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FOR THE BLEWER WOMEN:
Sondra, Cecilia, Evelyn, Victoria, and Julia
Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE, “Kindness”

. . . she took a long breath and looked behind her up the long walk to see if any one was coming. No one was coming. No one ever did come, it seemed, and she took another long breath, because she could not help it, and she held back the swinging curtain of ivy and pushed back the door which opened slowly—slowly.

Then she slipped through it, and shut it behind her, and stood with her back against it, looking about her and breathing quite fast with excitement, and wonder, and delight.

She was standing inside the secret garden.

FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT,
The Secret Garden
The bullet—cylindriform as a rocket but tapering to a point almost sharp enough to prick skin with a casual touch—was two and a half inches long when it was in its cartridge in the rifle. The shank was made of copper, and the expansion chamber would cause it to double in diameter upon impact. The tip was designed to swell upon contact as well, ripping apart the flesh and muscle and bone as it made its way to the elk’s or the bear’s or (most likely) the deer’s heart. It looked like a little missile.

The bullet did not hit Spencer McCullough in the chest that very last night in July, however, because that would have killed him pretty near instantly. Nor did it plunge into his abdomen, which—depending upon how much of his stomach, his liver, and his spleen were in harm’s way—would have killed him over the course of minutes. A thirty-ought-six—a .30-caliber bullet atop the classic cartridge case developed by the U.S. Army in 1906—turns bowels into pudding.

Instead, it ripped into the man’s body just above and to the side of his chest, slamming into him below his right shoulder. It shattered completely the scapula and his shoulder joint, demolished his rotator cuff (which would have been even more debilitating for his wife, Catherine, because she still gave a damn about her tennis serve), and mixed into a thick, sloppy soup the muscles that Spencer used to move his shoulder and lift his right arm. The bullet was traveling at two and a half times the speed of sound, and the tissue had to absorb the velocity: Consider the way a bullet does not appear to pierce a brick of Jell-O but, rather, causes it to explode.

What was of most importance to the two EMTs who arrived at the house at the very peak of Sugar Hill, New Hampshire, however, was that the bullet had also obliterated the first branch of the axillary artery—the superior thoracic artery—though as they were taking what remained of Spencer’s vitals near what remained of his snow peas that summer night in the garden they tended not to use words like axillary and thoracic. They used words like bleeder and terms like bleeding out, and Evan Seaver
—the male of the pair—allowed himself a small assortment of expletives and invectives. Evan was two decades younger than his partner, a fifty-one-year-old first-response veteran with hair the color of hoarfrost that fell over her ears and rounded her skull like a helmet. Her name was Melissa Fearon, but everyone called her Missy Fearless. She ignored Evan’s occasional lapses in decorum that evening because he had never before seen a gunshot wound. He’d seen his share of grisly car and snowmobile accidents, and he had in fact been with her when they found the vacationing TV producer who’d been decapitated behind the wheel of the convertible he’d rented in Boston. But that gentleman was clearly dead—not dying—and so Evan hadn’t had to get too close or spend any time with the corpse.

Both EMTs were volunteers who did other things for a living. Evan worked at an electrical wire factory in nearby Lisbon, and Missy taught math at the high school in Littleton. On at least a half-dozen occasions she had pulled her own students from their dads’ toppled four-by-fours or their very own Geos, Escorts, and Corollas, the vehicles inevitably crinkled like the foil wrappers that folded themselves around sticks of chewing gum. She had dealt before with audible bleeding—hemorrhaging that seems absolutely torrential, the flow not in reality making the noise of a geyser but seeming to everyone present as if it is—and seen people (grown-ups and teenagers and, alas, children) impaled on the shards of twisted metal that once were parts of automobiles.

Spencer was well into the first symptoms of shock when they arrived: He was cold and clammy and pale, and he was having great trouble breathing. Consequently, he was what Missy Fearon and her more seasoned associates referred to as a scoop-and-run. She and Evan did little at the edge of the garden where they found Spencer (his body half in the lupine that bordered the vegetables and half in the ugly, knotted vines on which once had grown snow peas) other than apply a thick, gauzy trauma dressing to the wound—and then lots of hand pressure—slip a stiff plastic cervical collar around his neck to immobilize his head, and roll him onto a backboard. Then they were off to the hospital in Hanover. Somehow Missy managed to stick a saline IV into Spencer in the ambulance while continuing to keep weight on the wound. She thought of how the EMTs sat on patients or jumped on the rolling gurneys to maintain pressure in the TV dramas, but she couldn’t imagine actually doing such a thing, especially with this poor guy. She’d be sitting on jam.

As for the emergency room physicians and the surgeon who, fortunately, lived within minutes of the hospital, once they had Spencer McCullough stabilized their greatest concern was the reality that before shattering all that bone in his shoulder and upper back, the bullet had done a pretty fair job of pulverizing the brachial plexus—the network of nerves that sends signals from the spine to the arm and the hand. Recall the Jell-O: Meaningful reconstruction was completely out of the question. Assuming they could even save Spencer’s right arm (which was no guarantee), it was highly unlikely that it would ever do a whole lot more than flop at his side like a scarecrow’s.

Inevitably, Spencer was right-handed. And so even though he wasn’t the athlete his wife was (the rotator cuff was among the least of the surgeon’s problems), this would be a severe disability. Even though he worked at a desk—Missy overheard enough as she worked to get Spencer into the ambulance to understand that he was a public relations guy for some animal rights organization in New York City, and this house he
was at was his mother-in-law’s—it was going to be a very long time before anything came easy to him again.

Once the physicians had started pumping the units and units (and still more units) of blood into him, done a chest X-ray, and gotten the only good news that Spencer McCullough’s body was going to offer that evening—there was no hemorrhaging inside the thorax and a lung had not collapsed—they set to work trying to control the bleeding in his shoulder and washing out the wound. This meant, among other tasks, meticulously removing all those tiny fragments of bone, which were now little more than contaminants. It meant using a Gore-Tex sleeve that looked a bit like a miniature version of a radiator hose from a car engine to reconnect the severed arteries, and then—when they needed yet more tubing—stealing a part of a vein from his leg.

Weeks later, they might do whatever reconstructive surgery they could. They might perform a nerve-cable graft, taking nerves from the part of the man’s leg where they had just taken a vein so that a portion of the pudding of sheared links in the nearly invisible wires in his right shoulder might begin to grow back. Or, if necessary, they might amputate the arm. In all likelihood, it was going to be completely useless. No, it would be worse than useless. It would be a hindrance, a limp and flaccid tentacle that hung by his side, caught on counters and tabletops, and banged against him when he tried to move his body in any manner that was even remotely athletic.

Still, Spencer McCullough was alive. And if someone had said to either Missy Fearon or Evan Seaver before they arrived at the house on Sugar Hill that a guy there had taken a bullet from a thirty-ought-six a couple of inches from his heart, they both would have assumed that they could have driven from the scene to the hospital at the speed limit with their siren and two-tone switched off, because all that was going to happen when they arrived was that the body was going to be declared dead and put on ice for the ME.

Only when they had deposited Spencer at the hospital and he had been rushed into the OR did either of them have the time to voice the questions that had crossed both their minds: Why the hell was there a loaded deer rifle on the property three and a half months before hunting season? And why in the name of heaven was a twelve-year-old kid—the guy’s own daughter, for God’s sake!—firing potshots into the garden on the last night in July?