REFLECTIONS

War Stories

The Captain sat in his vinyl recliner, green, like the muddy water of the Mississippi. He sipped from a small whiskey glass, his favorite bourbon, *Early Times*. He sat in his chair, feet propped in the air, the glass half-empty, the liquid tawny, ice cubes small and translucent. He, more animated and talkative with each sip. Frank and I sat on the carpeted floor, at the Captain's feet, all three of us full of fried fish, potatoes, and ice cream, stuffed full, bellies bloated.

Fighters swarmed in the air, acrobatic, tumbling. Streams of smoke and sounds of machine guns and cannons filled blue skies. The Aleutian Isles, Okinawa, Hiroshima, the South Pacific, PT boats like Kennedy's 109, destroyers and aircraft carriers, amphibious landing craft, and kamikazes—the sounds and smells of faraway places, of things of war danced in our minds, twirled us about the living room, made us dizzy. The ceiling above us, like a huge movie screen. We could never get enough of those stories, never enough of those war stories. And the Captain sat, just sat, telling those stories.

"Tell it again, Captain. Tell about the kamikaze," I said.

The Captain leaned forward, lowered the foot support of the chair, bent toward the coffee table, and reached for his *Lucky Strikes*.

"I've told that already."

He leaned back in the chair, his shirt open at the collar. His chest hair red and thick.

"Tell it again, one more time," I pleaded.

War Stories. That's what my brother and I called my father's memories. Captain we called my father, when he told those stories, when he was drunk, which were the only times he told us anything about himself. As far as we were concerned, we wished he would drink every evening. It wasn't often enough for us, my brother and me, but plenty too often for my mother.

I didn't know it then, but those stories carry me, carried me through his sickness, carried me through all the crap with his surgeon and the hospital. When he was dying in the hospital, when I had to argue with the surgeon that my mother, brother, and I wanted to have the ventilator turned off, it didn't occur to me to tell the surgeon about the Captain's war stories. The boat, the glistening fishing rods and reels standing neatly in a row in the garage, even the money seemed unimportant after he died. But I'm glad I have those stories, I'm glad he told us how he wanted to live, and how he wanted to die.

"Please, please, come on Dad—I mean Captain—just one more, one more time."

By the age of ten, I had perfected the manipulation for more stories.

He took the open package of *Lucky Strikes* in his right hand, tapped the package upside down on his left palm. Several cigarettes popped onto the floor, white cylinders floated on the blue shag carpet. He picked them up, between his thumb and index finger, placed one in his mouth, and tried to stuff the rest in the package. Not able to line each cigarette into the package, he tossed it and the remaining cigarettes onto the coffee table. He reached into his shirt pocket, checked his pants pocket with his other hand, then saw the lighter resting on the coffee table, next to the ashtray. He reached over, picked up the lighter, a silver wafer, and in a single flick of his thumb, a yellow and blue flame turned his face a faint yellow. His large nose and prominent brow jumped forward, and filled the room.

"Come on, please one more time," Frank pleaded.

The cigarette fell to his lap as he brought the flame toward his lips. Just before he burned himself, he released his thumb from the lighter. The flame disappeared.

"Shit!" he said in disgust at his clumsiness.

He reached down on his lap, and put the cigarette back into his mouth and lit it. He took a drag on the cigarette, and leaned back in the recliner. With his other hand, he held his favorite glass, lifted it to his lips, and poured the last of the bourbon down the back of his throat. He chewed on a fragment of ice. His eyes sleepy, half-closed, sleepy from the fried fish, beer, and french bread swimming in the late night whiskey. All was quiet, as we waited for the story to continue. Silence, except for the sound of my mother's footsteps in the bedroom above us.

"Please, one more time. Tell it again," I begged.

"So we heard this plane overhead, more than one plane. You see, they were swarming, like bees to honey. Suddenly, you couldn't see nothin', when almost out of nowhere, three, maybe four planes barreled down. You couldn't tell which one might be a kamikaze. Those Japs, they were crazy."

"Yea, then what." Frank, my older brother, tried to move the story along.

"Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! They were shootin' their machine guns. We were shootin' back. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! I'm tellin' you, it was crazy. Those kamikazes were crazy. No one could figure it." One more time, he told of the Jap plane, the explosion on the deck of his ship, fire, men shouting for help, the smell of burning fuel, the sight of wounded and dead sailors.

"The worst part though was Marty Gauchet, a Louisiana man like myself."

He hesitated, his eyes turned inward.

"You know the story."

"Come on Captain, tell it again. What happened to Marty?" I asked, as if I was hearing the story for the first time. We could never get enough of Marty Gauchet's death.

"I found him in the galley, the galley that I visited two minutes before the kamikaze." He said in disbelief.

"I could've been right alongside Marty Gauchet. It's a strange thing. How you can be here right this minute, telling this story, then walk outside, get into your car, and be killed two streets over."

He lit another cigarette.

"What did he look like? Tell us what he looked like." Frank interrupted his reflection.

"You guys know damn well what he looked like. I don't need to describe for the tenth time what a guy's guts look like when his belly's wide open, and he's bleeding to death." He was annoyed.

He had told us before how Marty Gauchet's belly was ripped open, how you could see his guts, how his blood spilled onto the shiny waxed floor of the galley, how the Captain tried to cover the hole with a towel, loosened Marty's shirt and tie, how he thought for sure Marty Gauchet was dying, and how he then died, in the Captain's arms, just like in the movies.

Other sailors died too. But, the Captain stayed with Marty Gauchet, until the medics came, then he helped move the bodies of the dead sailors to another place on the ship. The next day they buried the nine dead sailors—at sea, he said.

"What happens to them? When they drop them in the water, what happens to them? Do sharks eat them?" I loved the story of sharks in the water.

"They're dead. It's just their bodies. It doesn't matter what happens to them."

The Captain was annoyed. He didn't like the thought of sharks eating the remains of his buddy. I could tell that, even then, before he grew wrinkled and silent.

"It matters to me," Frank stated.

"Yea, me too," I chimed.

"That's the way they do it in the Navy, they bury their dead at sea." The Captain loved to teach.

"You can't bury someone in water." Frank had that look—gotcha!

"I bet the sharks had a feast of a lifetime." I imagined huge pointed teeth crashing around my leg.

Above us, water ran in the bathroom sink, seeped through the pipes, and turned the moment of silence into a seaside. Waves crashed down the side of the pipes between the walls. The Captain looked toward the ceiling. My brother and I shifted our attention skyward.

"Time to take cover," I said.

The Captain nodded with a mischievous grin.

"It's time for those boys to go to bed. Al, do you hear me, it's time for bed!" My mother yelled from above. The sound shot down the stairwell, spreading in the smoke and faint light of the living room.

"Al, do you hear me? Send those boys to bed. They've got to go to Mass in the morning."

"OK," he shouted back up the stairwell.

"We're just about done. We're at the end of the story."

"They've heard those stories. Do you hear me? Send them to bed," she yelled.

"OK, OK, they're goin'. They're goin', right now," he said.

He then turned toward us, his voice raised, "You boys go to bed, you heard your mother! Time for bed!"

He then winked, and we all sat for a moment in silence, conspirators.

"Jackie, you hear. They're goin' right now."

He winked again.

The words jumped out of the living room, into the hallway and up the stairwell to their bedroom. Silence. Then the creaking of wood floors above us. Then again quiet. The three of us looked at each other and laughed.

Frank reminded us about the last time our mother came running down the stairs, angry, telling us to go to bed, that we had to go to school the next day, that we needed our sleep.

"Remember her boobs. How they popped out of her nightgown?" Frank grinned.

"Yea, I said. They were like cantaloupes."

"Cantaloupes, try watermelons," Frank countered. We loved to joke about my mother's breasts.

The Captain lifted the glass to his mouth, swallowed a tiny fragment of ice left in the bottom of the glass, then handed me the glass. He winked. The Captain held his hands in the air in front of him, not speaking, pretending to pour from the *Early Times* bottle into the glass, and then nodded in the direction of the liquor cabinet. I walked over to the cabinet where the liquor was stored, stealth-like, creeping, as if my mother, hidden in the darkness of her bedroom above us, might see or hear me. I poured the clear brown whiskey into the glass. The familiar odor jumped to my nostrils. I turned my back to the living room, took a sip, and added some cubes of ice before returning to the living room.

"That's all I get," the Captain said, with a slight smile, taking the glass from my hand.

"Tell about the kamikaze again," I said. "One more story."

"I never understood those kamikazes. We thought those pilots were crazy. And there's nothing more scary than a crazy man with a weapon. Sure, it made good military sense."

Frank asked what did he mean. What did the Captain mean by "good military sense?"

"We—the Americans—had to always be on guard. There was very little you could do to defend against a kamikaze. One minute you think you are being shot at, you shoot back, and then suddenly, out of nowhere, the damn plane comes barreling down, straight down at your ship, at your friends, at you, straight to death!"

He paused.

"Crazy."

The Captain sat back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. Footsteps again.

"Al, send those boys to bed. I'm not telling you again," my mother yelled.

"Are you drunk?! Damn it Al, I asked you not to be drinking and keeping them up so late. Go to bed! We've got Mass in the morning. I don't want to come down there, damn it. Go to bed, damn it."

She came half way down the stairs. Her words growing louder. After the last "damn it," she retreated back to her room, stomped on the floor—our ceiling—and then silence.

"Why did they kill themselves?" I asked, ignoring my mother.

"Crazy, I guess. The common wisdom was kamikazes did this for their emperor, proof of their love for their country."

"Yea, but what good is that after you're dead?" Frank challenged the Captain.

"A man likes to control his destiny. When you're losing, better to go down in glory. Better than losing and being shamed."

The Captain said a lot more that night. Nothing you could do, he said. Just try to take cover, hope it didn't land on you, not that you wished it would land on someone else's ship. Nothing you could do, he said. Just cover your head and try to be brave. Said he didn't understand how a man could do that. He didn't like being helpless, where there was nothing you could do to protect yourself. He said it was inhuman to act like a kamikaze, even in war. He believed a man needed to control his life, control his destiny he said. Destiny. That was a word he liked to talk about when he talked about kamikazes. He said kamikazes scared the hell out of him.

He lifted the glass to his lips, took a full swallow, and rolled the whiskey down the back of his throat. Two cubes of ice sat in the glass, partly melted, shifting in the bottom of the glass as he set it down on the carpet next to the recliner.

"Light my cigarette."

The Captain handed me a cigarette and the lighter. The steps from above returned. I placed the cigarette between my lips. The taste, bitter. I struck the hammer of the lighter several times before it ignited. A few drags and the cigarette was lit.

"Here it is, Captain."

I handed it to my father, coughing.

The footsteps moved across the ceiling, a closet door slammed, then heavy steps, mad steps, fast and purposeful came wind-like down the stairwell. My mother screamed at us to go to bed. She came all the way down the stairs this time, her breasts snug behind her robe. She told the Captain he could sleep downstairs since he was so drunk. He could just sleep downstairs. Even if he could make it up the stairs, even if he wanted to, even if she wanted him to, which she didn't, he wasn't to come up to her room. He could just sleep downstairs. She retreated back up the stairs.

"Another one. Just one more," the Captain whispered and handed me the glass.

"Fill it up, just once more" he said and winked, his speech slurred, words sloppy, stumbling in the air.

My brother said he was tired and went to bed, after saying how our mother's boobs didn't pop out this time. I filled the Captain's glass half-way, and took another sip as I handed it to him.

"Do you like it?" he asked, handing the glass back to me.

"Go ahead, have another sip."

I grabbed the glass with two hands, and lifted it up to my mouth. The burning liquid tasted warm and bitter.

"Pretty good, Captain." I said, handing the glass back.

"Go ahead, have another."

I swallowed, then handed the glass to the Captain.

The Captain, stumbling on his words, dropped his cigarette from his mouth.

"It was OK for men to stay up late," he said.

"Men don't need as much sleep as women," he said.

He'd say "women" like they were the enemy. When he was telling war stories, when he was drinking *Early Times*, we were men, we needed less sleep. I never could figure out why we needed the same amount of sleep as women on nights when he wasn't drinking *Early Times*, when he wasn't telling war stories.

"Men don't need so much sleep. Now women need a lot of sleep. They need their beauty rest."

He loved to say "beauty rest."

"Men should get up before the sun, it's better for your health to get up before the sun, especially for men."

He had a lot of theories and ideas and wise sayings about men, about women, about life and death. The Captain was a philosopher when he told his war stories, when he was drinking his *Early Times*. A regular philosopher, Frank and I would say. The Captain seemed to have ideas on everything. Nothing escaped his ears and eyes. When we talked about illness, he was a regular Dr. Ben Casey. When we talked about history, he was smarter than Winston Churchill. And when we talked about the daily news stories, Walter Cronkite took second seat.

"One more glass," he said and fell to sleep, in the big chair, before I half-filled the glass one more time.

My mother flew down the stairs, one more time, yelled at the Captain, yelled at me, one more time, and said leave the Captain in the damn chair, let him sleep it off. No breasts popped out this time either. I brushed my teeth, and returned to the Captain, snoring, eyes shut tight, remote, on some distant island, in some previous life.

The room was quiet, only the Captain and me. The ashtray rested on the carpet, next to the recliner. He smelled of whiskey, tobacco, and fish.

"Pour me another one, just one more," he whispered as I tried to lift him from the chair. He tried to get to his feet, stumbled, sleepy drunk, quiet drunk, helpless. I put his arm around my shoulder. We walked side by side, the wounded Captain and me, down the hall, to the spare bedroom, the one where no guest ever stayed. I helped him sit on the side of the bed. He rolled back, his head hit the pillow just right. I lifted his shiny, black Navy shoes—that's what we called them—onto the foot of the bed, untied his shoes, removed his black socks, loosened his belt, unbuttoned his pants, pulled down his zipper. I walked around to the end of the bed, and tugged at the legs of his white linen Navy pants. I went back to the side of the bed, shook him by the shoulder.

"Captain, wake up," I said.

"Wake up, gotta get undressed before you sleep."

He groaned, opened his eyes half-way, touched me on the head, gentle-like.

"You're a good son," he said, then lifted his butt off the mattress and pulled his pants down to his thighs.

I went back to the end of the bed, and tugged at the pant legs again, and folded them over a chair. I unbuttoned the three top buttons of his shirt and removed his tie, and placed it over his pants. I pulled a blanket from the closet, covered him up to his chin. He was sleeping again. I kissed him on the cheek, his whiskers bristling from the half-day of growth. The smell of fish, of whiskey, of tobacco filled his breath. I turned off the light above the bed.

"Goodnight Captain," I whispered as I left the room.

And whispered it again after the surgeon removed the tube in his throat. Removed the tape pressed against his cheeks, untied his hands from the side of the ICU bed. And left me, my mother, my brother, sitting quietly behind the vanilla curtains, kissing his motionless body.

As I closed the door of the bedroom where no guest ever stayed, I heard the Captain grumble, "Goodnight sailor."

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