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HE WAS 16

He was 16. Immobilized in a hospital bed, he had to wait for us. The sheets were rumpled, Hershey bar and M&M wrappers littered the tray table, bags of clear IV fluids swayed above him. His veins bulged in his forearms, the kind that made starting an IV easy. He had no tattoos, none that I saw, but he had the muscular body of a boxing champ and the vacant eyes of a coyote, averted each time I entered his room. He'd been shot, twice. And he sucked his thumb.

One bullet had ripped through his groin causing massive damage and swelling that required bilateral lower leg fasciotomies. The trauma surgeon ordered the protective dressings be changed once per shift. It took three of us to do it: one to hold his leg, another to cautiously unwind the gauze making sure the loose threads that adhered to the wound were carefully removed. A third poured saline over it and loosened any sloughed skin or debris. He stared out the window as we worked, intent on the mechanical equipment housed there. The hum of the outside machinery was constant, not the comfort of white noise but the low rumble like an oncoming train. It was a lousy room. He was in a lousy place. With his head turned away he sucked his thumb. I only saw the movement of the curled fist moving up and down, faster when the soiled dressing was removed, slower when the clean band of nubby gauze was applied. It was physically taxing for all of us. But it was emotionally difficult too because I was afraid of him. It wasn't the anxiety of adhering to strict isolation to protect the patient from my germs or me from his. I wasn't afraid of catching a disease from him. I was afraid of the parts of his life that might rub off on me, of what social contagion I might take home on my uniform. He sensed my discomfort, I was certain of that, so I labored to hide it from him, though in truth I was hiding it from myself. He worked his thumb the way my baby did when he was too tired to fight having his diaper changed and it was easier to turn his head and let me change him. I tried to remember