

My chair is tipped backwards so that only two legs are still resting on the floor. My head rolls back and forth as I stare up at the stark white of the ceiling above me. The stingy basement office that surrounds me reeks of unhappiness and mildew, and I'm reminded of happier days back on the farm, when responsibility was not yet in my vocabulary.

"Michael!" my boss shouts, startling me. Tipping my chair back to its original four legs, I stare back into the eyes of Harold, the man I hold responsible for my endless boredom. I feel like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Tell us, Michael, what do you think of the new financials?"

"Well I - um, I mean, I think they're very nice," I stutter.

Just as I'm preparing to get chewed out for such a stupid, idiotic answer, Margaret walks into the room with catering. I thank her telepathically and get up to take a sandwich.

Once I've resumed my previous position, I find my eyes drawn toward a large red stain in the corner of the room. It's splattered carelessly against the wall, contrasting incredibly with the dirty white behind it. I wonder why I haven't noticed it before. The brightness of the color is astounding. I'm mesmerized by it, unable to tear my eyes away from the red stain before me.

Every blemish has a story, I know that much. Whether it's a chip in paint, or rip in clothing, everything has a tale to tell. Somehow, staring down at that ugly stain in front of me, I know that this story might just be an interesting one.

The smell of gunpowder filled the air. A frantic man pushed past me, his gun rubbing up against an old wound. An apology was not expected, though. During the war there was never time for simple chatter. When a man's life is at stake, it's rare to find one that has the consideration to look out for another.

I rustled through my bag, pulling out the slip of parchment that James Henry had given me just before he went AWOL. I glanced down at the paper. It read; *For James. Best of wishes - John*. There was an address scrawled across the bottom in

messy handwriting. He had said the house was a safe haven, but I was skeptical. I had always been told there was no safe haven during the war.

The houses were evenly spaced up and down the street. A bright white picket fence surrounded each, their badges of row house honor. I strolled down the center of the road, feeling out of place in my full uniform.

The whole place reeked of fertilizer. A lone tree sat squat between each house, every branch manicured to perfection. The clomping of my boots was the only sound breaking through the eerie silence that had befallen the neighborhood.

Once I reached the house I walked slowly up the front steps, taking in the normalcy of it all. A white house with blue trim lost in a sea of white houses with blue trim. And yet this house was supposed to be holding around a dozen Union soldiers every day.

I drew in a shaky breath and knocked on the door, once- pause- four times- pause- and then two. The perfect door quietly opened inward, revealing the posh interior of what seemed like a typical residence.

I jumped slightly when the woman that had opened the door for me cleared her throat. She was pretty, with short dark hair tied up into a bun on the back of her head and a long white nursing dress covering her body.

“This way,” she said harshly, herding me toward a trap door just to the right of the entrance.

“Don’t you think it’s kind of silly to have the door so close to the front of the house?” I asked her.

“How would it be silly?” she replied defensively, “What does it matter where the door is? If someone comes looking, they’ll search everywhere. They’ll either find it or they won’t. It’s of no matter where the door is placed.”

I was tempted to argue some more just to prove a point, but instead decided to use my better judgment and just stop talking altogether.

The light at the bottom of the stairs was dim to none, and it took me a few moments of adjusting before I was able to see anything. I could smell though, and the stench that filled my nose was rancid. I have smelled very few things that could compare to that odor. Once I could see again though, I knew what caused it. Somewhere near a dozen wounded soldiers lay in cots around a single room no more than five floorboards wide. The men's faces were grey and caked with dirt and stale sweat. Three other nurses wandered the room, tending to wounds and mopping up blood. My stomach churned and I felt ready to puke.

I allowed myself to become more accustomed to the odors as I made my way over to an empty cot in the corner of the room.

Once I had my few items squared away, I settled into the hard mattress. It was a welcome relief from the relentless walking, and I dozed off almost immediately.

My eyes snapped open suddenly. The woman that had let me into the house was leaning over me, tapping me awake. "It's time for your examination," she said in a monotone. I sat up, my bed complaining underneath me. "Take off your shirt," she commanded, to my embarrassment. I was only bare chested for a moment though, before she turned and began walking away muttering, "just as I thought. Measles."

She returned again within the hour, this time with a small flask in hand. "Drink up," she barked, shoving it into my dirty hands. I stared at the dark liquid for a moment, weighing my options. It was either playing my chances with measles, or being forced to consume this disgusting sludge between my fingertips. I was starting to consider doing the former, when the lady (I made a mental note to ask for her name at a more convenient time) made the choice for me.

The stuff was down my throat in a matter of seconds, and left me retching. My body wanted nothing more than to be rid of it. I personally took that as a sign that it may not have been the best thing to consume. Never the less, the deed was done, and the lady had already moved on to the next bed to force things down the throats of other helpless men.

My life went on at such a slow pace for the next few days that at one point I had completely convinced myself that time had lulled to a halt. My world had become nothing more than a mundane routine. When we first woke we were given breakfast; a scrumptious mix of cornmeal and the morning rounds of medicine. Later in the day the nurses changed the sheets, leaving those of us that could still stand huddling in the corner to stay out of their way. Sometimes my bunkmate and I (I haven't thought to ask for his name either, come to think of it) grunt at each other, both of us too exhausted to even get out a sentence. The rest of the day would go on as you would expect, some more cornmeal and medicine coupled with almost complete silence, save from the occasional coughing of a sick soldier or pained cry of an injured one.

It was on one of these very days, one that seemed, if possible, even more monotonous than the rest, that I heard the sound. Now the occasional noise was not odd, the sounds of a neighbor returning from work, or a child playing on the lawn outside. This sound was different though. I recognized this sound.

Back in my fighting days I sometimes used to hitch a ride with my old friend Davie Butch during feeding time, and we would sneak off to the village to eat. While there, we used to stop by local shops and things to look for newspapers and ask if anyone had seen our families lately. It was a bit of a risky business though, because every once in a while we would hear the very distinct sound of the Union patrol cart hobbling along the dusty road outside. It had one loose wheel that would jiggle back and forth every time it turned, causing it to make loud metallic sounds as it bumped and banged down the street. I remember us running down alleyways or climbing down to bar cellars whenever we heard it. We would always wait for what felt like eternity after the sounds stopped before coming out, just to be on the safe side. We had only heard stories of the way soldiers were treated when caught off duty, and were not about to face the wrath of whoever was behind that wheel.

I felt as though I'd been slapped across the face. "Go! Everyone, hide!" I began shouting, delirious. No one hid. They just stared at me, looking as though I was speaking a foreign language.

"Please," I continued, "The patrol!"

The moment that word came out of my mouth, everything became hectic. Men with broken legs were pulling themselves up the stairs, and nurses were climbing over fallen soldiers.

Just as the first people were coming to the top of the stairs, there was a loud knock at the door. Everyone froze, not daring to move a muscle. My breath caught in my throat.

Soldiers' feet slowly began tiptoeing back down the steps, their metallic footsteps echoing throughout the cramped space.

Suddenly the door burst open, followed immediately by the shout of an unsuspecting soldier. The trap door was slammed shut, and I found myself holding the metal ring attached to it closed.

I felt a sharp tug from the other side. It came sudden; a merciless yank that almost pulled me off my feet. Whoever was out there, they were strong.

I could almost taste the fear in the air. As I glanced feverishly around the room, I saw no hopeful looks. No feeling of power or courage was being emitted from these men. It was as if they'd already been defeated.

"Hey!" I shouted, feeling much less brave than I seemed.

Before anyone could respond, with one last pull from the man, the door slipped from my grasp and was thrown open. Looming over me was a man not much taller than my measly 5'7. He had a sturdy build though, with wide shoulders and bulging biceps. Even more intimidating than him, though, was his gun.

It looked like an 1861 Springfield Rifle, the same kind I had during training. It had a long black barrel that caught the light from outside almost perfectly, allowing it to dance mockingly along the gun. His beefy index finger was hovering over the trigger expectantly.

“Well what have we got here?” he growled, his voice raspy and commanding. “A bunch of deserters. Running away from your responsibilities, are you? Well you’re gonna wish you hadn’t done that-”

The butt of his gun was in my face before I knew what hit me.

The last thing I saw before losing consciousness was my blood splattered against the wall carelessly, contrasting incredibly with the dirty white behind it.

“Michael!” Oh god, what’d I do this time?

“Get your head out of your ass and start typing up the spreadsheets!” He shouts rudely at me, wiping the spit he had just sprayed from his chin.

“No,” I say, hesitantly at first, and then with more confidence. “No. No more spreadsheets, no more financials, and no more being treated this way. People have fought and died for our country, and I’m not about to waste their sacrifices.”

On that note, I get up, collect my few possessions, and walk up the stairs and through the front door. I only look back once, just a glance, to see the dark smudge my boot had left on the floor on my way out.