

# *LEST IT CONSUME US*

Robert D. Sparks Writing Contest

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I stared up at what I believed was night sky: featureless, starless, empty. My only sense of orientation of up or down came from a warm river of blood racing down the left side of my face. The smell hit me first, all too familiar, then the metallic taste as it pooled into my mouth as I lay tangled in my own limbs, sprawled atop my rucksack, trying to understand the events that had just occurred. Only moments earlier I was walking along the rough mountainside, following the sounds of my fellow Rangers in front of me as they traversed the terrain before I found myself in freefall. Rather than using my night vision equipment worth tens of thousands of dollars on that night with 0% illumination, I instead chose to travel by “sonar,” that is to track the sound of boots striking dirt ahead of me, the shuffling of feet and kicking up of dust guiding me through the darkness. This had worked just fine for me in the past, but in that moment, I realized that the shuffling I was following failed to warn me of the sharp bend in the path, leading to a plummet that ended with me there on my back.

Our mission, like all others we conducted, required maintaining security via light and noise discipline as we exfiltrated to our area of operation. This security was quickly undone when my sudden scream – triggered by my realization that gravity did indeed exist – prompted a frantic response of my battle buddies now above me, yelling for my whereabouts. The bright light of their torches illuminated my landing site as I looked up and saw where the road veered and where my foot missed the edge nearly 20 feet above me. Luckily, or maybe unluckily, I had landed on a bramblebush that may have cushioned my fall; the thorns scratched at my face and limbs even through my uniform, the pain at least offering some solace that I had not broken my back during my brief flight.

“That’s a looooot of blood dude,” I heard someone shout above me, “You good?”

I slowly flexed my fingers, hands, feet, examining the extent of my injuries. I could only grunt in response, my pride hurting more than my body. Finding my joints intact, I slowly rolled to my side, finally noticing the sharp pain directly over my left eye; a pulsating flow of dark red blood was now visible to me under the light. I heard them scrambling above me, trying to find a way to get me out of the brambles. Their solution simple: lower another Soldier by the wrists, have me grab onto their boots, and hoist me up to the rest of the team where they waited on a knee, pulling security over my impromptu rescue mission.

The medic examined the gash in my eyebrow, whistling at its depth in feigned admiration while I looked up at him with the blood now finally beginning to slow.

“We need that sewn up before we go,” he explained, rifling through his med pack, “four, maaaaybe three stitches.”

I like to think I am a hardened infantry officer, ready for the grueling aspects of the battlefield, but the thought of field stitches without pain relief on this mountainside was a less than appealing one. These thoughts must have shown on my face as he instructed me to “man up, Ranger, pain don’t hurt.”

It is a lucky thing that we do not remember pain – well, not in itself. What we recall is its presence, its weight, the way it settles into us, the emotions it stirred while we hurt. The sensation itself I can’t reproduce, but I can tell you I remember the moment the needle pressed against the ridge of my brow, the medic’s hand hesitating for just a moment as I could almost hear him trying to decide if he should proceed quickly or slowly. The needle suddenly plunged through the tough outer skin, pushing away the stiff bristles of hair,

sinking into the raw, opened flesh beneath. There was something sickening about this moment; the needle slid through the softest part of the dermis, part of my flesh that had never touched air before, never been exposed, never known what it meant to be outside of myself. The needle moved deeper than I thought possible before finally protruding into this cavernous space where the skin had separated. For just that moment I could picture it: the point of the needle hanging in that open void while the swaged end, crimped to the suture, jutted from my skull like Excalibur stuck in stone.

I felt the sudden *clack* of the forceps as they clamped around the needle again, pushing the rest of it through the path its point had just carved out. Where the metal of the needle once resided, the suture took its place, its fibers dragging against every raw surface inside of me. Every imperfection along the seemingly unending length would snag on bits of tissue, exposed fat, tender nerves as it traversed through layer after layer of my face. He held the needle in space with his free hand as he traced the forceps back to the wound, scraping against the thread with the same metallic rasp of scissors dragged down a taught guitar string. Grabbing hold, he slowly, deliberately, pulled more of it through; I could feel the texture of every twist of the suture as it traveled down its path. Finally he ceased; I clenched my jaw, taking a deep breath through gritted teeth, bracing for the next bite of the steel, waiting for the suture to bridge the gap from one side to the other.

He was right- three stitches was all I needed and, arguably, all I could tolerate. I had to fight every instinct to twist my head away from where he held it steady. The same light that had revealed his working area in the dark now blinded me, my eyes watered at the torch's intensity. With his thumb, he gingerly pushed against the final knot, then ran it over the rest of sutures, as if testing the merit of his handiwork. A dull pain radiated from this pressure - not sharp like the needle, but subdued. Deep. I blinked anxiously staring into that small sun, trying to imagine I wasn't sitting on that mountain top as he physically sewed my face shut. Every moment the needle was in his hand it hurt, every tug and pull a fresh reminder of me being threaded back together. The only relief came when the last knot was finally tied, the jagged edges of the cut overlapping haphazardly, failing to create the perfect seal my skin had only twenty minutes previously. I was overly cautious with the wound; even light movement of the skin when I raised my eyebrows in surprise or sneezed too vigorously would aggravate it, sharp reminders my face was still healing from the ordeal. The pain associated with my fall affected how I applied face paint, where my eye protection sat on my nose, how I wore my helmet; even now I shape my eyebrows to best hide the scar, a souvenir of my short flight into the darkness.

Even when the cut would swell, pressing against the stitches, pulling taught the skin around my eye, I didn't complain. I couldn't; I knew that my words or feelings about the ache would do little to accelerate the healing process, but rather signal to my peers that I was weak, feeble, easy to succumb to the scrapes and pains of kinetic operations. Pain was a way to weed out those who didn't belong, used to expose those who merely pretended to be capable - tool that separated those who could and those who could not.

From the moment I entered the military, your worth was decided on how much you could handle, the amount you could tolerate, the load you could bare. The expectation was for us to endure, stare defiantly, unflinchingly into the face of whatever stood before us and overcome it. Punishment was physical – we were expected to run sprints nonstop until

someone threw up, our “training session” not complete until this requirement met. We spent literal hours in “front leaning rest” - the push up position - trying desperately to straighten our elbows for the thousandth time, lifting ourselves from the puddles forming below us in sub-freezing temperatures as sleet or rain fell upon our limp bodies. Even movement techniques could be used to cause discomfort or pain; low crawling involved lying completely flat on your stomach, face turned to the side making physical contact with the ground, and extending your arms ahead of you, dragging your body to advance forward to simulate moving under a line of fire. We learned how to hurt; it was *our* pain, instructors told us, we had earned it, and it was about time we enjoyed it.

Especially in American culture, pain and suffering are seen as prerequisites for growth, maturity, self-improvement. “*No pain, no gain.*” “*Pain is weakness leaving the body,*” “*Blood, sweat, and tears.*” These and so many other statements, sayings, adages invade our vernacular, celebrating struggle and hardship as necessary to success. It’s universally understood that everyone suffers through pain at some point, yet when we do, we’re told to “suck it up” or “tough it out.” Learning a challenging skill is a “trial by fire.” Even self-inflicted pain is idealized - “taking one for the team” or to “fall on one’s sword” as if pain is not just an expected outcome of some activities but essential for our betterment. We tie suffering to many aspects of our life as it is one of the few experiences shared universally across humanity, second to none in its ability to influence personal action, surpassing even happiness or greed. The key difference among these universal experiences lies in the extent in which we pursue them or, in the case of pain or suffering, the lengths we go to avoid them.

Yet there is no clear distinction between when pain is to be endured versus when pain is meant to be relieved. At what point does my suffering shift from being a testament of my personal strength to a burden that I should not have to carry? How much must I suffer before I am allowed to say, “I am in pain”? Surely at some point, the threshold must exist; a line where endurance is no longer admirable, where the pain ceases to be a measure of resilience and simply becomes misery.

When am I allowed to hurt?

I am someone who has avoided pain at all costs. I hate it. It hurts. At thirteen years old, I refused to pull out my baby teeth, already being pushed out by their replacements, as I preferred, or hoped, that they would simply fall out of my mouth. I never understood it; why does pain *have* to hurt? I remember asking this as a child, convinced that pain could easily be replaced with a giant neon sign flashing “OUCHY”; the light would garner my attention, the lesson would still be learned, the action would still be deterred, why must I suffer to understand something is bad?

Pain is just a way for the me that lives in my brain to understand that the meat machine it controls has physical problems, inside or out. Pain itself does not exist in the universe independently; neither a microscope nor a telescope can detect it, measure it, assign it objective qualities for how it is experienced. It exists in the same sense that the color red does - there is nothing inherently “red” about the specific wavelength of light, yet our eyes perceive it, and in turn our brain interprets it, giving it valance, value, and meaning. Pain is a perception. Specific receptors, nociceptors, are excited by a narrow band of physical stimuli, generating a signal that ascends to the insula of the brain. Any interruption

in this path means the brain never receives the signal, and if the brain does not perceive it, we do not experience it; there is no pain without the brain. If received, the signal is integrated with other sensory and cognitive inputs, allowing the brain to evaluate the context of the signal before assigning meaning to it. Nociception is appraised against a myriad of other signals, determining whether it is a threat, a nuisance, or something not to be sensed at all.

A strong pain signal demands a response. At its core, this response is rather simple: “this is bad, stay away from this.” Yet it is never just a signal or a response; by design, this system must be unpleasant, something we are afraid of, something we recoil from, something that makes us averse to whatever action caused the sensation. Pain is experienced to augment our actions, induce change in our behaviors, a pre-installed deterrent meant to prevent us from repeating the same nociceptive experience. So deeply engrained in us is the idea that pain is simply bad it is often synonymous with the concept of punishment itself. The meaning of the very word “pain” comes from the Greek word *Poiní*, meaning penalty, something we deserve. In our wildest imaginations, the worst fate we can inflict on someone is an infinite existence of pain: the Christian Hell is a pit of fire, the Greek Tartarus a suffocating chasm of torment, the Egyptian Duat a realm where the unworthy are unmade, their very hearts devoured by another god. The ultimate punishment for all of humanity is simply the worst feeling we can experience – pain. An unending, unyielding pain.

It should come as no surprise that pain or the desire to escape it has been a central if not primary societal concern, shaping morality, medicine, and religion since the beginning of human history. An ancient medical treatise titled *The Edwin Smith papyrus* dates back over 3000 years and is the oldest medical text on trauma, describing some of the first recorded attempts to diagnose and treat dozens of medical cases ranging from spinal trauma to lower extremity wounds<sup>1</sup>. The ancient authors suggests treatment for the physical ailment through bandaging and rest, as well as pain relief from honey and herbs. Another set of texts written in 1550 BCE, *The Ebers Papyrus*, is one of the first known references suggesting the use of opium as a remedy for multiple ailments and illnesses, noting its ability to relieve pain and quiet colicky children<sup>2</sup>.

Almost as soon as we had learned to etch into stone or press ink to paper, we were writing about why we hurt and how to make it stop. Beyond just physical pain, early writings also approached the very morality of suffering in itself. *The Book of Job* is seen as the prototypical work that explores the human condition in its relationship with physical pain, emotional agony, and even the question of self, God, and human existence. Here is the story of a righteous man, Job, who became the subject of a wager between God and Satan. A test to see whether a man could continue to love God after he loses everything. His family is killed, his property taken, his body riddled with sores, disease, suffering. All this occurred to settle the question about humanity and faith. His suffering, his pain, was not a punishment nor a consequence, but simply a way to prove a point. Here, in one of the most influential religious texts written, our author, divinely inspired by God himself, gives an answer to the question about pain: *we hurt sometimes because God says so*.

We humans just hurt. We ache, we suffer. If there is no reason - no axe was swung to break a bone, no castle wall to fall from, no discernable course or reason for why we do -

then perhaps we suffer because we are simply meant to. We deserve to, we ought to, we need to. Pain is the cost we pay for our humanity in the sense that as we exist, we hurt. Pain alone, however, is not uniquely a human quality; dogs yelp and fish thrash as they recoil from harm, the biological response to a painful situation. What makes us human is that we do not simply feel pain; we understand it, we name it, we carry it. To recognize this hurt is to suffer twice: first in sensation, then in meaning. This suffering is to be human, to be human is to sin. And the judgement for our sin is to hurt.

When pain comes without an obvious cause, we search for meaning. For much of human history, these hidden pains from the likes of appendicitis or carcinoma were interpreted as manifestations of divine judgment rather than a medical condition. In some of our oldest surviving texts, we don't read about the musings of their day or laws individuals found unjust, instead we read about the wounded seeking remedies, those who suffer questioning their gods, individuals who grieve searching for answers. And without reason, pain itself became the answer. The Code of Hammurabi described pain as not simply a consequence but rather a currency- a response inflicted as retribution, measured in equal proportion to the crime committed. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, pain was a moral deterrent, pain was justice.

This notion of pain as a consequence shaped the fundamental experience of pain for centuries. It wasn't just a sensation or an experience, rather pain was a moral verdict. Suffering was to bear a judgment from God, from fate, from the Universe itself; pain hung precariously around your neck as a hidden accusation, a physical manifestation of the sins and crimes you committed, known or unknown. Little could be or should be done when it came to pain; who are we to tamper with God's will? If so deserved, you ought to hurt, you ought to suffer - pain was the physical debt paid in full to amend for the sins you have done.

Imagine explaining modern anesthesia to the clergy of the Middle Ages, explaining we could, with a very sharp knife, painlessly cut you open, change your anatomy, and stitch you closed again, all in effort to stop the punishment bestowed upon you by God himself. Imagine proposing that the very suffering placed upon you could be physically removed by a knife, cured with a drug, paid for with your salary. It would be blasphemy, heresy, to suggest curing God's will through physical means. Anesthetics, the very idea of lessening pain was an affront to God's work. For anesthesia to be taken seriously by the public, we had to change this view – that pain was divine – and start seeing it as biological.

Understanding that pain is not earned or deserved but rather a problem to be solved has a drastic impact on our approach to treating it. Without a moral component, pain becomes a biochemical issue- something we measure, analyze, alleviate. We can quantify it introspectively, a scale from 1 to 10, to properly vocalize an internal, personal sensation into something we can objectively measure. We now understand the mechanisms that govern it, the neuronal pathways it follows, the receptors that bind its signals, the route in which it ascends to the brain. Psychologically, we understand the weight we associate with it, the experience shaped by our interpretation. The meanings we assign to pain can vary dramatically depending on context; an adventurous evening involving hot candle wax dripping onto your chest invokes a different sort of memory than one that instead involves sesame oil poured onto an overly hot pan splashing over your bare skin.

With knowledge comes a certain level of control; understanding how a channel is activated means we can also find ways to block it. Recognizing that pain is a symptom allows us to utilize it as a tool, a signal to help diagnose deeper, unseen, and often nefarious issues. We can treat pain, dilute its affects, even repurpose it as is done in therapy for trauma or PTSD. We can transform pain from a traumatic experience into something new, into something less consuming, something that no longer wakes us up in the dead of night. We know so much - which pills to take, how much to prescribe, where to place an injection; pain has been mapped, dissected, digitized, and quantified. Pain and its physical components have been broken down to a level that we can lessen the fear of it with reason, finding comfort in just the knowledge itself.

But when we see it, when we truly feel it, pain still takes us by surprise. It's easy to forget how it weighs on us, how it affects us, how badly it can change us. There becomes a point where it is no longer just a sensation- pain can become all that remains of a person. It can shape not just our view of the world, but our view of self; we become our pain, it is personal to us. We fixate on its relief; necessities like eating, bathing, living are now secondary priorities to escaping our torment. We are devoured by our pain; our brain, so focused on this break in homeostasis, even robs us the energy needed to cry out. Some suffer in this silence, not because we choose to, but because pain demands it.

Pain has tertiary, quaternary effects that spread not just organ to organ but person to person. In our attempts to soothe, to comfort, pain can become infections as the futile efforts to relieve another's suffering only deepen the distress of those who must watch, powerless to stop it. Some pain takes not just the one who suffers but those who love them as well. This wasn't the kind of pain I knew; the kind you grit your teeth to through, the kind you endure. *That* pain, I understand that pain. I have experienced that kind of hurt. But this? This was different. This was unfamiliar. I wasn't hurting, Mom was.

She called me one afternoon unexpectedly; since Dad passed, she had withdrawn from the world, and to hear from her was a surprise. I knew something was wrong immediately – she could hardly say the two syllables of my name as her speech was so interrupted from hiccupping sobs. She tried her best to describe to me her sister's, Aunt Dee's, last hours of life in hospice; I just let her speak, knowing better than to try to interrupt her. The final stages of Dee's cancer spared no limb, tissue, or organ; she was too exhausted to speak, only offering bubbling groans through the saliva that pooled in her throat. She couldn't muster the strength to swallow it, instead letting it dribble form the corners of her mouth. Yet, she found enough strength to draw blood as she gripped Mom's hand, the wedding ring she wore driving between their fingers, denying her further the comfort my mother tried to offer her.

"She just kept choking," Mom tried to explain, her despair barely kept at bay, "she couldn't breathe, she couldn't see. The nurses and doctors flew in and all she could say was 'help.'" Dee's toes curled as she thrashed her arms and head, the doctor trying desperately to give her some kind of relief, a syringe of morphine in hand.

"They just poured it into her mouth, but she fought so hard it . . ." Mom continued, pausing only to take a breath before continuing relentlessly, "she fought so hard, she just ended up being covered in it. I just begged her to try to relax but she wouldn't listen, she just wouldn't listen."

She opened her mouth to speak once more but a small cry escaped her lips instead; her sorrow, already barely contained, began to spill over until she finally broke, the woman who raised me dissolved into a hysterical mess, her sobbing escalating into inconsolable wails. I was not prepared to hear this sudden outburst of emotion from her. I didn't know humans could make the sounds that she made; it was feral, primal, the sound of wounded prey as it acknowledged its demise. I found myself crying as well, these tears not meant for my aunt who just passed, but for the woman on the phone I couldn't comfort. I was helpless as she struggled to catch her breath, her voice grew distant as I heard her put down her phone to cover her face in sadness.

I wiped my tears away angrily as she continued to weep into her hands; I instructed myself to refocus on her needs rather than my own, frustrated at my weakness when Mom needed me to be strong. "She wouldn't go," she managed to say, voice strained against the emotions finally starting to subside, "her body wouldn't let her. She hurt so bad, and she wouldn't die. I asked her, pleaded with her 'Why can't you just die?' I just couldn't see her like that, Daniel, why wouldn't she just die? Why won't you die. . ." she trailed off, the reality of Dee's suffering reducing her to these four words.

Why won't you die?

Why won't *you* die.

Why won't you *die*.

She didn't mean it cruelly- she wanted to understand why Dee had to suffer like that. Why the weight of suffering was so unevenly distributed throughout the world. Mom questioned "why her", but I saw that she was also asking, "Why me?"; she was suffering too. Pain is not a solitary thing; it does not belong solely to the one who hurts, but to those who bear witness. Pain is the great equalizer - not in fairness, but in erasure. It takes and takes, leaving nothing of who they were; it reduces us, stripping away identity, history. You are nameless in your pain; we are all the same in agony that is left behind. Pain is lasting; when Mom thinks of Dee, she does not picture them baking together as young girls. She does not see the bride she stood beside on her wedding day. Mom remembers Dee pleading to die.

But pain is meant to end; burns heal, cuts scar, infections resolve. But to suffer without relief is something else entirely. Pain is a thief, stealing everything a person ever was, leaving only the memory of those final moments as a calling card, as if taunting us to try to remember a time before they hurt.

Pain is a tyrant; it forces us to carry this memory forever. At its command, we must obey.

Pain is a parasite; it feeds on the living and the dying alike. It consumes not just the body it resides in but licks its lips at others who bear witness.

Pain is a burden; it presses down on those left behind. Our knees buckle as it settles into our bones, our joints, our mind. It makes a home inside of our grief.

Pain is a question with no answer.

Pain is a sentence with no punctuation.

Pain is—



## References

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