

# The Windswept Journal

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## Going Home

The snow flew toward us in the headlights of the bus as we climbed out of the city through the storm. There was nothing quite as wonderful as the smell of a heated intercity bus on Christmas Eve. A safe cocoon to take us somewhere we were destined to go.

I sat mesmerized by the blizzard as it surrounded us. I always loved snow. It brought memories flooding back from the days when visceral feelings could grip my heart and soul, when I felt glad to be alive. The past few weeks had been terrible. And now I was just tired of living.

I remembered a Christmas Eve long ago in my early twenties when I boarded the bus on such a night, headed for my hometown farther upstate. I had rushed late from work to New York City's 40<sup>th</sup> Street Port Authority station and waded through rivers of bundled up people as we trudged with heads down along the snow packed sidewalks. That was the night I happened to meet Fred on the bus and we renewed our old acquaintance. He sat next to me now, the author of tonight's trip.

From farther back in my mind blossomed the memory of a winter night in high school when I'd stood on a downtown corner in my hometown and let my eyes follow the steeple of Grace Church up into the dark sky among the stars. I stared upward, fascinated by no more substance than tiny little pin pricks of light splayed across a blanket of darkness, a void I'd been told was the endless universe. It was a marvel how black nothingness could titillate the emerging intellect of a 15 year old.

God was up there, or so I'd been told in my Catholic school classes. And some day I'd go home to Him. But not just yet, thank you. From the heavens beyond the top of the steeple my thoughts rushed back down to where I stood rooted in the snow, my head dizzy with the night and a girl. I had walked from the North side of the city halfway home to Cornhill and clomped through snow that stopped falling ten minutes before when the clouds gave up the sky and allowed the Milky Way to dust its light upon my upturned face.

Snow had come down all evening and piled up over a foot. Plow trucks were out to clear the roads, but the sidewalks wouldn't be shoveled until early the next morning, making the walk more of a trek. No matter, I could hike to the Arctic Circle after such an evening. She had kissed me. My world would never be the same.

In the hour after our lips met I became convinced that nothing was more important than a kiss. As simple and chaste as ours had been, it more than touched me. It astounded me. I wondered why all the men and women I saw each day didn't use their time to kiss each other over and over. Maybe I wasn't allowed to, but certainly adults had the freedom to just stop in the middle of their work or chores, throw their arms around each other and kiss. I wondered why they didn't. And of course I wondered about more than kissing. Instead, people worked at jobs they disliked, saved money for boats they would soon tire of and planned vacations that would wear out a drill sergeant. As for me, I told Fred in this monologue of my youth, given the opportunity I'd try to kiss every girl in sight, assuming I found any who wanted me. I was busy in school most days, but I could start kissing right after I finished my newspaper route before supper.

From the seat next to me on the bus Fred laughed at my improbable reverie. “I remember that feeling.”

I laughed.

“The tingle,” he said. “What it was all about.”

I looked sideways at him and held on to the back of the seat in front of me as the bus began to move more like an airplane, swerving from side to side. Past him through the window I should have seen the lights of shopping malls, but there was nothing except the agitated swirl of snow.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said. “It *was* kind of like a tingle.”

He gestured out the window at the snow. “Just like Christmas. Like going home.”

Fred was the perfect companion for this trip. In fact, it had been his idea. He was one of those guys who without much ado grew up to be a nice person. In fact, he almost certainly had been born that way.

“Fred, I’ll bet on the day you were born ... and I do remember it was in the same hospital on the same day as me—

“Don’t start that twin brother stuff again,” he said laughing, “like when you tried to get me to buy you a beer.”

“Fred, I never did that,” I said trying to appear shocked.

Now we were both laughing.

“I bet you started making friends right off the bat ... in the delivery room,” I said.

I could see that mischievous look settle in Fred’s eyes. “I started with the nurses.”

“I’m sure,” I said

“I had to say Hello to Mom first, of course.”

“You no doubt planned a party for that evening in the nursery,” I said.

“Don’t you remember it, Dave? You were there.”

“Actually,” I said, “it was early to bed for me in those days, very early”

Fred and I could always riff on any theme handed to us. But now I was feeling just a bit woozy and said so.

“Your mind is still in and out of things,” he said. “No need to worry, it’ll clear up.”

We had met in our senior year of high school when our two schools were thrown together by the Catholic Diocese for reasons that never made any sense to us. We were in different home rooms and didn’t pal around much that year. After graduation we lost track of each other while Fred went to work in the family business and joined the National Guard to get his draft obligation out of the way. I attended a small local college. Two years later in the mid 1960s we each traveled to New York City to live. I took a job and Fred moved down for a year to study mortuary science. His family owned a funeral business. One Friday night we discovered each other on the bus headed home and became friends for the short time we lived in the city.

“You must have been a hell of a kid,” I said.

“When I was a youngster,” he said, “I’d wake up early Christmas morning and I couldn’t go back to sleep. Most years I didn’t expect anything in particular under the tree, but I knew there’d be a surprise and I couldn’t wait to tear the wrappings off.”

“I know the feeling,” I said.

“All the week before I would ... tingle, just thinking of Christmas morning and the rest of the day. We’d come back from church and have a special breakfast with something extra nice from the bakery. And then a day with the relatives coming over to visit. My father would pop in and out depending on how many souls were called home that day.”

“I never thought of what a funeral director did on holidays,” I said

Fred chuckled. “The march to eternity doesn’t stop.”

“Right to your front door,” I said.

He nodded. "At least when they're down, they stay down."

"Lost their tingle," I said, "for good."

"You never lose your tingle," he said. "Never."

What I liked best about Fred was the relaxed attitude he carried, more generous and deep seated than mine. I'm sure his was real. People who got to know me soon realized I was laid back only on the outside. Inside I continually agonized over one thing or another, often afraid and very unsure of myself. But Fred's personality was always real. He had the true spirit of a man who knew himself and his capabilities. He must have faced his demons earlier in life than most and learned to accept himself. It allowed him to accept others and come to terms with the world as presented to him. No doubt that's why he so enjoyed life.

I remembered stopping one night at the Olcott Hotel on West 72<sup>nd</sup> Street where he lived with roommates from the embalming school. We planned to go out for a few beers. The 1960s was a more formal time in Manhattan and while I waited in the living room for Fred to finish dressing, a few of the many mortuary science texts that lay about caught my eye. I began to read a history of embalming. Although the Egyptians were known for their excellent embalming skills, it turns out the hot dry climate was more responsible for their success in the preservation of 400 million mummies over almost six thousand years.

"What're you reading?" said Fred as he came into the living room and stood in front of the long mirror near the front door. He fastened the top button of his shirt and tied a perfect four-square knot in his tie.

"A text book from your embalming school," I said. "Did you know that embalming wasn't often done in colonial America? But it became popular during the Civil War because Mr. Lincoln wanted the war dead preserved and shipped home to their families for a proper burial."

"Yes, I knew that," he said. "I've often thought of it when I went down to the train station for a soldier's coffin."

"Viet Nam," I said. "It's terrible and it's just begun."

"Hey" he said, "I thought we were going out for a few beers."

"Well, at least your text books are interesting," I said. "My engineering texts were quite dull."

"I'm amazed you can pick up all of that in ten minutes from a textbook," he said.

"I read all the time, Fred. Not a big deal."

"I wish I was a natural student," he said.

"Fred," I told him, "you're a natural *person*. That's more important."

And so off we went that evening. First to Patrick J. Flynn's down at Columbus Circle near the Lincoln Center and West 65<sup>th</sup> Street. And another block further west we found a bar across from The Julliard School. We took care to choose places for their pleasant surroundings and cheap prices.

But now as I stared out the window into a blizzard of white I thought of all the walking about the city I could no longer do. I would never again be a young man. And neither would Fred.

Everything seemed so long ago. Memories overtook my mind like dreams. They were jumbled and confused, perhaps because of what I'd been through in the past few weeks.

I saw my children at different stages of their lives, from babies to the present day. I saw my wife as I have always seen her. For the past fifty years she has been for me the girl I first met one night sitting across the table in a college bar. I remembered my career, my accomplishments and my frustrations and failures. There came a dream of an evening as I sat alone in front of a Christmas tree, all the lights shining out from fragrant branches. I was in a wonderful room with a huge fireplace and handsome furniture. Books lined two of the walls and I sat near the fireplace at a polished desk. But the larger part of my mind was depressed and disappointed. An agony gripped me and gnawed at my heart. The sheer contrast between my good fortune and my depression stripped me of any happiness. I

didn't realize I had a glass of whiskey in my hand until I threw it at the Christmas tree. I never drank again.

When I awoke, I felt older. My arms and legs ached, the vague familiar echoes of age.

I glanced over at Fred. Beyond him I could see my reflection in the darkened window. My face seemed much wider than I remembered and my hair appeared lighter, what there was of it. Fred didn't look a great deal older than the last time I'd been with him in early 1965. In fact, not a lot older than the photo in his obituary, which suddenly came to mind.

I glanced down at my hands and they were those of an old man with age spots, pronounced knuckles and veins bubbling up from the back of each. When I pushed up the arm of my hospital gown there were more spots, dark and large.

"Where are we going, Fred?"

He smiled. "Home, Dave."

"You mean Home, don't you, Fred?"

"I mean Home, Dave."

"I have to say I'm a bit scared," I said.

"I know the feeling," he said.

"I always thought maybe my Dad would come for me."

"He'll be there. And everyone else."

"I have to ask you, Fred. We haven't seen each other in over fifty years. Why did you come for me?"

He glanced my way with a quizzical look on his face.

"We were friends," he said. "And I was an undertaker. I still love the business. I still love to bring people home."

I thought it was very nice of Fred to accompany me on my final journey. From nowhere a thought occurred to me with a twinge of guilt and before I could stop myself I spoke.

"I was in love with your wife at one time, Fred." I wished I had caught myself before saying it. He turned and looked at me with a blank expression.

"I didn't know that," he said.

I looked out the window and there was nothing there, not even snow. "When she and I were in the Sister Veronica's sixth grade class together."

He nodded and his smile returned. "And how long did your young heart yearn for her?"

I sighed. "Until I met Linda in the seventh grade."

He nodded again, slow this time in a sage manner. "And what did my wife think of your undying devotion ... fickle as it turned out to be?"

"I never told her, of course," I said. "I was an eleven year old Catholic boy in a Catholic school with occasional thoughts of entering the priesthood. I couldn't go around announcing my love to all the pretty girls."

"You mean you were too chicken to tell her."

I laughed. "Since you put it that way ... yeah."

"I know how you felt," he said. "How does one explain such yearning?"

I knew Fred loved his wife in the same way I felt toward mine. My wife had captured my heart and defined my life. She was everything to me. The tingle in my life.

"We were both very lucky men, Fred."

"I know," he said. "We were blessed."

Out the front window of the bus the snow had stopped. I could see lights ahead, concentrated in a small circle as if we were in a tunnel. The circle of light grew larger.

"I'm down for the count, Fred. Is that right?"

"Down and staying down," he said with a smile.

“I don’t feel as though I’m ready for this,” I said.

“Sure you are, Dave.”

“I feel breathless, Fred.”

“Because you’re not breathing, Dave,” he said. “And you’re not supposed to be.”

“I haven’t ... done everything I need to do.”

“You’ve done everything you could.”

“I should have prayed more. A lot more, come to think of it.”

“Your entire life was a prayer, just like mine,” he said.

“No, I mean—“

Fred glanced sideways at me. “I know what you mean. But everything we did was a prayer.”

“Do you mean,” I said, “like when I helped old ladies across the street?”

He laughed gently. “No, I meant what you spent most of your life doing.”

“Thinking of women?”

“Not only that,” he said. “All of your yearning. For a red bicycle when you were 8 years old, to kiss every girl in sight when you were fifteen, for the courage to tell people you loved them, for your academic success, for the woman you married, for the jobs you wanted, for the success of your children. Yearning was just that reflection we saw dimly. Desire was the tingle. It was our lifelong prayer and exactly what He wanted.”

“I thought I had to be heroic,” I said.

“No,” said Fred, “each of us is just a part of the dance, the great dance of his creation. He wanted you to join it, to bring your yearning as much as you were able.”

I sighed. “You make it sound like finding my way to heaven was actually much easier than I believed.”

“That’s right,” he said. “It was.”

Rest in peace, Fred Heintz, III. You are missed.

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