

TRISH GWYNN

Mine

It is 1999 and there is no money for college. She brings me a paper to sign because she is only 17, and though she has made the choice, she is not yet old enough to make the legal decision. It seems like a perfect solution - a steady job with benefits *and* free college? So I sign the paper and she becomes a Soldier, my first-born. My daughter.

She is mine.

It is 2003 and I am sitting at my desk paying bills when he comes to me, a paper in his hands. "I enlisted, Mom." I cry, I yell, I slam my fist on the desk, frustration and fear in equal parts. The paper he holds carries a different meaning to me this time. *What have you done?* His sister is with an engineering battalion in Iraq. Is it not enough to worry for that one? But he is 18, a boy no more, and the decision is not mine. The choice belongs to this Marine, my son.

He is mine.

It is early January 2007, and I have traveled far to settle in a country not my own - to work in an American hospital that exists for a singular purpose. It's an old hospital built on a steep hill overlooking a quaint village of orange rooftops and narrow, winding streets; its grounds once part of a Hitler Jugend-Schule, where some of the original buildings still stand. This hospital's motto is *Selfless Service*.

It has become mine.

Several times a week, Bluebird school buses arrive from nearby Ramstein Air Base. Each one is adorned with a red cross inside a white square affixed to their navy blue sides, and they line up at the ER entrance of the hospital. But these buses do

not carry school children, and instead of seats, their interiors have been specially outfitted with rows of hooks and anchors.

Teams line up outside the rear of the buses as they arrive; three people on either side reach out in unison to receive the field litters as they are handed down. A chaplain who stands at the front of the team leans in as each one is downloaded, and whether or not the person lying there is conscious says very quietly in their ear, "You're in an American hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, and you are safe here."

Each one of them is mine.

A young wife holds a clipboard, her mother at her side. She looks at the people standing around her, waiting, then down at her husband lying in an ICU bed. She has laid their new baby, just months old beside him, cocooned between his chest and arm. He has never held his child, born while he was far away in another place, in a third world from another time. His first born, now his only.

His body is in pristine condition as the bodies of the young and athletic are, it's only his head that is bandaged, and his eyes, swollen and raccooned gives him the appearance of merely sleeping off a bad bar fight. But underneath the bandages, there is a hole on either side of his skull where a sniper's aim struck true. His wife signs the form attached to the clipboard, then turns into her mother's arms and cries.

We're rolling down the hall from that ICU room to surgery where two teams of German surgeons are waiting. Because the US is too far away, six people across Germany and the European Union will be the recipients of a twenty-two year old's healthy young organs tonight. His wife trails us, their baby in her arms, and as we come to the red line painted on the floor of the OR, past which she cannot follow, she begs to be allowed to kiss him one more time.

We stop, and there is a strained silence among us as she leans over him, pressing the baby's face to his. The only sounds are the beeping of his monitor, the quiet whoosh of the ambu-bag, and the sibilance of her low voice whispering words of love and goodbye.

Everyone looks away at something, anything to distract us from this young family, from each other. We are interlopers here; it isn't for us to feel this loss. There is a hand-sanitizer dispenser mounted on the wall next to me and I fix my eyes on it and blink, blink, blink, holding my breath, afraid that if I don't the sob held tight beneath my diaphragm won't stay down where it needs to.

This tiny, broken family is mine.

It's late evening and I prepare to head downstairs to the DFAC to grab dinner. As I hit the wall button, the doors of the OR open to the sound of wailing coming from down the hall where the ICU is located. I see a woman making slow progress down the hall flanked by two Marine Corps escorts and a volunteer from the Fisher House. She is sobbing as they make their way toward where I wait for the elevator, crying so hard that she begins to retch. I run back inside the OR for a basin for her to be sick in but by the time I return she is down on the floor, where she lies moaning.

There is a wheelchair against the wall, I grab it and wheel it toward this woman who lies trembling, making sounds no human should ever make, and I think myself composed and professional until I crouch down beside her to try to coax her to stand. She looks up at me with broken eyes and in a heartbeat, my composure deserts me and then I am crying too, and I cannot punch it down, cannot make it stop.

In her eyes, I see not a stranger, but myself, and the knowledge that I am only a bullet, a pressure plate, a metal fragment away from becoming her; this newly minted Gold Star Mother. I glance up at her Marine escorts who stand looking at each other, wearing twin expressions of confused panic as if to say *Oh shit, now what?* These men, field-trained and combat-ready, are helpless in the face of women's tears.

She too, is mine.

They are all mine, and they always with me.

They are with me in the morning as Canadian Forces news on the radio serves as back noise while I ready for work. It goes without saying, that they are with me during the days and nights at the hospital as I pre-op them and assess their wounds, ask them if they need something more for pain and then make sure they get it. Often, they are unconscious and these are times when I consider it a blessing that they are out of it.

Once in the surgical suite, it's my job to unwrap their wounds, to prep the bloody stumps of limbs, the open abdomens and exposed pelvises, the missing buttocks, the torn genitals. With Hibiclens and sponges, I scrub pink lather over the damaged areas so the surgeons can do whatever they can to revise an amputation, re-anastomose damaged organs, place vacuum sponges over cavernous wounds that cannot be closed because there is no skin left to close them.

An outsider viewing us through an OR window would not understand how we can do these things while talking about the mundane, joking even—about bad dates, about travel plans, about the latest crazy thing a child or spouse has done, often

with rock music playing in the background. An outsider would imagine that it's just another day at the office for us, that we think of the person lying on the OR table as a just another piece of meat, that we do not care.

That outsider could not be more wrong.

They are with me as I drive along the autobahn and catch sight of one of the C-130 transports flying overhead toward Ramstein. They are often there behind my closed lids at night as I drift off to sleep. And sometimes, sometimes they float through my dreams, their names gone hazy in my memory but their faces and their wounds as stark and vivid as if every synapse in my brain has been individually branded with their images.

They have all become part of me, and there are times when I wish I had never seen any of them, then with my next breath, pray that I never forget a single one of them. They are all mine, not just the Americans, but the Canadians, the Brits, Australians, Georgians, Poles, all of them.

They all come through me on their way to somewhere else, and in doing so have forever changed me, become part of me, and I don't know whether or not to clutch them to my heart in gratitude or curse them for worming their way into my soul. It is a strangeness, hard at times to reconcile, something that can never be expressed clearly to someone who has not experienced it.

One day perhaps I will be able to do it justice. To explain what it is that has been lost. I do not yet have those words or possess the expertise to sculpt them into sentences that could make you really see it as it is.

How *do* you paint the expression on a nineteen year old's face when he wakes up and realizes that he will never father a child, never again have sex? What *are* the words used to describe the sensation of holding a strong, thickly muscled bicep in your hands as you scrub at its stump and know that the hand that went with this arm will never throw a football, touch a loved one's face, hold a child's hand ever again? What *is* the right platitude to say to a mother that the child she carried for nine months, the child she nurtured and raised has not survived his injuries and will never again come crashing through her front door, laughing, to ask what she's cooking for dinner?

I wish someone could tell me, show me where I can find those words. Then I could put them down for everyone to see, so that you would *know* what has been lost. Not what the newspapers or the politicians say, not the minute-and-a-half of thought you give to it on those days when you even think of it at all, not to the right or wrong, or the stay-in or get-out of it all that is usually the focus.

I want someone to give me the words that will make you *understand* what has been lost, to *feel* what it's like to hold the ugly, torn bloodiness of it in your own hands, to *experience* the breathless lungs and the heart squeezed fist-tight at the *inutterable waste* of it all. Where are those words?

So until I find them, I will keep doing my job, and I will wait until the day I find those words. And when I do I will shout down everyone, everywhere, until you listen to me, until you see, until you know. I will do it for them, because they are mine and because they deserve for you know just what it is that they have lost, and because I want you to know, I *need* you to know that they are not just mine.

They are yours, too.

TRISH GWYNN is a Registered Nurse with 23 years of ED/Trauma and Perioperative experience. She's worked as a Perioperative Nurse at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany since 2007, and is ashamed to admit she's still not very fluent in German.