

A
Rare
Kind
of
Faith

a short story by
Edison
McDaniels

A Rare Kind of Faith

**By
Edison McDaniels**

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A RARE KIND OF FAITH

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I knew there was nothing I could do as soon as I saw those films. One o'clock in the damn morning and raining, but the cold that came over me as I studied those images had nothing to do with either the night or the rain. It was the dread of knowing she was beyond any help modern medicine could offer.

She was going to die.

Not right there, not even that night. But as I stared at the flat, impersonal images of her wounded brain, my mind reassembled them into something fuller, into three-dimensions that I could work with, could contemplate. It was a useless effort though. All my contemplations told me she was never going to see four years old. I hated myself for knowing that just then.

I flipped the switches on the light boxes, darkening the room. I stood for a long moment, my right hand rubbing a new crease into my forehead. It was damn hard standing in that room, and I grew a headache just thinking about what was coming. It's a difficult thing to tell somebody they're dying—it's another thing entirely to tell someone their future is dying, that all their hopes and aspirations have met a dead end. Literally.

I was in no hurry to impart the secret I alone knew. The hospital corridor was dim as I walked the hundred or so feet from radiology to the ER. Half the lights had been turned off, to conserve energy I guess. It lent the place a surrealistic look though, and in the darkness of that moment I sensed the hand of death and its long, cold fingers nearby. But a neurosurgeon, that would be me, comes to know that death is always nearby, never more than a heartbeat or two away in either the day or the night—it just seems closer in the dark. As my footsteps echoed in the empty night, I imagined the grim reaper and those hands—oh God, those hands: big, brutish, calloused, almost a foot from base of palm to fingertips, those tips with their cold, unmerciful touch. I saw the face of death too, obscured not by an executioner's hood but a mask, the kind we wear in the operating room, where the eyes alone speak for us. As I imagined it, the reaper's eyes were dark, sunken, lurking things I couldn't quite look at—some things are better left unseen, even

unimagined. Walking down that corridor, death cast a clumsy shadow—the boogeyman, the closet monster from my childhood, the eater of souls. Me.

I wasn't the grim reaper of course—just the messenger. I would deliver the news, they would fall apart, we would call somebody from the clergy to help out, she would be admitted, and the futile suffering that was the battle to save her young life would begin.

I had seen it all before, had even given it a name. I called it the Sidney scenario.

I stopped by the desk for the medical record. I had gone directly over to radiology upon my arrival and hadn't needed the girl's name then, there aren't many brain tumors lurking about the ER in the middle of the night. The first thing my eyes happened to fall upon was her birthday, which was my birthday as well. An odd coincidence I could have done without at that moment. I'm not a superstitious person, but I've always been fascinated by birthdays and the coincidences that stack up around them. Sometimes they're just interesting, like her having my birthday, May 12th. But this went beyond that. This time it was downright eerie.

This little girl was born on May 12th and her name was Sidney Berry. Sidney, like my little sister, the one who died on my ninth birthday after a long and mostly futile battle...with brain cancer.

Yeah, I've seen it all before. And from both sides.

The curtain was closed around the cubicle and I stopped a moment, either to draw a last ounce of strength before entering—or to allow them a last moment with their precious future, with all their hopes and dreams still possible. When I did open the curtain, I found a black man of about forty sitting on the single chair beside the gurney. On the gurney itself was the cutest little girl. She had olive brown skin and thick black hair combed back into a single pony tail held together with a wide pink ribbon. She wore pink pajamas to match, a one piece sort that included booties and a long zipper down one leg. She was lying over on her side facing her father and when I entered she popped up immediately and smiled at me in a way no patient before or since ever has. Her lips curled back in a pleasing grin, her cheeks dimpled, and she batted a pair of big, soulful eyes at me. Her smile was comfortably familiar from the first and I had the impression I already knew her—and that she knew me.

There was something else about that smile though, something intensely disturbing, and it was probably the reason I had been called so quickly that night. It was uneven, a subtle asymmetry between the two sides, but glaring to my trained eye. She was still beautiful, but the left side of her mouth lagged and the dimple there was mostly just a suggestion. I suspected it had only been like that a day or two at most, otherwise somebody would have brought it to her parents' attention. Parents are often the last to notice things like that.

Mr. Berry was a big man, not fat but big boned. He too smiled and immediately rose from his chair, putting his hand out to shake mine. I introduced myself and asked if Mrs. Berry was about. He said yes, that she had gone to the bathroom and would be back presently. Okay, I replied, then asked a few questions to gather a history. It wasn't terribly important that history, but I wanted and needed to establish a rapport. You can't just blurt out *I've seen the images of your daughter's brain and you might as well start looking for a coffin now*. Truth be told though, I've seen physicians do just that.

When Sidney's mother returned I introduced myself to her, leaving out—for the moment—that I was a neurosurgeon, just as I had done in introducing myself to her husband. Nobody's ever happy to see a neurosurgeon, especially when their child—their future—is concerned. I wanted to work the field on my terms just then, bring them up to speed slowly and compassionately.

We talked awhile. Small talk in the wee hours of the ER I suppose. Often this is awkward, but there was no awkwardness in that cubicle that night. The Berrys were beautiful people, gifted with the most genuine and soft manner. They made *me* feel at ease. They both were obviously well educated—he was a Navy Captain and she was a college professor I found out later—but there was nothing pretentious about them at all.

Sidney had been diagnosed with an ear infection and I asked about that. “That's right,” Mrs. Berry said. “She's been pulling at her ear a lot lately, keeps rubbing the side of her head as well.”

“I see,” I said. She's probably had a headache I thought. Kids will do odd things with headaches, just about everything except say they have a headache.

I had been leaning against the gurney all this time and now, as Mrs. Berry spoke, Sidney stood up and put her arms around me from behind. She laid her head on my shoulder as naturally as my own daughter would. She too was just three and the similarity between the two spooked me as I felt Sidney's small embrace. For just a moment I found it hard to concentrate on what her mom was saying. “Any vomiting or problems eating?” I finally asked, knowing the answer.

“Hasn't been eating well, just picking at her food. I thought it was the flu at first.” She looked at me and I saw the concern in her eyes.

“And vomiting?”

“No vomiting, but, and this is the reason we came in tonight, she's been gagging a bit,” Mrs. Berry said.

“Can you tell me about that?”

We talked some more and I tried not to appear overly concerned, but I was never very good at hiding a thing like that.

“Do you know what the problem is?” Mrs. Berry finally asked.

“Well, let me examine Sid and then we'll talk, okay?”

Sidney still had her arms around me from behind. Her father picked her up and she immediately kissed him and offered an enormous though lopsided smile. Pound for pound, I've not seen a bigger smile since and it made my heart glad. He

gently set her back on the gurney.

“Sidney, can you close your eyes tight sweetie?”

She did and I saw immediately how her left eyeball rolled upward until only the white was visible. Called a Bell’s phenomenon, it always looks a little eerie, especially in a three year old. It’s not abnormal though, the eye is suppose to roll up like that. But Sidney’s eyelid, which was suppose to cover it, stayed put. That was the abnormality.

Next I had her stick her tongue out and instead of jutting straight out, it veered to the left. Damn, I thought, ticking off a list in my head. Each abnormality served only to confirm the diagnosis and offered small comfort.

When I finished the exam, Sidney laid down and closed her eyes. Looking at her, I couldn’t help but think of my Sidney, my precious little sister, and of the Sidney scenario: the lingering torment her death became. It always seemed to me she had spent her last few weeks and months dying when she should have been living. I put the image of Sidney—both of them—out of my head and turned to her parents. I couldn’t put off what I knew any longer.

They looked at me and I at them. I can’t say that I fumbled for words. I had been a neurosurgeon a half dozen years by then and finding the words wasn’t the problem. It was the sentiment that I struggled with, trying to keep my voice from breaking. In less than an hour, this little girl had turned me inside out. She had that kind of force of personality. Some people live seventy years and never make an impact on another person. Sidney Berry was three and had an impact on every person she met.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “there’s a tumor.” And just like that, they knew. We spent some time, quite awhile really, discussing it. I told them it was inoperable, suggested they get another opinion. When we finished, I said I’d make arrangements to have her admitted.

“Why?” Mrs. Berry asked. “What can you do for her tonight that we can’t do for her at home in her own bed?”

The answer, of course, was nothing. What better place could there be for a little girl with an inoperable brain tumor than home in her own bed, surrounded by all her familiars, by her loving family? And just that quick, I knew.

The Berrys got those other opinions, but so far as I know she never spent a night in a hospital. She died in her own bed just shy of three months later, after a trip to Disneyworld and with her family at her side. She might have lingered a bit longer with chemotherapy, but that wouldn’t have been living her parents said. They had faith she was going to a better place and what they wanted to remember was the way she lived, not the way she died.

A rare kind of selfless faith that was—letting a child live in the midst of dying. It made my heart glad.

About The Author

Edison McDaniels is a practicing surgeon & wordsmith, who writes short stories, novellas, and novels when he's not incising skin. Read more about him at www.surgeonwriter.com and look for his fine & intense works of fiction on Amazon for the Kindle.

His latest novel, *Not One Among Them Whole*, is available for the Kindle and soon to be released as a trade paperback from Northampton House Press.

Join his fan page on facebook at www.facebook.com/McDaniels.author. He invites you to follow him on twitter as well, @surgeonwriter.

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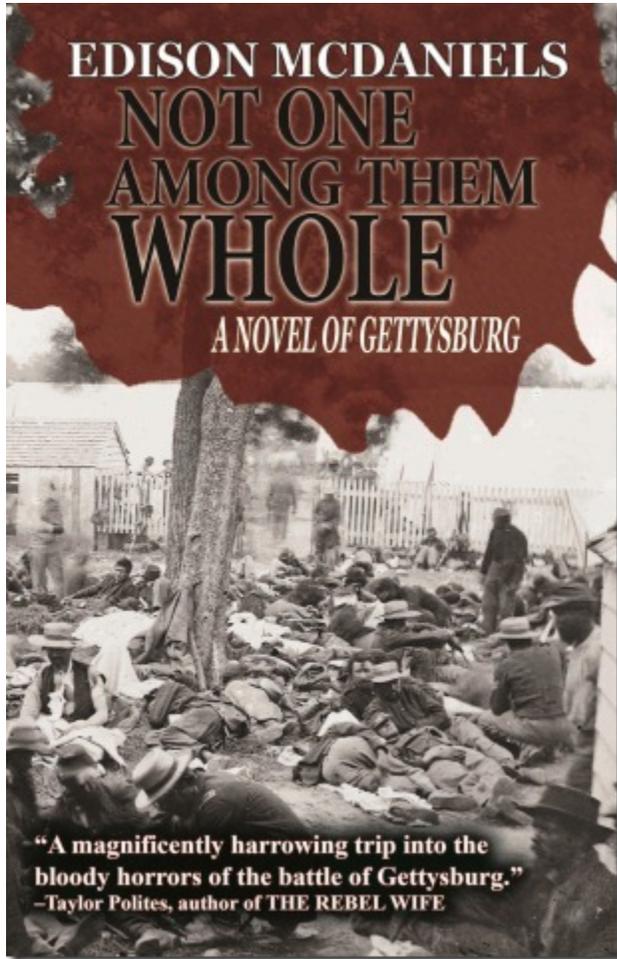
5.0 out of 5 stars

[Engaging, Heart-Breaking and Absolutely Fantastic](#) February 13, 2013

By [D. Buxman](#) [TOP 1000 REVIEWERVINE™ VOICE](#)

Format: Kindle Edition

I'm not a Civil War buff. I've always enjoyed history, but I've never been crazy about historical fiction. *NOT ONE AMONG THEM WHOLE* was the most pleasant surprise I've had in the past year. I was hooked from the first chapter. The writing is crisp, the dialogue is engaging and the plot lines are intricately woven and wonderfully timed. I would give this book 6 stars if I could. Edison McDaniels has a rare gift for honing the experiences of an epic battle into fine points of individual struggle and sacrifice. The descriptions of primitive surgical techniques nearly caused me physical discomfort at times, but I kept coming back for more since I truly cared for the characters. Although I finished the book a few days ago, I still find myself thinking about it. This is a terrific book that I will likely read again. I can think of no higher praise.



Bonus Preview of

NOT ONE AMONG THEM WHOLE: A Novel of Gettysburg

By Edison McDaniels

BOOK I: The In-Between Time

ONE

The end of the before time, and consequently the end of Cuuda's childhood and the beginning of the in-between time, came fast and without warning in the summer of 1857, on a day that dawned cloudless with the sun high in a vivid blue sky.

When the day ended, in a soaking rain this was, everything had changed.
Everything.
Forever.

“No! No, you caint put me in there. Please pa, don’t put me in there!”

Cuuda's protests, those of a little negro boy who’d only just lost his milk teeth, sounded weak and mealy. He was seven or nine years old—keeping his age was no priority and to say he was about seven or nine was good enough—and in he went, forced into the ground at his father’s own hand, kicking and bucking all the way, just up to the last moment. That last moment was, far as Cuuda could tell, the last moment in all the world and he suddenly stopped his carrying on and stared big into his pa’s face. The huge man had hold of him then, his great hands wrapped Cuuda's tiny wrists and the boy thought *don't let go pa, don't ever let go. Then, don't do this! Why ya doin' this?*

His pa's face seemed to break open then. His head tilted—as if a great weight pushed it so—and his lips quivered and pulled back, baring his gapped and yellowed teeth in a pleading, regretful grin. One eye squinted, closed completely, then opened before squinting again. Cuuda thought, would think forevermore, that his father had wanted to say something in that instant. He didn't however, and what passed between them was unsaid. Both their faces welled with tears and neither could take his eyes off the other.

Bucking again.

“Ya keep shut up now boy!” The words came out hard, like saying them was akin to cutting your own arm off. Not something you'd ever want to do, except maybe the world had gone to shit and right here, in this time and place, cutting your own arm off was about the only thing that made any sense. Tears welled anew

in the big man's eyes and that's what Cuuda would always remember, how the last time he saw his pa alive he had been crying. The only time he ever saw him such.

Cuuda opened his mouth. "But pa—"

He never saw the hand coming and probably his father had meant it like that. His hand was big and strong from working years in the field, could palm a melon and squeeze it one-handed till it popped like a ripe berry. His pa jerked his head first one way and then the other, and if he took his eyes off the boy, Cuuda never saw it. Listening was what he was doing, crooking his head to gain a better ear. The big man paused still a moment longer and looking into his eyes was hypnotic. Those eyes were a witch's brew of warmth and love and everything that was safe and Cuuda thought he could go his whole life entire without ever looking elsewhere. His pa's breathing was loud and labored and heavy. Cuuda's own eyes watered and his nose ran with snot. He sniffled and what came to him was the rank odor of an animal caught in a trap, a coon or maybe a wolf. He and his pa had caught a wolf once...

His pa's hand struck him upside his head and Cuuda's childhood ended.

He awoke later to a cold squalor. The moldy earth smell of wet dirt clogged his nose. Breathing was a chore. He could barely move his legs and even in the dark, the close confines of the box hugged him in a claustrophobic shroud. His arms were across his chest and only a few inches space separated them from the board above. He raised his head and struck that board and fell back dazed and in his mind heard his pa shouting at him all over again: *Ya keep shut up now boy!*

He almost wet himself. Then his father's words over and over again, each more insistent than the last: *Ya keep shut up now boy! Ya keep shut up now boy! Ya keep shut up now boy!*

His breath hitched in the close dark and he struggled against the box. He finally took to chewing his lower lip and somehow that made it better, forced him to slow down.

He thought, *in the hole then.*

He heard voices, or thought he heard voices. Like in a dream, the kind that comes in the middle of the black night unbidden. The kind that make a little boy piss himself cause he's shaking so bad and there's nobody around to comfort him. He had known a few nights like that.

"Where's that nigger boy o' yours?" A phantom voice. Real?

And then his mother's sweet, golden song. That was real. She sang: "Will the circle be unbroken? / By and by, Lord, by and by / There's better home a-waiting / In the sky, Lord—"

The sharp—very real—smack of skin against skin and now Cuuda did piss himself. He began to squirm in his confines, to cry, to pummel the boards of the box. Then more of his father's words came at him.

Don't ya cry boy. Ya cry, dey finds you.

He became still again, bit his lip and sucked in a breath and tasted dirt. A cruddy, earthy flavor that lingered after he spat. He took in another and felt his chest heaving, felt his parents going away, going to the *sure dead*, the place old Prosper had told him folks went when they died. A nice place he hoped.

Don't ya cry boy. Ya cry, dey finds you.

"Who they, pa?" Soft words, but they sounded loud in the box.

Toubob. Monsters.

In his mind, he walked the *sure dead* with Prosper. Neither one of them could read, but that didn't seem to matter. They found the stones of his parents. *Erasmus and Sara Monk*. They had no dates because slaves didn't get dates on their stones. Their deaths were as anonymous as their lives.

Toubob. Monsters. Or White folks. Same word for both.

They beat Cuuda's father senseless.

He heard his father wailing, heard the scrapings as they dragged him to the tree, then hung him first when his mother refused to give away her son's hiding place. Then her sweet singing again, strong and bold as ever. She could have been projecting to the heavens, but he knew she was sending her love to him. She sang and they waited for her. *They waited for her.*

"Amazing grace! how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me! / I once was lost, but now am found / Was blind, but now I see."

"That's just about the best nigger singing I ever did hear. Real sweet lady. Damn shame you won't tell us where that boy be."

"You leave my boy 'lone. He ain't hurt no one."

"Say goodbye lady."

Under the earth, Cuuda said goodbye.

A long time later—no idea how long in the silent dark—he kicked his way out of the box and rose out of the grave his father had fashioned for him. He was back a piece in the woods at the side of the road. The sun had gone away and the earth had cooled. When he came out on the road it was pouring rain and at first he didn't see them. He heard the heavy ropes complaining as they swung in the weather though, and then the lightning came and he saw them suspended in the tree like flying shades.

He wasn't big enough to cut them down and sat under the tree for the better part of two days trying not to look up except to scare the crows away. On the third day hunger and the natural tainting of their bodies encouraged him to move on.

"Boy!" someone shouted, "Boy! Y'all hold up there. Come here now boy!"

Cuuda stopped rummaging in the garbage, pulling a half eaten orange out from its depths. He turned toward the hollering voice, recognizing the toubob's low speech. He had long ago learned toubobs came in two classes: those who treated negroes like property or wayward children, and those who regarded negroes on a par with coons. The former were a nuisance, but tolerable; the latter were like mad dogs—unpredictable, with a tendency for a nasty bite.

Which is you?

He took a few reluctant steps toward the man, saw he was young, not twenty or twenty-five. He looked him over warily, the way one might do a snake. He avoided his eyes. Shoeless, Cuuda felt the cold mud squish between his toes. The same cold climbed his spine. "Yassuh?"

"What your name boy?"

"Jim, suh."

"Don't sass me boy."

"No suh. Never suh." *Don't move no closer.*

"So what your name BOY?"

Hesitation. In toubob's world, according to Prosper this was and verified by his own experience, one name was good as another. That the toubob was asking again was uncomfortable. *Ain't nuttin good.* "Most folks, they jus' calls me Jim, on account of m' pappy, big Jim." He smiled, a stupid grin that made him look simple.

"I could beat it outta ya boy."

Cuuda stood bulging his leg muscles, preparing to run. But where? He'd been running two months, every place as awful as the last. Back in the before time, he'd heard Prosper say how the world was a place with thorns, how a man could get himself dead without trying. The seer had been wise to the ways of the toubob world.

"Jim, eh?" The toubob stared at him with his head cocked at a crazy angle.

The toubob's forearms were done up with crazy wrappings of some sort. No, Cuuda thought, not wrappings. Bandages. Cuuda palmed his half orange—his orange, he had found it, wasn't about to share it with nobody—and rubbed it against his shirt like he was polishing it. He held it out. "Yassuh. Jim suh. Orange suh?"

"Do I looks like I wants a orange nigger?"

That ain't no question you wanna answer. The voice in his head was Prosper's—old and creaky like the man himself, but strong too. Cuuda listened out for that voice and kept his mouth shut and made little squishes in the mud with his toes. He was hungry in the worst way a boy can be, deep down where the taste for food is a poison that'll get you killed. He wanted—needed—to sink his teeth into the orange. The weight of it in his hand was a tease and his mouth watered. He saw now that the wrappings, the bandages if that's what they were, had come partially undone on one arm. Cuuda was close enough—too close he felt—to see something ugly under those bandages. A burn maybe, below the elbow.

"You simple boy? That your problem?"

Yeah, simple. “Yassuh. Orange suh?”

Toubob smiled. “You just a dumbshit baby nigger darkie, that’s all.”

Okay, if’n that suits ya. Cuuda redoubled his simple looking smile and stuck his tongue out like he was trying to catch flies with it. “Yassah,” he said. He bit the orange and its juices ran down his chin, over the dark skin of his neck. It would have tasted good in any other place, but here he barely tasted it at all. He just wanted to get it down, to have something filling the hollow under his ribs for whatever was coming.

“Well I could use me a dumbshit baby nigger darkie. Maybe I buy you, boy. Maybe you come with me then you eat.” Toubob stepped toward him, put a bandaged arm out. Both his forearms had been wrapped, but the wraps were dirty and old now. The one side, the one that had come undone, unraveled further. The skin under it was either dirty or charred going on black. Cuuda stepped back a pace. He barely breathed, as if chewing was the important thing and breathing came second.

“Leave him be.”

A tall, thin man in a green bowler hat stepped from the shadows.

“What’s it to you mister? I’m maybe looking for a nigger boy. Got me some work what needs doin’.” Toubob turned to Cuuda and sucked air through the gaps in his tobacco stained teeth. He was missing at least one in front, maybe more but Cuuda's glimpse was quick. “How’s about it, boy? Where your master?”

Cuuda swallowed, hesitated. His eyes went to the man in the green hat.

“He ain’t for sale,” the man in the green hat said.

Toubob eyed them both. “What?” The word came out of the corner of his mouth, as if escaping.

“You heard me. The boy ain’t for sale. He’s mine and I ain’t interested in selling.” Green hat turned to Cuuda and gestured behind him. “Get on back to that wagon, boy. Be quick about it. Ain’t got all night.”

Eat.

Cuuda wolfed what was left of the orange and looked past green hat. In the flickering light of a street lamp, he saw a painted wagon, a mural on its side. Letters too, though he couldn't read them. The paint was worn, the wagon old and tired looking. A miscellany of pots and pans and ropes hung from the wagon. Cuuda looked at toubob, then back at green hat.

“Yassuh. I’s sorry suh,” Cuuda said, and stepped toward the wagon.

“Goddammit, that ain’t your boy.”

“Prove it.”

“Ah shit, what the hell. I’ll find me another darkie.” He said it loud enough for Cuuda to hear. “Ain’t like they don’t breed like sewer rats you know.” Toubob snickered and it echoed down the alley.

Cuuda approached the wagon, biting his lip and looking back at the pair all the while. He leaned against the side of it, trying to decide if he should run or not. The green hat man was coming toward him and he had just about decided yes when

a little door opened above his head and a small creature with a face reminiscent of a man—only not—appeared. It had bright eyes and slender arms and tiny, perfect fingers. It climbed out and up and hung by its tail from a crossbar that seemed made for the purpose. A moment later it jumped onto Cuuda's shoulder and the boy gasped.

“Archimedes, mind your manners.”

And that was how Cuuda met the man in the green bowler hat and how the in-between time ended and the now time began.

NOT ONE AMONG THEM WHOLE is available in eBook for Kindle, Nook, Kobo, and other platforms now. Available in print in March 2013.
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