

Trip to St. Vitus

by Greg Stidham

Pine-Sol slipped up his nostrils before he was awake. The strong, clean scent was good. Burned a bit, made his nose twitch in the slumber of early morning, toward the end of night's sleep. But it smelled good, and it made him feel good about the cleanness of the air he breathed, still half dreaming. It was reassuring.

He didn't open his eyes, though through his lids he could make out the first of the morning light spilling in through the bedroom window. He allowed himself to ease back into dozing with the reassuring scent of the Pine-Sol growing ever stronger.

He didn't know how long he'd been back asleep when he heard it, but when he did, its pitch and intensity startled him awake. It was an air raid siren from the Second Great War—only louder. Or a tornado warning siren outside Topeka, only shriller. It was so loud it was surely maiming his eardrums.

The Pine-Sol was stronger than ever, but it was unnoticeable with the unbearable sound in his ears. He tried to wake himself, but he couldn't. He thought if he moved an arm, perhaps to the side of the bed where it would fall toward the floor, perhaps then he would awaken from the movement. But his arm was heavy. Heavy as a bag of sand bought to fill a child's sand box. He could not move it. He could not budge it. He was trapped in his wakeful sleep, terrified.

Trapped in this sleep, paralyzed underwater, he was unable to move anything. He could move nothing that would help him wake up from what he knew had to be a dream. And the shrill scream of the siren would not stop. And the Pine-Sol continued to suffocate the membranes of his nostrils. He was trapped underwater, drowning, not able to move to wake up, but the light still filtered through his lids, and the water, creating shadows of everything around him. And the shrill scream of the siren kept piercing his ears.

He thought he was not dead, not dead yet. And he thought he might be able to muster enough will and enough strength to bring himself awake. If only he could concentrate hard enough. Surely enough mental strength could bring him through this, and out of this. And so he tried, concentrating, trying again to regain some movement in one arm. Nothing. And then the other. Again, nothing.

He tried and tried, and nothing would move. Not an arm. No leg. His eyelids, even. Though he could see light filtering dimly through, he could not lift the heavyweight eyelids that kept him from seeing the familiar things in his bedroom.

He was falling, sinking deeper into ocean waters, and the lights were getting dimmer, the water slightly darker, the shadows more ominous. He knew he had to concentrate now, harder than he'd ever had to before, and he decided on his eyelids. Like a heavyweight lifter, he concentrated on the barbells on the front of his face, concentrated on bench pressing them open, no matter how much it hurt, how much he feared failing. He concentrated, and he pushed with every muscle in his face, every muscle in his body, to lift those weights, even just a tiny bit.

He worked and worked until he thought he would faint, and then one more push—his eyelids came open. And there was light. Real light. From everywhere. He tried to move his arms, but they were still heavy as sandbags. He couldn't budge them. But there was light. He could turn his eyes toward his bedroom window where the sunlight poured in, and it was familiar. But not. It was not yellow, or white, like he remembered—it was fuchsia.

Blood, purple light filled the room, and everything in it. The walls were bathed in it. The door to the hallway dripped it, as did

Blood-purple light filled the room, and everything in it. The walls were bathed in it. The door to the hallway dripped it, as did the ceiling. In the mirror on the dresser he could see his face. It too was fuchsia. And his hair. And still the siren pierced his ears, and the Pine-Sol played games with his nostrils.

At least he could move his eyes, from side to side, and up and down. But his arms and his legs felt like they'd been placed in concrete casts. He couldn't move them at all. He was terrified, and knew that he had to find some way to get out of bed. He also knew that his sheer strength of will had made it possible to get his eyes open.

So now he began to concentrate, focusing every bit of mental energy on bending his legs. For five minutes, or five hours, he concentrated. And then he pulled his left foot up in the bed, cocking his knee beneath the sheets. The effort exhausted him, but he continued to concentrate until his right knee was also bent.

The morning dragged on, and the fuchsia sunlight grew brighter streaming through the bedroom window. After a long while, he was able to move his arms and lift his head from the pillow. Then he worked his elbows behind his back and pushed himself up into a sitting position. He sat there for a long time, exhausted. Finally, he twisted to drop his legs over the side of the bed.

It must have been near lunchtime before he was able to put his feet on the floor and begin to try to bear weight. The siren's wail was less now, or he was getting use to it. Pine-Sol still permeated the air, making it clean and fresh. He wanted to get downstairs where things might be normal again.

Holding onto the head of the bed, he pulled himself to his feet, fully standing. The room reeled, circling around him. He felt like he was swimming, and he was nauseous. He thought he might have to throw up, so he steadied himself and stood still, taking deep breaths until the nausea faded and the spinning room slowed.

He knew he had to get down the stairs to his living room, and to the kitchen where the phone was. He summoned his strength now that the nausea was less, and began taking steps toward the door of the bedroom, and to the stairs just beyond.

The elation of success was surpassed only by surprise when he found he'd managed to make it to the head of the stairs. But the biggest challenge remained ahead: the fuchsia walls leading down the narrow single flight of stairs that seemed like an infinite descent into hell.

He took firm hold of the staircase. Very consciously planning every part of the move, he cautiously placed one foot on the first step leading down. The room gyrated briefly, but the second step seemed also possible. He took it. And one step at a time—one stair step, and one foot step at a time—he slowly made his way down to the first floor.

When he got to the living room, he was exhausted, and he collapsed into the ancient recliner chair, a family relic from years past. But not before grabbing the cordless phone from the table next to the chair, and he called his sister.

Later, he did not remember calling, or what he said. What he remembered was a sudden desire to do yoga in the fuchsia light bathing the room where he sat. And he remembered taking his foot, and bending his leg so his foot could be propped behind his neck. And he remembered almost succeeding. That was all he remembered.

Smokey's black nose hovered inches above his face, dripping occasional drops of clear cool snot into his beard. The large shepherd, his best friend for a decade, looked down into his eyes. There was no fuchsia aura—just black nose, deep brown eyes, and clear drops of cool snot.

He tried to lift his head, so that he could touch his forehead to the dog's cool nose. But his head felt like a blacksmith's anvil when he tried to lift it. The headache pounded, and he closed his eyes until the pain lessened a bit. When he opened his eyes, the dog was gone.

“OK. I think we can take these pads off now.”

He heard the loud, authoritative voice, and the next thing he knew he was a limp, shot rabbit in the hands of a knife-wielding hunter in the woods. He felt the skin being ripped from his chest.

He let loose a loud profanity, his eyes started open wide, and the white sun blazed blindingly down on him from directly above where he lay on his back. He could make out the shadowy forms of faces surrounding him on both sides, and above his head. The one above his face leaned in so close he could smell his breath. Not Pine-Sol, but something else. Rubbing alcohol. Yes. It was

rubbing alcohol.

“Mr. Novack. Mr. Novack. Can you hear me?” the face yelled so loudly it hurt his already pained ears.

“How the hell cannot I not hear you? Turn your volume down!” he tried to say. But the words came out all jumbled, mumbled.

“Do you know where you are, Mr. Novack?” Apparently the face had not gotten the message about the damned volume. “You are in the Emergency Room at St. Vitus Medical Center. You had a seizure.”

He thought they meant he’d been caught and they had seized drugs, but he didn’t have any drugs. He didn’t know what they meant.

“We’re going to take you to Radiology for an MRI.” Your sister is waiting just outside, and you can see her when you get back,” the voice bellowed. And then everything was calm, silent darkness again.

The next time he opened his eyes, he was lying in a dark tunnel, and the sound of a jackhammer surrounded his head, pounding his ears. “Cow-chuka, cow-chuka, cow-chuka.” He looked down and could see his feet silhouetted by a faint, bluish light coming from behind what appeared to be a glass window. He thought he could see too, just on the other side of the glass, the outline of a face looking in at him.

Was he dead? Was this hell? He didn’t know what was going on, but he instantly felt remorse for bad things he’d done in his life.

He wondered, had he done everything he could to save his marriage? What about his son? Was he not paying enough attention when his son began smoking pot every day and flunked out of college? Those, and other thoughts, drifted through his mind as he drifted back into sleep to the rhythm of the “cow-chuka.”

The next time he awoke, he was in a regular bed, one with a sturdy rail. Something was wrapped around his upper arm, and the wrap was tightening on its own, almost to where it hurt.

“Good morning, Mr. Novack. My name is Sandy, and I will be your nurse today. How are you feeling?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Where the hell am I?”

“You are in the hospital. You came in from Emergency yesterday evening. You’ve been sleeping pretty soundly ever since. Can I get you anything?”

“Can I get some cold water?” he answered.

“You sure can. I’ll get it for you just as soon as I finish taking your vital signs.” And with that, he fell back asleep, the tight arm wrap lightening quickly.

The next three days passed, it seemed quickly to him, but he wasn’t sure. He slept most of the time, day and night. He was so exhausted he could not keep himself awake, could not concentrate enough to carry on a conversation with the nurses when they came in to check his vitals, or with his sister the time one time she visited. He barely remembered talking with his landlord, who was also his friend.

He remembered a doctor coming in and standing next to his bed. The doctor told him his name, but he couldn’t remember it. He did remember the doctor saying something about the MRI being normal, and medication, and epilepsy.

He remembered also that the bed next to his had been empty, and then some time later there was a man lying in it, older than he was. His roommate also was not awake, and he had a clear plastic tube coming out of his nose. Novack thought he should say hello, but also felt that he shouldn’t wake him.

On the third day, during one of his longer wakeful spells, a man came into the room and approached his bed. He looked to be in his mid-sixties, with thinning white hair, bushy white eyebrows. His eyes sparkled from his round face, and he was wearing a black, straight-neck shirt with an opening in front that revealed a white collar underneath.

“Good morning, Mr. Novack. I’m Father McGurdy, the chaplain here, and I thought I’d drop in to see how you’re feelin’.”

“Hello,” he replied.

Father McGurdy explained further, “Your papers say you’re Catholic, so I thought I’d drop by to see if you wanted to chat, go to confession, receive communion, or if there’d be anything else I might do for you.”

Novack was confused. Catholic? Yes, he guessed. He’d been Catholic once, but he hadn’t been to mass in over thirty years.

And confession? Jesus. He hadn't been to confession since he was in grade school. He did remember his manners, though.

"Thank you, Father. I appreciate it. What did you say your name was?"

"McGurdy. Patrick McGurdy."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Father."

Father McGurdy held out his hand to shake Novack's, and responded with a question. "So, Mr. Novack. Tell me what brings you to St. Vitus."

"I'm not sure, Father. I think I went to hell."

"No, son. You only went to purgatory. It says in your papers that you had a seizure." And then, almost as an afterthought, "I was just kiddin' about purgatory."

"The nurses said you're gonna be okay."

"Well, thank God for that, eh Father?"

"Damn right about that, son." Novack was reassured to hear the priest say "damn."

"So, Mr. Novack... Have you got any family in town," the priest asked.

"Just my sister," he replied. "And I have two sons, but they live far away."

"What about your wife. Are you married? Oh, may I call you Charles?"

"Uh, no. I mean, yes. I mean, no, the wife left years ago. And yes, please do call me Charles."

Father McGurdy frowned slightly, nodded, then smiled and said, "Thanks. Nice to meet you, Charles. So, how might you be feelin' about havin' this epilepsy?"

"I dunno. I don't know what it is, exactly. It's pretty bad, but not as bad as being in hell, I guess."

"Ha!" Father chuckled. "No, indeed. But it might be a bit scary. Is it?"

"Well, Father... I'll tell ya. I was scared as shit for days. I mean for days!"

"And what was it that scared you, Charles? Were you scared o' dyin'?"

"Oh, no Father. I always thought dyin' was the easy part. It's living that tries the soul."

"Well," Father McGurdy responded thoughtfully. "I think you might be right about that." He paused. "So if not the dyin', what was it that scared you?"

A moment of silence filled the room. Then Novack said, "Hell, Father. It's hell that scares me."

"Hell scares the shit outta me, too, Charles. What is it about hell that scares you? You tell me, and I'll tell you."

"You're askin' me that, Father? Hell is what awaits sinners, right? Well, I ain't been to mass in a long, long time. I don't pray, not really. Not ever. I try to do good, but I'm not sure I have done so well."

Father McGurdy had a thoughtful, serious look. "What do you mean, Charles?"

"Father, I swear I did the best I could. I tried. But, well... I'm not sure I did so well. In fact, I think I fucked up more than I did good. It wasn't my plan. But I fucked up a lot more than I wish I had."

Father McGurdy was quiet. He pulled a chair up to the side of the bed, and he sat down. Still, he said nothing. He sat, arms crossed so one arm lay across his chest, the other, elbow bent, with his chin in his hand. He still said nothing.

"Father? You okay?"

"Yeah. I was just thinkin'. I don't know if I know anybody who didn't fuck up."

Neither man spoke for a long time. Father McGurdy sat with his chin in his hand, and Novack lay in his bed, half propped to sitting, both men looking into the distance. Finally, Father McGurdy spoke.

"I don't know anybody who hasn't fucked up. But I know a few who tried not to fuck up." And he paused. "They tried hard to fuck up as little as possible, and maybe even to do a little good, along the way, for someone else."

And the two were silent again. Novack was confused, but not like before. He was confused by the priest's words. And then the priest spoke again.

"I think I fucked up, too. But I tried. I'd like to think that is what matters."

Another silence. "Charles, would you like to receive communion?"

"Oh, Father. I can't."

"Why not?"

Novack thought for a minute, then answered, "Because I haven't been to mass in over thirty years. And I haven't been to confession in a lot longer than that, and I know you are supposed to go to confession within two weeks before receiving communion."

"Charles. You just confessed."

Novack started upright. "Really?" he asked.

Father McGurdy's reply was quick. "Charles, you are ready to receive communion if you wish."

Novack thought for a moment, and then slowly said, "Yes, Father. I think I'd like that."

The priest took a small leather wallet from his small satchel, and opened it. From it he withdrew a small velvet package, unfolded it, and withdrew a small, white wafer. He held it before Novack, and pronounced the words, "Charles, behold the body of Christ."

Novack remembered the response. "Amen."

And he took the wafer and placed it into his mouth, softened it with his saliva as he'd been taught as an 8-year old, then swallowed it.

The two men were silent, and then Father McGurdy began to re-organize the leather wallet. He put the wallet in his satchel, and was slowly getting up, apparently preparing to move on to his next visit. Novack interrupted the slow, somber preparations.

"Father? I am supposed to get out of here tomorrow or the next day."

"Yes?"

"Well, there's a great Irish band playing at Murphy's Thursday. Would you let me buy you a beer?" Novack's voice was hesitant.

Father McGurdy looked him in the eye for a long moment, and he drew a deep breath. "Yea. Murphy's. A beer. I'd love that, son. Murphy's. Thursday, then."

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