

# The Copperfield Review

<i>Fiction</i>
<i>Non-Fiction</i>
<i>Poetry</i>
<i>Interviews</i>
<i>Reviews</i>
<i>Submission Guidelines</i>
<i>Writers' Resources</i>
<i>CR Forum</i>
<i>Meet The Staff</i>
<i>CR Banner</i>
<i>Home Page</i>

## Immunity

By Amy Root

Tuberculosis, Wynn decided, would be her salvation. Surely her husband's cough was the sign of something fatal. Surely it would lead her away from a drippy roof and a prickly mother-in law, who complained loudly if anyone removed her catalogs from the outhouse.

Gladys hammered her fist on the pine table. "Now Wynn, I <sup>1</sup>m findin' myself at my wit<sup>1</sup>s end with you. I went out back and there weren't...no ...paper."

"That's a sad situation, Mrs. Davis. A sad situation indeed."

"Well what percisely am I to do?" Gladys began to curse in Welsh while trying to light her clay pipe.

"The rest of us manage, Mrs. Davis. So will you. The Sears and Roebuck isn<sup>1</sup>t lost. I used it to stuff gaps in the windows just this afternoon."

"I don't understand it, Bronwynn. My parents risked everything and dey had very little to risk to make a new life fer me in dis place dat no reasonable person can pronounce. And why do these states have to be named fer such a savage people? Hmph."

"Hmph," Wynn responded.

"Piteous Iowa. Pit-ee-us. Tis plain to see why the price was so low. Fifty cents an acre."

"Last time, your story was 160 acres for free. To anyone who could stand it for five years."

"Nothing came free to us, Bronwynn. It <sup>1</sup>s still an outrage if yer askin' me. It's no better here. No better a'tall. This is no better than the winters on the River Clwyd. And then the oxen, haulin' us all the way from Baltimore through Wisconsin. We could <sup>1</sup>ve been slaughtered any second of the day."

"I can't imagine who <sup>1</sup>d want to slaughter you," said Wynn, who was now tapping out a fox-trot with her little girl to keep them warm. The fire in the cook stove was waning.

"Yet now my own daughter-in-law can't even trouble herself to supply me with the most basic necessities, not even a scrap o' paper when I need to relieve myself ..."

"Myrna," Wynn whispered to the child, "remember. Your grandmother hates it

here because Iowa has too many vowels in its name. Her people like consonants better."

Myrna nodded, wondering if a vowel was anything like a bowel, as that seemed to be the topic of the argument.

"Yer people is mine too Winnie. Or so ya say. Though I doan see how ya call yerself a Celt with such black hair and black eyes, and skin that tans as fast as a goat's hide. It's the redheads and blondies—the fair ones like my son—who deserve to carry the name. Even my mother's very name—'twas Gwyneth—means white. And blessed. I think yer nothin' but a Roman or a Teutonic clan in disguise."

Wynn continued her kitchen jig, waving her tiny hands and thin frame in time to her daughter's. The child was a miniature of her mother, with a spray of mud-colored curls encircling a face that seemed to smile even when it was wincing. They stopped dancing as Reese moaned on the other side of the wall.

"You and Granny woke him up, Mama." Myrna covered her ears with mittened hands. "Make him be quiet."

"I'll try, little girl."

"Will you try your very, very best?" Myrna wanted to know, mimicking a phrase her mother used daily.

Gladys began clucking. "Reese is going to choke to death." She rolled the "r" when saying her son's name, especially when she was upset, and she prolonged the "e." It had pained her to change the spelling of his name from Rhys, the original letters inherited from generations of uncles, but too many of his schoolteachers had called him Rice.

"What's the matter with you, Bronwynn?" the grandmother continued. "What kind of a cruel nurse are ya? No wonder you didn't finish yer schoolin'. Whoever heard of a nurse with bobbed hair? You're a disgrace."

Wynn tied a stained square of gingham over her face before entering her husband's bedroom. The sturdy farmhouse had only four rooms, not including the cellar. The cottage offered little privacy or warmth, but Wynn often told herself to appreciate it because it was too small to need much cleaning.

She wished she could feel tender toward him. But looking at Reese, who lay crumpled on his side as he groaned and shivered, she could only see a reflection of herself during their first year of marriage, bedridden from a leaky pregnancy.

An ancient Welsh preacher had ratified their marriage in the same year the states ratified the Eighteenth Amendment. But Reese refused to put down his tarnished flask, filling it with cloudy, homemade whisky just long enough to keep him from being of any help. It dissolved his ability to sow or plow, milk or irrigate, pluck or fry. Yet his concentration remained sharp enough for fondling his wife in the weeks before she give birth to their only child. When Wynn pinched away at his hands, he took that as permission to fondle other women instead, especially if they offered. They offered often. With his yellow hair and uncalloused hands, and eyes as green as a sprig of mint, he gleamed among a county of grimy planters. When he went visiting, he shaved his sandpaper beard and restored his appearance, temporarily, to its former appeal. It was soon his habit to make these efforts for every woman but his wife.

Now he had just one posture and appearance: fetal, in bed, asking for something.

Wynn hoped it was tuberculosis, though her diagnosis skills were poor. She hoped it was TB because they owned fertile land, and when prices were up again, as prices always eventually are, she would persuade Gladys to sell the farm. They could escape on a sparkling express train bound for Minneapolis. They would rent rooms in a brand-new apartment building decked with lint-free

radiators, so warm that they'd have to open the windows in the winter. They would sleep in beds that folded down from the walls. The ironing boards would collapse into special closets, and there would be chutes for sending linens directly to a laundress. And they would buy a motorcar, a cheap secondhand T Model for surely no more than a hundred dollars, so that they no longer had to pull anything heavy behind them in unsteady carts, or ride in cutters drawn by flatulent horses.

And if Reese did not have TB, Wynn predicted that liver cirrhosis might do the trick in fewer than six months.

"Can't you *do* something?" Gladys cried from the hallway.

"You have to help me, Wynn," Reese spluttered. "Please help me."

She shut his bedroom door snugly behind her, tugging on its loose glass knob. She held a chipped, kidney-shaped basin under his face and pounded on his back, as if she were tenderizing a tough roast. For once she was surprised at the volume of his sputum. It arrived in a shower of thick blood, which rained pin-prick droplets across her only wool dress. She'd rushed in without putting on an apron.

"It's going to be fine," she told him, eyeing the product of his lungs and trying to calculate its exact quantity. It was as if there were no more air passing in and out of him, only weighty particles that clung together like paste.

"All right now, Reese? Better? Do you need the bedpan?" she asked, praying he'd say no.

She wiped his face with a dry cloth; there was nothing left in his pitcher, and she did not want to cope with the water pump tonight. She dreaded the carpet of snow outside their kitchen, without the sun to help soften it.

Reese sighed, smelling like rancid onions. He said, "You're a miracle."

She stood back suspiciously. She had closed her heart to him for the last time and was not going to let him pry it open again, especially not on his deathbed.

"Can I have some soup?" he asked.

He had barely eaten all week, so she hadn't expected him to have an appetite anymore. There wasn't enough food for four of them tonight.

"Well, I have no way to heat anything this evening. We're out of wood."

She had not planned properly that day. Though the air was dry and still, she knew that the almanac predicted worse weather before the season was over. Bursitis had convinced her to put off chopping until tomorrow. They had a potbelly stove to heat the center of the house, though the cook stove was now down to cinders.

"I'll get you some jam, all right?"

She knew of many treatments that might have made him better. Hidden in her commode was a thin glass nasal douche, still in its finger-length carton. She might have used it to reduce his infection, running a little saltwater or diluted boric acid through his sinuses. She also had a tin of mentholated cigarettes she had bought during nurses' training. One of the doctors told her to smoke them when she felt a sore throat coming on. She could have sealed the bedroom windows with extra rags and newsprint to make the bedroom less drafty. She could have changed Reese's sheets more often. But she didn't want to make him well, or comfortable.

"And I have some applesauce, Reese. Here, I'll get you some of that. You just rest now." She dared to look into his eyes, which could still somehow focus on hers. She longed for him to contract conjunctivitis. If his irises were fogged, they could not remind her of his formerly persuasive gaze.

"What are we going to do about this?" Gladys demanded to know. "If I lose him, who's goin' to work the fields in spring?"

Wynn ground her molars together. "Who's been working them until now? It wouldn't hurt if you learned a more useful skill than cross-stitching."

Gladys had once promised to give Wynn lessons in every kind of decorative needlework, but the one pattern Myrna owned still lay in its wrapper beneath a pile of unmended clothing that no longer fit anyway. The embroidery had been a wedding gift from Wynn's father. Above a scene of wagons wading through unnaturally robust gardens, colored letters spelled out "Travel east, travel west, after all, home is best." Her father had not been a sentimental man; she was now sure he had predicted her ruin and realized what a good joke the piece might eventually prove to be.

"Mama." Myrna spoke in a voice primed for negotiation. "I want to take Papa his supper."

"No, baby. You can't go in there."

"But I can put the cover on my face like you do, see?" She held a limp stocking to her chattering mouth.

"Just stay away, OK? Don't go in there," Myrna warned as she scratched her blood-stained bodice with a wire brush.

She picked up a glass saucer and dabbed stewed rhubarb onto it, because she discovered that there was no more applesauce.

"Dinnertime," she whispered to Reese. "Dinnertime," she repeated, more loudly. His eyelids did not flutter. Her face flushed with dread and hope.

"What's going on in there?" Gladys asked.

"I'm not sure. He's not waking up . . ."

For once, Gladys offered no response. Her three other children had not outlived her, giving her little reason to expect that Reese would either. Wynn watched the old woman rest her plump hand on the doorframe and shift her eyes from the floor to her son's body, which now lay tightly clenched, like a claw.

"I can still feel his pulse, though. I don't know, Mrs. Davis. He's seems unconscious." She put her head on his chest. Rales. That sound was one of the final warning signs listed in her outdated *Taber's*. Gurgling rales, she'd read, loud enough to be heard by the naked ear, as well as an enlarged spleen, were sure indications of pneumonia at least, if not TB. She began fingering Reese's abdomen, which felt sunken and bony.

"He's breathing, Mrs. Davis. It sounds awful, though. I don't know. I'm not sure what this is all about. Honey? Honey, wake up, here's your supper." She began humming "Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland." It had been one of their favorite courting songs; Reese loved to play it on his mother's upright in spite of the memory that Dreamland's towers and roller coasters had burned to cinders just seven unlucky years after the promotional waltz was released.

"Come on, sweetheart, rise and shine." But her husband did neither.

Gladys tightened her thin shawl around herself and sat in the parlor's window seat. The sky was thick now. There weren't any stars to light the dunes of snow, which had covered even the smallest niches of their property for weeks now. Though she had nurtured a high windbreak of shrubs and trees, Gladys thought her little house felt raw as a wound. She watched the slow flapping of the little birch sign that marked the entrance to their farm. Her husband had named it Derw Llwyn because of the property's thick oak groves. As she wondered whether the words themselves would freeze over that night, she heard Wynn shut the bedroom door again.

Wynn was concerned about her Reese's toes, which rested between two of the bed's thin iron posts. She grabbed his ankles and freed his feet, tucking the soiled quilts tightly, compressing his infantile position. In nursing school, one of her patients had been a man as tall as Reese. He died during in the night while Wynn was working, but she didn't realize it until several hours had

passed. By the time she confirmed his departure, rigor mortis had begun to stiffen his entire body, and she and the other night nurse were unable to extract the man's leg from between the rods of the footboard.

She had thought the rails were frivolous anyway. She had been told that at other hospitals a simple strip of metal arched over each end of the beds. Charts could be hung more easily this way too. She and the other young nurse had to pluck away at the man's shin, eventually twisting it through the narrow slats with a crackling sound that echoed throughout the quiet ward. On that same night, she had been asked to assist with the delivery of a baby. What emerged from the patient's womb was not a baby, but a ball of flesh that contained teeth and sprayed a fountain of serum. She asked whether it could live for very long, and the surgeon told her it had never lived to begin with. After that night, Wynn had trouble separating the two incidents in her mind, causing her to believe that leaving and entering the world could be equally grim experiences.

"I think Reese just needs to sleep, Mrs. Davis," Wynn said. "Come, Myrna, let's get dinner ready."

Without a fire, they ate cold courses: uneven rectangles of faintly green cheddar cheese; pickled carrots that had been sealed in jars months before; wispy slices of rich bread made from unrefined wheat flour, hastily ground walnuts, and black molasses; and for dessert, there was rhubarb, the one thing always in abundance on Wynn's watch. They ate off mismatched dishes bearing distant potters' insignia, from Ohio to Britain. These plates were segregated from the ones that Reese used. Wynn even soaked his spoons in ammonia; she had seen thrush on his tongue.

Only Myrna was hungry, or talkative. The meal was over soon. Wynn quickly shuffled plates from the rickety dining table, whose legs had been intended for nightstand. She ordered Gladys to put Myrna to bed, and to go to sleep herself as well.

"I'll wake you up if there's any news," Wynn promised, lifting an afghan the color of egg yolks from a battered steamer trunk. Like a nesting mother bird, Gladys spread layer after layer of blankets in the spool bed she shared with her granddaughter now. Wynn had claimed the fainting couch for herself long ago.

Then Wynn slowly pushed open her husband's bedroom door, prepared to see his body frozen and still. Yet it moved, off and on, in time with his shrieking breaths. For the first time in a year, she lay on the mattress beside him. It leaked goose feathers.

She did not touch him. She only rested her hand under her cheek and, propped up on one elbow, stared at his ascending and sinking chest. Her skin was cracked and red, but his glistened with fever. He tried to speak nonexistent words in his sleep, but talking turned to shallow gagging. He had always been a violent sleeper, miming a fleeing man or boxing his pillow. When she was unmarried, she slept each night with a pillow hugged to her torso, imagining that she was spooning. After sleeping beside Reese, she preferred spooning with the pillow. His tight, drowsy squeezes stifled her circulation.

There was no threat from him now; he appeared to be marooned beside her. When she couldn't fight exhaustion, she rolled onto her back, rushing into such a deep sleep that she didn't hear him rise from the bed hours later.

When the cardinals and daylight revived her, she squinted across the room and saw him sitting in his rocking chair, reading a yellowed copy of *Y Drych*. He dropped the newspaper when Wynn awoke. His jowls lifted as he grinned at her with stained teeth and, growling with phlegm, said, "Good morning."

"Good God," she replied, sitting upright slowly, as if in the presence of a predator. "I didn't think you'd make it through the night."

"I couldn't have done it without you, Winnie. You saved me. You made me well."

"How do you feel, Reese?"

"Famished!"

"How's your breathing?"

"Still kind of wheezy. But I'm through it now."

"Well, you'd better take it easy—it could be just a . . . false surge. You slept so hard. You were gone for a while. I couldn't rouse you."

"I'm just weak. But I made it through, Bronwynn."

She glanced at a teacup resting on the floor near his feet. She wondered where he'd found fresh water, much less heat, to make tea. Then she realized there was whisky in the cup, and that he was consuming the brown contents of a carafe wrapped in wicker. She started to ask him if he had been drinking throughout his illness, but Myrna and Gladys rushed in, squealing with pleasure. Wynn told them to keep a good distance, in case he was still contagious. "It's such a cold day," she added, shuddering under the sheets.

Primary colors trickled onto her face through the window, the refractions of an icicle. Even in the rising sunlight, the frozen bolts of water didn't spare a drop.