

## Requiem

Emily Ergenbright

It had been the screams that pulled William Petersen from his daydream. His green eyes snapped back to focus as his hand slipped from its task and missed the lantern, pouring oil across the polished end table and onto the carpet. He cursed under his breath as he ran across the parlor to look out the window and onto the street. The cobblestones were still wet from the day's rain, and the flames of the street lamps made them glow an eerie orange. Outside, the wind howled as the screams continued, the source immediately clear. Shouting men were flooding out of the doors of Ford's Theater across the street, carrying lamps and drawn pistols. He remembered the feel of a long stock rifle wrapped in a flag being handed to him as gunshots rang out on a winter morning. They ran off in different directions, their voices calling out into the night "Stop him!" "Traitor!" "Assassin!"

He could hear his boarding house had come to life again this late evening, his patrons stirred from their sleep, murmuring with worry and wonder. More and more people hemorrhaged out of the theatre doors as he watched, his nose pressed against the glass. He turned his head as he heard footsteps pound down the stairs and walked to the door of the foyer. As he got there, he saw one of his newer boarders, Mr. Henry Safford, bound across the foyer and back to the front door, where he used the key he had taken from its hook on the opposite wall and slid it into the lock. Peterson called out "What's happened?" but Safford was already out the door, lantern in hand. He was almost out the door himself when he heard Safford's voice ring out in the darkness, "Bring him here! Bring him here!" He stopped in the frame of the open door and watched as three men dressed in fine suits, flanked by at least a dozen soldiers, carried a limp form across the street to the bottom of his front steps. It took only a moment to recognize the man in their arms. It was all he could do not to cry out. He waved them in with haste, the blood draining from his face as they drew in closer.

He led the men to the first floor bedroom, which was usually left unoccupied unless necessity demanded otherwise. The room used to be his son Billy's room, and the yellow and white walls were bright as many lamps filled the room. On the wall hung a painting of children brushing a horse, a favorite of Billy's because he had wanted one of his own so badly. The children seemed to smile at him as he pulled down the blankets on the bed. As the men lay the body down, the crisp white sheets immediately bloomed red beneath the President's head, which lolled to the side as if he were a rag

doll. Petersen had never dreamed he would see this man this close. His hair, which was almost more grey than black, was sticky and matted with blood, and his face was sallow and heavy with age. His ears stuck out from the side of his head, massive and almost comical, much like the cartoons that were often on the front page of the newspaper. He was older and thinner than Petersen had imagined, and he looked frail as he lay still on the bed. It was all he could do not to smile. And just like that his glimpse was gone, and he was shuffled from the room and out into the hallway, where he found Lincoln's wife walking toward him.

The tears in her blue eyes did not mask their wildness, and as she pushed past him forcefully to get into the room, he saw the hands that held up her skirts were caked with blood, dry and crusted rivers running down through her fingers and staining her fine jewelry. Her long dark hair was pulled away from her face with a wreath of flowers, and it made her look almost childlike, and indeed he could see that her husband's pain had caused some part of her to flee, and in her shock she had become someone else entirely. He had seen it before. The mortal terror that turns women into sniffing girls who needed comfort or bitter crones that became isolated by their pain, and it was already clear which Mrs. Lincoln was to become. He returned to the doorway and watched as more men went in and crowded around the bed, which they had pulled into the center of the rug, a masterpiece of royal blue and cranberry swirls. The room was full of whispers, thick with concern. "The wound appears to be mortal...May God help us all..." A man came bursting into the room from behind him, followed by three surgeons. The others crowded around him and asked for instruction, like frightened school children, their backs turned to the limp figure in the bed. Only Mary Todd Lincoln stood there, her body shaking with silent sobs.

As he stood watching her, he caught pieces of the men's conversation. It was the man who had entered after him who spoke the most. "I need a telegraph set up in the rear parlor of this building. Gather all the witnesses you can find and bring them to either myself or Secretary Gideon. We need to find out what happened quickly and quietly, and we must do our best not to cause public panic. "You, soldier!" he said, his voice sharp and powerful like the quiet hiss of a burning coal. "You spread the word amongst the ranks – James Wilkes Booth is a wanted man." Then the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, noticed Petersen standing in the doorway and ordered him to be gone. He turned on his heel and walked away, his head swimming and ears ringing.

As he rounded the corner at the end of the hall, he saw that two

young soldiers were standing at full attention at the bottom of the stairs, staring vacantly into the foyer. He came to a stop in front of them, rolling up his sleeves wordlessly. One of them, a gangly boy who could have been no older than eighteen, had tears in his eyes, and his cheeks burned as red as his hair. The other, a little older, with dark brown curls and a solid frame, had clenched his jaw tight with fury. He wondered if the draft was to blame for them being here.

“I must get through,” he said to the elder, “I need to check on my family.” He was sure that his wife would have been frightened by the screams and confused by the presence of the soldiers and his absence. The boy did nothing but shake his head. He could not pass. Behind him, the door swung open violently and slammed against the wall as a young man raced inside, his black hair wild and unkempt, half the brass buttons on his uniform undone. Both the soldier boys snapped taught and brought their hands to their brows in salute. The man nodded quickly, but his icy blue eyes seemed to look straight through them as he asked where to find the President. They told him with mumbled breaths, eyes cast down at their black boots. The man walked off without a word. “Who was that?” Petersen asked. The older boy looked at him, fury afresh. “His son.” Petersen flinched at the word.

It was then that the hysterical wailing began from the back bedroom, screams so loud he thought they might split the wood, the horrible shrieks clung to the air in a ringing echo. Stanton’s voice rose over the hysterical woman’s screams, demanding “Take that woman out of here and do not let her in again!” He could hear the door swing open and quickly shut again, and the sound of a pleading man begging the first lady to regain her composure.

When they rounded the corner Petersen could see she had come completely unhinged, her eyes wild and fierce, tears streaming down her face. The soldier deposited her on the bench at the base of the stairs, instructing the two soldiers to watch her. He then took a deep breath and turned to go back to Stanton’s aide. Mary Todd Lincoln continued to howl ferociously, her terrible wailing screams ripping through the air like claws.

He turned on his heel and walked into the parlor, where the smell of the spilled oil still hung in the air like disease. The fumes made him feel heady as he walked to the small desk in the corner and opened the drawer, pulling out a bottle of bourbon. He sat down in an arm chair by the window, pulled the cork from the top, and took a long draw as he remembered the day his own son’s name had been pulled in the draft. The boy had been as white as a ghost when he told him, tears brimming in his green eyes and limbs shaking like leaves in an October wind. Billy’s mother had tried to

convince him that he would look handsome in the union blue, but the boy would not be coaxed away from his anxiety. He looked at his father with his mother’s eyes and silently begged him for help. His son’s fear had awakened in his heart an anger that had sat there until tonight, when he saw Abraham Lincoln’s bloody head hit his son’s pillow.

Hours passed before the President’s wife stopped her crying. It faded off into splutters and whimpers, and then into nothing; but he could still hear the creaking of the bench beneath her as she rocked back and forth, clutching her arms to her chest. Many people came and went through the front hall over the course of the night, going to the rear foyer where Stanton was conducting interviews and giving orders. He could hear the steady clicking of the telegraph as it floated down the hall, and he tried to decipher the code in his head, but he soon realized none of the news would be good. So he stopped trying.

It was almost sunrise before he rose from his chair, empty bottle in his hand. Many men had come into his home, and they crowded the hallway outside his son’s room, their nightlong vigil still going strong. The surgeons had not surfaced since the night. He walked to the window and rested his hand on the frame. People had flooded into the street in front of the boarding house, and soldiers had formed a barricade to keep them from rushing in. Women wept openly, while their husbands remained as stoic as stone, jaws set and teeth gritted as if they were snarling dogs. Many were his neighbors, his friends, people he saw everyday. Some of them had been there when he had put his son in the ground.

Two weeks after the battle of Rich Mountain, soldiers crowded around the hole in the frozen ground, gaping like a great black mouth that was waiting to swallow his boy. The snow had shone in the early morning light, and around the edges of the hole it looked like bared white teeth, the pale pine coffin sitting off to the side, the red ribbons of the flag rolling over the top of the wood like seven red tongues, taunting him. His son’s long stock rifle lay on top of the flag, and the field was silent as the priest read the words “Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places...’”

His wife shook next to him, her black mourning skirts rustling quietly as tears trickled down her cheeks as though from drying streams. He was suddenly struck with the memory of her holding Billy the day he was born, her face flushed with a happy red glow, her gold hair matted to her brow and falling in curls down her shoulders. The squalling infant’s hands were balled into little fists, and as she smiled and cooed he knew that this moment was

the happiest of his life. As his mind returned to the gravesite, he thought no mother should have to bury her only child. The priest's words seemed to shake the earth as he spoke, white plumes of breath filling the cold air: "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"

The soldiers moved into formation, a straight line facing toward the rising sun. On the sergeant's order, they raised, aimed, and fired. As the shots rang out, they tore his wounds anew, and he looked down at his chest to try and find the source of this fresh pain. When the second shots sounded, his wife fell to the ground, her black skirts spreading out around her like the petals of a flower. The black veil that had covered her face fell into the snow, and she lay her arms and head down on the coffin, spreading her arms across the bare wood in a final, silent embrace. As the final shots sang out with morbid pride, he lifted her carefully from the ground, wrapping his arms around her. A soldier wrapped the gun in the flag and held it out to them, his eyes cast at the ground and body rigid, as though getting too close would be indecent. The others took hold of the ropes that were looped under the coffin and slid it over to the hole, and they carefully began to lower it into the open, waiting mouth of the earth.

It was this moment that flashed in his mind when he heard the first whisper from the foyer. "Mother. . ." it was as soft as the footstep of a child, and it was all it took. Mary Todd Lincoln began to scream again, screaming as though she meant for every man woman and child to hear. Her painful, guttural, and raw sobs sprang forth from her like an eruption. At this, the people in the street began to cry out, "The President is dead! Abraham Lincoln is dead!" A flash of delight streaked through him like lightning, and his very soul sickened at the thought that he took pleasure from this great a pain. But this moment had been what he desired in his heart since losing his son – that Lincoln may know this family's pain, every family's pain, that he had sent to war. Lincoln and his wife had lost two children of their own, but not at another's hands. Not by another's fault. In this moment of selfishness, he hoped that the head wound had caused Lincoln pain that rivaled what Billy must of felt, who had taken a day to die on the frozen battle ground of Rich Mountain in Virginia. Slowly and with purpose, he walked out of the parlor and into the foyer where Mrs. Lincoln still sat, wailing in hysterics as she clutched her son's uniform, trying to pull him closer. The boy was stoic and rigid, like a great oak that would not be moved.

He watched at the window as four soldiers carried the flag wrapped body, balanced on a plank of wood, down his front steps and into a waiting

carriage. He could see his own image reflected in the glass, an old man with waves of wiry grey hair and bifocals that sat crooked on his long and pointed nose. He could not give a name to the expression on his reflection's face. It was a side of himself he had never seen before, this man who was satisfied with death instead of mourning it. The spectators had cleared the way out of respect, and they all wept openly now, men and women alike. The President's aides were clearing Billy's bedroom, taking with them the bloody sheets, whose red crescent moons leered at him with a morbid smile as they were carried past. When the last of them left, closing the front door behind them, he went back to the desk in the parlor and grabbed a rag from the bottom most drawer. He turned around, walked to the end table, and set to work on cleaning the oil he had spilled the night before.

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**Emily Ergenbright** is a senior majoring in English at Iowa State.