

Title: Passing Days
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The wound was worse than Dr. Holiday had expected. Carefully, he pulled the blood-soaked shirt away from the break, showing the protruding bone and the swollen, red skin around it. There were several long gashes as well, one of which ran from the ankle almost to the back of the knee.

He looked up. Melinda's head was pressed back against the ragged, blue-green futon, and her clothes were soaked. A sheen of sweat also covered her face, dripping down her cheeks and ears and seeping into the cloth of her mattress. The wrinkles of a thirty-seven year old Micronesian villager showed clearly above her eyes, which were squinted in pain. He grimaced, looking back at the wound. There was an evil, dark yellow color seated inside of the gashes and around the break.

"I am so sorry, Ethan," She said lifting her head slightly. Her words were unsteady, quiet.

He replaced the tee shirt gently. His hand was shaking.

A nineteen-year-old girl with weary eyes was seated beside Melinda, nervously dabbing at the woman's forehead with a folded bandana.

"Mandy," Dr. Holiday said, turning toward her.

She stopped.

"Please wait for me outside."

Mandy stood to leave, setting her bandana on the edge of the futon and walking toward the doorway of the tin-roofed hut. When she reached it, she stopped and glanced hesitantly back at him, as if expecting some further word.

He looked away, and in a moment she was gone.

“I’m going to give you something to ease the pain,” he finally said, turning back to his patient.

Reaching into the canvas pack at his side, he produced a small, silvery tube tipped with a needle. A typeset, red-lettered label on its side read, “morphine tartrate.” He broke the tip off of the needle and slid it under the skin of her arm, slowly squeezing until it was empty. After this, he slipped the used tube into a side pouch of his pack and looked back up at her.

“It’ll be a few minutes until the medicine sets in,” he said. “I have to go outside, to speak to Mandy, but I’ll be back very soon.”

She nodded slightly in return, and he placed his hand on hers briefly before standing to walk outside.

A steady breeze had picked up since he had gone in, and cool air from the sea washed across his face as he stepped onto the path beside the hut. A loud rustling filled his ears as long blades of grass on either side of the mud-clay trail swelled back and forth in endless waves. The nineteen-year-old girl was standing there, across from the hut, fidgeting with her hair comb and watching him.

He removed his glasses and let out a long sigh.

“Mandy,” he said, running a nervous hand through his thin, grayish hair. “We’ll need water.”

Mandy did not move.

“Mandy,” he said again, forcefully.

“You can fix Mama’s leg?” she suddenly asked. “Like you fixed Adu’s arm?”

Something in her voice made him afraid to answer. Had she noticed his shaking hand? Or had he flinched earlier, when he saw the break?

“All things are in God’s hands, Mandy,” he replied, looking away.

For a moment, they were silent.

“I’ll get some water, Grandfather,” she finally said, in a wavering voice. Turning, she began to walk toward the center of the little village.

He looked around. There was an old palm stump across from Melinda’s hut, and he was weary from his hike to the village. He stepped over to the stump and eased himself down, wiping a hand across his forehead.

He could see the village chief from where he sat, an older man with a round belly and reddish-black teeth, propped up against the side of his house, and clutching a half-empty bowl of betel nuts in his hands. The chief’s wife was also out, following a small boy about the path as he explored. Beyond them, several younger men were sitting around a fishing net, conversing as they mended it.

“It’s not good, Becky,” the doctor said suddenly, still staring down the path. The grass around him continued to rustle, and the palms still swayed above him. “I’ve seen bad. But the infection is so deep, and the fever... I don’t know.”

He ran a hand across his face, glancing out toward the sea. The water beyond the island’s reef was dark, moving in great, solemn rollers which crashed into the coral in massive cascades of foam.

“She was our first,” he continued, and something like a smile passed over him. “Do you remember, Becky? Nothing for five years, and then that day she came to us and told us, we had never known such joy. You didn’t even sleep that night, and you kept looking over at me and asking me if it had really happened.”

“Grandfather,” a voice called, and his thoughts were interrupted.

Mandy was coming back up the path, followed now by a young man carrying a bucket of water.

“Grandfather,” the young man repeated, hurrying past Mandy. “I would have come if I had seen you. I can help if you need.”

Dr. Holiday replaced his glasses and stood.

“Thank you,” he said. “I would be grateful for your help, Noah.

“We will need to heat this water. Do you remember when I showed you how to use my stove? It’s in the hut, in my pack. Mandy, I will need two straight branches – palm frond tips will work.”

It was about a quarter of an hour later that all preparations had been made. Dr. Holiday was kneeling on the floor beside Melinda’s bed, along with Mandy and Noah, and a gas lamp had been hung from the rafters to provide illumination in the twilight. The small camp stove that the doctor carried with him was also lit, and topped with a tin pot which held steaming water and several medical instruments.

“Melinda,” he said quietly, touching her shoulder.

She looked up at him groggily. “Ethan?” she asked.

“It’ll be alright, Melinda,” he replied.

She nodded slowly.

He turned to Mandy, who was by her mother’s head.

“Can you hold down her shoulders?” he asked.

The girl nodded, fearfully.

“Noah.”

“Grandfather?”

“Her good leg?”

“Yes, Grandfather.”

The stove and the lamp were casting vague, flickering shadows against the wall as Dr. Holiday shifted himself to the foot of Melinda’s futon. Taking her bad leg, he lifted it slightly and then lowered it, straightening out the knee as he did. Melinda groaned slightly as he rested it back onto the futon.

“Hold her now,” he said, looking up at Mandy and Noah.

Then, bracing himself, he placed both hands around Melinda’s ankle, and pulled. The sudden action caused Melinda to strain against her holders, sitting halfway up and trying to free herself from her daughter’s grasp. Then, suddenly, there was a strange pop, and Melinda relaxed, allowing herself to be eased back down into her bed. The leg was straight.

Dr. Holiday looked up at Mandy, who was still holding her mother’s shoulder with one hand. The other hand was shaking as she wiped it across her eyes.

Noah had let go of his grip, and was looking questioningly at the doctor.

“Is there more, Grandfather?” he asked, and he nodded toward the little stove.

“Yes,” Ethan replied, and realized that he was still holding Melinda’s ankle. He let go.

Melinda’s skin was still hot, and she had begun to shiver.

“Yes,” he said again. “We must drain as much of the poison out of her leg as possible, and perhaps she will be able to fight through the rest.”

Several hours later, Dr. Holiday was sitting wearily on the floor next to Melinda, who seemed to be sleeping. Her bad leg was covered in bandages and splinted between the two palm frond tips. The stove was off, but the gas lamp still burned, hissing slightly as it illuminated the hut. Mandy and Noah had gone outside.

There was now a pile of filthy rags and gauze material sitting on a banana leaf in one corner of the hut, and an empty vial of penicillin had joined the used morphine tube in the doctor's pack. He had just begun to close his eyes when she spoke.

"Ethan?" she said. Her voice was quiet.

His eyes opened, and he leaned up from the wall to face her. "Melinda?"

"Ethan?"

"Yes?"

Melinda paused, gathering herself to speak.

"I know you loved her," she said. "I know you loved her so much. And when she left us, I cried because I missed her, but also because I could see that you were in such pain."

Ethan said nothing.

"And I never forgot what you taught us, even when you left, and John died, and it was just Mandy and I."

"I should never have left," Ethan said, looking away.

They were both silent for several moments.

“I remember when you and Becky first convinced me to keep Mandy,” Melinda finally said. “She has been my joy. She and Noah will marry soon, too, so I go to the Lord without worry.”

“You’re not going yet, Melinda,” Ethan said.

“I am going,” Melinda replied, and her voice was barely audible.

At this, Ethan shifted back to kneeling at her side, and took her wrist in one hand. The skin was cool, though still damp from sweat, and the pulse was weak.

“Melinda, I’m sorry,” he said suddenly.

“You have been a blessing, Ethan,” she replied in a whisper. “From God.”

For a moment after this he stared at her, feeling her pulse grow slowly weaker. Then he called sharply for Mandy, who came running in several seconds later, followed by Noah. When she saw the Ethan’s face, she jumped to her mother’s side. There were tears in the doctor’s eyes.

The funeral was simple. Dr. Holiday read a few verses from the epistle of Hebrews, and Melinda was laid in the ground by the clay path, in a clearing right before the village. Mandy and Noah were married in that same clearing, several weeks after the funeral.

In 1977, ten years later, another grave was dug by the path, and a silvery-haired accountant named Michael Holiday came out to the islands to lay his brother to rest. A gravestone was placed there, on the path side, with this inscription: “Here lies Ethan Holiday, who gave his life in service. Of him, the world was not worthy.”