Oops...

by Mathew Paust

The first thing I remember about the dying man on the cot next to mine was his unprepossessing face. Its minimal features—small chin, timid mouth, frail nose, weak narrow-set eyes--contrasted so starkly with what I'd anticipated I might have tried to laugh if my every bone, joint, and fiber were not screeching in concert for me to lie back down and be still. Which I did.

What had lured me to sit up enough to see his face was the sound of his breathing, which, come to think of it, was actually the first thing I remember about him after the dream I'd been having of being buried alive gave way to the pains of awakening. It was the sound of his breathing, the rasping erratic gasps that seemed an eerie accompaniment to my own spasms of agony, so close it might have been *my* breathing I heard, echoing, mocking. More disheartening, the desperation of these gasps growing weaker, as if signaling the end of a struggle. And of a sudden it occurred to me the breathing I heard was coming from someone else, that surrender to death was not mine but was happening very near, and the adrenaline punch from this recognition overpowered my self-absorption and aroused me with the pure fire of curiosity.

As my thoughts coalesced around the man I now assumed was dying, a great warm gratitude embraced me with the notion he'd surely have killed me had Jamie not arrived in time to put him down. I don't remember hearing any shots, but the last image I can recall is the view from my helpless position on the ground of the long-barreled revolver in his bleeding hand. A prick of further recollection**:** the shouted sound of Jamie's birth name. I dropped my glance from the dying man's face to the hands gripping a filthy towel over his torso, and my great warm feeling froze to nothing. Neither hand bore any sign of recent injury. No blood…no bandage.

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