A True Story And How I Imagined It

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He stuffed a .22 caliber bullet up his nose. Sitting there in the eighth grade home room, he somehow managed to cram the thing so far up his nose that he couldn't get it out.

Mother Paul was explaining to the class the subtle nuances between the dangerous doctrines of Luther and John Calvin when she noticed the mask of suddenly realized horror descend upon Patrick Murphy's face. An army of Ursulines came to peer at the swelling nostril. Patrick stuttered during his mea culpa, embarrassed at his own damned stupidity. The nuns deliberated. Frustrated, their index fingers rigidly pointing at the lump in Patrick's nasal passage; they poked and prodded it with #2 lead pencils until one of the more worldly among them pointed out that the bullet just might go off and blow Patrick's brains out, and how would they explain that to Mr. and Mrs. Murphy and the Monsignor? So it was time to call the emergency room and announce the imminent arrival of a patient in semi-volatile condition. And time, of course, to pray.

Aside from the flush of embarrassment, none of this initially seemed to bother Patrick as much as it did everyone else. Oh, it was uncomfortable, and he didn't want to go to the hospital, but why was everyone so excited? He wasn't in pain. The thought of having to tell his father wasn't a very pleasant one, but these things can happen. It wasn't as if he'd done it on purpose. He remembered his father talking about his Uncle Billy, who, while balancing a bottle of whiskey on his head, had fallen off a barn roof in Toronto and was killed. Broke his neck. "Sometimes people do silly things," his father said with a nod and a wink. Never mentioning that Billy had been blind drunk, and had nar-
rowly escaped life threatening catastrophe dozens of times before. Fate had caught up with Uncle Billy. This purely was a jest of God.

Patrick had merely, unconsciously, slipped a slender, long-rifle shell into his nose and then using his little finger as a breech block, rammed it home, and no amount of blowing or snorting would dislodge it. He was scared at first and then just angry at himself. The other kids in the classroom stared wall-eyed, as if they’d never seen anybody before with a bullet stuck up his nose.

He overheard one of the nuns suggest perhaps tweezing the thing out with a paper clip. It was Mother Victorine, a renowned sorceress, who, while murmuring incantations, removed splinters with sewing needles sterilized in the flame of a candle. But Patrick knew it was a rim-fire, percussion cap cartridge and he covered his face with his hands and started bellowing, “Noooooo!” Now the audible manifestation of his anguish brought everyone to near panic and Mother Hildegard started the class singing On This Day Oh Beautiful Mother, while two of her colleagues whisked Patrick into the hallway. An ancient nun with a twinkling eye slid an institutional gray folding chair under his backside and he plopped down with his face in his hands.

“Keep your hands at your sides, Patrick. Don’t fuss with your nose,” Mother Cordula scolded.

“Yes, Mother.”

“We’ll have this all taken care of quickly, Pat,” Mother Colette interjected. She was always kind and never angry. “In the meantime, offer your suffering up for children in pagan countries, who are less fortunate.”

“Yes, Mother,” He wondered, were there “less fortunate children in other countries” with .22 bullets up their noses?

The anxiety and excitement were starting to work on Patrick and he wished this whole damn thing had never happened. He started to project. What would the kids say tomorrow? The worst of this might be just beginning. What if the doctors had to remove the bullet surgically? He’d have a huge bandage strapped to the middle of his face. What if he lost his nose altogether? He imagined the odd weight of a prosthetic nose throwing his head out of balance. Listing, first to port, then to starboard, as he fought to avoid falling asleep after lunch. A problem he struggled with daily.

How could he face his father at supper tonight? He was certain of the sanctuary of his mother’s midriff. He’d hide his face and hang onto her like a frightened possum. He hoped he’d never be too old to be comforted by his mother. But his father despairingly would shake his
head. Then, pinioned by his father’s accusing dark eyes, he’d shrivel at the volume of his rhetorical curse, “Jesus Christ Almighty! Where’d he get the God Damned bullet anyway!” The tears would come. His shoulders would begin to jerk involuntarily. His sobs would get louder and louder. His father would get angrier and angrier. And . . .

What about tomorrow? He’d be made fun of, he could count on that. They’d call him names. Tell jokes.

“Single-shot Murphy or Bullet-head?”

“Hey Murphy, look the other way. Don’t you know better than to point a loaded nose at somebody?”

“Murph, I got a question for ya. If you’re all alone in the jungle surrounded by Red Chinese and you only got one bullet — do you stuff it up yer nose?”

“Watch out for that guy over there. He’s a snub-nosed .22.”

He couldn’t face it. That’s all there was to it. He’d have to pack up and leave. He heard the siren of the approaching ambulance — the herald of his miserable, ill fortune. And he realized that this insignificant little slip of the wrist had ruined his life.

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“I’m gonna give you a shot that’ll freeze your nose,” the doctor was friendly. He liked to explain everything, believing that his chatty descriptions kept emergency room patients calm. Especially kids.

“You’ll still be able to breathe through it, but you won’t feel anything. If you do feel something, let me know right away.”

Patrick, on his back, looked up from the table into the bright lights. He could only make out glimpses of quickly moving shadows. The glare hurt his eyes. The local anesthetic was beginning to take effect, and he could feel the center of his face turning to stone.

“Alright, Patrick, we’re gonna get that bullet out of there now,” the doctor said reassuringly. “You needn’t worry, son. You wouldn’t believe some of the things I pull out of people that they push into themselves. When you’re older I’ll tell you some stories that’ll stand your hair on end. Hang on, here we go now.”

He could feel the dull thuds of the doctor’s hands as he made tactile explorations of the lodged cartridge. A cold, metal object — he pictured a tiny scaffold — held open and widened the entrance to his nose. He could hear what the doctor was doing, but he couldn’t feel it. Everything was muffled and distant. A cloth covered his eyes. The anesthetic sent false information to his brain. He imagined a crew of mine workers entering a deep treacherous shaft; their equipment
(ropes, hooks, carbide lamps, helmets) clattering as they negotiate the
difficult passageways.

His throat felt as dry as starched linen. A nurse dribbled some water
into his parched mouth. His hands were tight fists. Minutes screeched
to a slow grind.

Then the bright lights were out. The scaffolding came down. He was
sitting up and the E R staff was moving on to the next job. The doctor
was gone, but a nurse wiped his face and gave him more water.

“How do you feel now, Patrick?”

“Pretty good, I guess.”

“It'll be a while before the novocaine wears off. You wanna tell me
where the bullet came from? Do you have a gun at home?” She was
nice and seemed concerned.

“No Ma'am. I found it is all. At the dump, where the high school kids
shoot rats. I cleaned it up and I carry it in my pocket. I was playing
around with it when this happened.”

“That's very dangerous. Hope you learned something.”

“I did. Believe me, I did.”

He could see his father pacing in the waiting area, harried, ruffled.
Patrick’s stomach felt as if it would ooze out through the souls of his
feet. He stopped momentarily, stilled by dread.

His father looked down at him. Looking up, Patrick blinked several
times, and wrinkled his nose to test for feeling, but it was still dead.
He heard his father clear his throat to speak. How long can this ordeal
continue? Then he could hear his own heart beat. It sounded like a
steady drip drumming the back of a tin plate.

“Patrick, you scared the hell out of your mother and me and half
the damned convent. The doctor says you’re fine,” he hugged him too
tightly. “You'll have a little rawness in your throat, but you're fine.”

“I’m sorry, dad. I didn’t mean to.”

“Sometimes I wonder about you, Patrick. You don’t think. I don’t
want to doubt you, son, but sometimes you don’t think. You worry
me that’s all,” he was looking at his watch. He seemed uncomfortable,
awkward. “Let’s go home.”

They walked to the car and Patrick’s father opened the passenger
door for him. The stench of real leather was strong and pleasant. As
he buckled himself into the seat, a fist-sized lump slammed into his
throat. Oh, God, he thought, now I’m gonna cry. He tried to cry quiet-
ly, but his tears betrayed him. His father looked down at him with a
stern, reproachful face, and Patrick looked back only for a second, then
quickly looked away. The round-headed profile captured in family
snapshots was what his father saw. A familiar silhouette cut from black crepe paper when he was about twelve.

He reached under the seat for an old T-shirt he used to clean the windshield, and gently blotted tears from Patrick’s face. “It’s all I’ve got, son. Sorry.” Patrick took a deep breath, leaned back into the seat and closed his eyes for the ride home. His nose was running but he couldn’t feel it.

WISHING
Jay J. Kaylin

I went to this wishing well and when I was ready
I reached in my pocket and pulled out a penny
I wished to be free and do as I pleased
I wished I could cry without being teased
and I wished for my sister not to hit me in the head . . .
Then I wished that maybe I might have a dime to drop in instead.