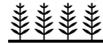


Noah Newmann, Short Story Second Place, 2021

## *Picketts' Field*



Leaves shiver under fading light. Cobwebs in the doorframe buckle and fall away as drops of rain step in the dust. A stone porch, polished by life, reminds me of the old one-room schoolhouse and its floor, of how I came back through the kitchen door with a stinging throat. How Maw's lemonade soothed the summer burn, a balm of sugar-lemon down the throat at once making the world breathe, living again, full, whole, and fine under the sun that beat like an oakwood cane. Winter comes, light cold and virgin as the snow beneath. Once more and again through the hoop of the decade the clock spins. I come back from school, a new made doctor. Maw is gone, my sister married and my brother tending the farm; I am alone. Now, black bag at my side, I wonder how I have gotten to where I stand on the porch under weeping eaves, a pistol to my skull.

The moment is all I feel, the rain is still, hanging feverishly. The man is stooped, pupils wide as pits. His hand is steady, and down the barrel he watches with keen interest. We stand, each taking the other's breath like thieves.

A cold, circular, steel-lipped kiss is all I am, a point of simple and terrible being as the rain runs down my back. Drawn out, stretched thin, the air is run with a stale carpet of whisky, an old haunt that drew me through the winter nights, welded to my work. That smell is the toothless whistle of friends from long ago knocking at my door, each a memory. One holds a pipe to his mouth and recalls the good times we shared, another mutters and knocks on wood.

"Wha' d'ya wan', eh?" I wrinkle my nose at the man's sour breath.

"I... came from town," I say. "May I set down my bag?"

“Who sen’ ya?”

“My secretary—I have a secretary—she brought me news of someone sick on your farm and she said it was urgent, so... I came as soon as I could.”

“Bastard.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Tha’ bastard boy! Sh’ told ‘im didn’ she? Didn’ she? Sen’ th’ boy ou’ to tell ya, eh?” The barrel presses into my skin. I feel it slicking with sweat as the man shakes his head.

“Yer a policeman ain’t ya? Come t’ my ‘ouse to pull me away, eh? Well, ye ain’t gettin’ me this time ya—”

“Sir I’m a doctor.”

“A wha’?”

“I’m a doctor on a house call. I’m not a policeman.” My glasses slide down my nose, threatening to fall off. The man’s head cocks to the side and he scratches under his hat.

“Doctor, eh? Tha’s true? Really?”

“Yes.”

“Well... if tha’s th’ case...” The gun lowers slowly, trailing over a brow, knocking against my nose, and catching my glasses. The barrel pulls the frames, and they fall. I blink, trying, failing to pull away the haze. The man’s face is a blur with no distinctive feature, washed out by the light from the doorway. I reach down to where I last heard the glasses tumble but am stopped by a cattle call.

“Ho, ho boy, where d’ya think yer goin’?”

“I need my glasses,” I say, hand pawing the stone. “I can’t see without them.”

“Sure, ya can. I know ya intellectual types. Ya just wear ‘em to make yerself look th’ part. Do I ga’ tha’ righ’?” I swallow my fear and stand up straight, looking at what I suppose is his face. I say nothing, pulling my bag close. “Well? Comein! if ya wanna stay ou’ wi’ the cayoots I’ll let’ ya! I don’ wan’ yer type in ‘ere bu’ if th’ woman wan’s i’ she’ll ge’ wha’s comin’...” He waves me through the door, and I step myopically through, putting my hand out. His shadow lumbers ahead carrying that smell back through the door.

“Are you Mr. Picketts?” I say by way of civility.

“Yeah. Through ‘ere.”

I think he points, and I follow. I am tempted to check the time as I pass through what must be the kitchen. I told my secretary that if I was not back from Picketts’ farm by four o’clock, she was to lock the office and throw away the key. She winked and said that she would.

The door creaks open, letting the gloom leak out with the smell of stale sheets. A window rattles with rain, and there is a candle burning.

“Over ‘ere.” I see the metal of the gun shine like a wand in the gloom. “She been sick all o’ three days, no good... Nobody t’ wash or do th’ kiddies’ own sup...” The gun drops and heavy steps orbit behind and fill the door, leaving me to my work. I set down my bag and roll up my sleeves, squinting at the blurs that make up the room. I feel for the neck, finding the beat. It is weak and the skin is lacquered with sweat, the breathing shallow with the fever burning bright.

“Mrs. Picketts. Mrs. Picketts, are you awake? Can you hear me?” The head turns and a hand stirs beneath the sheets, the linen moving like beach sand. “Mrs. Picketts? What is your name?”

“Martha...” comes the answer, “but you... should know...”

“Martha?”

“Yeah, Martha! Martha’s ‘er name, Martha!”

The voice crashes like hail through a window. I ignore it. The face comes into focus as I squint, the nose and hair now familiar, just they were when we were in the schoolyard together

and the other boys made fun of my glasses and she stepped out, balling up her fists. Now she is sweating under yellow sheets, my sister.

“Martha...” I say, rolling the word over the tongue and out again. “Are you in any discomfort, aching, perhaps a sharp pain in your abdomen?”

She shakes her head in confusion.

“Abdo-what?”

“Your belly. Do you have any sharp pains, or is it a dull ache?”

“No. But I do have an ache in my back... though sometimes it flares up... somethin’ fierce.” I reach under her, probing with my fingers. She grunts as I lift the blouse, revealing skin patchy and discolored like a stain across the back. I reach over and take the candle, holding it so I can better see the bruise. It is round and red like a plum. I urge Martha to turn over, and as she does, I see another spreading over the small of her back.

“Hey. Hey, wha’ ya doin’?”

“I am examining the patient, Mr. Picketts. Here, hold this light so I may better examine her.”

“No, ya aint lookin’ a’ ‘er like tha’! Tha’ aint righ’!”

“Pay no... attention to him,” Martha says, rolling back. “He’s all bark... No bite.” The smile is weak.

“Martha,” I say, biting my lip. “Has... have you had a *fall*, lately?” I lean close, see her nod. “Sickness? Vomiting?”

“Wai’...” says Picketts, cocking his head, again, scratching under his hat. “Martha? Ya know th’ doc?”

“I do... he’s my brother I told you about... went to school six years back? ‘For I met you.” I hear heavy feet come close. I set down the candle and replace the blouse. Martha’s hand reaches out and grabs mine.

“Have you seen the children? The little girl and my boy? Near grown now, my boy. Almost as handsome as his pa.”

“He ain’t grown yet,” says Picketts, standing shakily by the table. “Le’ go of ‘im Martha.”

“Have you had any problems like vomiting, Martha?” I ask, again. “Yes or no.” Again, she nods, looking at Picketts’ gun.

“Sir,” I say, opening my bag with one hand. “Your wife has an infection of the kidney caused, in this case, by severe blow of some sort. I am prescribing—”

“A wha’?”

“A blow administered by a blunt object.” I stand, pulling Martha’s fingers from mine. “It can be caused by a very bad fall or the administration of a cane or stick that is *blunt*, to the *back* and *sides*, where the kidneys are located.”

“Wha’? Ya mean like a whippin’?”

“Something like that.” I sort and draw out a bottle from my bag, corked, and set it on the table under the light. “I am prescribing this medicine to be taken after every meal. One spoonful, three times a day until the bottle is finished. No strenuous activity, no lifting of heavy weight, and make sure that she gets plenty of light and air.” Picketts takes up the bottle to watch the medicine turn lazily between his fingers. I close my bag.

“How much will i’ cos’ me?”

“No charge.”

“How much I said!” His eyes are wide, sooty holes. His words are clear and clipped. “There’s always a price with yer kind ain’t there. Ain’t there!”

“Honey, please don’t yell, please...”

“Shut up, woman!”

The bottle flies, and I see it arc, over and through the haze to the window where it shatters into a thousand glittering drops of light. They fall over my sister, and she is crying, hands covering her face. I turn to Picketts, away from Martha, bag in hand. I am close enough to see his face, flushed, sweating fury, great beads spilling over parted lips. He is crying, weeping, staggering—my hand clutched at his collar. I march with him sagging under my fist, past the two children, over the crunching of my glasses. I leave him at the fence, take the gun and for a moment I consider the shining stock, sleek with rain, then hurl it out and over until it falls like a stone into the sopping field. I clean Martha's face with my handkerchief, dabbing her eyes, and instruct the children to gather their things and bring up my horse and cart, and not to mind the thunder.

We leave. Martha is in the back of the cart with the younger, a blanket held over them, dripping with rain. The older, a boy of five with a straw hat pulled over his straw-colored hair sits with me, points my way down the road, sometimes pulling the reins this way or that. At one point he pulls on them sharply and the horse skips to a halt. I hear the stones scatter as the wheels stop turning.

“What's wrong?” I ask, staring ahead, blind but for the grey and green blur that swims with the wind. “Have I steered us wrong?”

“No... it's nothin'.” The reins are handed back to me and I give them a gentle flick. The boy curls against me, his hat nearly falling off as I put my arm around his shoulder. His voice is quiet, hushed in the rain.

“Pa's in the field.”

