The leg rested on the table in front of the wagon, alone.

It was a hot June day.

The cobblestones were heated like the coals of an oven. They stung the feet of the men without shoes and warmed the soles of the men with. The barracks were humming. The tents were buzzing. The midday fires and the food that hung above them sizzled and the cotton drifted about on the breeze.

The lone leg sat there, surprised, turning an alarming shade of greenish-black at the stump.

Its owner sat in a bale of hay several yards away, chewing the wad of fabric stuffed in his mouth and wondering hazily what was going on. His breath smelled of alcohol and his uniform smelled of blood, and the wagon smelled of salts that stiffened the muscles and dampened the mind.

The wagon was very large, and green, covered in a dirty tarp and without a hitch. It was almost bigger on the inside, this wagon, like a tent all to itself, and dark as the shade of a poplar tree. Jars of suspect, sanguine serums filled boxes scattered about. Hooks and nails dangled from ropes draped across the ceiling. The operating table was little more than a large wooden soapbox. The surgeon worked in this place.

His patient—the Lieutenant—lay on the wood and shifted against the splinters, staring up at the hooks and the ropes and the dirty, dirty tarp. The Lieutenant could hear the surgeon rustling around behind the table, sorting through the boxes. The air in the wagon was hot and filled with sawdust and dead skin. A single ray of noontime Georgia sunlight emerged from a slight tear in the ceiling and fell across the single red stripe denoting the rank of the patient.

Footsteps on wood. The surgeon emerged from out of the Lieutenant’s field of view, hooked nose, bright, small eyes. He dangled a bag of salts in front of the Lieutenant’s nose.

“Breathe in,” he commanded, and the Lieutenant did so. Immediately the air in the wagon seemed thicker, lapping at the Lieutenant’s eyes and cheeks. The Lieutenant exhaled slightly and relaxed as the buttons on the Lieutenant’s coat were undone, one, two, three. The coat was opened, the shirt was lifted, and the surgeon saw the beginnings the bandages wrapped tightly around the Lieutenant’s unwounded upper chest.

The Lieutenant stared, waiting to see how the surgeon would react. The surgeon raised one thin, tight eyebrow, glanced with an expression of mild surprise at the Lieutenant, and said nothing. The Lieutenant’s eyes followed the surgeon’s hand as he reached down to a small table, grasped a small scalpel with his long, twitching fingers, and held it up against the one ray of light. The scalpel winked at the Lieutenant once, conspiratorially, and descended.

In a single, delicate motion, the surgeon opened the Lieutenant. The Lieutenant felt no pain, but a curious sensation as the stagnating air rushed in and settled between the organs.
His birdlike face tilted down and loosened in a lackadaisical concentration. “Gut first, I think,” he murmured, and then decided. “Yes. The gut. That’s the start. It will all be easier from there.”

The surgeon set to work.

The Lieutenant agreed with the surgeon’s choice to start at the gut. The Lieutenant could already feel it, breathless, emptying, collapsing in on itself. The ties were severed, one by one, as the scalpel did its rounds. The Lieutenant winced weakly and tried to look away as the surgeon carefully lifted something large and red and wet from the opening and stowed it away in a mason jar. The swooping, falling sensation subsided. The Lieutenant unclenched a fist.

This was the surgeon’s job. The amount of privates that the Lieutenant had seen freeze up, stumble, drop their powder or pellets. Uniforms ripped to shreds. Chests torn completely through. They stopped dead still in in the face of roaring, screaming cannon and once they fell they never moved again. Gallons of blood. The smell of powder. The weight of a rifle in your hands and the ground sucking at your feet and the bullets hissing in your ears, making promises to you, drawing blood on your cheek or your shoulder as a reminder. It was easy to panic. And when you did, you were dead.

The surgeon was humming. “When you get hysterical on the battlefield,” he said, “What most people fail to realize is that it usually begins with the feet. It starts at the feet and sneaks its way up, through the legs. It’ll have to go.”

He hummed as he hemmed. The scalpel grew redder and redder.

The Lieutenant, like anyone who had been out there, who understood more than what books will tell a body, knew full well that fear was the biggest killer in the war. Fear was creeping black and gushing red. It was smothering white and choking brown. Fear killed men and the surgeon killed fear. Organ by organ. When he was done cutting it all out of you, it was so easy.

Here’s the gun. Stock, lock, and barrel.

Safety off,

powder in,

shoot to kill.

Repeat repeat repeat. Without blinking once.

The salts were swirling about in the Lieutenant’s skull. The hooks dangling from the ceiling swayed dangerously as the surgeon pulled something out of the Lieutenant’s shin. The Lieutenant was able to get a good look at his face for the first time, and the nose that had seemed merely big before was now beakish. His teeth shone when he smiled; rows and rows of tiny, serrated nubs, sharp as barbs. His two round, beady eyes gleamed in the dark.

“When you grow afraid,” he continued, “Your heart typically begins to judder. We can’t have that in the middle of a battle. Hold still.”

A wet slicing noise. The Lieutenant looked away. Felt something being removed. Felt something being filled. The surgeon did not stop.

“Our throat,” he continued, almost jauntily, “begins to close itself. Restricts the windpipes. You’ve felt that before, yes? That simply will not do.”
The Lieutenant could not watch. The room was reeling, the salts were murmuring. The surgeon drew his cold blade across the Lieutenant’s neck and the Lieutenant felt red. Redness ran down the backs of the Lieutenant’s eyes and down the sides of the Lieutenant’s skull. Air fled the Lieutenant’s throat, soft, sibilating sounds, spilling secrets, spilling blood. The grin on the Lieutenant’s neck was sealed almost as quickly as it had been opened.

“Your veins,” the Lieutenant heard the surgeon say through the redness, “turn to ice and your blood to chilled wine. No, no, no.”

The Lieutenant’s arm began to open up. Through one wide, dilated, patiently and quietly screaming eye, the Lieutenant watched with dull half-fascination as the surgeon’s uncut, dirty fingernails entered the Lieutenant’s arm

and

gradually

with great deliberation

withdrew, nails now horrifically red, pinching a long, blue vein. It was here the Lieutenant returned to gazing at the dancing hooks on the ceiling. The scalpel roamed, removing, replacing. The blood was drained from the Lieutenant’s ears, in the case that it roared during a battle. The tear ducts, which ran the risk of clouding vision, were expertly slashed out. The last thing the Lieutenant saw before the salts dragged her mind down was the face of the surgeon; a hideous bird mask, a mask of the plague, deep, shining glass eyes, a split-seam mouth grinning at her and grinning at her and

When the Lieutenant came back to the place, there were stitches underneath the shirt. The flap-door of the wagon was open. The Lieutenant looked around and took in the dullness of everything. Something was missing from the world...no, something was missing from the Lieutenant.

Was it?

The Lieutenant’s hand immediately shot to the stitches. Felt around. Empty here. Empty there.

Up to the bandages. Not empty.

Huh.

Down to the legs. Not empty.

The surgeon caught the motion before the Lieutenant could hide it. “Funny, isn’t it?” he asked the Lieutenant. “You think if I wanted you to be without fear, I’d have cut your...personals right out of you. Yes?”

The Lieutenant nodded slowly.

The surgeon brushed his nose with his clean, dirty fingers. “Most people don’t understand my line of medicine,” he said. “I’m leaving them in. You’ll need the strength in them.”

The scalpel winked again.

“Next!” he called out, and the Lieutenant left the wagon.
The leg was still there, by itself. Its owner was still there, passed out in the hay. Possibly dead. The blackness had crept up to his knee. Hacksaw marks. They were not pretty. But to the Lieutenant, they weren’t particularly ugly either. The fear was gone.

The Lieutenant felt a stitch split. Felt warm blood seep through the blue Union uniform. The Lieutenant didn’t care, or couldn’t care. Blood. Rain. All the same. The fear had been scooped out, piece by cancerous piece. She was all that she was now.