

## War Wounds

The boy was probably 8 or 9 years old and he was coming from school as he crossed the snowy field that lay between the cemetery and Walter's shed. At his age, the boy could think of nothing better than to be out in a snow storm, the needle-like ice particles blowing against his face while in his imagination he crossed the Canadian arctic wastes searching for a way-station or hunting camp like in the movie he had seen last weekend.

Walter looked up from his small workbench in the tiny shed when he heard the far-off sound of someone howling. Out the window he could see a boy struggle through the drifts of the snow, lifting his legs one after another as if he was deeply mired in mud. Over the wind, he could barely hear the youngster yelling hilariously at the top of his lungs, shouting into the mouth of the storm as he kicked up the snow with his boots and made his way across the field.

The stomach-twisting fear lifted a bit inside the old man and he coughed and cursed the weather and wondered why he chose to sit out here in the shed behind the house on these days when the snow came down like a blizzard of vengeance. True, it was cozy out here with the little coal stove and he didn't have to listen to his wife sigh and snort about the soap opera characters she listened to on the radio all afternoon. But here he was again on a snowy day, bringing his fear out from somewhere deep to deal with it again and again.

Closer to the shed now, the boy stumbled on through the snow and Walter watched as he abruptly stopped and peered back over his disappearing footsteps behind him. He staggered back over them and soon was flailing in the snow, searching for something. Walter saw the boy's bare foot and realized he had lost his boot.

As the snow came down furiously, Walter 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 swiftness of his rescue.

Walter was shaken by his over-reaction to the little emergency and coughed profusely before he was able to catch his breath. But the fear that had begun in his stomach when the snow first began before noon had now abated.

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 and after they had introduced themselves Walter put David's wet socks on the stove to sizzle and dry. They talked of school and weather and soap operas. David could see the storm let up as he gazed out through the window, a French door mounted horizontally with lots of window panes and a panoramic view of the field. When his socks were dry, actually singed a bit, he put on his boots and continued on his way home. David was pleased to find a new friend. Walter was too.

David didn't always find Walter in his 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 chuted down in a howling wind with near blizzard strength did David find the old man out in his back shed.

On such days Walter would leave his wife to her radio programs and settle down in the shed to light a fire in the small stove as the snow came down heavy and continuously. He would stare out over the field as the snow piled up and the fear continued to grow in his belly. His mind would be pulled back to those frozen snowy days in the Ardennes Forest where he had been one of 81,000 American casualties in one of the deadliest battles of the War. His mind's eye would again see the trees exploding 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 as he lay with dead buddies around him in that awful frozen field, his lips moving to 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 sitting in the little shed in the middle of a snow storm, he tried to meet the fear again. This time to conquer it? He didn't know.

When David would come across the field in a snow storm, Walter would lurch out of his frightful reverie back to the present. The boy found himself welcomed into what he now thought of as a sort of

man's playhouse and he would stomp the snow from his boots as he walked over to sit near the tiny stove.

There was one particular snowy day when it all 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, anything, but didn't know where to begin. The old man took the pad, propped it on his knee and drew a great northern moose so well it was apparent that he had some training. Then he showed David a few techniques for drawing animals using triangles and circles and ellipses. David realized that nice drawings were possible from his own hand. That school year he drew 13 moose, 11 dogs, 5 cats and a cow on the day his father stopped by the side of the road to let him capture it 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, old talents and ideas spilled from him as he began to doodle and draw, shading and edging his work. He wished he had some real drawing paper and soft pencils and maybe some charcoal. He wished he had the paints and pastels he had owned before being drafted and taken off to war years ago.

David now found Walter in the shed almost each day when he crossed the field on the way from school. Snowing or sunshine, rainy or windy days, Walter's renewed interest in his art began to blossom out back in the little shed. When David would enter the playhouse, there would always be a new sketch or drawing. Eventually there were paintings of dense bright colors that suggested but didn't define their subject. David really had no words he knew to describe the paintings' subjects, but he sensed their power and violence and yes, he could feel their fear.

After the southern winds blew through the valley in April and the sun later climbed higher in the sky toward the solstice, David's schooldays ended and he didn't cross the field again until autumn. He could have walked up Conklin Avenue and crossed the field to visit Walter during the summer, but to tell the truth when he had last stopped by the little shed in June, Walter had been very busy with his paintings, almost in a frenzy, and their conversation had been a bit rushed as the old man wheezed and coughed and held his brushes with two hands.

Sometime after school began again in September, David crossed the field and passed the shed, not

finding the old man there. He could see paintings inside, but no Walter. He 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 only had one lung, you know. Lost the other at The Bulge. "Winters were tough on him," she said. "I don't know why he sat out there in that shed in the bad weather."

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

She looked at him as though he were crazy, but walked with him to the little shed 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 he scanned 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 entrance 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 paintings progressed and 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. If the brush work hadn't been similar, David would not have known it was painted by Walter. It was somewhat larger than the others, a beautiful painting of the field in summer, as seen through the multi pane window of the shed. It was and it still is the most wonderfully executed landscape that David had ever seen. It looked like the world at peace.

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