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Doc

Mary Swander

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Doc · *Mary Swander*

Doc sent his hopeless here
to the Grotto of the Redemption.
We pull into the lot and
park near the Stations of the Cross,
each scene pieced together with
moonstone, opal, jade.
You say we'll stop
for Father Grieving's blessing,
and soon we are kneeling
under the Beatitudes,
his hands on my shoulders,
the way they rested on
Doc's arthritic, asthmatic, insane.

“Yak-a-wa-kaw-do-oh-ma-da,
la-la-loop-pa-wa-key-no-way-na-ma.”

His eyes roll toward the sky
as he speaks in tongues.

“Ha-wa-wa-dee-da-way-he-no-way,
fo-moo-lue-see-we-day-no-fay.”

He guides us to the Shrine of the Virgin,
her marble face serene,
eyes, rubies, staring down
at the water dripping
from her hands
pressed together in prayer,
water falling through the air,
each drop adding one more
deposit to the stalagmite
rising from the floor.
He tells us how
it all began here

with a woman in a wheelchair,
her lips moving silently
to the rosary,
her fingers too cramped
and twisted to hold the beads.
“May I pray with you?” he said,
and then their voices rose in unison.

“Glory be to the Father,
and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost . . .”

and as they travelled the decades,
the mysteries,

“As it is now and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.”

he felt a light spread
through his bones,
his muscles, move out his skin,
filling the shrine.
Then the woman rose, slowly.
One step. Two. Three.
She shuffled forward.
“Glory be,” she murmured.
“Glory be,” she shouted. “Glory be!”

After a few years the shrine
filled with old wheelchairs,
hearing aids,
braces, crutches,
and you remember Edith Hill
interrupting Sunday dinner again
and Doc suggesting that maybe
Father Grieving could do more
for her lockjaw than he.
Well, when Edith came home
chomping and chattering,

she darted down Main Street
to the Corner Cafe
and soon even the Methodists
began to make the trip:
Shorty Long with his lumbago,
Gloomy Heinz with his swollen prostate,
Putt-Putt McNut with his harelip.
But in the middle of the night
Doc still cranked up his old Ford,
blasted his blowtorch
under the engine to warm it,
and drove out the country roads
through the snowdrifts,
stopping to shovel, stopping
to hook up his chains,
gloves sticking to the metal,
driving on, fighting the wind,
searching for the place
with the lantern on the gate.
And inside the house,
the woodstove huffed
in the kitchen
but the stuff in the cupboards
was frozen, and in the back room,
a woman huddled under the quilt,
temperature 104°.
Lobar pneumonia.
She pulled through with
what Doc left: tincture digitalis,
Brown's cough syrup, codeine.
And Doc pulled down the roads again
on into spring
with the storms and mud
and Mammy Flannery ramming
logs into her cookstove,
steam rising from kettles,
and Tillie with her first
upstairs in the dark bedroom,

rain leaking through the ceiling,
Doc rolling up his sleeves
and Mammy holding an umbrella
over his head. After twelve hours,
“Now push, now, push, push, push,”
the baby finally came and was fine,
but no matter how hard they worked,
the afterbirth just wouldn’t budge.
Then Mammy was on the stairs,
tramping in with a beer bottle.
“Here, girl, blow,” she said.
Tillie threw back her head
and blew hard,
then the placenta shot out intact
and Mammy carried it to the garden
to mulch the roses.
Doc slipped the bottle into his bag
and took it with him
then to every birth.

When his daughter, Rita,
turned sixteen, Doc handed over
the wheel and blowtorch
to her and together
they drove down the gravel road
and around the wash-out, creek swollen,
water backed up in the ditches.
When they slowed at the stop sign,
she stretched out her left arm
for a turn,
and Doc put out his right,
then stomped his foot
into the floor board.
“Give it the gun,” he said
as they charged up
the muck-rutted hill
to the gypsy camp
where a man lay in a tent,

left ear sheared off,
hanging by the lobe.
In the dim lantern light,
Rita threaded the needle
and Doc sutured,
cartilage and scalp,
and when they finished,
a woman dropped two gold pieces
in his bag.
When they drove out again
for the stitches,
the tent was gone,
but back in the office
they found another gold piece
tied up in a scarf
with tiny bits of thread.
“Ear must’ve stuck on,” was all Doc said.
And that afternoon he cut Billy Kunkle’s leg off.
Old man Kunkle ran a sawmill
south of town and one morning
he and the boy rushed into
the office, Billy’s right shoe
covered with blood.
Doc pulled off Billy’s muddy pants
and when he peeled away his hightops,
his right foot was left
in his shoe, the bare stump
of his leg sticking out.
Doc wanted to amputate
below the knee to make
a good fit for an artificial foot,
but old man Kunkle said,
“No. Leave him with what he’s got.”
So, Doc cleaned and dressed
the wound and sent him off
with a tetanus shot.
A few days later,
Doc walked over to check

and as soon as he entered
the front room,
he smelled the gangrene.
This time the old man agreed,
and to stop the growth,
Doc sawed above the knee,
but sewed up Billy
a good stump and
was always proud after that
when he watched the boy
amble down the street with barely a limp.

When Doc had his stroke,
he was knocked right off his feet.
Months before, beer bottles
had spilled out of his bag,
out of George's barn,
off shelves and into glasses.
It was the Depression and
he was getting paid with chickens.
Then Uncle Sam shipped him
down to Arkansas to care for
a CCC camp full of hungry men
and there's the picture of him
in the album—jodpurs and boots,
Mounty-type hat—his face swollen,
cheeks sagging like the roof
of the cabin behind him.
And that's where it happened—
the dizziness, the headache,
the cabin steps, the trees
blurring, multiplying by two,
his own right limbs
weighing down, going numb.
Nell sent you and Rita
to drive him home
and Doc lay on a stretcher
in the back of the Ford

while the two of you sped
the thirty-hour trip non-stop.
Rita kept checking Doc's breathing
and once when she thought
it had stopped, his chest heaved.
"Give it the gun," he sighed.
At home, Nell stationed him
on the cot before the bay window,
the breeze coming through the screen.
On a hot August afternoon
Doc watched the neighbor children
playing in the yard,
the grass damp with mist.
It felt like rain and Doc thought
the children like cattle
under the tree, raising,
lowering their white faces
as if from some meadow pool.
He thought of his childhood
farm in Ireland,
how it stretched out over the sea,
how now in the heat the children's
bodies looked like the rocks below.
He thought of the sounds inside
his chest, the snap and pull
of the water hitting the rocks.
Then first he saw the boy,
the bat, Billy Kunkle racing
toward first base, weight shifting
from foot to stump,
the other children moving back,
their gloves in front of their faces,
blotting the sun,
waiting for the smooth arch of the fungo,
the ball spinning,
stitches fraying, sutures
loosening the leather flap.
Then Billy's good foot

was in the hole,
the ankle twisting, snapping,
a tiny splinter of bone swimming
into his vein, speeding
toward his heart.

Then the boy was on the ground,
the children running toward
the house, Doc rising on one elbow,
shouting through the screen,
“My, God. I can’t get up!”
Then Nell was in the yard,
picking up the boy.

The other children began
to disappear, one by one,
their faces a blur.

Doc could hear only the noise
of the locusts drumming
against the screen.

He could see the boy
running again, falling to the ground.

He could see the boy
racing toward first base,
his foot in the hole,
sinking further and further
into the earth.

He could feel the lawn
open around him, fill like a pool.

“Yak-a-wa-ma-kaw-do-oh-ma-da,
la-la-loop-pa-wa-key-no-way.”

Father Grieving sprinkles holy water
on us, circles the car,
blessing the body in the back.

“Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop,
O Lord, and I shall be cleansed:
Thou shalt wash me, and I shall
be made whiter than snow.

May almighty God have mercy on you,
forgive you your sins, and bring you
to life everlasting. Amen.

May the almighty and merciful Lord
grant your servant, Rita, pardon,
absolution, and forgiveness of
all her sins. Amen.”

Father hugs each of us good-bye,
then I turn over the engine
and back out past the Ten Commandments,
past the Archangels Michael and Gabriel,
flicking on the wipers
to whisk away the drops
of holy water that dot
the windshield like rain.