. He likes to shoot cigarette smoke at the ceiling, too. Sometimes, when he knows I'm watchin, he'll blow little chunks of smoke from his mouth that form perfect tiny rings that could fit around your finger. The rings grow and grow as they rise and they always fall apart just before they get a chance to bang into the ceiling. My mother doesn't like what my father does with his cigarette ashes, though. Ashtrays are everywhere at Popp's but my father has no use for 'em. When he drinks, he sits with his back smushed into the back support and his right leg crossed over his left. He always flicks his ashes into the cuff of his right pant leg and he always wears cuffed pants. My mom's the one who gets stuck cleanin those cuffed pants.

My older brothers, John and Tim, used to come with my dad to the tavern but they don't come anymore. I don't know why. Whenever I ask them why, they never answer. They're teenagers now and they don't seem to care much about Dad anymore. They're missin out on a lot. I think ya get kinda stupid when you become a teenager. I feel sorry for my three sisters. They never get to come

to Popp's. My Mom would never let 'em. "A tavern is no place for a little lady," Mom says. They're missin out, too. I sometimes tell my sister Sharon what happens at Popp's and she can't believe it. She gets all filled up with, "He did what? Who punched who?" and "Who fell offa the stool?" You know how girls can get. Sometimes I even get to come with my dad on Wednesdays and Fridays. Those are his three biggest days, but Saturday is definitely the biggest.

My father drinks lotsa shots and beers as the day passes. He smokes and joins in manly chit-chat, too. The day goes along smoothly, mostly cuz Mr. Lassandrello didn't show up. This Saturday ends like most other Saturdays. At 5:00, Mr. Popp tells us to go home. He knows our schedule.

"I'll be taking me eye back now, Master Dennis," Mr. Popp says. "You've been a fine wee lad, today. Now, get goin' before the real Master throws your supper out the window." Mr. Popp grabs his eye from the bar top as my dad and I head out the door. I don't watch him stuff it back in place. Mr. Popp's right. It is indeed supper-time. Ah yes, Saturday, supper-time. Stew night. I'm ready for it. I flip the ball into the sky over and over again as we walk home, catching it each time. Sometimes I don't get to toss the ball on the walk home, but my dad doesn't need to lean on me tonight.