The Aluminum Cross

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Abstract

"How do you feel?" "A little warm, but not bad." I gaze down at the kindly old face. Her eyes are closed now, but they will open soon to drink in another gray glimpse of the ambulance...
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—Leo Rickertsen

“How do you feel?”
“A little warm, but not bad.”

I gaze down at the kindly old face. Her eyes are closed now, but they will open soon to drink in another gray glimpse of the ambulance. She’s old, but her lineless face belies her age. Or perhaps it’s the shadowless blue eyes or the high cheekbones supporting them. Perhaps it’s the brown, faintly reddish hair framing those eyes. Maybe it’s that mouth, white-lined in pain or anger or contentment. Perhaps it is that white line. Strange how it never changes. The lips separate for speech, but the white line remains, partitioned by a word for only a moment. The familiarity of the line holds my attention. No matter what my mother’s mood was, her mouth remained like this, always the same. Not angry looking, but not happy either, its difference from most mouths is striking. This mouth is my mother’s. In it I can see all of her religiousness, purity, redemption, and pride. Because of this I begin to see my mother in the old lady’s eyes, face, and hair, too. Only that creaking, toneless voice reveals the old lady’s age. She seems comfortable—without pain—mildly waiting.

“Abide with me fast falls the even tide. The darkness deepens, Lord with me abide. Please, son, sing with me.”

I begin to sing haltingly, fighting not to scream out in my hypocrisy. Lord with me abide. She has nothing. She is going to die so what does she do? Sings. Sings a song I have nearly been able to forget. The room blurs, and my cheeks tickle from that false sweat falling from my eyes. Anger empties itself out between my lashes. Tears? Amazing how a white-line mouth can bring back a memory. Can bring it back vividly enough to expose the sensitive nerve all over again. Again I see the bleary-room, darkened in anticipation of death. A small, grayish-white face cries up at me from a glistening pillow.

“Son, always remember what I’ve told you. Live as I’ve taught you to live. Make God the center of your life.”
All that religion. She speaks as if she were a classmate writing in my annual at the end of the school year . . . always remember the good times we had . . . blah, blah, blah. Meaningless phrases. Trite, overworked, rewritten each year until they mean nothing.

My mother with all her religion had not died easily. Stomach cancer. It eats at the insides of the body until tubes become all the channels of life: sources and outlets. A tube to eat through, a tube to breathe through, a tube draining the kidneys, and a tube instead of intestine. I still hear her in fevered delirium. Whenever the doctor removed the tube to look at her throat, she rambled on about eyes and colors and God and warmth and Christ and faith and heaven and eyes.

"God! Three eyes, blue and red, climbing the walls, skid.......skidding apart, now crossed, now only one, now three, glistening, tears, laugh, big, BIG! covering the ceiling, covering the lamp, glowing, dark, black." Then the doctor would force that fire hose back down her throat and she would mumble incoherently around it.

"The darkness deepens, Lord with me abide." The old lady is clutching to that song as if it means everything. One stupid song. One stupid God-song.

My mind races, but I say nothing. The ambulance hardly looks like a place for hymn singing and church services. The medicine cabinet altar with its first-aid Bible stand behind the driver. Above it, hanging limply, is a red plasma bottle on an aluminum cross. Blood seeps through a tube from the crucifix into the arm of the tired worshiper. She lies before it, lower than a kneel, in the final throes of the benediction. A neon chandelier glows over the sparse congregation. A police radio pipe organ hums throughout the synagogue and seeps through cracks in the rear double doors. Here is a church and a cemetery on wheels—both temporary, both false—true only to the addicts of religion. Glancing down at the doctor's guest register, I reread the shattering diagnosis.

A small, oval steering wheel has done all that damage. Sixty miles per hour, drowsiness, wet pavement, a dog—and that steering wheel has put them together in a fatal combination. But an ordinary one at that. One repeated hourly in accidents all over the highways. One I have seen time and time again. Sometimes the face is crushed, sometimes the chest, and sometimes the stomach and intestines. They all have writhed before me, injured by their own miscalculation, their own imperception, their own thoughtlessness.

A cold, trembling hand—tenacious, desperate—fuses itself to my forearm. Startled by its fierceness, I stare at it. The lumpy, blue-veined fingers grip at my arm, forcing a white and red frame around them.

"Son, why do you shake so? I will be all right. My stay here has been pleasant, and I await the glories of heaven. Don't worry, I am protected and so are you. He will help when He is needed."

Incredible! Incredible how some fantasies can survive even in the face of death. But the old lady will break down as all the others have. She'll break down as my mother did, screaming and cursing at the pain. Screaming at life as it pitilessly leaves her flesh. Screaming at the doctor as he works mechanically, trying to save a lost cause. Pain will soon take over and drive all the religion out of her. And her suffering will become God and heaven.

She lapses into the fantasies of the Lord's Prayer as the siren moans in accompaniment. And the crucifix sways in rhythm to the syllables. But the old lady will soon break down.

I want to find out how she really feels behind that religious mask. I want her to break down. I want to prove to her how shallow such unimportant belief really is, so I ask again, "How do you feel?"

"I'm beginning to feel some pain. The Lord is testing me, and I am beginning to feel His power." The hell! So that's God. A hot, searing finger probing in an open wound. Tearing, jabbing, inflaming the body with bolts of misery. Testing! Testing! It's only her nerve ending recording the impulse chemically along the nerves to register in her brain. Nothing God-like in that. It's pure chemistry. She'll break down.

"Lord have mercy! If it's Thy will, take this affliction from me!" Ha! Already she's beginning to whimper under
the strain. The voice crying out in the wilderness! Pain is the conqueror of all.

A breathy scream mingles, overcomes, and shatters the whine of the siren. Her feeling is increasing. Her God is not saving her from it. She writhes below me, a child in a tantrum. Her eyes bulge and dilate, and her mouth tightens to the white line, as flesh changes from white, to crimson, to purple, to gray. Grayish-white on a glistening white pillow... the act is repeated. She is not unique. God fearing, she is not unique. I recall a moment in the last hours standing before the tube-infested figure lying gray on the bed. A tube is removed and the mouth speaks of colors that fill with sound. Blues are deep, full, filling a bass into an inaudible chant. Reds are high pitched, brassy, boldly whispering the funeral melody. Yellows and browns are hidden but pulsating, invading harmonics to fill the song. The ceiling and its eyes sing to my mother as she throws herself deeply into the bed, groping for something to help her. God is no longer a necessity.

The old woman suffers the same way. Soon for her, God will no longer fill the terrible need for a relief from pain. And her religion will fail her as it faltered in my mother and countless others I watch, a spectator in a religious ambulance arena.

"Son, can't you give me something to stop this?"

"I'm sorry. You've already been given 200 cc's of anodyne. Any more would kill you." Before I can finish she is laughing. Laughing, clutching her broken stomach. Laughing so hard it seems forced as it changes to an intense cackle echoing through the church. The religious cloud she forced over me makes the laugh more severe, biting into the atmosphere she has so carefully built. She gropes for support from the sheet covering her and tears it apart. And the pain forces itself back, strangling the hysterical convulsions into watery gasps. Once again she shudders, just as others have. Just as my mother's face shudders with the tearing of each nerve ending until the nerve gives way in shock.

The old lady's hand drops away from my arm. I am used to that pressing, pulsating grip. I look at her curiously. Her lids fall back revealing glazed, thick-teared eyes.

"Son, help me stop this pain. Do anything. Kill me! But stop this pain! Let me do it myself!" She reaches for the scissors on the bench beside me. The struggle is short; she
has little strength. She sinks back into the pain, cursing hollowly. “God! God! Damned! Me! I hate God! I hate! God won’t help! Me!”

Death comes noiselessly, scientifically. The heart stops, the lunges deflate, the eyes sink, and the tongue falls back in the mouth allowing only a dry, unfinished breath to rattle out. No climax, no blinding flash of light as her soul flies to eternal haven. She dies like all the rest, caught up only in omnipotent pain.

But the churchiness lingers. The plasma bottle still swings with an aluminum cross. The white line never moves, but “abide with me” echoes in the neoned cathedral. The sheet lies torn in two, so I can’t even cover her face. Abide with me, abide with me, abide with me and on and on until the siren sings in time, the chandelier flickers to the syllables and the plasma bottle swings in rhythm. I can’t get rid of the atmosphere. It grows with each moment.

A bluish mist clouds my glasses. But the fog can’t be cleared away. There must be an explanation, a cause for every effect. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. I look at the nearly empty plasma bottle. Take it down, get rid of it, it is finished.

The old lady’s hand drops from the sheet and brushes my knee. Gravity! The force of gravity pulls all objects to its bosom. Why does the plasma bottle holder still swing? The bumps keep it swinging to “abide with me.” No, I’m singing to the sway of the bottle support. Science explains all. The flicker in the light. Neon gas will cause a flicker effect when it is nearly gone from the tube. Must replace it along with the sheet she ruined. This ambulance is dirty. Scrub the whole damned thing down. Get this creepy feeling out of here.

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**Haiku**

—Dean Womeldorf

The flower sends its fragrance  
Into the spring night  
A sidewalk cafe