

Crossroads

by Elise Andreas

Marjorie Watson lay motionless. The rhythm of her breathing saw her chest rise and fall slowly. The white room was eerily silent. The only sound came from the nurse whose soft-sole shoes scuffed the sterile floor as she moved between flashing monitors, the intravenous drip and the chart positioned at the foot of Marjorie's bed. Ward 6B had been her home for six months, ever since a stroke had knocked her down. In the days following her admission, family had flocked to her bedside forming a circle, holding vigil, willing Marjorie to return to them. The sounds of their grieving had filled not only her room but echoed down ward corridors leaving others all too aware that life and death were locked in a struggle in Room 13B.

That was then. Tears, mournful cries and questions posed around Marjorie's bed had been replaced by silence. Rory slipped quietly back into the room - eager to escape his memories and the incessant Christmas Carols playing in the cafeteria.

He remembered racing down the stairs full of excitement and anticipation, ready to open his presents. His mum had grabbed his hand and pulled him up.

"Whoa, hold up! Merry Christmas, Honey!"

"Merry Christmas, Mummy!" he had squeaked, swaying on the balls of his feet.

"Come on, Little Man. Let's go and see what Santa's left for you." She smiled lovingly down at him and Rory remembered just how bright her eyes had twinkled.

The nurse smiled, dragging him back into the room. She nodded at Rory and, having finished her routine observations, left him alone with his mother. While other family and friends had come and gone, Rory had remained steadfast. His love for his mother was unquestionable and unconditional. He had served as sentinel; ever vigilant, ever hopeful that his mother's condition would improve. Tonight, however, was the night he had been dreading.

Rory's gaze shifted in the direction of a card that lay on the bedside table. He could see that the hospital chaplain's name appeared at the bottom. This was not the first time that Father O'Leary had visited. On his rounds he had visited Marjorie, praying for her, hoping for her, believing that a miracle was possible. Unfortunately, Rory was no longer as optimistic. His confidence had slowly been eroded as his mother's condition deteriorated. Having first found Father O'Leary's presence a genuine comfort, Rory was now uncertain and disillusioned. Initial talk of miracles replaced with the reality of routine tests and examinations that never returned positive results.

Rory flipped the Chaplain's card over and over again in his hands. The stark black cross positioned in the top right hand corner of the card stirred dormant memories of his days at St Joseph's as an impressionable student in Religion lessons. "Jesus is the way, the truth and the life!" he recalled Brother Lawrence constantly reminding the class. "The path to everlasting life comes courtesy of our Lord's sacrifice." Rory tried to draw inspiration from these once sustaining words but this was no class room and he was no longer young and

bullet-proof. He put the card down. Glass smashed down the hallway followed by a sharp cry. Rory was taken back to a brisk but sunny afternoon at home.

He was outside kicking his football around in the backyard. He was doing pretty well, practising for trials that started once the holidays were over. He dropped the ball onto his foot and kicked it so high that even he couldn't catch it. Moments later, a crash smashed through the air. His mother's lead-light window shattered everywhere. Rory raced up to retrieve his football and cautiously entered the kitchen.

"Mum I'm so sorry! I know you worked really hard making it. Please, Mum - it was an accident!" he pleaded. His mother nodding tentatively. He remembered her sigh.

"I know you didn't do it on purpose, but you'll be doing the dishes for the next week."

Doctor Collins' arrival snapped Rory from his nostalgic trance. "Good evening, Rory. Your mother remains unresponsive," he advised in a professional, matter-of-fact tone. "Her vital signs are not improving. Life support remains an option but..."

Rory interrupted. "I realise we've arrived at something of a crossroad, Doctor Collins,". He said despondently. He thought he would vomit as yet-to-be-faced options swirled inside his head. The doctor ignored him, racing into his pre-prepared speech.

"Recovery, after six months in a comatose state, is rare. The research indicates that the likelihood of your mother regaining consciousness is remote. The chances would be one in a million, Rory," the Doctor stated efficiently.

He could hear the doctor say, "Ultimately, it is up to you, Rory, as next of kin. I only came to inform you of what I professionally believe would be in the best interests of your mother," but he couldn't feel the words.

Rory closed his eyes, tiring of the professional opinion he was being offered. It seemed like it was only yesterday that he'd run into the kitchen and patted his Mum on the head, finally taller than her and home for the first time that semester. He'd asked her how he could help. She'd laughed, ducked out from under his arm and said, "You can cut the tomatoes."

Doctor Collins moved to the door and placed a form on Marjorie's bedside table, alongside the Chaplain's calling card. The sound caught his attention. "I trust you'll make the decision that's best for your mother." The Doctor's eyes wrinkled as he nodded and moved dispassionately on to continue his rounds.

Rory grasped the thin, white paper which would decide his mother's fate. The words "Consent Form" burned their way into his consciousness. Rory felt giddy and almost stumbled. He reached for the chair parallel to his frail mother's bed. He inhaled slowly and deeply. He was torn as conflicting scenarios shredded his mind.

Through his grief, he saw the Chaplain's card. He grasped for it with his left hand. The tears that fell simply smudged the slips of paper that would ultimately guide him as he chose his mother's final path. He dropped them back on the bed. I hope Brother Lawrence is right, Rory thought as he reached for his pen.