

The Other Side of the Wire

An excerpt from the novel by Chris Salber

Philadelphia, October 1918. The influenza that swept the city after the Liberty Loan parade has reached South Philadelphia, and it has reached the Callahan house on the row. Thomas is 22. He has spent his whole life keeping a careful distance from death, ever since a summer afternoon in 1907 when his friend Edward walked down to the creek and did not come back. Now death has climbed his own front steps.

. . .

They nailed the placard to our door on a Tuesday, and after that the house was a different country.

I know it was a Tuesday because my mother had been counting the days since the parade, the way you count after you have done a foolish thing and are only waiting to learn how foolish it was. Two Saturdays before, half the city had stood shoulder to shoulder along Broad Street, waving little paper flags for the Fourth Liberty Loan while the bands played and the great men spoke, and the newspapers had promised there was no danger in a crowd.¹ There had been every danger in the world. Within the week the wards were full, within two the undertakers had run out of coffins, and now a square of white cardboard hung crooked beneath our knocker, INFLUENZA lettered across the top of it, and below that the order that no one in the house was to come out and no one well was to go in.²

My father lay in the front room, where the morning light was good. My mother would not have him carried upstairs, where she could not watch him breathe.

He had been the strongest man I knew. He unloaded ships down on the Delaware, and when I was small I had believed, the way a boy believes a thing without ever deciding to, that my father could lift the river itself if someone only asked him kindly. Now the blanket over his chest rose and fell in a shallow, borrowed rhythm, and between one breath and the next there was a pause that went on a half second too long, every single time, so that I found myself breathing along with him, dragging the air in through my own teeth as though I might catch a lungful and carry it across the room to him in my two hands.

The row had gone quiet in a way I had never heard in all my life. No stoops swept, no children skipping rope in the gutter, no organ grinder down on the corner. Twice a

¹The Fourth Liberty Loan was a wartime drive to sell government bonds to the public to help pay for the First World War. Philadelphia's Liberty Loan parade on September 28, 1918, drew roughly 200,000 people to Broad Street, in spite of warnings from several physicians that such a crowd could spread the influenza already appearing in the city.

²Within days of the parade the city was overwhelmed. On October 3, 1918, Philadelphia ordered its schools, churches, theaters, and saloons closed, and health officials posted quarantine placards on the homes of the sick. Coffins ran short, and the dead sometimes lay uncollected for days.

day a wagon came along the street at a walk, and you learned not to look too long at what was stacked in the back of it under the canvas, and you learned to know it was coming by the sound of the horse, slow, because there was no hurry left in any of it. Mrs. Kilroy, three doors down, had lost her husband and both her sons to the grippe inside a single week, and there was a placard on her door as well, and I never once saw her in those days, only heard her some nights through the party wall, a sound with no words in it at all.

I sat with him through the worst of the afternoons, when the fever climbed and the light went thin. I did not know what a man is meant to say to his own dying father, so I said nothing that mattered. I read to him from the newspaper, the war news out of France that had turned, that autumn, suddenly and impossibly good, as though the whole world were being cured of something in the very hour my father was not. I read him the headlines, and I folded the page over quickly whenever I came to the long grey columns of names that ran down the side of it every morning now, a second kind of war news. Those I did not read to him.

And I did not tell him that I was afraid. I had never once in my life said that word out loud, not since the August afternoon in 1907 when I was a boy of eleven and stood on the bank of the Wissahickon calling a name into the green water, over and over, and the water gave me back nothing at all, not so much as an echo.

Once, on the second night, he surfaced. His eyes found mine and held, clear as they had ever been, and his hand closed on my wrist with a strength I would not have believed was left anywhere in him. "You'll not do what I did," he said. I asked him what he meant by it. But the fever pulled him back under before he could answer, and I was left holding the question the way you hold a letter that has come with no name and no return address.

It was on the third day of the placard that I saw the boy.

He was standing at the foot of the bed, in the corner the lamp could not reach, in short trousers and the flat cap he always wore shoved back off his forehead, the way his mother was forever scolding him for. He did not look one day older than the summer he left us. He was watching my father, and then he turned and watched me instead, and it was the old look, the one he used to give me from the top of some wall we had been told not to climb, the look with no words in it that asked only whether I was going to be brave enough to follow.

"Edward." His name was out of me before I knew my own mouth had opened.

My mother turned from the window. "What did you say, Thomas?"

"Nothing," I said. When I looked back, the corner held nothing but the coat stand and the dark.

. . .

Father Byrne came that evening, in the blue hour before the lamps were lit.

He could not come inside. The placard forbade it, and a patrolman had begun walking our block slow and steady to see the orders were kept, so the priest stood down on the pavement below our front step with his hat held in his two hands and his stole already about his neck,³ and he called up to the open window the way a man calls across a river to the far bank.

“Frank,” he called. “Frank Callahan. Will you let me do this for you?”

For a long moment I was certain my father had not heard him. Then his hand moved on the blanket, one finger and then another, and he worked his lips until the words would come, and what he said was not the thing a dying man is supposed to say.

“Not yet.” His voice was hardly a voice at all. “Not yet, Father. I’ve a thing left to see.”

I waited for the priest to argue. I had watched Father Byrne argue with grief a hundred times, watched him climb hard stairs into rooms other men would not enter. I was sure he would come up our steps now, placard or no placard, and the patrolman be damned. He did not. He only bowed his head, as though a man turning away the last rites at his own front window were the most natural and reasonable thing in all the world, and then he said the thing I would hear him say again in the worst hours I had not yet come to, years off down the road, long before I ever understood what he meant by it.

“All right, Frank.” He settled his hat back onto his head. “But the door is on Tenth Street. And it does not require a Sunday.”

Then he blessed the house from the street, his hand lifted in the gathering dark, and the patrolman stopped and took off his cap until it was finished. And Father Byrne walked away beneath the first of the gaslamps as they came up yellow along the row, and I stood at that window a long while after he had gone, watching the empty place where he had stood, half of me expecting to see a boy in short trousers step down off the curb and go after him.

. . .

My father lived nine days more. Long enough, as it turned out, to see the thing he meant to see, though I did not know that night what it was, and would not understand it for years, not until I stood one day in a doorway of my own. They buried him quickly, the way they buried everyone that autumn, with no crowd

³A stole is a long, narrow band of cloth a priest wears about the neck when he administers a sacrament. Father Byrne has come to offer the last rites, the sacrament for the dying (see the glossary).

permitted at the grave and the priest's few words carried off flat on the wind.⁴ My mother did not weep where I could see her. I did not weep at all. I had become very good, by then, at not looking straight at the thing that waited in the corner of the room.

That is the trouble with being 22 and afraid. You believe the whole of the story is about whether the man in the bed lives or dies. You do not yet understand that the story was never once about that. It is about the door, and who is standing on the far side of it, and whether you will ever, in all your life, find the nerve to walk through.

⁴By the time the epidemic eased, more than 12,000 people had died of influenza in Philadelphia in roughly six weeks, making it one of the hardest hit cities in the country. Large funerals were discouraged, and many of the dead were buried with almost no one present.

A Few Terms From These Pages

The Fourth Liberty Loan: A government drive that sold bonds to ordinary people to help pay for the First World War. Buying one was treated as a patriotic duty.

Placard: A printed notice or sign. Health officials nailed placards to the doors of quarantined homes so everyone would know sickness was inside.

Quarantine: Keeping the sick, and often their whole household, apart from other people so a disease cannot spread.

The gripe: An old, common name for influenza, the illness that swept the world in 1918 and is often called the Spanish flu.

Stole: A long, narrow strip of cloth worn around a priest's neck during a sacrament.

The last rites: In the Catholic Church, the sacrament given to a person who is dying, meant to prepare the soul for death. Also called Extreme Unction.

The Wissahickon: A creek running through a wooded park in Philadelphia. Here it is the place where Thomas last saw his friend Edward, in 1907.

Gaslamp: A street lamp lit by gas rather than electricity. A lamplighter walked the block at dusk to light each one by hand.

Thomas will spend the next twenty years learning what his father was waiting to see, and who Edward truly is. [The Other Side of the Wire](#) is available in full at [add link].