

“Your friend won’t be there.”

The roommate turned to see his landlady standing at the bottom of the stairs.

“Tenants were complaining that the bath had somebody in it for a long time When I went up to check, your friend was collapsed near the toilet I couldn’t tell if he was drunk or sick He kept mumbling something which sounded like ‘dying’ so I called the health department They took him away.”

“Where did they take him?”

“They were so quick I couldn’t catch that”

“When did this happen?”

“Oh, about half past six.”

The friend raced up the stairs to the rooms. “Your friend didn’t look too good. The bathroom had to be disinfect...”

The roommate was rifling through Luke’s possessions He found Luke’s parents’ address and telephone number but where was Luke? He knocked on the landlady’s door.

“What is it?” she answered through the closed-door.

“Where’s the nearest hospital?”

“I believe it is Saints. It’s a couple blocks up from the park on the river. It’s a big place. You’ll see it.”

The roommate burst through the front door out into the street. His heart was pounding. He began to run. After running several blocks the roommate saw a large building on a side street. The scene was like an unsettling dream. There were ghostly figures of people staggered throughout the street. They stood well apart from each other. A white mask was visible on some. There was also a masked policeman by the entrance. Luke’s friend started toward the building. Then a huge, dark silhouette blocked his path.

“What’s your business here?” The policeman said through his mask.

“I need to find Luke Shea. His folks got to know he is sick. His father is a police sergeant uptown”

“Sargent Shea has a telephone I’m sure. Do you have the telephone number?”

“Yes”

“You stay right here and I’ll see what we can do.”

After brief time, the policeman reemerged from the hospital. “Shea is not here. Try the temporary hospital at the athletic club. It’s two blocks up and four across.” The policeman then returned the paper with the telephone number and address to the roommate.

The dim lighting made this location even drearier than the hospital. Once again he was stopped. This time by a stouter, masked policeman. The policeman brought the telephone number and address inside. After a brief period, the policeman emerged.

“You can go home now. The officer inside is going to telephone the sergeant’s home.”

“So Luke is here?” the roommate asked.

“Yes, of course, now get home! No one is allowed in”

Luke’s friend had no idea of the hour. When he finally reached their rented rooms he realized how exhausted he was. He sent a heartfelt prayer heavenward for his friend Luke. Then he fell asleep.

It was *Sargent Shea’s* morning off. He had been working seven days a week for two weeks now. He had worked late the previous evening. He did not appreciate the telephone ringing so late in the evening.

“God damn telephone”, he muttered.

“Stop cursing!”

His wife then answered the telephone. “Yes Where? Let me write this down.”

The Sargent could tell his wife was upset by the telephone call. He rose quickly.

“Luke has taken ill. He’s in some athletic club turned into a hospital, downtown!”

The Sargent and his wife had been alarmed by the sickness that was spreading throughout the city. They had placed many calls to Luke’s building but Luke was never there. They had visited once, but there was no one in the rooms. Luke responded to the note they left under his door to telephone them. The telephone call from the hospital raised the fear it was already too late.

Luke’s father had been considering a desperate measure to bring his boy to safety. He would have Luke arrested. This would get him off the deadly streets. Better his son be regarded as an alive miscreant than as a dead saint.

The Sargent and his wife got dressed and headed downtown. They knew they could not see their son. He would be quarantined. Perhaps there was some way to influence the quality of his care. A police badge has its privileges.

They were stopped by masked policeman on their approach to the makeshift hospital. Sargent Shea displayed his badge. "I want to find out about my son, Luke Shea."

"Wait here please." It was several minutes before the policeman returned.

"He was just checked. He has some labored breathing, dry cough, and a bit of a fever. But, all in all, the lad is holding his own."

"I would like to talk to the doctor", the Sargent asked.

"There are no doctors here."

"No doctors! Who is caring for the patients?"

"There are a few nurses, and several volunteers."

"My son needs a doctor. Where's the nearest, real hospital?"

"It's about six blocks away, but they won't be taking any transfers. They opened this place because they have no more room. Besides, there are less doctors there than there are fingers on my hand. They're overcrowded by the hundreds. The doctors are in France or in troop camps."

Sargent Shea and his wife turned white as paper. Their hopes sank so fast they felt nausea. They were in shock. The policeman took notice of on their reaction.

"Sargent and Mrs Shea, I will insist that someone check on your son regularly. I will be here until five this afternoon, maybe later. I will not leave until someone in this hospital calls you about your son. He will get the best that we can do. Please return home. There is nothing more you can do here now." The policeman jotted their telephone number in his notepad.

"What is your name Officer?" asked the Sargent.

"Riley, Jim Riley"

"Thank you Officer Riley. Thank you."

The tears began to roll from Mrs Shea's eyes She was shaking.

Once they were home, the Sargent called the station house. He arranged some overlapping shifts to cover for him on the next day. Despite the long day this would impose on some of his fellow officers, there were many who owed him favors. In more than one case, they owed him their life.

Mrs Shea alternated between laying down, pretending to read, and getting up randomly to fix pillows and straighten bed sheets. It seemed like the hands of the clock were glued in place. After what seemed like a week, the hour approached five. Five minutes went by, then ten, then fifteen. The telephone rang. It was a woman's voice. The news was not good. Luke had developed pneumonia. He had lapsed into unconsciousness.

After the call, the Sargent and his wife decided to attend evening services at their house of worship. They said the religious words with all their heart. Their eyes were fixed on the image of their God. They asked for forgiveness for whatever wrongs they had committed to merit the evil that afflicted their son. Independently both the Sargent and his wife proposed a bargain to the deity. If the deity would perform a miracle and spare the life of their son, in return, at least one of them would attend services every day. The Sargent would stop his cursing. It was a solemn bargain, meant to be kept.

After the service, the Sargent and his wife asked one of the assisting boys to fetch the priest. The Sargent explained the situation to the priest. He then handed the priest an envelope with money in it. "Please say some extra prayers for my boy Luke tonight. I'm not sure if I need a little more money for him to be remembered in tomorrow morning's service I can..."

The priest interrupted him. The priest would pray for the Sargent's son and remember him in the morning service too. Then he took the envelope.

As the couple crossed their house of worship they stopped once more before the image of their deity. They both lowered their bodies to one knee. Then the Sargent's wife rose and walked over to a row of candles. Her husband followed. The Sargent's wife took out some coins. There was a closed, brass cup with a slot for coins next to the candles. She placed the coins into a slot. She then lit a candle with the taper. She handed the lit taper to her husband, who also lit a candle.

The Sargent and his wife went out into the crisp, evening air. "Now, we have done everything we can. It is in God's hands now", said the Sargent. Their peace of mind was temporary. It was time to inform the other family members of this great misfortune. Luke is "holding his own", the Sargent repeated on each telephone call. He half convinced himself that this was true.

That night, the Sargent drifted in and out of sleep. He would sometimes be awakened by a shaking of the bed. His wife was quietly sobbing. Both were up at daybreak. They kept trying the telephone line to the athletic club turned hospital but it was continually busy, despite the best efforts of the telephone operator.

The look on his wife's face alarmed the Sargent Her eyes, though red, seemed crystal clear. They seemed to be looking right through him. This was not just grief, it was barely controlled anger. Some weeks later a minor incident would cause her to lose control of that anger. "You and your damned politics! You did nothing but fight with that boy! He was a good boy and you browbeat him You drove him off." The Sargent would be speechless She had never spoken to him in this tone before "Keep to yourself from now on!" Thus, for many months afterwards it was the Sargent who would be the "bitter man."

For now, it was still only an icy stare. Her conversation was brief and controlled. The Sargent decided he would go outside to the sidewalk below "to take some fresh air." He changed his clothes. As he reached the second step on the landing he heard the telephone ring. He turned around and opened the door. He saw his wife with the telephone receiver to her ear, "Oh, Oh! Oh no!" Her face turned red and the tears began to flow down her cheek. She handed the telephone to her husband and rushed from the room. "We're sorry to tell you... His remains will be available at the back entrance We have no long-term storage." The Sargent slowly lowered the earpiece to its cradle. He joined his crying wife sitting on their bed. She coldly submitted to his attempts to console her.

Much later, the Sargent went to the funeral parlor just to get out of the apartment. His wife was telephoning her relatives. The Sargent knew this funeral parlor well as it frequently handled the deceased of the police force in the area.

"I'm so sorry to hear of your loss. It is a loss to the community. I am also sorry to inform you there are some issue with our services that have been mandated due to the current situation."

"We know, only fifteen minutes for the service", interrupted the Sargent.

"Yes, you are correct, of course There is another matter. We do not know at this time when the service will occur. Naturally, we will be collecting your son's remains immediately."

"Why? What do you mean you don't know when the service will be conducted?"

"We have no coffins. Nobody does. The suppliers cannot keep up with the unexpected demand. The coffins have been on backorder for weeks."

The Sargent and his wife would have been even more upset had they known the entire truth. After taking some steps to preserve the body, their son's remains would arrive at a rundown, rented horse stable. Their son's body would join others on the makeshift shelves. It was a warehouse of human firewood.

Over the next several days the Sargent would telephone the funeral parlor repeatedly. "Your son will be one of the first. We always take care of the force." The delay upset the Sargent's wife terribly.

It occurred to the Sargent that he should collect his son's possessions from the rented rooms. He suggested his wife remain home and she agreed. He brought some empty luggage with him to work. After his shift, he headed downtown in uniform. This would help him avoid unnecessary delays and any questions on his movements by the downtown police.

He had no room key. He took a chance that his son's roommate might be in. If not, he could ask the building supervisor for access. He mounted the stairs. When he reached his son's door he found it unlocked. He opened the door slightly, knocked, and called out, "Michael! This is Luke's father. Are you home?"

There was no answer. Somehow he sensed someone was in there. He opened the door and entered. In the corner he saw an emaciated man in what was once a dark suit. The man held a large sack. He wore a mask over his face and white gloves covered his hands.

"Who are you?" demanded the Sargent.

"I've done nothing illegal, officer. The landlady has told me to come clean up the room."

"And just where are the goods in that sack going?"

"I dispose of them."

"Is this how you're paid? You hock the goods of the deceased!"

"It's just a pittance."

"Give me that sack!" The man carefully put the sack on a nearby chair, then backed away. The Sargent retrieved the sack.

"What's your name?"

"Jones, James Jones"

Just then the Sargent heard footsteps on the stairs. He heard a woman's voice.

"What's the ruckus about up there?" The voice seemed vaguely familiar to the Sargent.

The Sargent stepped out onto the landing. He saw a diminutive woman's face looking up at him from one flight down the stair well. "Oh", she said, "is something wrong?"

"I've come for my son's possessions. He has passed on. What is this man doing here?"

The woman's voice was sharp "I can't have rooms standing idle. When the second one disappeared, what was I to do? I have to get ready for new tenants."

“You have no right to give away someone’s possessions!”

“How am I to know who, or what? I just got to get that room ready. Are you going to arrest me for that? Is that illegal?”

“This man here is taking...”

“That scarecrow up there does what he pleases. It is no business of mine.”

The Sargent was becoming upset. He now recognized that voice. Against his better judgment, he started down the stairs. The woman had a head start. She quickly descended the remaining two flights of stairs. He heard the echo of a door slamming. The Sargent turned back and headed towards the rooms. The little man was gone. The Sargent crossed the room to the window to see if there was a fire escape. Then he heard the soft patter of rapidly moving feet on the stairs behind him.

The scarecrow’s escape normally would have spurred the Sargent to immediate action but the Sargent had other issues to consider just now. What happened to his son’s roommate, Michael? After some consideration, he decided to pack the possessions of Michael as well. There wasn’t much to pack. Some of Michael’s possessions might have already left with the “scarecrow.”

He managed to get the sack and luggage down the stairs. He stopped and knocked at the landlady’s door.

“What do you want?” She answered through the closed door.

“You didn’t give our son any word of our telephone calls, did you?”

“I am not a secretary. I’ve done nothing wrong and I’m not answering any more questions.”

“Damn you!” said the Sargent and slammed the front door behind him.