

## The Bog

The following letters were discovered inside a lockbox salvaged from a manmade cave under the warden's cellar at the Thickle Correctional Workfarm in Volo, Illinois. The papers, though scorched in the fire, were legible. No other records of the events (Feb. 14<sup>th</sup> through March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1951) were recovered at the site.

19<sup>th</sup> consecutive day of rain

Dear Sir:

This morning I murdered Sgt. Stargel accidentally in the course of his treatment and had to face the grim task of exhuming the prisoner Danner whom we buried two days ago. All the other bodies have been incinerated according to my orders. I had hoped Danner's death would be the last. The little deviant seemed to fight the disease harder than any of those infected before him, and for a time he seemed to be winning the struggle. A wiry man, a tough terrier, he summoned every ounce of his strength to grapple with the pain, which I know was severe. He endured silently and

showed what I must call courage in his decline. I wish I could attest to the same fortitude in Sgt. Stargel's case, but his delirium, caused partially by the contagion itself, was difficult to watch even for a seasoned physician like myself. I felt a glimmer of hope. Then, after seemingly restoring some of his senses, the serum I had derived from blood and tissue samples taken from Danner's liver failed. It was the most promising vaccine I have yet developed to combat the horrific plague that has overcome this camp. I will immediately begin a comparison between Stargel's and Danner's corpses. After the Sergeant's death, I am no longer sure that the pathogen resides in the liver. Other organs must be tested.

Officer Calhoun, who is now the last surviving guard, has his hands full nursing the thirty inmates who are still alive. Execution of his duties has been slowed as a result of the injury he sustained when a group of inmates rushed the fence after they witnessed the first few gruesome casualties of the infection. I cannot blame them for their reaction. If not for my oath as a physician and my sworn duty to the State as acting warden of this facility, I would have driven clear to Florida without rest. He will not have time to aid me in preparing the bodies for dissection. It's a second go for Danner, but the process of decomposition has

complicated matters. Calhoun had no opportunity to build a coffin and we buried him wrapped in burlap near the edge of the bog. Presently, we are the only two men not in the throes of mortal illness and confined to our beds. Our rural compound is modest in size, and we have converted the entire bunkhouse into an infirmary. I ordered Calhoun to serve the men bacon sandwiches and sauerkraut in hopes that the aroma from their dinners will mask the stench coming from the lab where I will be working all night.

Yours truly,

Dr. Hamish Tinn, M.D.

Physician and Acting Warden

Thickle Correctional Farm

20<sup>th</sup> consecutive day of rain

Dear Sir:

Half a dozen men expired during the night. I found them dead when I did my rounds. None of the living patients could sleep so soundly. It was their stillness that caught my attention. I believe Calhoun, working through his exhaustion, did not even notice their passing. I put him to bed for the short hours until dawn, then I carted the dead over to the lab. A rotten sulfurous yolk of moon shed feeble light through the windows of the infirmary. The

inmates looked at me with sheep eyes. What honest words of comfort can I speak to them?

Battaglia, a stout smuggler and pimp, spat on me when I crossed the floor to examine him, and he cursed my name and the name of my wife. Before he became infected, we often spoke in my office, smoked Chesterfields in the yard where he tended the grounds of the softball diamond, and once we played an evening of pinochle after I delivered the news of his mother's funeral. I let him drink a water glass of my whiskey while we played. Tonight, he was before me transformed -- I do not think he remembered our former exchanges -- into a frothing, barking, less-than-human being. Though he was mentally and physically deteriorated past the point of any recovery, I had to squeeze my fists and walk away to keep from striking him for the vile insult to my wife. She too has succumbed to this disease. The loss of her is devastating.

She was the first to display symptoms of the infection and the first to die. I do not know whether it was her sex, her brittle health, or her pregnancy which made her most susceptible. While most of the men lingered for days or weeks, she collapsed within hours of showing signs of change in her body. Of course, the baby, only carried two thirds of the term, did not live. In the midst of my torment,

suffering this shocking double loss, I was pulled away from my private heartache to administer to an epidemic of ailing men. I have been so consumed by the present burden of caring for the violently ill and dying that I have left my grief to wait with my dead wife and child in the little graveyard behind the warden's house -- I could not stand the idea of burning them in the incinerator with these disgusting criminals.

Soon after my wife's sudden and disturbing breakdown, I called a meeting with the guards to tell them her condition was grave and I would be taking her in to the city hospital. The guards could perceive my abnormally agitated state of mind. At that time, though I gathered from their hesitation a certain reluctance to introduce another factor into my decision, they did not come straight out and inform me of the spreading illness, but asked me to delay the trip an hour in order to check one man whom they found unconscious at my doorstep. They were engaged in beating him brutally for attempting escape -- their jackbooted kicks and swatting batons bruised his face and torso -- until they realized he was nearly dead already. He appeared to be suffering in a way resembling my wife's condition. Stargel and Bukovich dragged the inmate - his name was Francis Rensellar - into my examining office. They left him on the floor, and I

remember Stargel said, "This man's good as dead, Doc, nobody can blame you if he doesn't pull through."

Bloody Rensellear crawled into the corner of the office. He appeared to have no use of his right leg. I asked the guards, who obviously terrified him, to leave us alone. I bolted the door behind them. Rensellear's fingers were swollen and bent in all directions, broken. I had seen the guards resort to finger breaking when they were questioning men who lied or refused to tell the whole story, but I was surprised to see a sick man treated so roughly. The guards were stern, hard, but ordinarily fair men. So why such an enthusiastic beating?

I recalled what specifics I knew of this prisoner. He was from Canada originally. Redheaded and muscular, but not a brawler like most of the big men. He was convicted of forgery, had a great artistic gift for drawing, and was otherwise quiet. He liked his solitude, penciling portraits of the homely mugs of fellow inmates and feathery landscapes of the stubble fields between the camp, the bog, and the single road. He always subtracted the fence from his pictures. I had several of his finished drawings hanging in my house, including a portrait of Tessa before she was pregnant. He got a new box of pastels for that one. We had been so pleased with his work that I gave special permission

for Rensellear to take weekly walks in the bog with an armed escort, so that he could sketch the many birds and small animals we have living there.

Rensellear wore death in his skin, and I was not expecting a word out of him during the examination. But when I reached out and touched his chest to remove his shirt, he spoke.

"Please, you cannot blame me," he said.

My wife had raved similarly when I found her the same afternoon. She had been flush, her face and neck red-hot, a slippery sheen of sweat glistening on her. Her clothing -- she had stripped down to her beige, lace-trimmed, silk camisole -- was falling off, exposing her growing breasts. She hunched at the sill of an opened window, trying to catch her breath and cool herself. The rain blew chilled through the window, soaking her flimsy undergarment and puckering the freckled taut flesh of her plump stomach. Under her arm she tried to hide something from me. A cardboard heart. Love poetry penned in black ink by a beautiful hand. It was obviously her Valentine to me, though she had neglected to sign her name. I had forgotten the holiday completely.

Deciding it would be less alarming for Rensellear if I attempted to communicate with him within his dementia, I asked him what would I blame him for? He replied, "Your

wife, your wife." When it finally sunk in to him that I did not intend to kill him, he grew silent and stared at me. Then, he laughed. I told him that I was going to inject him with antibiotics and that I would call in a replacement physician to set his fingers and ankle, also broken, because I had to take my wife to the city immediately. Ironically, there would be no rush, since she was dying as I spoke.

When I depressed the plunger on the syringe, he said his last words to me. "You know," he said, "I'm not the only one." Those words uttered from the quivering lips of a crazy dying man proved to be prophetic. The disease multiplied like a rumor in the bunkhouse while I treated him. Unknown to me, he must have had an allergy to this particular antibiotic, because he convulsed, rattling to the brain's strange electricity, and was dead before I withdrew the needle from his arm.

Yours truly,

Dr. Hamish Tinn, M.D.

Physician and Acting Warden

Thickle Correctional Farm

[Here one letter is missing from the sequence because it was too badly burned to read. The corner of a sheet of paper

and a pile of ashes were found in the lockbox.]

22<sup>nd</sup> consecutive day of rain

Dear Sir:

I suppose the contagion might be emanating from the bog. Trapped primitive gases piping lethal fevers from the massacred Indians up through the peat. Revenge visits without announcement. My wife and Rensselaer both spent hours walking the planks the inmates constructed for passage through the bog. They float on the bog's surface, branching off like veins. No matter.

Twelve is the number of survivors this morning. Following my orders, Calhoun set the bunkhouse on fire. The dead were in the majority, and it made little sense to keep moving them. The structure screamed in the inferno. Nails shrieking as the walls buckled. Fat blazing tongues licked skyward, but only the smoke rose to make his escape. Shackled to their bed frames by their wrists and ankles, the survivors watched the spectacle. The intense heat offered little consolation to the men who were freezing in the cold downpour, arranged on the lawn as if they were farming implements exhibited for sale.

Yours Truly,

Dr. Hamish Tinn, M.D.

Physician and Acting Warden  
Thickle Correctional Farm

23<sup>rd</sup> consecutive day of rain

Dear Sir:

Calhoun's headaches have worsened, he drools ceaselessly, and I dread the morning when I have to force my revolver against his scarred temple and put him down. We were unable to identify the inmate who attacked him in the riot, but we confiscated the weapon, a spear fashioned from a sharpened rake handle. No matter. All the prisoners' sentences have been amended to read: Penalty Of Death. In the mean time, we will live together in the warden's house like a large ugly family.

Yours truly,

Dr. Hamish Tinn, M.D.

Physician and Acting Warden  
Thickle Correctional Farm

24<sup>th</sup> consecutive day of rain

Dear Sir:

I will relate a curious episode of this disease's mania which we witnessed during the night:

The inmate Morris had lost color and movement in his hands, so I removed the shackles from his wrists. I saw no risk in my action. Morris had been unconscious for two days, but his heart beat strongly whenever I examined him. On my midnight rounds, I wanted to see if his hands were responding positively, given the relief of being freed. What I found when I shined my Coleman in the cellar was Morris' empty bed. Though it was not completely empty, for he had hacked off his feet to slip the ankle shackles. Under his blood-drenched mattress, I found the instrument of his amateur surgery. He had bent up the rim of his bedpan and used the thin metal edge as a scalpel blade. I did not bother to awaken Calhoun, but threw on my slicker and boots and followed the blood trail over the wet ground. His stumps left behind a track of distinct cavities in the mud. Fifty yards shy of the bog, I spotted him humping along through the slop. Seeing he was no threat, I holstered my revolver. The strain visible on his face and the herky-jerky contortions of his lower extremities reminded me of slapstick I had seen clowns perform for Ringling Bros. when I was much younger. Please do not think that I am a cold fish. The man was insane and utterly numb to pain as evidenced by his gory self-mutilation. I only comment that the pitiful sight of him had a comic element to it. I was

indeed worried that he would find his way amazingly down the singular washed-out road and make contact with outsiders. Drawing my revolver again, I dispatched Morris mercifully with three fatal bullets. The idea that this contagion would spread beyond the camp is my last unrealized fear.

When I first became aware that I was dealing with a rapid and fatal infection, I took drastic precautions. I ordered the guards to inform their families that they would be lodging at the camp because the rains had flooded the bunkhouse and we had to shelter the inmates in tents. For security reasons the guards would be on round-the-clock duty until further notice. I assured the guards and their families, quoting different reasons, extra wages would be paid out to match their services. The deluge has been an inconvenience to practical matters as well as to the soul, but I was able to put it to some good use. We have had such an unusual winter! Our only road washed out on Valentine's Day and I made no communication for repairs. Since we are the only people living along it, I am certain no else has reported its condition. I told the guards the telephone lines were dead because of the flooding. I feel guilty for making a statement that was not true, but I did not want them to say too much to their loved ones and start a panic. Personally, I canceled all visitation and deliveries to the

camp pending repair of the road which, as I stated, I never reported. I called my superiors in Chicago, and using the rain again as my excuse, told them to contact me through the P.O. in town. They never call me anyway.

I saw the terror in the guards' eyes when I first explained the scope of the epidemic at the camp. I sedated them against their will by drugging the coffee. Regrettably, except for Calhoun, I had to resort to the same restraints with my loyal guardsmen that I used on the inmates. I hope their sacrifice is memorialized someday with a bold statue.

Yours Truly,

Dr. Hamish Tinn, M.D.

Physician and Acting Warden

Thickle Correctional Farm

25<sup>th</sup> consecutive day of rain

Dear Sir:

After years of living with wretches, the taint of their influence rubs off. I am suicidal. Though it will offer the containment we desperately need, the prospect of moving the surviving two inmates, Calhoun, and myself further

underground is plainly, unspeakably bleak. Yet Calhoun has commenced digging the cave. I have two gallons of kerosene and a hand in the matches. We cannot hold here forever.

H.T.

[At the bottom of the page, the writing takes up in rough crude letters.]

Calhoun kilt the Devil docter. Shovelsmash his Godamm head in like a watermellen. Dig a big grave. Got the fire on fire. The dr's wife was a whor. I am Calhoun.