

War Wounds

The boy was 8 or 9 years old. Walter could see him crossing the snowy field that lay between the cemetery and Walter's shed. The man guessed the youngster was coming from school, and a moment ago had looked up from his workbench when he heard the boy laughing and yelling into the face of the storm. Needle-like ice particles blew against the kid's face, as he kicked up the snow with his boots, making his way through the field like a young explorer crossing the Arctic wastes.

Inside his tiny shed, Walter moved closer to the window and watched the youngster struggle through the drifts of the snow, legs lifting one after another as if deeply mired in mud. To be that young and innocent, thought Walter, was truly the gift of one's lifetime.

The stomach-twisting fear began to lift a bit inside the man. He coughed and cursed the weather and wondered once again why he chose to sit out here in the shed behind the house on these days when the snow slapped down on the land like a blizzard of vengeance. But it was cozy by the little coal stove, and he didn't have to listen to his wife sigh and snort through the invented troubles of the soap opera characters she followed on the radio each afternoon. So here he was once more on a snowy day, bringing his fear out from some dark closet deep inside, where he was able to feel it again, but not see it.

Walter stayed by the window to watch the boy stumble on through the snow. The lad abruptly stopped and peered back over his disappearing footsteps. He turned, staggering back to where he'd been, and was soon flailing in the snow as though searching for something. Walter saw the boy's bare foot and realized he had lost his boot.

As the snow came down furiously, the man bolted out the door, grabbed the boy, found the lost boot and carried them both back into the heated shack. The boy was shaken by the almost violent rescue, and Walter was a bit stunned by his over-reaction to the little emergency. He coughed heavily before he was able to catch his breath. Walter didn't often

forget to limit his exertion, as he'd been advised by his doctor at the Veteran's Clinic. But he noticed the fear that seemed to arrive with the snow was now gone.

The boy looked around the interior of the little shed and thought it was pretty neat. Everything including the workbench was smallish, like a playhouse, and all of the tools were lined up precisely where they belonged on the wall at the back of the bench. The tiny coal stove pushed out a welcome warmth. After they introduced themselves, Walter put David's wet socks on the stove to sizzle and dry. They talked of school and the weather and even soap operas. Soon David could see the storm let up as he gazed out the window, a French door mounted horizontally with lots of glass panes and a wide view of the field. When his socks were dry ... actually singed a bit ... he put on his boots and continued his way home. David was pleased to find a new friend. Walter was, too.

David didn't always find Walter in the little building each afternoon on his way home from school, although he would often peer in the window, ready to wave and say Hi. Only when the snow slammed down in a howling wind with near blizzard strength did David find the man out in the backyard shed.

On such days Walter left his wife to her radio programs, lit a fire in the stove and settled down in the tiny building to be with his thoughts. He stared out over the field as the snow piled up and the fear continued to grow in his belly. His mind was pulled back to those frozen snowy days in the Ardennes Forest, where he had been one of 81,000 American casualties in the deadliest battle of the War. His mind's eye again saw the trees explode around his foxhole and the snow and dirt plume up around him as mortar shells landed everywhere. Once again he felt his limbs freezing and the terror mounting. He saw himself lying with dead buddies around him in that awful frozen field, his lips mouthing the mantra, "It'll Get Better, It'll Get Better." But it didn't. Something tore through his chest and he woke up back in a Belgium field hospital, drowning in a sea of pain. Now, a decade later, sitting in the little shed in the middle of a snow storm, the fear came back to him and he sought to meet it again as he stared out on the field. Walter didn't know if he wanted to conquer his dread or simply shine a light on the pain. He just didn't want it to hurt so much.

On those snowy days when David came across the field from school, Walter would lurch from his frightful reverie back to the present. The boy found himself welcomed into what he now thought of as a kind of man's playhouse, and he would stomp the

snow from his boots and walk over to sit near the tiny stove.

There was one particular snowy day when something new began, as David remembered it. Walter had asked casually about school and the boy pulled out his drawing pad and said he was supposed to draw something for homework. It could be anything, but he didn't know where to begin. The man took the pad, propped it on his knee. Taking a pencil from the bench, he drew a great northern moose. The likeness was quite good, and it was apparent that Walter had training. Walter gave the pad to David and showed him a few techniques for drawing animals, using triangles and circles and ellipses. David was thrilled to produce nice drawings by his own hand with this technique. Over the next few months, the boy drew 13 moose, 11 dogs, 5 cats and a cow, the latter on the day his father stopped by the side of the road to let him capture the animal in his sketch book.

Walter was rather surprised at himself, that his skills came back to him so quickly. When he took some wrapping paper down from a shelf and spread it on the workbench, ideas and old talents spilled from him as he began to doodle and draw, shading and edging his work. He wished he had real drawing paper and soft pencils and maybe sticks of charcoal. He missed the paints and pastels he had owned years ago, before being drafted and sent off to war.

David now found Walter in the shed each day when he crossed the field on the way home from school. Snowy or sunny, on rainy or windy days, Walter's renewed interest in his art began to blossom in the tiny shed by the side of the field. When David entered the little building, there was always a new sketch or drawing hanging on a wall. Eventually there were paintings of dense bright colors that suggested but didn't define their subject. David really had no words to describe the paintings, but he sensed their power and violence, and he could feel fear saturating each piece.

After the southern winds blew through the valley in April and the sun began to climb higher in the sky toward the solstice, school ended and David didn't cross the field again until autumn. He could have walked up Conkling Avenue during the summer and crossed the field to visit Walter, but when he had last stopped by the little shed in June, Walter was painting in a frenzy, as if driven by a demon or the clock. Conversation had been rushed as the man wheezed and coughed, holding his brush with two hands now, laying on the colors from dozens of new tubes of paint.

On the day school began again in September, David crossed the field and came to the shed. The man was not there. Paintings were evident through the window, but not Walter. The boy passed by on two or three more occasions before finally working up the courage to go around to the front of the house and ring the doorbell.

Walter Katowski had died, said his wife, stifling a sob and wiping away the tears. "War wounds," she said. "He had only one lung, you know. Lost the other at The Bulge," she continued. "Winters were tough on him. I don't know why he sat out there in that shed all the time."

"To paint," said David "His paintings are still there in the shed."

She looked at him as though he was crazy, but then walked with him to the little building in the back yard. In a moment they were both inside. Mrs. Katowski looked quite puzzled as she gazed at all the artwork, and she began to cry quietly. Walter's paintings were arranged in a line around the inside of the shack, as in a crowded gallery.

David noticed something about them. There was an order to their arrangement and he could sense a drama unfold as his eye moved along the line of paintings that began on one side of the door, went down one wall and over the workbench, then under the window that looked out on the field, across the other wall and finally back to the door. The objects in the paintings, whatever they were, never gained any more definition, but the colors toned down and became less garish as the line of paintings progressed. The edges of the objects softened. Imbalances came into balance and the chaos let up. The fear came to rest.

At the end of the line was a painting quite different from all the rest, but David knew it had been painted by Walter. It was somewhat larger than the others, a beautiful painting of the field in summer, as seen through the multiple panes of the shed's window. It was ... and it still is ... the most wonderfully executed landscape that David had ever seen. Viewed through Walter's eyes at last was a world at peace.

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