An Old Soldier's Warp and Weft

A memoir, by FWT

Introduction:

Norman McLean, author of the novella '*A River Runs Through It*' (better known for the celebrated 1992 film version), did not publish that memoir-based work until he was in his seventies. Presumably, it took the wisdom of that age for him to strike the right tone in writing about difficult memories.

I was in my mid-fifties when I first attempted to write a memoir about my late father. At that time, I had time off work for the healing of a broken bone. During the recovery, I collated notes taken over many years and sketched out a rough plan. But I could not find the right tone. To borrow a Zen analogy— I failed to ride the bull home— let alone transcend it...

Nearly seventeen years later, I have revisited the rough notes of that abandoned project. This version is briefer than that of my earlier design. Even at seventy-one, I struggle with getting the right tone. Yet the writing has illuminated a few dark corners— an incidental effect. The primary aim was simply to overcome the taunting of unfinished work…

Identifiable names (notably, those of pet dogs) have been changed or alphabetized. Otherwise, this is a work of non-fiction— to the extent that any memoir based on contemporaneous notes and old memories can possibly be.

-FWT, June 2023

One: War Stories

1

It was in the late 1980s during his recovery from cancer surgery at the New Brunswick DVA (Department of Veterans' Affairs) clinic that my late father took up needlepoint. He first thought it a woman's craft— but my mother said he found it less unmanly than "laughter medicine" or group prayer— which were among the alternate therapies on offer. Before leaving hospital, he made wall hangings of an eagle and a Union Jack. In the same phone call, my mother said the old soldier was starting on hooking rugs…

In another call several months later, my mother mentioned an unusual rug my father had completed. He had worked on it in the waning light of late summer on the deck of their rustic camp on Lake Makadavic. Apparently copied from the design of the Nazi flag he brought back from Europe at the end of the Second World War, it featured a black swastika…

"No one would want a thing like that. I'll just have to get rid of it. Do *you* want it?"

It was about eight years later, two nights after his funeral, that my mother posed that question… My daughter, MT (then twelve), and I were with her in the living room of the old house just hours away from flying back home to the west coast.

My mother had spoken at length of her dreary responsibilities in the coming weeks. There were papers to be signed. There were personal items like clothes to be given away. There was property to be sold. Shameless offers, she said, had already been made on his Ford truck and ATV "even before his body was cold." Then there were the many things to be sorted out. There were a few sentimental keepsakes— but a lot of stuff to be trashed.

"He always kept things like old electric razors in their original boxes with their guarantees," my mother said.

My father was not a typical hoarder. According to my mother, the many boxes in the cellar were neatly arranged. She also mentioned there were multiple boxes at their camp. Those would have to wait for sorting until the camp was opened up in late spring. She said that most of his crafted items—including the swastika rug— was stored in the shed there.

I never directly asked, but somehow my mother assumed that as his only son, I should inherit his war souvenirs. I would certainly not have objected if my elder sister wanted them. She lived in the province and had remained dutifully close to our parents through the years… She might want to hand them on to either of her two sons who could be interested in maternal family history. The son and daughter of my middle sister, who

lived in Ottawa, were still too young to have shown any interest in the war service of a grandfather to whom they may not have been close. But the two sons of my eldest sister (then in their twenties), had probably spent far more time in visits with their grandfather over their lives than I had spent in his proximity since childhood. In living far away and scarcely visiting— I was uneasy about claiming his war relics. It felt dishonourable…

Still, I wondered whether his war souvenirs— along with his soldier's pay books and old mortgage deeds— were still in the metal box at the back of the bedroom closet. If so, there would have been a thrill in just opening it without the childhood terror of being caught in the act. Yet so soon after the funeral, that seemed equal to the shamelessness of the villagers making offers on his truck… The better approach, it seemed, was to wait until MT's next visit with her Nana in the summer. I could ask her to bring back a few mementoes of her Papa… As for my mother's question as to whether I wanted the swastika rug—

"I'll think about it and let you know," I said.

It would be another eight years before any of the war souvenirs would come into my possession. They would arrive in the luggage of my then 13-year-old son, MH, returning from a summer visit with his grandmother in New Brunswick. The swastika rug was not among them. I was not disappointed— but still curious about what had become of it…

A decade after his passing, I try to imagine what he could have been thinking—sitting in his deck chair in front of his beloved camp— methodically stitching out that rug…

The work could not have been done in some alcoholic haze. Apparently during cancer treatment, he was forced into sobriety. Perhaps it was stitched in bitterness. For one who so valued rugged independence, the invasiveness of the cancer surgery must have been humiliating…

Maybe his mind was on politics. Maybe every jerk on the yarn felt like a tightening of the noose on the neck of perfidious government. In earlier days, he was mum about political affairs– believing that to be his duty as a civil servant. Still, grunts from behind newspaper pages snapped open with both fists were plainer than words. The Conservative Party of Canada was never conservative enough for him.

Yet apparently in his latter years, he was sometimes given to mordant, self-deprecating humour. Perhaps that was the mood in which the swastika rug was hooked. Maybe it was intended as a prank… Of course, having only sketchy reports from my mother in phone calls— I can only speculate.

Although there was time— and opportunity—we never reconciled. Yet I want to remember my father for more than the angry apparition that still sometimes appears in dreams. I can never stare down that apparition, but I am too old to shirk from it…

At the same time, I want to honour what is honourable. To paraphrase the oft-quoted funeral eulogy of Mark Anthony in '*Julius Caesar'*— I do not wish that the good be "interred with his bones". Most certainly, I do not want to wield the shovel.

Still, I cannot ignore the swastika rug…

2

Strands for any possible unravelling of it, stretch back to earliest memories:

In the 1950s, World War Two was as fresh in mind as the 911 attacks are today. For boys too young to remember, there were toy army sets and American war comics where the bad guys were 'krauts and Japs.' Almost everyone's father had been in the war in some capacity— but few boys could boast of a father who had "seen more action" than could I. No other boy I knew could claim that their father had landed in Normandy on D-Day.

Yet very early, I sensed a connection between my father's war experience and his binge drinking. The worst episodes were dutifully covered up. Yet sometimes liquor warmed him to become what seemed to be his best self— animated and even darkly funny… When I sensed such a mood, I sometimes asked:

"Tell me about when you were a soldier, dad."

No doubt from time immemorial, little boys have listened to war stories at their fathers' knees. Probably through the ages, most have listened as did I—in morbid fascination. At the age of six or seven— I crouched by his chair, picturing the gruesome scenes with half-closed eyes…

By my teen years, I had stopped speaking much with him apart from asking for money. Still, I continued hearing his old war stories along with the usual subjects of his paranoic drunk talk. In those moments, I typically stood in a doorway, pretending not to be interested… Yet the fragments of his war anecdotes heard from childhood to early teens are like unerasable videoclips deep in the hard drive of memory:

'…He and his buddy jump out of a jeep, which rolls driverless down a hill… Dipping from the sky after it, like a hawk with stretched talons, is a German Stuka… Bullets zing along the road as my father and his comrade jump for the ditch…'

More than once my mother came into the room, interrupting: "What do you think you're doin'—ravin' like that to a kid?"

"Ravin"" was a word learned very early. It meant not to pay attention to the crazy shit that often came out of my father's mouth when he was bingeing. Only rarely did my mother use it in a playfully scolding tone. That tone seemed to indicate the rare occasions when my parents were getting along…

Yet the war stories— although heard only when my father was liquored up— seemed important to remember. I even had a sense that he wanted me to remember them. He might even have hoped I might eventually record his stories. At least in me he had an audience—unlike when he talked to himself when drinking in the kitchen in the middle of the night…

Decades on, I am humbled by the tender ages of World War Two volunteers like my father. He was only nineteen when he signed up. When I was a smart-ass college kid, he was with the Canadian army in England, bracing for the expected German invasion.

Even in awe of the maturity of that generation—I cannot sentimentalize that those boys

were primarily moved by patriotic duty. In the evolutionary sense, defying death is what young males naturally do. In absence of war, young men race around dead man's curve, dive from cliffs or do triple hits of acid.

For my father's generation, rallying to the call may have also seemed a rite of passage. Their fathers and their uncles choked on poison gas drifting over the trenches in the Great War… The previous generation's courage perhaps seemed a challenge they had to match… Along with fulfilling tribal honour, enlistment also offered excitement, camaraderie— even sexual opportunity. The possibility of never coming home was not likely at the forefront of the thoughts of many of those young men showing up at the recruitment centres…

As for my late father: when war was declared, he was working in the kitchen of his father's restaurant. He had dropped out of high school the previous year having taken his failure in algebra as a verdict on unfitness for further formal education. He probably felt that a future depending on a strong back and calloused hands would shame his clerical clan. In that context, the opportunity to serve his country in a world war must have seemed a godsend…

A couple of times (in boozy animation), he spoke of first hearing of Canada's declaration of war on Germany. After listening to the radio address by Prime Minister King on September 10th, 1939, he excitedly called up to his mother, coming down the stairs.

"This is nothing to be happy about!" she scolded.

In another version of the same anecdote, his mother slapped him. Even if he hadn't been slapped—my father said he deserved to be. In his excitement, he failed to remember that two of his maternal uncles had been soldiers in World War One. They never came home. My father said that up until the late 1930s, a letter with blurry postmark or an unexpected ringing of the phone sparked hope in my grandmother than one of her brothers might still be alive. Officially listed as missing in action— they were likely blown to bits…

'…He is behind the wheel of his truck driving in a convoy into newly liberated Nijmegen, Holland. An old man wobbling ahead on a bicycle falls into the road. My father slams on the brakes [in each telling, the floor was stamped harder] *all but certain that the poor old Dutchman was run over… Then after a suspenseful moment, the face of the old man rises up from below the hood of the truck. My father jumps out of the truck and helps the old man to his feet. "Canadese soldaat— danke, danke, danke!" the old man grins.'*

"A German column woulda rolled right over the poor ole bugger," my father said.

3

The house where he grew up was in the same New Brunswick village he came back to after the war. Up until their passing in the early 1960s, both my paternal grandparents lived in that same tidy white clapboard house—just a short walk from my father's "shack by the railroad tracks"—one of his sardonic expressions.

As a child, I thought it curious that my father called my grandmother (whom I remember only as a groaning invalid) "mother". He did not seem to relate to his "dad" with the same Edwardian formality. Perhaps my grandmother's city family believed that in wedding a former lumber camp cook who ran a village restaurant— she had 'married down.' Perhaps she had encouraged her brood to regard her as a 'lady.' These are mere speculations….

Among his eight siblings, my father was the black sheep— a black-haired child in a fair-haired clan. In his last years of school, he apparently had good grades in English, but submitted to being streamed into shop classes— which he resented…

The cushioned footstool and an oak end table which my mother displayed in the living room were products of his school carpentry. Yet through his adult life he never kept carpentry tools. Perhaps working with his hands reminded him of the jobs he had to do before the war: kitchen work, stocking shelves in his brother's store, even shoveling snow on the railroad extra gang.

It wasn't until the late 1940s that he got his break. Despite the want of a high school diploma, he was given a chance to write civil service exams. That led to the job he held until retirement: a customs officer at the border crossing six miles from the home village. He never forgot that as a war vet, he befitted from 'affirmative action' decades before the term was coined…

'...His Battery comes into a nearly empty village in German territory, newly liberated from the Nazis… After taking down the swastika flag from the deserted school, they find in a classroom, the bodies of some villagers. There is a girl with braids and a blonde boy—both with faces twisted in the rictus of cyanide…'

I had once assumed that my father's middle-distance stare was an effect of war… But from anecdotal snippets heard from my mother after his passing, I have gathered that the old soldier may have always lived mostly inside himself. She said that his elderly mother once told her that he didn't talk much as a child— but he loved to garden. As a boy, he turned a swampy patch behind the family shed into a bountiful vegetable garden. Every spring thereafter until the passing of his elderly parents— except for the interruption of the war years— he planted that same garden…

He was never a joiner. For a time, he was a member of the village curling club but quit, probably after having taken offence at some supposed slight. Much earlier than that, he stopped going to the village legion. He only started marching with fellow vets on Remembrance Day in his final few years— perhaps having decided that he wanted a Legion-themed funeral. He never went to church. That was *not* because he didn't believe in some Calvinistic version of hell…

To the end of his days—he took his greatest pleasure in rod and gun. In no hunting season of my childhood did he fail to get a deer. While many villagers took fish and

game with little regard to laws or limits— my father strictly obeyed the regulations. His adherence to the limits was more than just the awareness of consequences for the reputation of a customs officer caught breaking the law. Before the era of environmentalism, he appreciated the 'balance of nature.' He almost always hunted and fished alone. Much more than the sport, he enjoyed the solitude of the woods.

'… *His company stops to bivouac for the night behind the front in the Belgian countryside. He beds down in the pitch black between two blanketed forms of presumed comrades… Waking at dawn, he discovers that he slept between the corpses of two German soldiers…'*

In concluding that oft-repeated anecdote, he once said:

"Nothin'— nothin' in the world— stinks like a dead human bein'… The smell— you just can't imagine it!"

Yet imagine it, I could. In my early childhood, the very words *'German'* and *'human'* sounded malodorous…

In another memory from about the same time, I am watching my father shaving while getting ready to go to work. Our first house by the railroad tracks lacked a bathroom, so he had to plug his electric razor into the wall socket behind the kitchen table…

I watched in fascinated while he removed the cover of the razor and blew the whiskers into the palm of one hand.

"Think you'll ever shave?" he said. "You never know."

From my sitting on the floor perspective, I watched him turn towards the kitchen sink.

"It looks like dust," I said.

"Yes, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,'" the old soldier intoned. "That's what we're all made of. That's what we'll all going back to."

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Two: Betrayal

1

I have sometimes wondered what might have been the happiest period in my late father's life.

Like anyone spared excessive deprivation or abuse— he must have had some nostalgia for his early days. The only anecdote I recall him telling of his childhood was of catching hell from his bewhiskered grandfather. The old man happened to be in the outhouse which was a target of rocks thrown by my father and some other kids. As for his teen hijinks— his buddies or his girlfriends— I heard almost nothing. My impression is that his enlistment in the army saved him from the aimlessness common in young men at the end of the depression…

As a soldier, his experience of the terrors of war were squeezed into the few months that followed D-Day. For most of the war years, he was in training in England. I do recall him once or twice looking meditatively into a glass of Moosehead before speaking warmly of English pubs and visits to London. Perhaps his fondness for remembered England of the early 1940s was behind his request for his coffin to be draped in the Union Jack…

Still, letters he wrote to a sister-in-law (copies of which I first read just a year before his death) reveal his hopes of settling down on home soil. Perhaps like most young men at war, thoughts of a good life awaiting a triumphant return helped him through the darker days. Yet probably more than many young men— he was prone to believing he was undeserving…

Even given his pessimistic bent, I think there must have been times in the 1950s when he savoured what seemed the bounty of victory… He was back in his home village with a secure job, a family and robust health to enjoy the outdoors. Even under the shadow of the mushroom cloud, those years could well have been his most satisfying— at least to the extent he was wired for any contentment…

During the 1950s he probably felt that the international order was in steady hands. Eisenhower, his former Allied Commander, was US President. Ike's Vice President, a former Navy man, also was a figure whom my father trusted. I recall him once mentioning that his elder sister, a naturalized American, told him that apart from his baldness— he looked a lot like Richard Nixon. The old soldier was tickled to hear that.

In the late 1950s, it must have been reassuring to him that Tories were in power both in Ottawa and in the New Brunswick capital. Yet he was probably not an initial supporter of Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, whose prairie populist style was not the sober-grey anglophile conservatism that appealed to my father. Still, I vaguely remember waking up to excited voices from the living room on the night in 1957 when Dief swept into power…

At home in sobriety, my father was always wary of direct expression of his political views. Yet by his reactions to the TV on election nights when the Conservatives lost— it was obvious that his hatred for the Liberal Party of Canada was visceral. That bitterness, felt by many Anglo-Canadian men of his generation, almost certainly went back to the war years.

A few times, with tongue loosened by Lamb's rum (his favourite spirit), I heard him speak bitterly of "the French" who refused to voluntarily serve in the dominion's war effort. Even when conscripted for home duty, they "took to the woods" or were "hidden by priests". Yet the Liberal government of Prime Minister Mackenzie-King supposedly did little to enforce conscription or punish deserters... The old soldier believed that boys who volunteered in 1939 for overseas service bore more than their share of sacrifice. He thought it ironic (although he didn't use that word) that it was mostly English-speaking volunteers who fought and died to liberate France…

Of course, his version of history failed to take account of the fact that few Quebecers looked to France in a manner similar to that which many English Canadians of that era looked to 'Mother England'. Of course, for most *habitants* of *'la belle province',* France was as distant as England or Germany…

Even if willfully blind to that, my father certainly would have known that *Le Régiment de la Chaudière* and the North Shore regiment of Acadian New Brunswick preceded his own into the line of fire on D-Day… Yet stuck in his craw was the idea that "the French" had no loyalty to Canada— yet used the threat of separation to cow successive governments (usually Liberal) into catering to their demands. That bitterness wormed forward through the decades…

In breathing the same air, I must have absorbed something of my father's anti-Liberal resentments. In early childhood, I would amuse maternal relatives in their farm kitchens in Carleton County by spouting out in scorn the names of Liberal politicians. Until the age of reason, I parroted an execrable Tory mentality...

Many years later, during the federal bilingualism debate, I once heard the old soldier grumble: "Why should they [the French] think they can run this country? Do they think we forget we beat them on the Plains of Abraham?"

If Conservative power in the late 1950s gave my father any comfort, that was temporary. In the early 1960s the Liberals were back in power both federally and provincially. My father seemed to clench teeth when New Brunswick's first Acadian premier appeared on TV. He seemed as much needled by Louis Robichaud's accent as by a resentment of the

rival tribe nosing deeper than his own tribe in the public trough…

Yet he had more contempt for the Lester Pearson government in Ottawa. Along with multitudes of older Anglo-Canadians, he was infuriated by the replacement of the old flag with the "red rag" maple leaf. He felt that in their eagerness to appease Quebec, Liberals were desecrating Canada's British heritage. For veterans like my father, the retirement of the Red Ensign (with the revered Union Jack in the top right corner) was a desecration of the emblem Canadians had "fought and died under"…

When in 1968 Pearson was succeeded by Trudeau— disdain turned to detestation. My father and the new Prime Minster were nearly the same age but could well have been born on different planets. One was a Quebecois born into old money. The other was an Anglo Maritimer without a high school education. One obeyed the call to arms while the other got an Ivy League education and aimlessly roamed the world during the war years. For the former, the latter was an embodiment of arrogance rooted in cowardice…

In the eyes of my father, no Prime Minister before Trudeau had so openly championed the unswerving first principle of the federal Liberals: catering to the whims of Quebec in the fear of breaking up the country…

"Let the bastards go," my father muttered more than once before the flicker of TV news…

That sense of grievance seemed to matter not because it was supported by fact— but by how powerfully it was felt…

2

Apart from embittering experience, the old soldier's limited exposure to media in those years must have shaped his political bent… His source of news was the daily '*Telegraph Journal'* of Saint John, New Brunswick— supplemented by news from local TV and radio. The sole TV signal within reception range also originated in Saint John. Meanwhile, the kitchen radio station was permanently set on the private Fredericton station… The few times I tried to turn the dial of that radio to the (albeit faint) CBC signal, my father would grumble and turn it back…

Along with much of New Brunswick's means of production in that era, both those stations were owned by provincial overlord, K.C. Irving. Nevertheless, my father accepted Irving's sources of information while being suspicious of the assumed liberal bias in Canada's public broadcaster…

He could sometimes be cynical. I recall his reaction to a segment of *'This Hour has Seven Days,'* the popular CBC TV newsmagazine of the mid-1960s. On that Sunday evening, the program featured a debate as to whether Canada, having so little independence from the USA, might be better off becoming the fifty-first state. The teaser introduction showed a bulldozed building— supposedly a Canada Customs' post— collapsing in dust.

"Yeah, to hell with it," my father muttered from across the living room. "Tear it all down!"

Yet however skeptical of domestic national unity, he was not amused by Yankee swagger… He was particularly annoyed by the Americans' self-glorifying portrayals of World War Two. When an American war movie appeared on TV, he would leave the living room in a scoffing 'tsk'. He was particularly annoyed by '*The Longest Day'* (1962), the Hollywood version of the D-Day invasion, staring John Wayne. Over its three-hour length, the movie made no mention of Canada…

He was not a reader of many books, but he probably would have enjoyed Shirer's '*Rise and Fall of the Third Reich'*, a best seller in the early 1960s. Yet any history of the war by an American had to be suspect…

The only book about the war I recall seeing near his living room chair was *'Memoirs of an old Sweat'.* It was by a Canadian veteran who was a columnist for the '*Legionary'* magazine. For years, that yellow-covered paperback remained under the lampstand on the TV side of my father's chair. Apart from the *Legionary'* the magazine rack on the left side of his chair held copies of '*Reader's Digest',* and in later years, *'Time'*.

Despite his wariness of American bluster, he got that subscription to '*Time'* soon after it launched a 'Canadian edition'. That consisted of four pages of Canadian content stapled under the front cover of the regular American edition. Still, along with the international coverage— '*Time'* offered articles on music, books and the arts. Even my little world was thereupon enlarged by the weekly magazine published by Henry Luce, advocate of the American Century…

It was sometime in the late fall of 1963, just after the Kennedy assassination, that my father left the latest '*Time'* on the coffee table folded to an article I was expected to discover. The article was about a musical group from England consisting of four young men with funny haircuts. That was several weeks before the Beatles first appearance on the Ed Sullivan show.

Perhaps like many Canadian veterans who spent their early manhood in training in England, he had a soft spot for 'Mother England'. On leaves from his training camps—he got around the island—visiting London several times. His war letters reveal that he dated British girls.

In the first few weeks of 'Beatlemania', my father seemed pleased that English pop stars could be as popular with Canadian kids as greasy American teen idols like Elvis…A few years before Sgt. Pepper psychedelia and Lennon's bed-ins for peace, the Beatles looked benign…

Yet that innocence was short-lived. Before the end of 1964, the pop music invasion from "swinging England" seemed to be morphing into something sinister. The new bands had names like the Animals, the Kinks and the Rolling Stones. In place of shiny mop-tops

and choir-boy grins was shoulder-length hair and feral sneers. Defiant youth began to copy and amplify the crazy styles. Soon American bands were outdoing the Brits in outlandishness. The wild music seemed to promote dope, sex and hatred of parents. Anti-Vietnam War radicals joined in the brainwashing of gullible teens… American flags were burned and hippie deserters streamed north to pollute Canada…

That was the 1960s as my father saw the era. Forty years on, I have no more sympathy for that characterization than I had as an adolescent presumed to be one of the sheep in rebellion…

Yet now much older than my father was at the time— it is easier to understand the embitterment of a middle-aged veteran feeling that the upheaval of the social order was creeping like poison gas into his own home. What was anyone of his background to make of psychedelic music throbbing from behind a sullen adolescent's bedroom door?

Very few middle-aged men who grew up in the depression and went to war in their teens could fathom how youth raised in plenitude could possibly be so ungrateful… My father was certainly not alone in that era among veterans who asked themselves amid their bewilderment: "Is *this* what we fought for"?

3

Many vets may have asked themselves that same question much earlier: even back in 1945 or 1946 within hours of stepping back on home soil.

One notable dramatic portrayal of the unease (if not disillusionment) of homecoming is William Wyler's '*The Best Years of our Lives'* (1946). Although the setting is middle America, the film captures something of every soldier's struggle of readjustment to civilian life— the brief exhilaration and the crushing letdowns…

In watching that movie, I've wondered about my father's experience in the days after disembarking from the troop ship in Halifax harbour. (Hard to imagine how it must have felt— stepping onto ground he thought he might never see again). Perhaps his excitement mounted in the train ride back to New Brunswick. Even if there had been boisterous drinking with fellow soldiers, he would have been looking out at the landscape he fervently missed. Perhaps his heart was pounding as the train wound through the woods near his home village...

Upon arrival, I imagine him in khaki uniform shouldering his duffle bag into the passenger car doorway… Whoever was at the train station to meet him, would have offered embraces and slaps on the back… He would have received grins and handshakes all the way down the platform and across the tracks to the waiting car… It must have seemed unreal— passing though familiar streets for the first time in five years. Stranger still would have been entering his parents' house. Maybe its familiar smell seemed a little peculiar…

Perhaps like the characters in '*the Best Years of Our Lives'*, he was eager to get away for a drink… If the first venue for that was the local legion— everyone would have wanted to buy him a beer… Yet the glow of a hero's welcome would soon turn to a lurid light. Even on that first night back, he might well have been catapulted into the arc of the crash. It may have started in some glib questioning about the war ('*How didya like those hot French gals?' 'How many krauts didya kill?'*)

More than a decade and a half thereafter, I would sometimes wait in the car for what seemed hours parked across from the Fredericton Legion while he was gone for "one quick beer." I wondered why he never drank at the Legion in our home village. It now seems likely that he made that choice within days of his homecoming…

It is not hard to imagine that on first morning back in his boyhood room, he woke with a dreadful hangover… Yet worse than any nausea would have been the reminder that he was twenty-six-year-old, soon to be demobilised— with little education and no job prospects… Meanwhile, he faced his uncertain future in an era before expressions like 'culture shock' were coined or readjustment counselors—outside of family or clergy— even existed. Yet after a week or so of extending laurels, his village expected him— along with fellow veterans— to resume his life as though nothing had changed…

Of course, no serviceman or woman can be unchanged by war. No one comes back with the same eyes. My father, like most of the others, would have been bothered by things that previously escaped his notice. He probably always hated inane chatter and overbearing bullshitters. But I suspect that in his coming home, his loathing of such types deepened. Even if he had always been a little shy, it had to have been the war that turned him so grimly inward....

In July 1996, six months before he died, I took a video-camera along on what was to be one of my last visits to the home village. I had hoped to record my father reminiscing. I was not particularly interested in hearing him recite his old war anecdotes. Those nuggets were nearly as fossilized in my memory as they were in his. I was hoping more for details about his homecoming. Unfortunately, before the end of the first day on that last visit, any hopes of recording history were dashed by my own surrender to claustrophobia.

So among all the disappointments of the visit, was the loss of an opportunity to pick up on something I remembered him once saying, back in the early 1960s:

"I shoulda lit out," he had muttered. "Goddam it— I *should* have! I shoulda gone west."

Was it possible, I wondered, that in later years he be got some consolation in the fact that I had "lit out"?

4

'You don't want to worry about me bringing a Scottish lassie home with me after the war…'

That is a direct quote from a photocopy of a photocopy of a letter my father wrote to his sister-in-law in the early 1940s. My mother passed on to me a sheaf of those photocopies (some barely legible) in the mid-1990s. The most arresting sentence in that one letter is the one that followed the first one quoted: '*I have been out with a few of them* [girls] *over here but they are not as nice as our own Canadian girls…'*

Having better pay than their British counterparts, Canadian soldiers apparently had no difficulty is finding willing British girls to date during those years. Judging from the photo of a jaunty lad in uniform, my father at twenty-four probably had more going for him than just his soldier's pay … But maybe he found the British girls a little hard-edged— a little too eager for a ticket to North America. Meanwhile, it could have been fantasies of Canadian girls—pure as the virgin snow he missed— that got him through the dreary English winters…

Within a few months of his return, he got a nineteen-year-old New Brunswick girl in the family way. She had been a waitress at the lunch counter at the village railroad station. My mother and two of her sisters, farm girls from rural Carleton Country, all married World War Two servicemen within a year of those young men's homecoming…

My parents' marriage certificate lists only my mother's sister and her new husband, a returning sailor, as witnesses in their civil wedding at St. Stephen, New Brunswick. No parent of either bride or groom was in attendance.

I have long suspected that my father disappointed his mother by not 'marrying up.' It seems no coincidence that my paternal grandparents never met my mother's parents. In any case, the tendency of baseless haughtiness in my father's clan was something of local village amusement… Still my paternal grandmother apparently grew to like my mother who in later years, helped in the invalid old woman's care.

Sunday afternoons of my early childhood often involved a brief visit with the paternal grandparents. Their dim-lit house tended to be a gathering place after church for paternal uncles, aunts and cousins. Before leaving, my mother would ensure that I shook the hand of our octogenarian grandfather and that I gave our bedridden grandmother a peck on the cheek. Since my father did not attend church, he tended to make his regular visits to "the house" (as he referred to his childhood abode) at other times.

In contrast to those regular— yet rather formal— visits with paternal grandparents, a few times a year, my sisters and I would accompany our mother on extended stays at the rural homestead of my maternal grandparents in the St. John River Valley. The small family farm with chickens, pigs, a milk cow and a draft horse (my grandfather hauled pulp wood into his late sixties) was a world apart from the paternal grandparent's house. In no visit

to the farm can I recall the presence of my father. Perhaps he resented being reminded of where my mother grew up…

Maybe my father felt he did not get the “pure as the driven snow” bride of his wartime fantasy. His disappointment was usually borne in brooding silence. During his binges, it could burst out in paranoic “ravings” …

Long before he hooked his Swastika rug— he was tormented by imagined betrayals…

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Three: Fang and Claw

1

On a few weekend afternoons in the early 1990s, my wife and I were visited by my father's youngest brother who lived in the Fraser Valley, about an hour's drive away. A retired military man in his early sixties then working as a prison guard, he would usually bring along a sixpack of cheap beer. While drinking four or five cans to my one or two, he would talk about the New Brunswick village where a generation apart, we both had grown up. His primary interest was updates on his older brother's health. From his own sources of gossip, he usually had more information than did I…

In one of those visits, I recall his reaction to news passed on by my mother in a phone call: that my father would need radical surgery to treat his spreading cancer.

"Ya know," my uncle winced, "it probably wouldna gone so far if he'd seen a doctor earlier. But then your father didn't believe in doctors!"

He went on to say that the old soldier had once told him that nature should always be allowed to take its course. When his younger brother asked him to expand on that broad assertion, my father apparently asked: "Does a deer that breaks its leg out in the woods have a doctor?"

That information did not surprise me. My father was not a reader of literature but would have loved Jack London's stories. The theme of pitiless struggle for survival in a harsh clime would have strongly appealed to his grim intuition… Most at ease in the woods, he had always believed in the justice of fang and claw…

My late father loved dogs. Had he more self-confidence he might have trained sniffer dogs for customs inspection—an opportunity he once declined.

He certainly intended to train and breed Bobby— the certified pure-bred American Eskimo which was the first family dog in my memory. Sadly, Bobby had barely reached maturity when he got away one bitter January night, chasing after bitches in heat. I was just coming in the door from ice-skating when the phone call came that the body of our fluffy white dog, run over by a car, needed to be picked up from the caller's driveway. The news was devastating for the whole family—especially for my father. He vowed that if we were ever again to get a dog— it would have to be a spayed female mutt…

The opportunity came in the spring of 1963 when one of my friends asked if my family might be interested in taking a puppy from the litter of his older sister's mongrel. That puppy was a part cocker spaniel which my mother named Princess. She grew to a lovable pet with a thick black coat and gentle eyes…

In first bringing her home, I had sworn to be responsible for her care. Yet within a year, the novelty of having a dog faded with the interests of pre-adolescence. By then, Princess's primary loyalty had already been directed to her reliable source of food and attention… My father not only fed her but took her for walks in the woods. Whenever he was in the living room, Princess would stretch devotedly at the foot of his chair…

Like any obedient pooch, Princess was housetrained as a puppy, but when about five years old, she inexplicably began to have 'accidents'. The porch took on a uric stench… The poor dog was plainly suffering from something beyond her control. Yet in an era where the services of vets were sought mostly for horses and cows—nature had to take its course…

Princess used to have the run of the house but she was increasingly confined to the porch. On warmer days she was kept on a chain anchored to the front steps. The dooryard became a mine field of dog poo. At least in her final year, she was not beaten for her messes.

Still haunting a half century later, is the image of Princess greeting me every afternoon on my return from school. She would rise painfully, the chain rattling as she thrashed her tail. More than often not— I would bound up the steps— ignoring her…

My mother continued cleaning the porch and my father buying dog food— but he gave gruff warnings:

"Why to hell do we have a dog that no one's payin' attention to? Maybe I'll have to get rid of the damned thing!"

Perhaps in teen insolence, I shrugged my shoulders.

It was a warm day at the end of September when I came home from school to find Princess absent from the steps. Her chain was also gone. Inside the porch, my father was sitting on the fusty sofa. His face was flushed. On the floor beside him was a half-bottle of cheap sherry.

"I shot Princess today" he said, staring blankly out into the driveway.

Stunned, I crouched down. Voice cracking, I asked how it happened. After a long sigh, the details my father droned out seemed more gruesome than any of his war stories…

He said that he had not intended to shoot Princess when he drove off with her in the early

afternoon. Anticipating her first walk in weeks, she apparently wagged her tail eagerly and jumped into the back seat. He said that he threw his rifle in the trunk only as an afterthought. Hunting season was just a few weeks away and he wanted to check the accuracy of his rifle's sights.

When he parked inside a wood road, Princess ran up ahead, frisky to be off the chain. Still, she kept squatting to pee. That, said my father, was the harsh reminder that the porch would get even stinkier in the long winter ahead. He said she seemed to be happy–– so it looked like as good a time as any "to put her out of her misery."

He went back to the car for his gun. Princess was far ahead on the trail sniffing at the leaves when he crouched and took aim. After he pulled the trigger, as he later put it, "all hell broke loose."

Either his aim was a little off or Princess jerked up her head at the last instant. In the crack of the rifle, Princess began running back to him howling insanely. Her muzzle was half torn off and blood was spraying. He said that in the seconds before he could aim and fire again—the terrified creature was at his legs—begging her most trusted human for help.

"The way she howled and looked straight up at me. It was god-awful!" In concluding, my father shivered and unscrewed the bottle—one of many he would empty over the next few days…

It was late in the following spring that he spent another short vacation on a binge… When I came into the kitchen on one of those afternoons, he surprised me.

"Let me show you somethin'," he said with his rummy smile.

Uncertainly, I followed him out to the inner porch. From the floor he picked up something round and greyish white. It was about the size of a baseball.

"Know what this is?" He dropped it into my hand.

At first, I thought it was an Indian artifact like the ancient stone scraper he once found in a brook. As I squeezed the thing, he looked out the window.

"I went back to the place where I shot Princess last year," he said. "There were just a few bones left. That was in the middle."

"What is it?" I shook my head.

My father blew out a long breath. "It's a kidney stone. That heavy thing was in her bladder all along." Eyes crinkling, he stared back at the window. "Maybe she could have had an operation. I could have taken her down to the vet in St. Stephen. I just don't know why I didn't!"

The kidney stone went into one of porch drawers along with screws, spare hinges and shotgun shells. It remained there for a few weeks until my mother threw it away...

Forty years later, I try to remind myself that in that distant time, the emotional 'toughness' needed for mercy killing was even regarded as a mark of manhood. That message was popularly reinforced in Disney's *'Old Yeller'* (1957) in which a boy is forced to shoot his pet dog which was bitten by a rabid wolf in the very act of saving the boy's life…

In any case, that was a time when the putting down of sick or unwanted pets was almost always done by the owners. My father was no more stoic in accepting that 'responsibility' than most other men of our village. But he was likely different than most others in the deepness of his private belief in the law of fang and claw. Yet even in that grim appreciation of the pitiless struggle for survival, I suspect that the shooting of Princess haunted my father as much as did his memories of war…

When my kids were little, for bedtime stories, I sometimes told them about my boyhood experiences. In that context, they have heard the sad stories of both Bobby and Princess. Of course, I spared them the grisly details. In concluding the story of Princess— I told them that their grandfather treated Cleo (short for Cleopatra), like a queen to make up for not having treated poor Princess better. The girls knew Cleo from their summertime visits to New Brunswick. In a photo taken on the Makadavic lakeshore, the old soldier looks equally protective of dog and grandchildren…

Cleo outlived my father by a couple of years. As my mother told it: when he was borne out on a stretcher to an ambulance on his final night— Cleo was whining and licking his hand…

2

One of my eldest daughter MT's sharp memories of her Papa, as she called her grandfather, was from a visit when she was only eight. Both she and my younger daughter, TE (then only six), had spent nearly three weeks that summer with their grandparents at their lakeside camp. As MT told me on the phone the day after, the incident began with an injured raccoon "hanging around the garbage can". The unlucky creature had been attacked by an aggressive country dog.

I found MT's description of the incident curious enough to note down afterwards in her own words:

"*Nana* [her grandmother] *tried to chase that raccoon away… Its tail was all chewed off and its eye was popped out. There were flies all around it. When she told Papa, he went for the shot gun— but it got away..."*

"Before supper, TE was out playing behind the camp and she saw it tryin' again to get

into the garbage can.... This time papa got the gun in time. He missed the first shot. It was really loud! He had to shoot again. The second shot went right through its mouth. TE didn't dare look— but I saw it. It was really gross!"

"Papa picked it up with a shovel and threw it in a hole Nana dug across the road. She made sure we didn't touch the body but we buried it together. Nana helped us write out R.I.P. on a paper. That means Rest in Peace. We put the sign on top of the grave with some flowers. TE buried a strawberry plant in the dirt…"

As I listened to my daughter speaking in the New Brunswick accent of her grandmother (which she retained for a few days after coming home), I thought of the poor raccoon. The flies on its bloody tail must have driven it half-mad. After the first deafening report of the gun, even blinded, it must have tried to scamper away. In the horror of a fellow creature's unimaginable suffering in its final seconds of awareness—I could not help but be reminded of Princess…

At the same time, I knew the old soldier took no pleasure in killing. He probably thought he was doing his duty—protecting his granddaughters and Cleo from a possibly rabid animal… Still, the notion of rescuing a distressed wild creature would never have entered his mind. Shooting the raccoon would have seemed to him a simple case of *helping* nature take its course…

I still wondered whether watching his little granddaughters putting flowers on the wild thing's grave might have touched the old man's heart…

3

MT's story of her Papa putting a raccoon "out of its misery" —brought to mind a nearly forgotten incident that predates the shooting of Princess:

At the end of the summer before I turned fourteen, I went on a day-long excursion with my father to a remote stretch of the Ste. Croix River. With just over a month before the start of hunting season, he wanted to scout potential "deer-yarding" territory. Along with a bottle of rum, he brought along his Remington 30-06. He said he needed to adjust his sights.

Due to her entanglement with a skunk at East Grand Lake earlier that summer— Princess was left at home. I tagged along because I was soon to get my first bird-hunting license. Most notably, by that age I found my father in the glow of alcohol far more accommodating than when he was cold sober…

From gravel roads in hillbilly Charlotte County, we turned into a couple of wood roads that dead-ended. My father finally found one wood road (almost grown over) that led to the bank of the river which forms the boundary between New Brunswick and Maine. With the Ste. Croix running at its late summer low, we parked right on the bank.

It was a sultry afternoon, and I felt like taking a dip. I went into the woods and changed into my bathing suit and my father got a canvas chair from the trunk. I went down to throw rocks in the water and he sat silently sipping from his bottle amid the river's calming flow.

The river was too shallow for swimming, but for several minutes I crouched down waving arm in the warm water. When I came back up the bank, he was leaning over the back seat of the car, slipping the rifle out of its case…

"Think you could handle this?" he asked.

While I already had permission to use his 16-gauge shotgun in the upcoming hunting season, he had never before invited me to fire his rifle. Up to then, he had assumed that his 30-06 was too heavy for me to hold up with one arm, and the recoil too strong… Of course, I wanted to prove otherwise.

With the rifle forestock balanced on a tree stump, I took aim at a drift log caught in an islet in the middle of the river. The log was pushed up at an unusually sharp angle, probably by spring flooding.

"Push the butt firm against your shoulder," he said from behind.

My eyes slightly blurred as I squeezed the trigger. The crack of the rifle startled and the kick did sting. Unsupported by a firm grip, the barrel had slightly wobbled.

"Did you hit what you were aimin' for?" His tone suggested disappointment.

"Not sure."

"Was it that log stickin' up?"

I nodded, handing over the heavy gun.

He lifted it to his shoulder with ease. Just as when I watched him cleaning and oiling that gun in at the kitchen, I was struck by his gentleness with the thing. In finding just the right spot to grip, he seemed to almost caress the forestock… In one fluid motion he locked on his target, fired and lowered the barrel.

"Hard to tell from here where I hit it," he said.

"I'm gonna go see," I said.

Hoping that I had not missed, I waded over to the islet. The water was chest deep but warm and the current not too strong… Scrambling over rocks and driftwood, I caught sight of the two yellowish bullet holes in the log … So, my one-armed aim wasn't so bad after all! I bent over the log and stuck fingers in in the neatly formed holes.

Suddenly, like a deer in the crack of a twig, I felt alarm. I was aware that my right side— my dripping empty sleeve— was squarely exposed to the view from the shore… Turning to my left side, I saw my father was standing by the chair, cradling the rifle. He was grimly smiling…

At that instant, I felt what seemed a telepathic apprehension: Did I not *appear* to him like a maimed creature— best put out of its misery? Did it not cross his mind just how *easy* it would be to drop me with one clean shot? I also sensed that he would quickly dismiss such a dark thought—but it would leave him feeling guilty…

With left side turned towards my father, I carefully eased my way over the slippery riverbed back to the shore. I went to the back seat of the car for the towel. When I turned back, he was strapping the rifle back into its case— still with his grim smile...

Of course, I can never know what was crossing my father's mind that afternoon he watched me wading to the middle of the Ste. Croix River… Ironically, the trill of danger I felt could be evidence of my inheritance of *his* susceptibility to paranoia… Still, the incident is somehow entangled with the memory of the injured raccoon and the shooting of Princess…

4

"Have you heard of '*Mein Kampf*', dad?"

It was in the fall of 2003, after returning from one of her last visits to New Brunswick, that MT (then eighteen years old), asked me that question. She was at the computer desk randomly looking at pictures pulled up from an Encarta CD. One was of the Nuremberg rally.

"I certainly have," I said. "But I've never cared to read it."

"Nana has a copy in English" she said, scrolling faster.

"Where in hell did she get it?" I asked, knowing the answer.

"It was Papa's. Nana found it when she was cleaning out the storage shed at the camp."

"What did she do with it?"

MT had already moved from Encarta back to MSN Chat.

"Hum? Oh, I'm not sure. Think she was going to throw it away..."

So, in that moment, another strand of the Swastika rug was revealed…

Just what *had* the old soldier been looking for in Hitler's poisonous polemic? He was not a broad reader of history. He would not have sought it out for scholarly research any more than for the pleasure of being scandalized by obnoxious ideas…

For him, probably just getting his hands on '*Mein Kampf*' was a private act of defiance. The act of reading words written by the figure presented through his lifetime as the personification of evil— might have provided a new thrill of defying shibboleths. Perhaps it was the cancer that had uninhibited him to dare explore a forbidden text…

Whatever might have grabbed him in those pages, I wondered whether he had been struck by the sheer malevolence of the idea of Aryan supremacy… At least, he should have recognized just how deeply at odds Hitler's obsession with race was with his own loyalties… There was no evidence whatsoever that it mattered to my father that three of his grandkids were of mixed heritage. All the photos of my kids with their Papa during summer visits show a mutual affection…

I rarely spoke with him from the 1970s onward but guess that his privacy about politics never changed. I cannot imagine that he ever adopted the style of the American hard right. He would never have joined a fringe party, worn a hat with a jarring slogan nor displayed one on a bumper sticker… Cautious Canadian, his attraction to elements of fascism had to have been a private affair…

Yet it occurred that examining his personal copy, could provide real clues. Perhaps there were dog-eared pages— even underlinings. Any traces of what my father lingered over would be so revealing! In that moment when MT casually mentioned its existence, I thought of asking my mother to save for me, that copy of *Mein Kampf* mildewing in the rafters of the camp shed… Yet well before our next phone call, I knew that either she— if not her second husband– would have thrown it away…

5

My father was certainly not alone among men of his generation who stewed before the TV news— especially during the 1960s. Spectacles such as that of hippies cavorting at Woodstock could well have reminded them of the smiling boys and girls in 1930s' newsreels of Nazi youth camps. In TV images of a world coming apart at the seams— legions of those vets probably asked themselves: "Is *this* what our comrades died for?"

In latter years, especially in sickness, my father could have been just one of many old vets needing a balm against the bitterness of a world changed beyond recognition…

In that thought, I recall a village neighbour who was visiting my father, *circa* Christmas 1970, for a seasonal toddy. Back from college on a holiday visit, I chatted with the neighbour while my father was in the bathroom. Even in that brief time, somehow the topic involved his soldiering days. In speaking of the Nazis, the vet (then in his early fifties), drunkenly declared:

“It was our duty to fight the Germans. But I really admired them!”

About a year later, I heard tragic news of the same veteran. After getting fired from his job, he killed himself. However petty the infractions for his dismissal, perhaps he believed that suicide was necessary for protecting the honour of his family… It was hard not to draw speculative conclusions about his means of self-execution. The weapon he chose was a Luger pistol— a coveted war souvenir…

My mother later reported that my father was kind to that neighbour’s youngest son. The boy in turn, grew fond of the old soldier. Even in his latter years, my father apparently took well-lubricated ice-fishing trips with the grownup son…

However given to self-torment, my father was not one to be driven to such desperation as that boy’s late father....

I must admit that soon after hearing about my father’s copy of *Mein Kampf,* I succumbed to the temptation to have a closer look at that vile text. It was easy enough to find online an English translation in PDF format. Even with the excuse of ‘research’—I felt a little soiled skimming through it. Yet I found what I was looking for: several Hitlerian salutes to the law of fang and claw. Among them:

‘…*Struggle is the father of all things. It is not by the principles of humanity that man lives or is able to preserve himself above the animal world, but solely by means of the most brutal struggle…’*

If he’d read those lines— my father would certainly have been reminded of the deer with the broken leg…

****

Four: Husband and Wife

1

In 1990, in casting eyes about my parents' living room after sixteen years away, one of the first differences I noticed was the absence of a porcelain figurine. In none of the nooks and shelves (then mostly occupied by photos of grandchildren), could I see the figurine of the yellow-haired girl. That was the Royal Doulton ornament my mother apparently received as a gift soon after her wedding. She once cherished it— even with its hairline cracks and tiny chips in the flowing red gown, brushed over with red fingernail polish.

More than once, that ornament had been flung against the wall. More than once, my mother picked up the broken pieces and laid them out for gluing. After a period of silence—my father would oblige. He would use the same contact cement with which he repaired his false teeth bridge…

Perhaps the figurine was eventually shattered to bits or my mother simply threw it away. I supposed that long before 1990, that old token of a marriage seemingly held together by epoxy glue had disappeared…

Whether my father's benders coincided with his days off work or something more basic to his chemistry— I can only guess… Back in the 1950s-1960s, he could be a genial drunk– but too often alcohol inflated his suspicious bent into full-blown paranoia…

On such occasions, the household would be awakened in the middle of the night to his voice booming from the kitchen. Sometimes he was telling himself war stories. His usual obsession though, was my mother's supposed infidelities. He would make wild accusations about multiple dalliances. The suspects ranged from a local grocer to a TV repairman. Most often repeated were his names of some of his fellow officers, his brothers-in-law— even his younger brother… The only village men off his lists were timid bachelors or those too deep into the bottle to think about women…

He usually roared at my mother from the kitchen while she stayed silent behind the bedroom door. Sometimes he raved in rhyming doggerel (*"She's a whore—to the core—a dirty whore—to the dirty rotten core!")* Other times, he would mutter about the causes of her supposed unnatural carnal appetite (*"She grew up watchin' farm animals— she can't help herself!"*)

When his voice lapsed into silence, I would let out a let out a breath of relief. Then just when I was drifting back to sleep— the loop would start up again (*"She's screwed every man around— up and down the town— around the whole goddam town!")*

Sometimes he could go into cruder detail. The dirty words didn't bother me. From infancy, a gamut of obscenities was dismissed as "drunken ravin'." I doubt that my reaction was typical— but I do not believe that hearing obscene ranting in the middle of the night is necessarily traumatic for a child. Its worst effect on me was only the loss of sleep…

But then there was the torment of repetition. I remember lying in the dark, longing for something new in the loop of crazy talk. Even a few different words— the slightest change of tone, it seemed, could have made the nearly unbearable— almost entertaining… In some way, the torment of predictability was similar to that of the droned-out passages of the *'Book of Common Prayer,*' endured in the Anglican church on Sunday mornings… Years later it was no surprise to learn the prisoners in totalitarian interrogation chambers are often broken by forced listening to endlessly repetitive tape loops...

There was some variation when my mother came out of her room. Sometimes she would yell (*"You're sick—sick in the head. You need to be sent to Lancaster!")* Her reference to the provincial mental institution would be typically followed by growls, screams, thuds or slamming doors…

One very early memory of my mother's hysterical screaming was later interpreted as her having caught him out in some actual sordid dalliance. His paranoia did not confer immunity to hypocrisy…

When cold sober, my father could be almost prudish. He once muttered disgust about a nudist magazine left in a desk drawer at his work. Another time he complained about the "filthy tongue" of a fellow officer who told off-colour jokes. Along with the hypocrisy— the taking of such offence could have been a result of his puritanical upbringing by a woman he always reverentially called "mother."

Incidentally, the 'filthy-tongued' officer was high on the list of those suspected of lusting after his wife… That fellow, incidentally, was the friendliest among all my teen buddies' fathers. At some point over years of chatter in the customs office, he probably had asked my father a simple question about my mother. Indeed, any man's neighbourly enquiry about her was sure to raise his suspicion…

My mother was active in the Ladies' Auxiliary and the curling club. She was well liked in the village. On the rare occasions she coaxed my father out to some gathering, he would usually come back ranting about some man with whom she might have chatted. (*"You could hardly keep yer hands off his crotch, could ya? Right in plain sight!")*

Hearing it all from my bed, I could only think of how miserably groggy I would feel in

school on the morrow…

2

The first time I saw '*Raging Bull'* (1980) I was much reminded of my father's paranoic jealousy. In one scene of the film, the boxer Jake LaMotta [played by Robert De Niro] is shown in a restaurant staring at his young wife greeting his acquaintances at another table. As she smiles and shakes hands, he stares at her with narrowed eyes—parsing her every gesture. That suspicious look—I knew too well… In a later scene of the film, when Jake accuses his own younger brother [played by Joe Pesci] of having sex with his wife, the brother retorts: "You know what you should do? Try a little more fuckin' and a little less eatin'—and you won't have troubles upstairs in your bedroom!"

Unlike the character of LaMotta, my father was not given to binge eating. As for his binge drinking— perhaps he deserved similarly blunt advice— had there been anyone who dared give it…

Even into my cynical teen years, I did not suspect that any of my father's accusations were true. Yet by that time, I sensed there had to be some basic incompatibility in a marriage as unstable as nitric acid and glycerol…

My mother was friendly and chatty in the manner by which Maritimers are often known to charm outsiders … She could have been a little naïve and overly trusting of responses to her friendliness. In one photo taken in the late '50s—she sits astride a bicycle (which she never learned to ride) with a coquettish smile. At heart, she was a Carleton County farm girl.

She was seven years younger than my father. She was not yet thirty when I, her youngest, had already started school... Like any young woman in a troubled marriage—she must have felt tied down. Even in having friends and sisters close by, our village must have been stifling. It was much too small to pursue adventure— let alone some secret affair… I suppose she took the few outlets available: church, the curling club, the Ladies' Auxiliary and Harlequin novels…

Meanwhile outside of work— outside of hunting and fishing seasons— my father's nights were increasingly spent in his armchair, brooding …

One of my very earliest memories is of toddling up to my mother's bedside where she lay moaning. I wondered why she wasn't getting up. Years later, she told me that could have been one of the times she had been pummeled and bruised…

I recall another time, probably a few years later, cowering with my sisters around her in the corner of my sisters' bedroom while my father roared a few feet away. I felt the spray of flying spittle…

There were other times when my father clenched fists and lunged at my mother— but I

never witnessed any beating… Routinely, she would vow to call for help— though rarely she did. The few times she followed through, she restricted her calls to her brothers-in-law. Although the pathos was only exposed to family—having to admit to her desperation for the first time— could have been as distressing as the threat of beating…

Among the rare outside interventions was the night my mother phoned my father's older brother. I remember it well for having played in the driveway the whole day before with a new badminton set. My father had rigged up a net using some old boards from the coal shed torn down a few years before. My sisters and I—even my mother and father— had taken turns with the rackets though that balmy spring day. I had gone to bed in happy exhaustion.

At some indeterminable hour, I was woken by a passing train and then a commotion in the dooryard. There were three loud voices: my mother's, my father's and that of his brother. I came downstairs and watched the drama through the open front door. In the moonlit yard my uncle was taking staggering swings at my father with the broken badminton net pole. *"I'll smash your jeezless head in,"* he slurred, "*You dirty bald-headed bastard!"*

Silhouetted on his knees, my father clutched at his head. Neither uncle nor my mother could have guessed that my scream was not for the violence. My distress was rather for the tearing down of the badminton posts… In any case, thereafter, I could never look that scowling uncle in the eye—nor could he, it seemed, look me in mine…

Another incident occurred on a winter night a few years later at our second house. Taunted and threatened with beating, mother called her younger sister's husband to her defense. He was high on my father's list of suspects. Just off his late shift on the railroad, that muscular uncle in snow-caked boots stood in the middle of the living room with cocked fists. *"You don't dare to fight a man, do ya?"* he growled.

My father, groveled drunk in the corner, chin slobbering. No man could have looked less like a gunner who had landed in Normandy on D-Day. It was deeply embarrassing...

3

When she was in her mid-teens, my oldest sister (five years my senior), intensely despised the raving. More than once, my father had shocked her visiting girlfriends with drunken comments. That— my sister's temper could not abide…

One afternoon, coming home from elementary school, I opened the door to screaming and crashing glass. My sister, whose bawling echoed from the living room, has just broken a quart bottle of Moosehead over my father's head.

He was sprawling on the kitchen floor amid a puddle of beer and shards of green glass. As he moaned, my mother crouched beside him cradling his bleeding head. In that moment, I was more embarrassed by the Pieta-like tenderness than by the squalor…

An even more memorable incident involving my oldest sister occurred a few months thereafter. My mother was away for the day on a curling 'bonspiel' and my father was in the kitchen raving… My sister who was probably about fifteen at the time, was trying to study and could no longer bear the filthy talk…

I was standing by the water heater (the warmest corner of the house) when my sister rushed into the kitchen, crying. She grabbed the handle of the cast iron pot simmering on the stove. She swung it around and bashed my father in the face. He spun backwards, clutching at a cupboard drawer which pulled out as he thudded onto the linoleum. I cannot remember how long he lay there or when my mother came home. My sharpest image of the incident is of picking up bloodied toothpicks amid sticky bottles of nutmeg, cinnamon and congealing beef stew…

My mother came up with the story that he cut his cheek when falling down in the woods. Although it was past hunting season, she was able to say that he slipped in slick snow when dragging out a Christmas tree...

The scar from that blow, he bore to the grave. As for the iron pot that struck him— it moved with the family to the second house where it hung for decades from a nail at the back of the inner porch. Every time he passed it to open the trap door to the cellar, he was probably reminded— in true Calvinist fashion— of his unforgivable sins...

4

It is entirely understandable why my mother covered up. Apart from the fear of shame, probably her greatest worry in those years was of my father losing his job. At that time, customs officers had an employment status in the village only second to that of railroad engineers. Just as with a teacher in the village, a certain probity was required of a civil servant. Still probity was judged oddly in an era when taking a deer out of season was a more serious offence than assaulting a wife…

Drinking off duty was a private matter— but no custom's officer could long get away with leaning into a car window fuming booze… Apparently, my father was not alone in occasionally showing up tipsy for the midnight shift.

Those officers were lucky to serve on such a remote post. Despite a paucity of traffic, that crossing on the New Brunswick-Maine border operated twenty-four hours a day with no fewer than three officers on duty. In those long empty nights, the men could take turns retiring to the upstairs lounge. For any officer in ill-shape to face the public— there was coffee and a sofa to snooze on. More than once, according to my mother's gossip, face and reputation was saved by that buddy-system…

Still, I gathered that my father did his job well. When donning his black uniform with the brass maple leaf badge, he adopted his reserved but cordial manner. Locals crossing the border knew him as one who didn't bully nor zealously search a car. He was considered

one of the "fairer guys" on the customs. His deep voice and half smile gave American tourists no better introduction to a land of peace, order and good governance…

His general reputation in the village was of a private and serious man. Except for coldness towards those on his suspect list— he was not considered unfriendly. He was scrupulous in his public dealings. I recall him going back to the grocery store to return a two-dollar bill accidently given in change… If drunken bellowing sometimes echoed beyond our walls— that would have been largely ignored. Sounds of domestic commotion were not uncommon in the village.

Indeed, it is possible that much more sordid scenes than any I ever witnessed occurred within the walls of other village homes headed by vets.

Among those I knew about were that of my uncle D., the husband of my mother's older sister. A boilermaker who worked in the railroad shops, he had served in the navy through the Battle for the Atlantic. A guitar player with a ribald wit— he was my favourite uncle. Yet rum transformed him into a family-terrorizing gorilla... Then there was the father of one of my teen buddies who was a Canadian army vet of the Italian campaign. A cheery man with twinkling eyes, when drunk, he was apparently also a wife-beater…

Those men were all fortunate to live in a village where Remembrance Day was so solemnly observed and vets assumed to have paid their dues so deeply respected. Few places in the dominion cut more slack for men who in a later era might have been shamed, fired or charged with assault... By such tolerance— jobs were secured and families were raised. Had some of those families been isolated in cities—they might have been ravaged by much darker rages... Indeed, none of father's darkest rages ever involved a *loaded* gun...

In that household in which I grew up there was a cyclical pattern of blows ups and interludes of peace. There were periods when my father would avoid not only sleeping in the main bedroom— but even avoided being in the same room with my mother. She would leave a plate of food for him which he would gobble only when she left the kitchen. Yet usually after a week of two of such tensions, he would move from the tiny spare bedroom back to the marital bed... Any object damaged in drunken rage would be repaired and peaceful domesticity would resume. In such periods, the home environment did not seem much different than the TV families like the Cleavers— that is, until the next binge...

5

As earlier reflected, my only real torment when my father raved in the middle of the night—was the repetition. I was especially relieved when his attention drifted away from my mother to his war stories… Listening in the dark, I always strained for new details in his retellings of his old stories. His monologues would sometimes become dialogues— such as in narrating an argument between himself and a fellow soldier while driving

along in some military vehicle.

A few times, his voice gave way to sobbing. *"The best boys died and the cowards survived,"* he once blubbered. *"That's what I am— a goddam coward!"* No boy of that era could lightly take the sound of his father crying …

Another time he was sleeping off a bender when from behind the bedroom door there came the sound of moaning and banging fists. My mother told me he was sick from drinking too much. Looking back, I doubt that was the DTs. As a binger rather than an alcoholic, he was likely not tormented by spiders on the wall. Those episodes were more likely war flashbacks...

In his memoir *'And No Birds Sang'* (1979), Farley Mowat describes the near mental breakdown he had while serving with the Canadian army in the Italian campaign. The life-long lingering impact he calls "the worm that never dies…" His expression is apparently drawn from a biblical passage (Mark 9:48): *'where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.'*

Those undying worms surely burrowed into skulls of soldiers in Normandy in 1944 just as they had in Italy the year before. It is even possible that my father was infected by the same undying worm that tormented soldiers who survived the battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC.

It was not until 1980 that the American Psychiatric Association assigned post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS) to its manual of disorders. War trauma, of course, is not the only cause of the disorder—but from time immemorial—a very notable one. Fortunately, returning vets from more recent wars have had better support than any available in previous generations...

Yet even today, many suffer PTSS alone and in silence. Some manage to hide signs of inner turmoil and carry on in the semblance of normalcy. Many returning vets from World War Two did just that— they came home and resumed the responsibilities of their pre-war lives. How did those vets manage to contain the worn that ate the brain of so many others?

From 1970 onward, my father and I were rarely in one another's physical presence. The only contact I had with him was in phone calls and a few visits. There was an extended period (mid-1970–1980s) when I stayed deliberately out of touch… So whatever speculations I draw about him, must be hedged in the fact that we lived for only a fraction of our respective lives under the same roof...

The episodes of his tormented sleep are drawn from my earliest memories. Such memories do not reach much earlier than the late 1950s— more than a decade and a half after the end of WWII. At that time, my father was only in his late thirties. If he had at that time suffered from flashbacks, they might have faded by his forties. It was only in the subsequent decade (1960-1970) when my most enduring memories of him were set…

His bingeing and raving from that period might not even have been manifestation of the undying worm. Those aberrances might have been generated by a more deeply rooted virus…

Unlike many less fortunate World War Two vets— he escaped utter destruction by his demons. From middle age nearly to the end of his life— he had good fortune. Yet my father would have been the last to claim that he deserved his bounty.

Most who knew him in his latter decades would have been shocked in hearing of the dark history. They would probably assume that this version of my father's history is nefariously distorted. That would not be an unreasonable assumption for anyone who knew him only in his later years. His fellow lakeside cottagers could never have imagined that from the comfort of his sundeck, the friendly old vet had hooked a swastika rug…

6

In February 1997, on the night after my father's funeral, I sat for a while in his borrowed recliner chair, soon to be returned to the Veteran's Affairs hospital. On the lower rack of the side table on the left was a stack of photo albums. For several minutes I flipped through them.

The one at the top of the pile had photos from the more recent years. They included photos of my kids (especially of MT, my eldest) on summer visits to New Brunswick and a few I had sent my mother from our suburban Vancouver home. Below that, were albums of photos from the 1970s-1980s when I was absent from the scene. Those albums mostly contained photos of my sisters and their kids through birth to high school graduation.

One from the late 1980s showed my father and sisters among a cluster of paternal relatives all wearing blue tee-shirts bearing the family surname. The group photo was taken at a cemetery in Fredericton, New Brunswick, before the gravesite of the clan's presumed forebear… That photo dated near the time my mother moved back with my father...

She had left him a decade before. She shared an apartment with my middle sister in Saint John where she worked in a nursing home. After my sister married, my mother lived alone in her apartment until her retirement.

I was living in Zimbabwe when I first got the news (in a letter from my middle sister) that she was back with the old soldier. I was not surprised. My mother had earned the right to share in his generous Customs Officer's pension. Then there were the family ties. Just as suggested by that photo of the family reunion— their marriage was not glued back together not by any miracle of reconciliation— but by the inescapable bondings of clan and village…

Soon after my mother moved back, they bought their camp at Lake Makadavic. That

setting became a ‘golden pond’ setting for family visits, including in later years, those of my own children. My few awkward visits there were never long enough to know how my elderly parents were really getting along. Along with four months at Makadavic, they had to spend long winters in the old house in the village— amid the ghosts of darker times…

Still, they stayed together until the ultimate parting… My mother supported the old soldier through the final stages of his cancer. She took it as her duty. About three years after his death, she remarried. Her second husband was a widower who was also a retired customs officer. He was notably one of the few of my father’s fellow officers whose name was never uttered in the midnight ravings…

Among the many photos of both sisters and kids from the early 1980s, I lingered on one of my middle sister with her two fledglings with their smiling Papa. It occurred that in almost every memory from the 1960s of a *pater tyrannicus*— my middle sister is absent. Yet until the last year I lived under my father’s roof, she was also present through the eruptions of craziness. She would have been awake in her bedroom— if not standing silently in the background.

In February 1997, she had but one month to live. Looking in sorrow at that photo, I wondered— how did she deal with her dark memories and how did those dark memories deal with her?

She was an avowed Christian who was genuinely forgiving. She also most resembled our father— a likeness that inclined him to a special affection for her. She would probably not have confronted him to acknowledge his guilt, urged him to prayer or suggested a family counselling session. Such could have been approaches of my older sister. It was not hard to imagine the old soldier, thus confronted— confessing sins in the verbosity of a few drinks…

Yet it seemed more likely for both my sisters to have chosen to ignore the past. My father was a doting grandfather. There were almost as many photos of him reading with grandchildren (including my kids) in the albums as group photos before family cars. Why should either of my two sisters— both with secure middle-class lives— care to dredge up sordid memories of a distant past?

A few days thereafter, I would see my middle sister for the last time. The question about her dealing with her childhood memory was just only one of many I would never get to ask…

The album I lingered most over on that night in Feb. 1997, was at the bottom of the stack. Immediately recognizable by the tan leatherette cover—it was the very first collection of family photos.

Apart from a few gluey gaps in the black pages where photos had been pulled out for copying, the album was intact. The photos all dated from the 1950s and early 1960s. Mostly black and white, many were taken by the same Kodak Brownie. Birthdays,

Christmases and vacations were memorialized. There were photos of a ‘tenting’ trip to Prince Edward Island and another to New Hampshire featuring a visit to Santa Claus Village. A few showed my two sisters and I smiling before the family’s new Ford sedan. In another, I was standing behind the propped-up body of the slain buck which my father had just brought home.

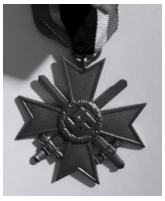
In imagining myself a stranger turning the pages of that album, I could see no hint of abnormality… Apart from a tendency to frame out the right side of the male child, the family depicted could have been an ‘average’ one of the era: white, middle-income dad, stay-at-home mom with 2.2 children. A stranger might even get the impression of a *happy* family. No doubt that was the intention of my mother, in her selection and display. There then came to mind the oft-quoted opening line of ‘*Anna Karenina’*:

‘Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way…’

Perhaps very few middle-aged folks can look at photos of their childhood without hearing some rustling of closeted bones. Why shouldn’t it be thought that those photos captured all that really *ought to* be remembered? With a ‘tsk’, I slipped the album back to the bottom of the pile.

****

Five: Father and Son



1

After the age of fourteen or so, I rarely sat in the living room at the same time as my father. About the only time I approached his easy chair was on Friday at noon when I needed money for the weekend. The little I got usually went for cigarettes or beer, but I would say I needed money for the Saturday night dance.

Without lowering his '*Telegraph Journal'* he would typically scoff:

"The dance? You don't dance. You just sit there."

"I listen to the music," I would say.

At that time, any tidbit about my behaviour he would have guessed— or possibly heard from my middle sister who sometimes attended the same dances.

"That's not normal," he would grumble before pulling out his wallet and flipping me a two-dollar bill. I would typically grunt thanks and retreat until the following Friday…

At that age, the very thought of a conversation with my father about any topic of real interest was cringeworthy… It was embarrassing that he might even suspect that I was trying to develop informed opinions… But I can recall one memorable exception during my latter adolescence:

It was on a night when I came home before midnight— early for a weekend. Even so, I probably had had a few beers. In passing the living room where my father was sitting alone before the late news, a procession of Cadillac hearses on the tube caught my attention. The program was a CBC documentary report on the American funeral industry. I had recently read (probably in '*Time'* magazine) a review of Jessica Mitford's *'The American Way of Death'* and was curious.

Instead of bounding up the stairs as usual, I sat on the sofa at the end of the living room. Across the room, in profile with clasped hands, my father slightly rocked in his chair. For several minutes we watched in silence. It must have been the images of embalming paraphernalia (and the beer) that caused me to blurt:

"That's sick!"

Startled, my father twisted around. "Sick? Who's sick?"

Unguardedly, I continued. "They're pumping chemicals into dead bodies and dressing them up like dolls. It's sick!"

"You don't know what to Christ you're talking about," he growled.

His scorn reminded me of how I had unintentionally shocked him at his father's funeral. At the side of the grandfather's coffin, as a curious— but thoughtless—thirteen-year-old, I had asked: "*Are bodies dressed below the waist?*"

Still, that night as a presumably more thoughtful seventeen-year-old, I pressed on:

"Corpses don't have to be make up to look like they're sleeping peacefully. Coffins don't have to cost hundreds of dollars. It's all a stupid waste of money."

"That's the way we do things," he turned his back. "But you wouldn't know what normal is."

The word 'normal' was rarely absent from my father's rebukes. The last thing I needed, he always implied, was to draw further attention to myself. That was only common sense— which I presumably lacked. So, 'normal' was intended as a digging reminder that abnormal behaviour was compounding the shame of my most obvious abnormality… The devolution over the years from his tentative: '*Don't you want to be normal?'* to the bitter *'You despise everything normal people stand for!'* made it plain that by my mid-teens, he considered my case hopeless…

2

I have sometimes wondered exactly what went through my father's head upon first hearing that I was delivered minus a right arm below the elbow. The normal budding of that limb was somehow disrupted *in utero.* That mysterious disruption resulted in one of the congenital limb defects that occur about once in every 500-1000 live human births. In my case, the malformation was isolated— pointing away from any genetic or even any teratogenic cause. The disruption was probably as random as that which gives some carrots or strawberries unusual shapes…

Yet my father would likely have taken that random deformity as some cosmic judgement. His demons would likely have whispered doubt about his paternity. Such doubt would have served to block out the more taunting thought of some possible defect in his own seed...

Perhaps he wondered whether there were accompanying internal abnormalities. In that case, he knew that nature would take its course... But if the course of nature was not to be so swiftly taken— what would lie ahead? Would the child ever be able to care for itself? What chance would it have of a normal life? Knowing his pessimism, I can imagine such

were his hauntings in his first hours after receiving the stinging news…

Perhaps it even crossed his mind how the regime in whose defeat he contributed just six years earlier, dealt with the handicapped. He might have been torn by the realization that Nazi policies, however harsh, would have relieved him of the shame and burden he was about to face…

Do I go too far in dark speculation? The only evidence is what I recall through his drunken ravings and mumbling of my mother in the kitchen heard with ear to a heating grate. Layered onto those memories are, of course, multiple interpretations and reinterpretations. At the same time, I recognize that my very bent for dark speculation could be inherited…

3

I have multiple memories of my father standing over me, trying to force me to eat.

I was, indeed, a finicky child. At table I was rather like '*Augustus Who Would Not Have Any Soup*', in the sadistic nineteenth century children's poem by a *Doktor* Heinrich Hoffman. When I turned up my nose to the hearty fare set before me, my mother often relented and warmed up something extra from a can. There was no such spoiling when my father was present.

"Don't you realize if you want to live— you gotta eat?"

Sometimes he would try to push the spoon into my mouth. More often, he would lean down inches from my face, roaring the same warning more bluntly: "If you don't eat, you will die!"

Even when blinking in a drizzle of saliva, I would sit stubbornly as the cold mess on the plate congealed…

He had probably been drinking the time he said: "I don't know— maybe you'd rather be out in the graveyard. Maybe you'd like to sleep out there. Deep under the snow, maybe you'd be nice and warm."

Those words did not scare me but his strange half-smile on that occasion, did. I got the message: No coddling could ever be expected from Mother Nature. Unlike human mothers— she was harsh and unforgiving… Submitting to that iron law, I choked down a few spoonfuls…

It was not until after my father's passing that I came upon a quote from '*Mein Kampf',* a copy of which he read in later life. The quote seemed to echo that warning at the supper table, four and a half decades earlier:

'…*He who doesn't wish to fight in this world, where permanent struggle is the law of life, has not the right to exist…'*

Even without appetite for home cooking, I somehow eluded the fate of Augustus who became *'like a little bit of thread'* before ending up under a tombstone... Still, I was a runt— the skinniest and palest of face among ruddy cousins. In our draughty shack by the railroad tracks, I was subject to eczema and hacking winter colds. But I was not frail.

Up until pre-adolescence, I tried my hand at the 'normal' activities of village boys— briefly even hockey and baseball–both at which I was certainly hopeless. Still, with naughty smile, I could have been Beaver Cleaver. Armed with my BB gun, I could have been Dennis the Menace. When the right side was not so carefully framed out of the Brownie lens— the cow-licked Timmy with a hook could also have been a poster boy for the March of Dimes…

For a few years, it seemed I had a measure of my father's approval. He sometimes took me on fishing trips. In long tramps through icy swamps— even when tormented by blackflies— I tried not to whine.… In hot afternoons hunched with tangled fishing line in the bow of his aluminium boat (when I'd rather have been swimming) I tried to be patient. In his better moods, he would cajole with folksy gems like: "you can't get anywhere half-cocked!"

Yet by the onset of my adolescence, the son my father did not have was the last guy I wanted to be…

I have wondered whether he really did once bounce me on his knee. That could be a dream fragment, misfiled as a memory. Even in the era before men commonly hugged or even held their children, my father was particularly ill at ease in physical contact. Like Dick Nixon, whom he resembled, he would have awkward in even bouncing a daughter on his knee…

I remember once on a fishing trip when wading beside him across an icy stream, I momentarily lost my balance. When he grabbed my arm and pulled me up— it seemed as embarrassing for him as it was for me…

It could well be that such squeamishness in physical contact in childhood, is a strong determinant for future estrangement… By 1967, the year I turned sixteen, squeamishness metastasized into carbuncles of revulsion.

4

Had I been fit for unskilled labour, I would have quit school that year. Instead, I sat through classes replaying rock albums in my head… While I privately read literature and attempted poetry, I was certain there was nothing to learn from the square-headed teachers of the village school… It was partly in emulation of the archetypical sixteen-year-old— Holden Caulfield— that I decided to spectacularly fail every subject except English…

"What do you think you can do without an education? Do you wanna sit on the street and sell pencils?"

My mother broke into tears upon seeing my report card. She blamed bad company and the seduction of hippie culture. Several months earlier, she had burned my treasured army surplus jacket, upon the back of which I had inscribed in black paint: *'eight miles high'*, *'revolution'* and *'god is dead'*... In once seeing a protest march with a flag-burning on TV, she had said: "I'd rather put a son in the graveyard than to see him disgracing himself like that!"

Up to that point, my father said little about my disgraceful ways. Assuming I was weak-willed, he wasn't surprised. But he silently fumed.

My parents hardly spoke at the time. My mother's appeals for help in straightening me out was one of the few openings for their communication. The most memorable of such appeals came in the same week of the disastrous school report.

My mother had insisted that I get a "proper" haircut— but I came back from the barber shop with only a light trim. At the time, long hair worn in 'hippie style' was banned by the village school (Greasy pompadours, although longer, posed no threat to the social order). A couple of my long-haired buddies had been suspended. My mother was adamant that I not add expulsion to the shame of a failing report card.

"He never touched a goddam hair," she shouted. "You go back and get a decent haircut or your father will drag you back!"

When he was informed a few hours later— drag me back was precisely what my father did. I remember choking out: "Com'on— be reasonable!" as by the scruff of the neck I was frog-marched into the back of his car. Arms crossed, he stood over the barber's chair while the old barber, shaking in embarrassment, shaved my temples square... It felt like an emasculation…

"You dirty bald-headed bastard," I cried from the back seat on the return drive. "You think you can ever make me look like you?"

Back in the dooryard, I was dragged out of car and into the porch. In an explosion of rage, my father slammed me into the wall. I tried to twist away from his slaps and punches until dropping in a heap.

"You wanna be a goddam freak?" he roared. "You can clear out and never come back!" He slammed the inside door.

"I hate your fuckin' guts," I blubbered after him.

That little episode would visit the dreamtime for decades to come…

5

A few weeks after the forced shearing, I rummaged through my father's war souvenirs.

I had long known that they were stored in a grey metal box at the back of his closet. When younger and home alone, I had handled and sniffed every musty item in that metal box. On the top layer were his soldier's pay books, war-time European coins and his own army service medals.

Rolled up at the bottom were his Nazi memorabilia. That included a German sailor's tunic and a Nazi flag. Rolled inside the flag in a plastic pouch were his two iron crosses. Sharp-edged, with swastikas in the centre of double-crossed swords, the iron crosses had a sinister allure…

For many youth in that era, the swastika was more associated with biker gangs than with World War Two. Exploitation movies like *'The Wild Angels'* gave the impression that the swastika was for Hell's Angels what the peace symbol was for hippies. I thought bikers were greasy dummies but granted that they were colourful hell-raisers… Swastikas on their helmets were middle fingers wagged at authority…

I can't remember what my intentions were when I took my father's iron crosses. Perhaps I just wanted to show them to my buddies. Maybe I figured I'd have them back before he missed them. Yet in looking back, I fail to understand how my sixteen-year-old brain could not have even dimly considered the consequences of getting caught. The recklessness, it seems, was largely driven by revenge. All that summer, I rued my short hair…

I put one of the iron crosses on a leather thong. I hung it round my neck, but mostly kept it hidden inside my shirt. One afternoon at the beach on the American side of the border, it must have been dangling out. An older fellow from my village (who was soon to become the community's primary dope provider), noticed it and called me closer. He lifted up the medal on the thong and turned it between his fingers.

"Don't you know this is an insult to every man who fought in the war?"

I told him I didn't care.

He then surprised me by asking: "Hey, can I borrow it for a few days?"

He said he wanted to show it to a friend who was a college student in Fredericton. The guy was supposedly studying history and would think the German iron cross was "pretty cool."

That sounded impressive enough for a kid inclined to defer to university students. I handed it over. The lending didn't seem an inconvenience since I had my father's second

iron cross to put on the thong.

A couple of days later, I had the iron cross round my neck while on the porch of the grandmother of a new friend from Halifax visiting her for the summer. In coming out onto the porch to hear her grandson play his guitar, the grandmother caught sight of the iron cross. She was shocked. In finding out later that my friend's grandfather was a World War One vet, I could hardly blame the old woman for phoning my father…

A few hours after the phone call, I was backed into the corner of my bedroom with my father hulking over me. His eyes were pinpointed with rage. "Tell me where it is," he seethed, "or I'll bash your goddam face in!"

I had already surrendered one iron cross and was pleading for more time to recover the other.

"Who did you give it to?" he roared.

Sobbing, I blurted out the name. "I'll go talk to him— I'll get it back. Just don't hit me!"

Maybe with arm raised to ward off blows, I looked pitiful. Maybe he realized that the last beating had only fuelled my defiance. Whatever his calculation, he dropped his clenched fists and let me go.

For the next week, I stayed with another friend at his family's lakeside camp. Only on the following Saturday night on the outside steps of the dance did I run into the borrower of the iron cross. He had been trying to avoid me. He said his university friend had gone home to Montreal. He'd have to wait until fall to get it back. I could only guess how much money changed hands in what was to be that iron cross's permanent disappearance…

My father did not raise the stink he'd threatened. He probably wanted to avoid village rumours about his Nazi souvenirs. A further complication was that the father of the guy who 'borrowed' the cross was his insurance agent— not a man to be dragged into an accusation aimed at his son…

So, all my father could do thereafter was to keep his metal box locked and the key hidden. But the theft of the iron cross was not to be forgotten— let alone forgiven…

6

Even as my grades spiralled downward, my father must have noticed the library books in my room. Maybe he took my private reading as faint hope for someone unable to make a living with his hands. Still, he knew that the books could do nothing for a want of common sense. Fancying big words was useless when one didn't know enough to zip up his winter boots…

In believing that I was, above all, gullible— he no doubt suspected that some of those books were fanning my rebelliousness. Yet more plainly subversive to him were my LP records…

That suspicion was most memorably manifested one Saturday night in the fall of that watershed year of 1967. I had come home earlier than usual. My mother was away in Carleton County visiting relatives and my father hunched before the TV, drinking. Without grunting a good night, I went straight to my bedroom and shut the door. On my record player, I put Side Two of my Doors' album. In the opening notes of *'The End',* I shut off the light to enhance the eeriness.

The killer awoke before dawn
He put his boots on
He took a face from the ancient gallery
And he walked on down the hall

About midway through the Doors' hypnotic journey to the end, my door burst open. In silhouette, my father hulked in the frame…

"How can you lie there and listen to that crazy shit?" he said. "Just how simple-minded are you?"

He stepped into the room and stood for a moment over the record player. "You don't have a clue what's really going on. You are so easily led."

"Leave me alone," I rolled over.

He then stood at the foot of the bed. I could smell his sour breath.

"Don't you know what brainwashing is?" he taunted.

In the background, Ray Manzarek's spooky organ chords swelled, and Jim Morrison growled his oedipal lyrics:

And he came to a door
And he looked inside
"Father?"
"Yes, son?"
"I want to kill you"
"Mother, I want to..."

Suddenly, my father crossed back towards the record player and yanked out the plug.

"Brainwashed," he muttered, lurching out the door…

In his thud back down the stairs, I got up, shut the door and turned on the light. From the

desk drawer, I took out my hunting knife. I slid it under the bed, within reach. It did not occur to me that the knife had been a gift from him on my fourteenth birthday—about a hundred years before…

7

In the winter of 1969, during my final months of domicile under his roof, my father binged with increasing frequency. Those binges were almost always accompanied by the usual ravings of paranoic jealousy. One episode I clearly remember for its particularly ugly turn… In my mother's absence (she was probably away curling) that afternoon, the theme of his obscene monologue turned from her to me...

It was not the first time that in drunkenness, he insisted he could not possibly be my biological father. On that afternoon, though, he went into detail. He ranted about how he was working nights in the week that I was conceived. He named the suspects with whom he supposed my mother had been dallying…

But then he got uglier: "When your mother found out she was pregnant she tried to get rid of it. That's why you are the way you are!"' He went to explicate the method of the alleged failed abortion…

One might suppose that to have been a traumatic moment— but in truth—it was quite the opposite. It was intensely liberating.

For the first time, I saw the man ranting before me not as my father— but as some paranoic drunk to be permanently avoided. With that revelation, I felt I owed him nothing. There was no filial obligation—no cause for guilt in its denial. I felt like Huck Finn, slipping free of the corn whiskey demon possessing his knife-wielding Pappy. I was ready to saw through the cabin floor, fake my death and light out down the river for new territory…

8

'Ran into your father the other day. He looked like a jaunty Brendan Behan in a slouch cap...'

That is a quote from a letter received in Vancouver in the fall of 1976. It was sent from the same old buddy whose grandmother had phoned my father about the iron cross, nine years earlier. He was writing to invite me to visit him in Halifax at the end of that December. My friend knew that I had signed on for what would be my first teaching stint in Africa. I would have nearly two weeks to kill before arriving in Ottawa for the orientation sessions in early January.

Two years earlier, I had shifted my base from the east to the west coast. Then after traveling in South America, I got the itch for the tropics. In a sense, I had 'lit out for the territories' although the breakout was hardly as dramatic as once fantasized…

My old ties were not severed. My best friends still resided in the east. I kept in touch with them by letter. Still, I not only stopped writing family— but even eventually cut off my phone to avoid unwanted calls…

Until my last year of college, my visits 'home'— just as hour's drive away—were primarily to see buddies. I had no choice but to stay at the old house. During those latter visits, interactions with my father were strained, but not confrontational. When I made it to college, he seemed to grant that I was not entirely vacant between the ears. But nothing would still have convinced him that I had any more common sense. That deficit was especially clear to him on a night I arrived in the village on the train. He was at the station, working the customs. When he was about to step on the train for his inspection— I was about to step off— in dirty bare feet… *'Have you no goddam shame?'* he later seethed.

After I moved in with my college girlfriend, the visits were rarer. The last of them was on New Year's Day, 1973. On that afternoon, my father scared my girlfriend by laying a drunken hand on her shoulder...

Yet three year later, in receiving that letter from my old buddy (just returned from a visit to the village), I was intrigued. I could see my father out for a walk lit up with Captain Morgan's rum. But looking like a roguish Irish poet? That defied imagination. Still, I wondered whether living alone had somehow mellowed him. Was it possible that we could get along for a few days?

I knew I could not travel to Halifax without stopping over in Saint John. Although I had not kept in touch with my mother and sisters while on the west coast— I was not quite so hard of heart as to be in their proximity without briefly stopping to bid farewell.

So, after visiting friends in Montreal, I planned to take the CPR passenger train to Saint John. It was a train I'd taken many times since boyhood: its first stop in re-entering Canada from Maine was my native village...

The kicker in my friend's letter was: *'your father would be glad to see you'...* So, in that moment, the prospect of stopping over in the village no longer seemed an ordeal… There was even a likelihood of seeing old boyhood buddies, home for the holidays. It also occurred that my spending Christmas Day in the village rather than at my elder sister's place would spare a heathen intrusion upon a sacred Noel…

Just before dawn on December 23rd , after nearly three years absence, I stepped off the train in my native village. Snow was softly falling. The cold almost immediately penetrated my Vancouver-winter overcoat. I crossed the main street and walked up to the end of the adjacent avenue. In eerie silence, I stopped before the white house on the corner. The old place looked smaller than it did in dark dreams.

I opened the porch door to the faint odour of deer hide. Crossing to the inner door, I

knocked. There was a trampling of feet on stairs before the door was thrown open.

"Why in hell did you knock? The door wasn't locked."

The scowling man with red nose looked nothing like Brendan Behan.

Honking with a wad of tissue, my father stood aside as I slid past.

"Can't get rid of this goddam flu, he scowled. "No, no— don't slam the door!"

I stood awkwardly in the kitchen, with backpack at my feet. Between blowing his nose and coughing, my father needled me with common sense questions ("Have you read up on the place you're going to? Did you write any Canadians who ever stayed there?" "You sure you know what you're gettin' into?"). He said he just got off the night shift but was off until Boxing Day. In that first fifteen minutes, I decided to cut the visit from three days to one.

When he went back to bed, I got on the phone. Disappointingly, the closest of my old buddies were not around. Still, a brief gathering of a few among the extended cohort of boyhood was set for early afternoon.

Before my father woke, up, I was in the living room of one among the old cohort whose father was working in Ontario. The mother of the house was a strict Baptist, so no beer was allowed.

With the checked shirts, shoulder-length hair and beards— the gathering looked like a Credence Clearwater Revival reunion… The chatter was mostly about a plywood mill, recently started up in the village. The oldest fellow among us— in his late twenties— jokingly asked at one point how many in the room had taken "pogie" (unemployment insurance) at any time in the previous year. All hands went up—mine included… I could not deny that although I had left the village— in that significant way— the village had not left me…

I was glad to get away— but still had eighteen hours to kill.

When I got back to my father's house, the solstice afternoon was already darkening. He was in the living room, drinking rum.

"So, the minute you get here— you have to run off?"

"I'm not going anywhere tonight," I said leaning into the doorway. "But I'm leaving tomorrow morning."

"Suit yourself," he muttered.

"I didn't sleep much on the train last night. I'm going to lie down for a while."

"Suit yourself," he said again.

In a twinge of guilt, I hesitated for a few seconds. If I'd simply sat down for a few minutes, could what followed have been avoided?

The door in the tiny room above the kitchen would not tightly close. I was reminded how my father immediately tore off the hook and eye latch I'd once attached there. In faint tremors of claustrophobia, I lay on the cot. Suddenly, a taunt from below bounced up through the air vent:

"Did get your dope today? How long can you go without it?"

I was not surprised that that particular folly of my adolescence still loomed large for him. His suspicions that I was a dope-user were confirmed in the summer of 1969, when he opened the packet of marijuana mailed to me in care of the village general delivery. The sender (the same fellow who 'borrowed' the iron cross, years before) wrote a suspicious return address. With that clue— and his Custom's officer's nose— my father intercepted the deadly narcotics…

"You went to Vancouver because the drugs weren't strong enough here. Now ya must need *stronger* dope!"

When the taunts subsided, I tried to read. I even managed to doze off for a while. Around 8:30 PM, I woke up hungry. Faintly hearing the TV, I went downstairs. At the bottom of the stairs, I hesitated in the living room doorway. The old soldier was hunched in his easy chair, glass of rum at his elbow.

I took a deep breath. "I'm just here for a few more hours. I don't need to hear any more crap, OK? I'd like to get something to eat then try to get some sleep. Is that too much to ask?"

He did not turn around or respond. On the TV screen, there appeared to be a Christmas pantomime. On a near empty stage was a mutilated Christmas tree. A figure in white face paint was bending over the heap of limbs, dabbing eyes in exaggerated sorrow...

"Yeah, Piss on it, piss on it!" my father muttered.

In the kitchen I gobbled a couple of pieces of toast. I was tempted to take along the bread knife. Going back upstairs, I passed the living room without stopping.

When I turned out the light, I began to wonder whether the Saint John stopover would be much less grim. I had not written or phoned my sisters for more than two years. What reception could I expect? I had no doubt the Christian hearts of my eldest sister and her husband would be open. My appearance could present a greater test of the benevolence of my mother and middle sister.

My middle sister then shared an apartment with my mother in Saint John. Two years previously, she lived in North Vancouver where she was teaching in an elementary school. For nearly a year, she lived just an hour's bus ride away. Yet even when she phoned weeping after the break-up with her live-in boyfriend, I did not visit.

Even greater guilt was sure to be borne in seeing my mother. Just a year before, a Christmas parcel from her arrived in the mail drop of my rooming house (She had got my address from one of my friends). I left the parcel on the doorstep after crossing out my name and writing: *'return to sender'*… In receiving her rejected gift, I could imagine that words she uttered to me years before, again crossed her mind: '*I'd rather have a son in a graveyard that to see him disgrace himself like that!'*

So it was, I roiled in regret for venturing east of Montreal. Why did I not heed gut apprehensions? How could I have been so masochistic? If my rent in Vancouver hadn't been due— I wouldn't have had two weeks to kill. So, I was a *stingy* masochist!

Around 11:00 PM, the raving in the kitchen started up again. Its looping rhythms sounded almost exactly as they had in childhood—before the crazed utterances they voiced were even understood. The obsessions were the same— only with updated detail. "The dirty whore", no longer under the roof, was claimed to be plying her trade in Saint John... Then came foaming allegations more squarely aimed:

"Why to Christ did you turn up here? You despise the sight of me. I could tell from the dirty look on your face the second you walked through the door!"

Soon, the self-pitying loop spiraled inward to the core of his paranoia:

"Despise the bald-headed bastard all you want. I don't give a good goddam! I'm not your real father, anyway."

Around midnight, he went quiet. In hearing him creaking up the stairs to his bedroom, I stood with back pressed against the door…

While he did not burst in as feared— I got dressed to be ready for a quick exit. Not that from a December night in the Twilight Zone— there was anywhere to escape to…

I kept checking my wristwatch of the floor beside me. Through the night, the minute hand on the luminous dial jumped forward in fifteen-minute segments. I regretted not having also within reach, the bread knife…

At 7:00 AM, I crept down to the kitchen and turned on the light. With the electric kettle on the counter, I got myself a cup of instant coffee. At around 7:20 AM, I was strapping up my knapsack when my father came downstairs. He stood in the kitchen door, wiping his red nose—sober. Just as after his binges of old— he might have been feeling ashamed...

"You need any money?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"You have a good half hour before the train gets in," he said as I put on my overcoat.

"I can wait up in the waiting room," I turned away.

"Well, I guess I might not see you again."

"Maybe not," I said over my shoulder.

Silently vowing that it would be the last time— I was careful not to slam the door.

Despite the vow, the closing of that door in December 1976 was not to be the last. Its next opening though— would be nearly a decade and a half away…

In those years of absence, I did come in proximity. During intervals back in Canada from teaching in African schools, I visited old friends in the east. In one visit back from Halifax, I took the westward train from Saint John to Montreal. Unavoidable on those tracks was the twenty-minute station-stop in my native village.

I kept my head down lest I be recognized by locals on the platform. Far more dreadful was the chance that my father was on train inspection duty that night. Mercifully, he wasn't. Still, when the train shuttered forward past the dim lights, I felt pangs of sadness. The old soldier had probably been hunched before his TV… After travelling around the world— I had passed the old house within spitting distance without stopping…

9

About six years thereafter, I was teaching in Zimbabwe and recently married. It was bewildering to my Shona wife how family ties could be ignored on either side. Encouraged by her, I wrote my mother and sisters, including photos of our infant daughter. Within the next two years, our second daughter was born. Along with letters, my mother and sisters sent parcels with baby clothes and toys… Unlike at the Vancouver rooming house a decade before—— there was no longer a bitter impulse to spurn her kindness…

When we 'immigrated' to Canada in August 1988, my mother invited my wife and our two little girls to stay for a week in New Brunswick. That allowed me time to make ready for my family a fragile nest on the opposite coast. In having seen my wife's anguish in leaving her family half a world away, I was deeply grateful for the hospitality…

At that time, my mother was back with my father. I had not spoken directly with him since that nightmarish Christmas Eve night in 1976. I was initially apprehensive of how

he might receive my African wife and biracial daughters. Yet in a phone call a few days after their arrival, my wife gushed about how the girls were taking to their “Papa.” My mother later sent a photo of him with my daughters on his lap. He was reading to them from his living room chair…

In the two years that followed, when my mother called, I would switch on the speaker phone. My wife and daughters would usually talk to their Nana and Papa first. Only at the end of the call, would my father and I exchange words. We were carefully cordial…

In June 1990, along with our girls, my wife and I of us flew east to visit my middle sister in Ottawa and then friends in Montreal. From there, we took the CP train back to the village— my first return in fourteen years…

At that time, my father had already received cancer treatments but was in a hale remission. He refused any help (especially from me) in so much as pulling a lawnmower cord... For the first few days, I remained carefully cordial with him. Yet like some recurrent autoimmune disease, within a week the old claustrophobia had flared back.

While our girls were at ease with their Nana and Papa, even my outgoing wife could feel the tension. One night, from across the bed she whispered:

“I wish I could leave early. Everyone’s suspicious. Parents are suspicious of children and children suspicious of parents. This is a family of suspicion!"

Upon returning home, I set about composing a novella based on that visit. It collapsed under its own weight…

While my next return would be six years later, my eldest daughter, MT, made regular summer visits. There are scores of photos of her visits back east taken over the years— as many with my sisters’ families in Ottawa and Saint John as with her Nana and Papa at Lake Makadavic.

In August 1993, when I was on a miserable shift and my wife was feeling housebound, my mother invited her to fly down to New Brunswick with all three of our kids in tow. That would be the first time our then fifteen-month-old son, MH, would meet his Papa.

Unsurprisingly, my wife afterwards admitted to stir-craziness at the lakeside cottage. Still, she brought back pictures that MH might eventually treasure. In one he is sitting on his Papa’s lap with a story book. In another on his lap astride his all-terrain vehicle...

In none of the photos of that visit— nor in any photo of my fledglings with their Papa— is there a hint of awkwardness…

****

Six: No Turn of the Worm

1

In June 1994, my mother called to tell my wife and I about the Canadian Legion-sponsored trip to Europe from which she and my father, along with both my sisters, had just returned...

The four of them had travelled to London where they met up with other Canadian vets and their accompanying families. From England, their group travelled to Normandy. There, on June 6th— along with thousands of other World War Two vets, their guests and scores of dignitaries— they commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day... The solemn ceremonies took place on the beaches where that largest sea-to-land invasion in history took place half a century before.

"It was the trip of a lifetime," my mother said, "I wish you'd been there!"

She felt obliged to pretend that I would have been welcome as my sisters in the old vets' entourage. Of course, we both knew that such a scenario defied even the possibilities of Bizarro World.

As in most phone calls with my mother, I had the speaker phone on. It was easier talking with my mother when my wife and kids were in the background. Still, calls from the old house were becoming less strained. The burgeoning civility was far easier in disembodied voices than in physical presence.

Only towards the end of that call did I talk to my father. I usually braced before our exchanges, but that time I was genuinely keen to hear what he had to say about the monumental trip.

"We watched the ceremony on CBC TV," I said by way of introduction. "They were interviewing vets who landed on Juno Beach. One was from the North Shore Regiment. Another guy was with— I think he said— the Chaudiere Regiment."

"The Chaudiere, right." His deep voice quavered. "Yeah, we were kind of in the background."

I was startled. "In the background? So, what time of day did you go in?"

He cleared his throat. “Well, we waited our turn in the convey and got across the channel in the afternoon of June 6th. By the time our L.C.T., the landing craft, was ready to go— the tide was out. We had to wait until the next morning before the tide was back in. Then we drove our trucks through the shallow water to get ashore. We almost got stuck in the sand. There was still a lot of smoke and the smell of cordite. We passed German prisoners, even bodies unburied. It was something that stays with a person for the rest of his life..."

It was odd to hear him give such detail in a sober voice. At the same time, his description seemed like one he had rehearsed and repeated throughout the trip.

“So, you didn’t actually land on June 6th— but on the day after?”

“Well, it depends on how you want to look at it.”

“Well, it must have been interesting to be back.”

"Yeah, it was nice to see some of the fellas again...”

He then shifted away from the D-Day anniversary trip to his health (“Didn’t sleep last night. Godawful pain in my hip.”)

All the while, I was processing his casual admission. So, he had set foot on Juno Beach on June 7th, 1944— the day *after* D-Day. The eight-year-old who once boasted of his father’s war service, would have been shocked by that detail… So, was he— or wasn’t he— a D-Day vet?

In the following days, I did a little research:

It was the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, the Chaudieres and the North Shore Regiment who were at the forefront of the Canadians’ Juno Beach landing on June 6th, 1944. The 3rd Canadian Anti-Tank— my father’s regiment— landed in the second wave. By then, the Germans had been routed from their beach defence fortifications. By the second day, the roads above Juno beach were jammed with Allied vehicles poised to push the front inward...

So my father did *not* stumble into blood-murky water— as some Canadian soldiers had twenty-four hours before. He did *not* have to run up the beach in the zip of machine gun fire… As he said— he drove ashore…

Still, on D-Day+1, the noise and traffic on the beach must have seemed like some Piccadilly Circus of hell. As he said—it was the smells that stayed with him. On June 7th, mortar shells from German positions further inland were still being lobbed at landing craft. There was still sporadic sniper fire. Driving up from the shore, his truck could still have struck a landmine or could have been strafed from the air…

Soon thereafter, he would have driven to the front—or close to it. In the weeks and months that followed— right to April 1945— he had close calls. He could have easily been one of the 45,000 Canadians killed in the liberation of western Europe…

As for my father's old claim of being a D-Day vet— on June 6th, 1944, he was within sight of the shore. Was that not close enough? The technically of being stuck in a landing craft, I concluded, would not have made him less worthy of the medals he wore during the commemoration ceremony, fifty years later… There was still truth in what I first vaguely apprehended in childhood— that he played a tiny role in a great historical event...

Yet fifty years on, he was old and sick. His memories of D-Day would soon disappear with him. Was it too late, I wondered, to record some of his primary history?

Around that same time, I had taken a course in qualitative research methods, which included interviewing techniques. I could certainly see myself interviewing anonymous vets—but my father? Could I even imagine a scenario of him sitting across from me, speaking freely? However unrealistic—— the notion struck.

About a week later, my elder sister called, along with my mother who was visiting her in Saint John. When my mother came on the phone, she talked more about the D-Day anniversary trip. She said that sometimes the old soldier had been "acting funny."

He apparently took along in his suitcase, one of his prized war souvenirs: the Nazi flag.

"When we were in Caens," my mother said, "he wanted to drape it across the hotel balcony. That was his idea of a joke. Crazy, eh? I stopped him."

Throughout the trip, she said, his speech was slurry and he was unsteady on his feet.

"That was his over-medication. He wasn't paying attention to how much painkiller he was taking. At least it stopped him from drinking."

After that, we talked about MT's upcoming visit. She was already packing for her three-week stay with her Nana and Papa beginning the first week of July.

"I know you're workin' and you can't come with her," My mother said. "But your father's not doin' well at all. It's been awful long for you. If you want to see us while we're still above ground— better not wait too long!"

In the usual shudder of guilt, I told her not to be so morbid…

2

The D-Day anniversary trip came more than five years after the old soldier's first

diagnosis of prostate cancer. He had already had several years of retirement bolstered by Canada Savings Bonds and a government pension. He hunted and fished— and spent summers at Lake Makadavic. When my mother retired and moved back, they even went on a couple of winter vacations. He apparently once took a turn on a paraglider in Acapulco…

When he got his diagnosis, he probably felt he'd already had more than his share. Yet for all his fatalism, he did not—surprisingly— yield to nature taking its course...

The man who hated doctors and who was contemptuous of others' malingering— took every treatment offered. He endured medical indignities which would have been unimaginable to him in younger years, Along with the chemo, he submitted to the surgical removal of his testicles. With follow-up hormone treatments, a softness apparently came into his features. He shaved less and took a liking for sweets. However humiliating, the treatments granted a few more summers on the lake. Right up to his last year he fished and rode his ATV. He stopped hunting before then—no longer being strong enough to drag out a deer…

All the foregoing details were related by my mother in her phone calls. In one update in late 1995, she reported: "He loses things and blames me for it. He gets all numb— like he's drunk— even when he's not had a single beer."

It was plain that a final visit would soon no longer be a matter of choice. It would no longer be an option at all.

Meanwhile, every time the phone rang, my wife and I braced for ever more grave reports.

My middle sister and I had been of different tribes in our adolescence, so we were not close. During our college days in New Brunswick, we sometimes bumped into one another in venues such as pubs—but barely exchanged greetings. In the mid-1970s, she taught elementary school for a year in North Vancouver. She lived just a bus ride way— but I visited her only once.

Yet in 1985 when I sent her a photo from Zimbabwe of my first new-born daughter, she sent a parcel of baby clothes. Her kids— a girl and a boy— were only a couple of years older than my girls. When we arrived in Canada for resettlement in August 1988, she and her husband picked us up at the airport. For the first few days, they hosted us in their Ottawa home. In the years following, there was no Christmas or birthday without gifts mailed from "Auntie K." Her many kindnesses far exceeded her Christian charity...

"I have some bad news."

Those were her words at the beginning of her phone call one night in December, 1994.

"Last week, my doctor found a lump in my neck," she continued. "It was cancerous. The oncologist— she's a nice young woman— she thinks that maybe it's spread to other

places.”

My middle-sister had had surgery for breast cancer eight-year earlier. That brutal biopsy that marked the end of her remission would just be the first report of metastases...

“I have this tingling sensation in my right side. I got a prescription for sleeping pills and painkillers. But I'm going to keep working as long as I can."

In the shock of that grim news, I tried to be positive. Lamely, I suggested that she do thorough research on treatments and not discount alternative medicine.

"O, yes, " she said. “I’ll try anything that works. I'm a fighter." That declaration, sadly, did not convey her usual sunniness.

You're my brother,” she said at the end. “I thought you should hear from me before hearing from anyone else."

In no phone call had she addressed me with fewer “dears”. Absent was any façade of the Pollyanna or the selfless Christian. Bared in that call was the heart of a young woman struck by suddenly fragile mortality—and desperate to seize upon any hope.

“We are here for you, K.” was all I could say.

An hour later, my elder sister called:

"When she told me,” she sobbed, “I told her she should phone you. You’re her brother.”

I took that as a tiny reminder of the decade and a half of our estrangement.

“Well, we can hope for the best,” I said, wincing at my platitude…

"Christmas just won’t feel right,” she said woefully. “I wish we could all spend a Christmas together. I know it wasn't easy for us when we were kids."

“Maybe we will someday,” I said, wondering why I had unconsciously used the formerly buoyant tone of our stricken sister…

"They radiated a tumour on her rib. The doctor said it was so large! I just pray that she gets a few more years... Your father’s not doin’ well, either. The cancer’s all through his bones.”

That was just one of the one of the distressing reports received from my mother in the months that followed. Still, I delayed making any plan to visit. I told her that I couldn’t possibly come while juggling graduate courses with full time teaching. But I knew I was risking the haunting of final farewells missed.

“They had her on morphine for the pain, but it was givin’ her nightmares. I don’t know

that they can give her now!"

The reports grew graver in the winter of 1996. By then, I had finished the post-grad studies. Also, by that time I had finally accumulated enough seniority at work to take July as a vacation month. There were no more excuses.

I booked flights for both my daughters (then eleven and nine) and myself to Ottawa at the end of June. The plan was to visit my middle sister and family for a couple of days before proceeding to New Brunswick. My wife agreed to stay behind with our son, MH, who was then only four. A neighbour would babysit while my wife would take her turn at up-grading studies… A friend of hers would lend me her video-camera for the trip. I took along enough 8 mm mini-tapes for several hours of recording.

I thought there could be a chance to videotape the old soldier. On the phone, we had grown able to talk a little less guardedly. Meanwhile, I had questions about some details in the nearly illegible photocopies of wartime letters my mother had mailed the year before. There was the hope that in his awareness of immanent mortality he could agree to be interviewed about his war years. As for my old claustrophobia in the native village— I felt the accompaniment of my two daughters would provide resistance to that…

Ironically, my attitude before the 1996 visit was rather similar to that before the Christmas visit prompted by a friend's letter, twenty years earlier. That was the time I had failed to take *'your father would be glad to see you.'* as a forewarning…

3

The first video of the 1996 trip was taken in the suburban Ottawa living room of my sister K. She was sitting on her sofa with her son (then twelve) and my two girls. The three cousins cuddled round her as my sister turned the pages of a photo album.

She was having one of her better days. Having suffered enough with the chemo and stem cell treatments, she was then taking only painkillers…

"When I was a little girl," she said sweetly, "I wondered why there were so many pictures of my sister and so few of me. I thought maybe I was an orphan."

Years later, in watching that video of my late sister, I wonder how she felt about the pointed camera. Even had she been uncomfortable with my videotaping— she would have been too polite to protest. She took pride in her dress and appearance— and always wanted to look her best in photos. I may not have even asked her permission.

I do recall mixed feelings at that moment. On one hand, I wanted to capture a scene by which my kids would fondly remember their Auntie K. On the other hand, the act of videotaping a tender moment seemed intrusive. More disquieting was that the videotaping may have seemed callous to her. Had I more hope for her prognosis— would

I have been so eager to capture her images? Of course, she had multiple memories of a younger brother's insensitivity— so would not have been surprised...

Two days thereafter, I woke in a foggy dawn amid doggy odours. It took several seconds to grasp that I was on the sofa on the musty porch of my father's house in New Brunswick…

My legs were still cramped from the thirteen-hour drive from Ottawa with my brother-in-law. He and his daughter were on their way see his elderly parents in Prince Edward Island. My two girls had sat in the back of the van along with their fourteen-year-old cousin.

In the front seat, I tried to prod my sister K.'s husband, a career army officer, into revealing something of his politics. I even found myself devil's advocating for the aggrieved Albertans against eastern elites. Yet though most of those hours churning through the rain along *le fleuve* Saint-Laurent, I heard only the windshield wipers…

We rolled into the dooryard of the old house in grey solstice twilight. Within an hour of arrival, I excused myself and bedded down on the porch...

Dead tired, I slept until nearly 5:00 AM. In wiggling out of the sleeping bag, I noticed a rash on my inner wrist. It was mild eczema —the first flare up in over a year. Still, a little rash seemed a manageable reaction to the local allergens.

In mid-morning, my father came down to the kitchen where the girls and I were finishing breakfast with their Nana. He had been in bed when we arrived the previous night. I stood back as MT and TE gave their Papa a hug. I was jarred by his paleness and hunched shoulders. He managed a grin. After we limply shook hands, he asked about the drive down.

"So, how have you been feeling?" I said, addressing him in person for the first time in years.

"Well not too bad. Quite the pain down my spine these days, though. My whole back, down into the prostate... Can't stand up for more than a few minutes at a time." He winced. "Go on— finish your breakfast. Don't mind me!"

Even if he had really meant *'don't bother me!'* I felt no ominousness in that first exchange.

Indeed, the first hours were allergy-free. I showed my mother the videocam and was eager do some recording. When we later repaired to the living room, I set it up on a tripod in the corner.

My mother was sitting in the rocker on the left side of the TV. The girls were moving

between the armchair beside their Nana and her antique doll collection under the cuckoo clock. Old Cleo, the mixed spaniel mutt, was on the rug sighing in her sleep. My father was in the reclining chair on loan from Veterans Canada. That chair was positioned at the same side of the TV where he had always sat.

When I casually started the camera, my mother was showing a diamond ring to the girls. Twirling it, she told them that it was given to her by their Auntie K. She had got it in the 1970s from a doctor to whom she was briefly engaged. The doctor did not ask for it back when the relationship ended. Before her marriage to her current husband, my sister apparently gave the ring to our mother.

“I don’t care who gets it when I go,” said Nana. “Long as they don’t fight over it!”

That anecdote led to a recounting of a bickering over the inheritance of my paternal grandfather’s watch by my father’s brothers back in the early 1960s.

"On his deathbed, dad said wanted me to have that watch,” said my father leaning forward. “I really should have had that written down.”

“You can have all those dolls,” my mother chuckled to MT, “But don’t you dare fight over this furniture!”

The talk shifted to my middle sister, who would be flying down from Ottawa with her son in a few days. Her husband and daughter would be returning from Prince Edward Island to meet them there in New Brunswick.

"She’s awfully weak to be travelling,” said my mother, rheumy-eyed. “She tires so easily. I hate to think it could be the poor dear’s last chance to come home!” She pressed her hand against her mouth.

My father let out a long sigh. “I feel bad about her taking that morphine. That's something they don’t give you unless it's real bad.”

He stretched fingers on the arm rests. “Well, I got nothing to complain about. I’ve had seven years since they diagnosed me. I’ve lived to be a ripe old age. I'm pretty lucky, I guess."

“Well, you survived a war,” I said. “That’s lucky.”

The old soldier leaned back, ignoring my comment. Still, he did not seem to mind that the camera had been running for the previous twenty minutes.

At that moment, I felt safe enough to remain behind instead of accompanying my mother to Saint John the following day. I would see my sister M. in a few days anyway, during sister K.’s visit. At that moment, I felt confident that he would agree to sit for a recorded interview about the war.

That night, while the girls were watching a movie with their Nana, I was on the porch trying to read '*Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles'* by Jacques Derrida. It was one of books I had packed in the hope of exploring ideas I might further research in doctoral studies—a possibility I was toying with at the time. I wished I had brought along lighter reading. I felt too exposed to write in my journal.

Giving in to the itchiness, I walked down the street to see whether MR, an old friend from college days, was home. He and his long-term partner, GV, both registered nurses, had recently returned from Halifax to the home village. They lived with MR's elderly mother and worked in the local residential care home…

I knew that my father would resent my eagerness to get away from his house. I also knew that showing a preference for the company of old buddies could poison any trust needed for a videotaping. Yet I risked it. After circling the block a couple of times, I knocked on MR's mother's door.

MR himself opened and warmly bade me into the kitchen. He was in his nurse's uniform, ready for a night shift. He said he'd heard I would be visiting and had arranged to get a couple of days off work. He invited me to join him and GV the following day on a drive to one of the neighbouring lakes. I accepted, assuming we could still be back by mid-afternoon. That would still leave enough time for a video-taping—providing the old soldier was in a receptive mood.

The next morning, my mother and MT left for Saint John, as planned. TE, surprisingly, decided to stay behind. I guessed she felt her Nana was paying more attention to her older sister than to her. She might even have wanted to spend more time with her Papa, knowing it was likely her last visit with him. Whatever her reasons, I was grateful for her company. Her sweet presence was a shield against the gloom of the old house…

Just as TE and I were ready to leave, my father came into the kitchen. I said we would probably be back for supper. He bent to fill the dog dish, saying nothing. When I added that we were going for a drive with MR, he frowned. For a few seconds I hesitated at the door…

4

In store was a long tour through dusty roads untravelled since summers of yore. We wound through woods and farmland before arriving at the provincial park at Lake George, not far from the St. John River. I supposed that MR was encouraging my nostalgic recollection of the place where I'd once spent a summer working in a ranger station...

TE and I sat on a picnic table above the gravelly beach, while my friends took a dip in the cove. My daughter had brought her bathing suit but was put off when I told her about the frog-itch. That was a skin-inflammation that ruined more than one afternoon of swimming

in that lake in childhood. Then there were the mosquitoes. The slathered-on DEET lotion provided by MR, seemed to make them hungrier. The Lake George of 1996 belonged to a different universe than the one I'd known a quarter century before.

After their swim, MR asked me to drive. Our hosts then sat in the back seat, drinking beer from a cooler… While I drove, TE beside me took some video of the passing landscape. Our final stop was at a summer canteen where we got greasy hamburgers. Parked beside locals slouching by the open doors of their pickup trucks, we wolfed our food. Fly-dope on the fingers did not enhance the local cuisine. I wondered how long in that environment my body could hold off malignant tumours...

It was nearly 5:00 PM before we got back into the dooryard. The tension behind the kitchen door was sensed in the first rank whiff of the porch...

My father was in the kitchen, bent down with a spray can of Lysol and a cleaning rag.

"Your mother made some stew you can heat up," he gruffed. "Your girl must be hungry." He bent down lower and squirted. "Poor Cleo's havin' the runs again."

"You want some stew, honey?" I asked. TE shot me her don't-put-me-on-the-spot look.

"It's OK, we ate earlier. Maybe we can have a snack later." I looked away from the brown-stained rag. "I'm just going to put on a video for TE."

At that moment, he must have caught my grimace. He looked up with the suddenness of the twitch of a chicken's severed claw in the tug of its exposed tendon.

"You think I have poop on my hand? It's not poop— it's iodine. I have a cut that won't heal."

"I didn't even notice it," I said, taking TE's hand to nudge her towards the living room…

In the jarring return of the old poisonous dynamics, I cursed myself. How could I possibly have thought that visit would turn out any differently than the others?

"Can I get you anything to eat, honey, seriously?" I asked TE, who was holding her knees on the rug in front of the TV. '*Beauty and the Beast'*, rented from the local variety store (owned by a paternal cousin) was just beginning.

"Is there any popcorn left?" she asked.

I could hear the toilet flush from upstairs. "Let me look," I said.

Alone in the kitchen, I microwaved a bag of Orville Redenbacher. I brought the bowl of popcorn into the living room and put it down beside TE. I assumed that my father was in bed for the night.

“If you need me, honey,” I said, “I’ll be out on the porch.”

I did not expect to be sharing the couch with old Cleo. She normally slept at the foot of my father’s bed. I gingerly took the far side.

It had just occurred that the old warrior might be missing his beloved pooch when I heard footsteps. Cleo looked up, raised herself arthritically and jumped down. When the door opened, she trotted behind it. My father stood there, glaring.

"You’d think you would be in there watching that cute movie with your little girl.”

“She knows I’m right here,” I said.

He stared. “Did you not tell her to stay away from me?"

“What?” I feigned a chuckle. “That’s ridiculous!”

“Listen, I know what you're up to. You want to get rid of me so you can get MR and them over here."

"I don't know what you're talking about. " I stood up.

"You want me to do a disappearing act, I know.” He looked out the porch window, as if expecting some intruder.

‘I was just sitting here, hoping to read for a while in peace.”

“The way you give me dirty looks,” he scoffed. “I don’t have to put up with it.”

It was an eerie moment of *déjà vu-vu-vu,* Somehow, I managed to speak plainly.

"Why do you have to treat me like a fifteen-year-old? Why do you have to be so suspicious of everything?”

"Suspicious?" His eyes narrowed, "Even your mother's suspicious of your performance around here. Turnin’ up your nose at what’s on the table. Sleepin’ on the porch. Leavin’ your kids here and takin’ off with that MR. It’s like you hate the sight of us. It’s not normal!”

Even wracked with cancer, he assumed that by voice and menacing gesture he could still intimidate. But only if I submitted.

“No, this is not normal,” I said.

His face suddenly changed. “I don’t know why to Christ you didn’t go with your mother. I'm a sick man. You're not helping me here. You’d better smarten up or clear out.”

He turned and closed the door behind him. After the creak of his steps back up the stairs. I waited a few more minutes then joined TE in the living room. While Beauty danced with the kindly-voiced beast, I leaned over her and whispered.

"Listen honey. We'll go to your auntie M.'s tomorrow. I'll ask MR to drive us down to Saint John. You'll be OK in your Nana's room tonight. Don't forget to brush your teeth."

TE did not seem upset. Disney magic was apparently shielding her from the evil spirits of old house. When she went upstairs, I went back out to the fusty sofa.

The old soldier, cancer ravaged, finally seemed more pitiable than threatening...

The next morning, MR kindly agreed to drive us to Saint John… He said he was already planning to visit a mutual buddy in Halifax. Leaving a day early, he assured, would be of little inconvenience.

"Your father sure doesn't like me," MR chuckled as he pulled away from the village.

He went on to tell how the previous fall, he and GV had asked my mother for permission to take Cleo for a walk. They loved dogs but hadn't one of their own. On a trail outside the village, the dog pulled loose. Dragging the leash, Cleo ran home covered in burdocks. The old soldier was livid.

I laughed. "At least that doesn't sound like paranoia."

5

Within an hour of being dropped off in the Saint John suburb, my elder daughter and I went for a walk behind my elder sister's flower-bedecked home... I had already told my mother and sister why we had to suddenly leave, but wanted to give MT a gentler explanation:

"I don't know what you heard from your Nana, honey," I said, "but nobody did anything wrong. Your Papa just wanted to be alone. Some people feel that way when they're very sick."

"Oh." MT immediately changed the subject. "Did you bring the video camera? Nana said she wants to be interviewed."

My mother needed no prodding to talk about her girlhood memories. A few months earlier, my sister M.'s older son had made an audio tape of his Nana's stories of growing up on her family farm in Carleton County. She was well-rehearsed.

That evening, she sat in the big armchair by my sister's fireplace. By turns, my sister M. and my girls sat in the adjacent chair. Across the room, I set up the video cam and loaded a fresh cassette.

For over than an hour, she rolled forth her familiar nuggets. She spoke of her adolescent love of reading (especially '*Anne of Green Gables*') and the meanness of the old lady where she boarded for a year of high school. She offered a little comedy (her finicky grandfather picking over his food) but much more of tragedy. She told of the death of her three-year-old sister from "black cholera."

Then with more dabbing of her eyes, she recalled receiving the news that her beloved older brother, serving with the Canadian army in the liberation of Italy— had been killed in action. She was just seventeen and working as a waitress at the village station restaurant along with her two older sisters. The three girls were given only a day off to go home to the family farm. However oft repeated, those details were still wrenching…

My mother's soft voice and tendency to speak quickly could have been better captured by an external microphone. Technical shortcomings aside—it was a performance worthy of moving an unborn descendant.

Still, by the time I loaded a second cassette, I was fidgeting. In the immediate self-chastisement, I acknowledged that memories of growing up on a New Brunswick farm in the depression were no less 'precious' than memories of D-Day… But then—it was not my mother's voice that was likely to so soon disappear…

Sadly, the old soldier would probably not trust trust anyone enough to share his anecdotes as freely as my mother had just done. It occurred that like so many vets— he would rather have his war memories die with him…

An hour or so thereafter, my brother-in-law showed me the pull-out bed in his office. The biology teacher soon to retire, welcomed me to peruse his bookshelf but warned me not to touch his computer which he was "reconfiguring" (I assured him I would not).

In our brief chat before he left the room, I told him about the confrontation with my father which led to our unexpected arrival. I spoke freely—just as I had often done while staying with him and my sister as a high school student. Of course, he knew his father-in-law well enough not to be surprised by my report. His response was surprisingly frank:

"Some people show others how to die with dignity," he said. "It is their finest hour. But it's really sad when other people— right to the bitter end— are determined to be the same assholes they always were."

It was an insightful observation from the son-in-law whom the old soldier suspected— according to my mother— of having designs on his truck...

The following morning, the girls and accompanied my mother in her Camry back to the home village. She thoughtfully took the coastal route— longer but more scenic. For lunch, we stopped for fish and chips at a canteen overlooking the Oak Bay provincial park. We'd camped there several times in the early 1960s.

When the girls went together to the washroom, I said to my mother from across the picnic table:

"I just wanted you to know that you are welcome to come out to B.C. and stay at our place. Anytime—we're glad to have you."

"Well, you never know," she said, "I'd like to spend some time in Ottawa with poor K., this fall. It's hard to get away while your father's so sick."

"Well," I hesitated, "I just hope you understand that if something goes wrong here— I don't think I can get back—especially at short notice."

"So, what are you saying?"

I looked aside. "Well, I'm saying that I might not be able to make it down for a funeral."

"It's up to you," she said sharply. "You decide that for yourself."

As soon as we got back to the old house, I showed MT how to use the videocam. She took it over for the remainder of the visit and filled all the tapes.

Among her recordings were lengthy clips of her cousins. When my sister K.'s two kids arrived (her son flying down with his mom from Ottawa) along with my girls, they slept in a tent set up on the lawn. MT took video of her sister and cousins in the tent and in her Nana's room... She also got my sister M.'s 26-year-old son, resembling an older Harry Potter, hamming for the camera…

Her lengthiest sequence was a scene in the crowded living room during the brief visit of sister K. Along with her family were my sister M., her parents-in-law and her older son. Although I was there with both girls, I appear only with my back to the camera. Midway through the clip, the usually shy TE performs her '*Little Red Riding Hood Rap'* ("She's really got rhythm!" one voice gushes).

My father was absent from the scene. At one point in the afternoon, unrecorded, he came down to the foot of the stairs and told the kids to "pipe down."

MT did get a few clips of her Papa. In one scene, he is sitting on the porch with hands folded looking out the window. TE is sitting calmly in the chair across. When MT asks him questions ("You think it's going to rain today, Papa?") He looks up at the camera, haggard but smiling. A few seconds later, he addresses TE. His mumbled words are unclear but his tone is gentle… I doubt that such gentleness would have been exposed had I been present.

MT's most touching clip was minutes before my sister K. and her family departed on the road trip back to Ottawa via New England. She had had a terrible night but somehow

rallied in the morning for the trip.

The sequence begins with a sweeping shot of the dooryard, lingering on Cleo, leashed below the porch steps. The view whirls around 180◦ to show sister K.'s husband loading up the back of the van. Then MT focuses on her Auntie K. as she moves among the family, giving farewell hugs and words of encouragement. She is stylishly dressed in a black leather trench coat. Her dark brown hair, grown back without a wisp of grey after her chemo treatments, could be that of a woman in her twenties.

My daughter's lens follows the farewell hugs, the closing car doors and the van receding down the street towards the US border. It was a poignant capturing of what would be the last moments of my sister K.'s final visit to her native province...

6

In our final days, my father and I seemed to tacitly agree to stay out of one another's way as much as possible.

Still, when my mother cooked, we obligatorily sat at the table together. As was her manner, my mother nervously yakked to ease the tension ("TE's a darn good little eater! Doncha just love them new potatoes?") It was hard to prevent stomach-shrivelling reminders of boyhood from showing plainly on my face....

In the inevitable close quarters, my father and I could not avoid a few minor clashes—such as when my six-pack of beer left in the fridge was missing. I found it warming in a corner of the porch.

"Now that he can't drink himself," my mother muttered, "he won't have anyone bring liquor into the house… But don't start him!"

When I bought some fruit back from the local grocery, he sniffed at the bunch of bananas left on the counter. He lifted a brown-speckled one like a dry turd. "You didn't pay regular price for these, did you?"

"What does it matter? You don't have to eat them."

"Doesn't matter?" He tsked. "I sure wouldn't pay top price for over-ripe bananas. You oughta be more careful with your money!"

Then there was TE's little spill of grape soda on the porch floor. I rushed into the kitchen to get paper towels. Yet by the time I returned, the old soldier was already on his knees wiping with Lysol and Cleo's clean up rag...

"Let me help," I said bending down.

"No, no." he held out one hand. "It's all taken care of."

That warning, issued several times over the previous days, was unmistakably clear: '*This is my house. I'm in control here...* "

Without his control— would the kettle boil or the locks turn? Would the loosed forces of chaos rumble under the foundations, and the old place tumble into a yawning chasm? That old house seemed to so manifest the old soldier's spirit—it was hard to imagine its walls withstanding his absence...

Finally, the hour came when my elder sister loaded our bags into her car. My mother would accompany us on the drive to the Fredericton airport.

My father came out onto the rain-splattered steps to receive big hugs from my girls. Taking a deep breath, I closed the trunk and crossed the driveway. Could we not be cordial in parting?

I shook his soft hand but did look him in the eye. Awkwardly, I stabbed at some parting truce. "Thanks for putting up with company while you're not feeling well... And sorry for whatever wrong you think I did here."

He scoffed. "Well, we all do wrong, don't we?"

Those would be our final words in one's another's physical presence...

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Seven: The Last Post

1

After we returned from our 1996 summer visit, the phone calls with health updates resumed with greater frequency. There were varying reports about the old soldier's condition. Some days he was spiralling downward while in others he was supposedly holding his own.

"Dad seems to be about the same," said my older sister in one call. "No worse off than he was last summer. He's obstinate. He says he'll outlive us all."

My father would sometime come to the speaker phone himself. "I guess I've seen better days," he said in September. "I can hardly move my arm but I'm still hangin' in there..."

Despite the tensions of the July visit, my father and I resumed our long-distance cordiality. That was even before the shock of his registered letter:

Perhaps it was MT who had told her Nana how her mom and dad always came back bickering from their Saturday afternoon 'open house' tours. With the kids outgrowing space in our rental, my wife was insistent that we had to get a house of our own. Yet in no neighbourhood within an hour's drive of my work could we find prospects within our budget. We were constrained as much by our available down payment as by the income-limited mortgage ceiling.

About a year before, in one of his Sunday afternoon visits, my uncle (the retired prison guard) had said: "You can't afford a down payment on a house? Your father has done damn well with his savings. Why not ask him for some help?"

Despite my wife's urging, the last place I would grovel for such 'help' was at the knees of a *pater tyrannicum*. I cringed in the very thought of it.

Yet utterly unexpectedly— there came in the mail— a certified cheque from the Bank of Nova Scotia. Its amount was for more than our existing little nest egg. It was easily enough to cover half a house down-payment. The cheque bore my father's signature and was sent just a week after our tense farewell in his driveway…

The first thought was to send it back with a polite note. How many middle-aged men would

accept an elderly parent's assistance for their first mortgage? Such dependency would be dishonourable even in a normal relationship. In my case, it seemed shameless.

The same train of thought barrelled deeper into suspicion. In nearing the end, was he attempting to purchase some indulgence for past sins? Could I ever feel at ease in a house acquired on a down payment of guilty conscience?

Yet maybe his giving was sincere generosity—amplified by the shadow of impending mortality. In any case, his generosity was directed more to my children than to me... Why should hollow pride deprive my kids of a grandfather's legacy? With that *ji jitsu* of justification— I decided to accept the largess.

"You might have your bedroom very soon, honey," I later told MT. "Your Papa has given us a big help towards getting our own place."

She was overjoyed— as was her sister. Even more so was my wife. On her insistence, we gave notice on our rental and committed to moving at the end the month. The need for haste, she said, was so that 'Papa' could see photos of the new house before he passed. As much as the heart was warmed by her excitement, I felt a little queasy. Yet I deposited the cheque...

Phoning on MT's eleventh birthday about a month later, I told my father that we made an offer on a three-bedroom bungalow in a neighbouring suburb.

"I sure hope you beat them down on it," he said.

"We did the best we could," said I. "We are really grateful for your help. It was more than generous."

"You know you gotta be a wheeler-dealer these days," he said. "You don't want to find out after you signed papers you've been taken to the cleaners."

I took that as more than just a chiding for buying overripe bananas two months earlier. Even after signing the cheque, he could not help insinuating that no fool could be riper for a suckering on real estate that one born without a lick of common sense... Yet I could say nothing. The cheque was deposited. I was already in bondage to his help...

By mid-November, we were moved into our new abode. The heavy mortgage and doubling of commuting time imparted a new sting to bad days at work— but I kept that to myself. My family was happy.

"Why didn't you write your father a letter, thanking him?" asked my wife, soon after we moved.

"I thank him every time we phone," I said.

"Yes, but you never wrote it down. When people put something on paper— that's when it

really counts."

Perhaps if I'd followed my wife's advice, thereafter, I would not have been haunted by the fact that 9.5% of the house would always belong to the old soldier...

2

The graver reports that fall were not of my father's condition but rather that of my middle sister. Even in in her deteriorating health, she phoned us as often as we phoned her.

"They want me to do chemo again," she said in one call. "They say there's a new drug you can do at home that's not as harsh as the others. But my hair will fall out again. I told them I'd think about it…"

A few weeks later, she said: "The only therapy left is male hormone. Hair would grow on my face and my voice would deepen." she sighed, "No, I don't think I'll take it. What I need is quality time."

As she became sicker, she seemed to take greater pains at putting others first:

"Poor dad," she said that November, "he's in more pain than I am. He could have a community nurse come to the house. But he refuses to have anyone give him enemas or even wash him. He's mean to mom even though he depends on her now for everything. Poor dear— I just hope she gets some rest."

More memorable in those months was her call one bleak night in December. "We signed the papers for a palliative care hospital yesterday," she said. "That's only if it gets too hard on my family for me to stay at home…"

Then in her usual manner, she asked: "So how have *you* been, dear?"

Instead of simply saying "nothing to complain about," I burbled on about the irritation of the previous night's power outage *("It was so frustrating! The kids had to go to bed in the dark without a hot supper.")*

She listened in silence. What a privilege to be rattled by something so petty! Perhaps in that moment my tone distinctly reminded her of a self-centred little brother...

3

Just before Christmas 1996, my mother called with the news that my uncle D., her late sister's husband, had passed in Montreal… In childhood, I had a special affection for that uncle who played guitar and sang ribald lyrics. Yet my father despised him. That was unusual since Uncle D. was seemingly the type who loved rum more than women…

So in the end, the old soldier outlived his brother-in-law, the old sailor. I could not help

making a connection between my father receiving that news with my mother's report that he had had a good day. If his rally was triggered by *schadenfreude*, it would be as short-lived as the reported glee of Hitler in the Berlin bunker, in hearing of the death of Roosevelt...

The call soon after on Christmas afternoon, was recorded with our new videocam. The clearest segment of that sequence of the 4½-year-old MH, talking with his Papa. Cradling the phone, he rocks on his new skateboard. His Papa's voice booms over the speaker phone.

"You got your own bedroom," says the disembodied voice, referring to the photos we had sent. "That's lovely."

When MH mentions that Santa brought him a skateboard, his Papa says with surprise: "Aren't you a little young for that?"

MH looks between his mother and me for help with his answer. Guilty as implied— we had no prompts to whisper.

Well, enjoy it," says the indulgent grandfather. "But you don't want to fall and hurt yourself."

"I won't, Papa," little MH says softly, still rocking...

"Bye-bye, dear. See you again."

There was an unusual tenderness in that final recording of the old soldier's voice...

4

"Your father's really gone downhill in the last two weeks." said my mother in mid-January 1997. "He can't dress himself or even take a bath anymore."

She said that she was finally receiving the help of a home care attendant. That came in the person of SB, who was the wife of one of my teen buddies.

"She's always happy. Not many he'd trust—but your father likes her," my mother said.

She also reported that my cousin, LS (hellion comrade at age ten), had taken down their Christmas tree. He had also recently house-sat with the old soldier while my mother went shopping in Fredericton. My mother further mentioned that my old college friend, MR, a nurse, had offered to walk Cleo...

The implication was that in absence of immediate family— the village took care of its own. I was duly chastened.

"Your Aunt M. is coming on Thursday while I get my hair done," my mother went on. "She

said she wanted to get him to pray with her.'

My mother's younger sister was a life-long Baptist. What a victory it would be for her to convert a brother-in-law so steeped in sin! Having less control than a 3-year-old in feeding, in dressing—in ablution— could he be dragged whimpering to Christ? Particularly ironic that would be for one who long lived by the law of fang and claw...

"Not too many others come in, though," said my mother in weary summation. "He never liked many people so as you know— you reap what you sow."

Indeed, those last weeks— except for the loyal old Cleo on the mat below his bed—he was mostly alone. Yet the old soldier himself would probably have been the first to believe he was receiving just deserts.

In the last week of January 1997, my mother gave the impression that both my father and middle sister could be in their final days.

"K. had to go into the hospital emergency and get hooked up to an I.V. I wish I could with her up in Ottawa right now. If anything happens to her, I'll just have to put your father in the hospital."

Later the same evening, my elder sister phoned.

"Patients often ask me how long a parent has to live," she said, speaking as a palliative care nurse. "I tell them it depends how fast they're going down… In November, when mom and I got back from Ottawa, dad had the place cleaned and supper heating up on the stove. Today he's bedridden and can't move his arms… They're giving him pills for anxiety— he's scared."

No detail about his condition I'd heard up to then was quite so jarring. What did the old soldier most deeply fear? What terrors could be penetrating the morphine fog and palpitations of physical pain?

Maybe lying in the dark, he relived the horror of a mortar shell whistling towards him, more than fifty years before… Maybe he remembered a pact he made with himself— flat on his stomach with his face to the ground. Maybe he promised himself that if he survived the war, he would prove worthy of deliverance...

For fifty-two years, he was spared. He went on to have a family—to hunt and fish; to drink and sometimes rave. While the struggle with his dark side never ceased— he performed his duties, obeyed the law and kept his head down. He always paid his debts. But did he keep his promise to the 24-year-old gunner lying in the ditch? In the encroaching dark, perhaps it was the uncertainty of that which the old soldier most feared…

The room where he would spend his last days was the same bedroom where I had once slept. But all traces of my brief occupancy had long disappeared... In my last visit, I noted

the framed photos with which he surrounded himself. On the bureau (which once held my record player) was the portrait of the smiling young soldier in wedge cap. In another photo, the same young soldier had his arm around his older brother with whom he met up in France one day in 1944. On the dresser was a group photo of his 105th Anti-tank battery.

Most prominent were the grey portraits of his forebears on the wall facing the near side of the bed. In Victorian dress, his parents and grandparents looked into the mysterious future with solemn countenances. In the upswelling bugle notes of the last post, perhaps the old soldier felt ready to dissolve into their midst...

5

The day before he died, I was teaching a reading lesson with a class of immigrants. We were working through a comprehension passage entitled: '*I meant to call.'* It was about a busy daughter who failed to check her answering machine despite the flashing red light. She missed the message from her father asking her to call. She heard it only after receiving news of his sudden death. The reading was designed for the grammatical practice of infinitive phrases but selected by a guilty conscience.

While the students silently read, I scrawled a discussion question on the whiteboard: *'Could the events described in the story take place in your former country? Why or why not?'*

“In Taiwan it is not uncommon for someone to quit his job temporarily to go and look after their parent," said one student after the silent reading. "Or if you couldn't take care of them, then you would send your wife. Or at least pay someone to look after them."

“Really, " said another student, formerly from China, "if someone didn't take care of his parents, he would be ashamed in the community."

"That’s civilized," I nodded. “It’s hard to claim the same for abandoning elderly parents in rest homes. That’s what often happens here."

'Civilized.' On the whiteboard, I squeaked out the letters in red marker pen...

The students could not have failed to notice my hand was shaking...

6

"Your father passed away this morning,” said my mother on the phone. “At 7:00 AM.”

The red digits on the bedside clock radio read 4:20 AM– four hours behind Atlantic time. From her last dire report, the news was not unexpected.

I turned on the bedside lamp. "When— when did you say he died?" Seeing T. stirring, I turned on the speakerphone. Its squelch hid the croaking catch in my voice. "That’s feedback," I said.

"Just over an hour ago," my mother said. "He went into the Fredericton hospital by ambulance in the middle of night. He knew he wouldn't come back."

She described the final minutes before his stretcher was trundled out into the bitter winter night.

"Cleo licked his hand. The poor dog is still running around here in circles completely lost."

She continued with what she thought we wanted to hear. "Before they took him away, he mentioned all of your names. I had to remind him of little MH's name… He loved all of you."

T. cried out. "Now MH will not be able to go fishing with his papa!"

"Go ahead, cry," my mother said. "It's good for you!" She sniffled. "I'm half-crazy here myself. Haven't even started to make the arrangements. M.'s still up in Ottawa with poor K. She's flyin' back this this morning to help me. I'll phone back when there's anything more to tell."

After the call, I turned off the lamp and held T.'s hand. Gradually, her soft sobs subsided.

So, the old soldier's suffering had finally ended. Shivering, I tried to visualize his dying hours. In the back of the ambulance— maybe he felt every turn of the road to Fredericton he'd travelled a thousand times. Maybe he was dimly aware of passing the Makadavic camp road, passing the logging roads where he had tramped and hunted and fished— passing it all forever…

I thought again of how the man who so avoided church seemed so sure he was bound for hell… I also remembered the times he revealed his secret fear of being a coward... With all that self-doubt, his final hours in a morphine delirium could have as horrific as the journey though the Buddhistic Bardo. Yet his demons would have been conjured from some Calvinistic vision of dying beyond grace—for sins both real— and imagined…

But maybe he was spared the horrors. Maybe he felt a blanketing sense of peace such as that described by David Livingston, remembering the moment he was staring into the jaws of an attacking lion.

Maybe the old soldier has visions of emerging from a theatre into the noise of Piccadilly Circus on the arm of a fawning English girl… Maybe he saw himself wading the alder swamp back from Dead Brook with a creel of trout…

Perhaps the blur of such soothing images shifted back before the war— back to his childhood. Maybe he felt the hand of his elder brother, whose bed be shared, shaking him awake. Just before the final dark—maybe he was waking on a winter morning of the late 1920s… Maybe he was comfortably yawning in the crackle of burning wood and the smell

of porridge bubbling on the stove.

His dying at 7:00 AM— the time he usually got up— seemed fitting.

It was also at 7:00 AM that we woke the kids and told them the news. All three crawled into bed with us. MT first wailed then sobbed. TE softly whimpered. Little MH, stumbled in, blinking from sleep not quite sure what was going on.

Later in the afternoon, T. took the kids to a movie at the mall to get their minds of the gloom. I waited for my mother's return call. At about 8:00 PM her time, she called with the information that the funeral would be at 2:00 PM on the following Wednesday in the village Anglican church.

"I set the date a day later than I preferred," she said. "I wanted to give you time to make it. Our dear K. would love to be there but she's too sick to fly now. You've got to come, OK?"

She was obviously thinking of what I'd said the previous summer about the uncertainty of *"coming back at short notice..."*

"Well, I can get a few days bereavement leave, I said. "But the problem is booking a flight within the next few days. I've already checked out the fares. They're about double than what you usually pay— even with the so-called compassionate discount." I hesitated. "On top of that, MT is begging me to go. "

"Don't worry," my mother said. "Make two bookings. You get your own ticket— but I'll reimburse you for hers."

"Are you sure you afford that?" I asked.

"I said don't worry," she scoffed. "The dear little thing was close to her Papa. She should be here."

However guilty for taking my mother's money for MT's ticket just six months after accepting the old soldier's largess— I went ahead with the bookings...

7

The red eye from Vancouver was followed by a three hour wait in the Ottawa airport before the hour-long flight to Fredericton.

My mother assigned a paternal cousin and his wife to pick us up at the airport. Hardly having spoken to him in childhood (we were of different tribes), there was little to say in the ninety minute drive to the village. We arrived in my mother's dooryard just an hour and a half before the funeral. Against my protests, the cousin insisted on dragging our bags onto the porch...

Brushing the snow from our shoes, I thought of the final handshake with the old soldier in exactly the same spot seven months before. In eerie *deja-vu*, I pushed through the porch door.

My sister's eldest son, having arrived from Montreal the day before, opened the inner door. From across the kitchen my mother glanced over with her nervous scowl. She had delayed the funeral a day for us and we had still barely made it.

"Sorry, the flight from Ottawa was an hour and a half late," I said.

"We gotta be there a half hour early," she said, giving MT a quick hug. "You'd better get ready quick!"

I clomped upstairs to change into suit and tie. Either I was too groggy to take offence in my mother's brusqueness— or mercifully resistant to the usual sensitivities. It also occurred that it could be due to the permanent absence of the spirit which, until five days ago, had so dominated that house...

Just over an hour later, MT my mother and I were mounting the creaky steps of the village's Church of England. Stepping inside, I winced in the almost forgotten stink of pew varnish. The church was already half full.

"Your father's up at the front." said my mother.

It occurred that the last time he was probably in that church was in attending his daughters' weddings, decades before. It would hardly have been comforting for him to have then known that his next appearance would be in an open coffin…

With hand on MT's shoulder, we moved slowly up the narrow aisle. On the way, paternal relatives unseen in decades— or never before— reached out with hands to be shaken. I submitted to a few stiff hugs. The usual awkwardness was blunted by wooziness.

The coffin was positioned lengthways in front of the foremost pews. The bottom half was draped in a Union Jack. Propped up on a metal stand behind the coffin were two large floral wreathes. Inscribed on their trailing ribbons were: '*Brother'* and '*Dad'*. I felt a ripple of guilt for not having contributed. Had my sisters asked— I would have obliged.

My elder sister in a black dress stood at the rear of the open coffin— seemingly keeping vigil. Before the church-full of eyes, we performed the required hug.

"Here's dad," she whispered.

MT and I looked down at the body.

"Your Papa's at peace at last," intoned my sister, taking MT's hand.

The body was dressed in a light blue suit. A navy blue Royal Canadian Legion beret was propped at the head. Pinned on the side of the plush white lining was his bar of war service metals...

The jowl and cheekbone bore semblance to the living person, but the tucked chin was too full. With the head sunk deep in the plush lining, the baldness (of which he had been self-conscious from his twenties) was less conspicuous. While the face had the standard waxen look, the folded hands looked shiny-white. It appeared to be over-application of cosmetic.

It occurred that were he to have had some portentous vision of it— my father probably would not have been too displeased with this rendering of the mortician's craft... There came to mind the moment in adolescence when he angrily reacted to my comment on the creepiness of dolling up corpses. "*That's the way we do things around here!"* he had thundered.

MT stifled a sob. I patted her back aware that our every reaction was being noted. I could not have been more grateful for my daughter's presence.

Minutes before the service began, I slipped out to my mother's car to fetch my videocam. She had already agreed that my sister in Ottawa would like to see some video of the funeral. Back in the church entrance, I greeted a male cousin unseen since college days. He kindly agreed to take some video from the back of the church.

At the front of the church, I slid back into the front pew alongside MT, my older sister and mother. She poked my side.

"Do you like the casket?" she asked. "M. and I picked it out."

Brown ash with brass handles, the coffin gleamed like the brand-new brown Chevy the old soldier drove into the yard one fall afternoon, thirty years before.

"It's pretty fancy," I whispered.

Moments later, the cassocked preacher appeared from a vestibule on the right. With white pompadour and shiny black shoes, he looked more Baptist than Anglican. Discreetly he nodded to a pair of young undertakers in black tuxes with razor-creased pants. With awls in white-gloved hands, they approached the coffin. My sister sobbed as the lid was closed and cantilevered down. The service then began.

"On page 36 of the hymnal," said the Reverend, "that'd be the purple book in front of you— *'Abide with me'."*

I gathered my mother had chosen the hymns. The opener was best known known for reverberating through the lurching deck of the Titanic... Through the following twenty minutes, I tuned out of the droning liturgy until the preacher delivered his sermon. His

theme seemed to be: *'Christ as a trail blazer and a pioneer'*. That bizarre image conjured an NRA Jesus in Davy Crocket hat with musket in hand.

Even my mother slightly scowled. She later said that the preacher was a stand-in for the regular reverend who was ailing. She also informed that the substitute was from the nearby town of St. Stephen where he also worked part-time with the presiding funeral home…

As the preacher stepped down from the pulpit, the organ welled up in the opening chords of *'How Great Thou Art.'* In a sudden sour note I glanced across at the organist. Although corpulent and balding, he was recognizably the same paraplegic pianist who dazzled the village music festivals, thirty-five years before. With a flourish of finger-work, he compensated for his little fumble…

With the rites of the Burial of the Dead concluded, one of the boyish-moustached undertakers returned to the side of the coffin.

Unexpected thereafter, was the participation of the Royal Canadian Legion. That began with the Legion branch president from a nearby village mounting the pulpit. In smarmy voice, he made an extended statement about the "trampling of our heritage" for which the Union Jack bedecked coffin served as backdrop.

He was plainly echoing the anti-French bitterness of many old Anglos of the area. A few years previously, that bitterness had propelled several candidates of a right-wing fringe party to the provincial legislature... Very likely my father had voted for that party.

When the creepy branch president left the pulpit, the tenor changed. The overhead speaker sounded the bugle notes of the Last Post. There followed a minute of silence broken by a few geriatric coughs. Several hoary Legionnaires then came forward to the closed coffin. Each stuck a poppy into a Styrofoam cross positioned at the side.

Among the Legionnaires were a few retired customs' officers—my father's former workmates. One wiped away a tear before planting his poppy. Another old vet who limped forward was identified by my sister as having come up from St. Stephen for the funeral. He had been a fellow soldier in my father's battery. The old fellow pulled his poppy off his own lapel. Before turning around, he gave the casket an affectionate double-tap....

With the poppy-pinning concluded, the pair of undertakers rushed forward again to slide the coffin onto a dolly. On rolling castors, it was borne down the aisle. Heads turned as if in following a sweeping bridal train.

As the coffin was wheeled out the side door, MT and I rose along with the rest of the congregation. From the top of the outside steps, we watched the coffin borne up by four of my father's nephews. Down the salted pathway between snowbanks, they trundled the heavy load. The hearse was idling on the street below. As soon as the coffin was slid into its back door, the hearse drove off towards the village cemetery.

In the feeble sun, we gazed down at the empty street. MT suddenly burst into tears. Perhaps her Nana also recognised that as the most genuine grief expressed by any mourner in attendance…

Still to be borne was the tea by the church ladies' auxiliary. On the shovelled path to the church hall, I thought of the cluster of poppies on the Styrofoam cross. According to my mother, it was only in his last few years— after decades of absence— that my father started attending Remembrance Day ceremonies again. Whether he explicitly asked for it or not, he got the Legion funeral he'd wanted...

Though not a church goer, he probably also would have felt it appropriate for his funeral be in that same village church his parents once attended. For all his suspicions, he was comfortable in the village where he spent his entire life apart from his five years at war. In return for his war service and dutiful working life thereafter, he had his village's respect. His funeral was solemn and well-attended— his dark side overlooked.

8

MT and I stayed two more days with my mother before flying back home via Ottawa.

The first night, my sister's eldest son stayed in the spare room. With the porch unheated in mid-winter—I had no choice but to take one of the bedrooms. My mother initially asked me to take the one recently vacated by my father.

"There's nothin' wrong," she tsked. "It's your old bedroom. It's been all aired out and the bedding's been changed!"

I offered to sleep on the downstairs sofa, but she insisted I take her room.

"You don't mind—do you dear?" she asked MH. "You and I sleepin' in your Papa's old room?"

It was not the first time that my eldest daughter proved to be more accommodating than her fussy father...

The following morning, MT and her cousin sat with their Nana in the living room. They were joined by my other nephew who came over early from his other grandparents' house across the village. My mother was in her nervous but talkative mood. Hands folded and gently rocking, she gave grim details of old soldier's final days.

"Cancer was all through him at the end," she said. "Right into the brain."

She spoke of dentures and glasses dropped into a slop bucket; blood and black bile vomited; a palsied attempt to self-insert a catheter tube... Just a few days before he was taken to the hospital, she said she was woken up in the middle of the night by "funny noises downstairs." When she got up to check what was going on, she found him at the

door wrapping up his feet in plastic bags:

“He told me he heard footsteps in the snow,” she said, “and he had to go on a trip.” She asked him where he was going. In repeating his words, my mother imitated a gruff voice: *"'You know where! You go to church every Sunday, don't you?'"*

Finally, she spoke of what she’d heard from the nurse on the IC ward, where he’d spent his final hours. “He kept tryin’ to get up out of the hospital bed. He wanted to get away. They had to strap him down.”

In her pause, I glimpsed something of the horror of squirming against the weight of death pressing his chest. Would that last hour have been any easier if he hadn’t been alone?

“Before the ambulance took him, he thanked me for taking care of him,” she looked at her hands. “I went as far as I could go with him. I couldn't go any farther."

She seemed unduly sensitive to potential insinuation about her absence at his hospital bedside. Perhaps it was life-long experience with village gossip.

On the sofa across from their Nana, the three cousins looked glum. My eldest sister’s boys were spared further revelations by the call from their father informing them to be ready to be picked up for the drive to the airport. While waiting for his arrival, MT went out into the dooryard with her cousins. In the unusually mild air, the twenty-something boys engaged her in a three-way snowball fight. I captured a few minutes of it on videocam. It was a relief to see them all laughing.

After my nephews drove off with their father, I gave MT a hug. If any remembered detail of the previous day were to ever trouble her sleep— she showed no signs of it.

“So, how are you doing honey,” I asked, “really?”

“It’s nice to be with Nana,” she said.

9

“We’re still interested in the snowmobile. Just tell us how much you want for it."

SB, the wife of an adolescent friend who had earned the old soldier’s rare trust in her home care ministrations over his final weeks, was just one of visitors who popped in through the day. Along with extending condolences, opportunity was taken to express interest in properties possibly eyed for months. SB was to leave disappointed.

"I promised it to LK," said my mother, referring to one of her younger sister’s sons. "I have to give him first pick."

Soon thereafter that nephew and his wife (twice his size), came by. They sat in the living

room with ears cocked towards the kitchen where their aunt was on the phone. She was getting a dealer's appraisal of the snowmobile's value.

"It's worth at least $1,300," announced my mother after the call. "It's hardly been used." Rabbity noses wiggled in dismay of their aunt's opening gambit.

Another cousin who dropped by in his blue work overalls happened to have the same shoe size as his late uncle. He left with two shopping bags of shoes and boots... Meanwhile, my mother had already begun cleaning out his dresser drawers. At one point in the afternoon, she called my sister, MT and I to his bedroom to show us his apparel.

"All these socks. He never wore them. All these ties, shoes, shirts," she muttered, "shame to give them away to strangers!"

Even had the clothes fit, I would have been squeamish to wear them. I did take a tweed slouch cap. It could have been the same one he was wearing long ago, when a friend remarked in a letter that the old soldier looked like a jaunty Irish poet...

By the end of that evening, my mother had queries about his deer rifle, his ATV and his beloved Ford truck… I was reminded that in my wife's African tradition— it was taboo to even talk about the dispersal of a dead person's belongings until a calendar year had elapsed. In New Brunswick custom, twenty-hour hours apparently sufficed.

After supper, my brother-in-law dropped by upon his return from the airport. He and my sister, having stayed with his elderly parents for the funeral, would be going back to Saint John on the weekend. As we chatted in the kitchen, the topic turned to a possible memorial for my father's grave.

"Well, he's up there in the vault until spring so I don't have to rush," said my mother.

At that same moment she was bending forward from her chair to pat Cleo. The old dog feebly wagged her tail and licked my mother's hand. "Poor thing," she said. "So smart. Howled the whole night your father went into the hospital."

"Well, he sure loved that dog," said my brother-in-law. "Wasn't that the last name he called for?"

My mother sighed.

"Do you have a good photo of her?" asked my brother-in-law, in his science teacher voice. "They use laser technology now to cut out images. They can etch images onto any surface— even marble. If you wanted, you could have a tombstone with Cleo's image on it."

However unaware she was being considered for memorialization in stone, Old Cleo's tail wagged a little harder.

“I’ll be up there too, someday,” my mother scoffed. “That’s not something I’d be happy lyin’ under!”

For that moment, the subject was dropped and a decision about the old soldier’s tombstone duly tabled...

On the afternoon before our departure, I accompanied my mother in filling up her tank for our trip to the airport. MT stayed with her aunt. Like most villagers, my mother got her gas cheaper in the small hamlet just across the US border, only a ten-minute drive away.

As we started off, my mother was humming to herself what could have been a hymn. On the outskirts of the village, we passed the cemetery. Below the gate was the small brick building that looked like a fortified tool shed. Before the iron door were tire tracks in the snow. Those tracks were probably from the hearse that made its last deposit there two days before…

In the side mirror, I watched the gate recede. So, the old soldier’s body would stay in “the vault” until the ground thawed— at least until May.

It occurred that my father had passed that crypt thousands of times, going back and forth from his customs’ job. I wondered if in passing it— especially on the midnight shift— did he ever shudder? Was he ever struck that were he to die in winter— his body would lie there for months? In that thought there came to mind the biblical verse that seemed like a curse: ‘*pray that your flight be not in the winter…’*

“No sir, I’m not gonna sell that truck!”

That thought was interrupted by my mother blurting one of her thoughts out loud.

“What’s that?” I asked.

She tsked. “I’m gonna make my own decisions about what I sell and when. No one’s gonna push me. No way, Jose!”

She was nearly seventy and still faced the heartbreak of the loss of a daughter. But with one funeral behind her, perhaps she was beginning to feel unexpected strength...

10

The following afternoon, my middle sister’s husband picked up MT and I at the Ottawa airport. I was nervous about the imposition of our two-night stopover while my sister was so gravely ill.

"Hope it's not been too much of a strain,” I said on the drive to their house in the eastern

suburb. “The steady stream of in-laws must be trying."

"No, no, no—" insisted the colonel, "it's good for K."

He asked a few questions about the funeral. As a military man, he was not inclined to show his feelings—but we never doubted the sincerity of his welcome...

My sister greeted us at the door. She looked wane and her voice was hoarse.

MT went upstairs with her aunt to the room of her 16-year-old cousin. I waited in the living room for my sister to come back down.

On the coffee table was a scattering of paperbacks: *‘Cancer as a Turning Point', 'Encounters with Angels'; 'Miracles in our Lives.'* On the rug beside the sofa was a heavy bible. Curious, I opened it to the page marked by the red ribbon. It was the Book of Psalms… What does it take, I wondered, to keep faith in the same supposed deity who had visited innumerable indignities upon one’s flesh? As perverse as such belief was to me— in the case of my sister, I was prepared to respect it…

An hour later, I had the videocam plugged into the living room TV. Blanketed in a shawl, my sister watched from the sofa.

The video of the funeral was blurred and wobbly. My cousin at the back of the church must have switched on the camera without properly checking the focus. Even the audio was somewhat muffled. Still, my sister recognized the voice the soloist who sang ‘*Rock of Ages’*.

"O, she's a lady from the Pentecostal church,” she said. “Mom heard her sing once and loved her voice. She asked her to sing at dad’s funeral."

The remainder of the recorded minutes were of the strange sermon, almost inaudible. My sister silently listened. I wondered whether she might be thinking of another memorial service too soon to come…

"It's so nice to get out."

The following afternoon, my sister was feeling well enough for a short excursion downtown to view the ice-sculptures displayed in the Ottawa Winterlude festival. After taking a few steps alongside MT and my teen niece, she sat nestled in her fur coat on a bench near the Rideau Canal.

In the background, Chinese music commemorating the Year of the Ox echoed tinnily from speaker columns. On the left, a group of Chinese tourists posed before a shimmering ice dragon.

“It’s a beautiful afternoon,” said my sister, blinking in the winter sunshine. My brother-

in-law in a coonskin cap, stood behind the bench with his arms crossed.

Meanwhile, I was balancing on a snowbank several meters away, training the videocam on both of them.

Even more than in the previous summer, I sensed her discomfort with the camera's intrusion. Was the thought of future gawkers at her images in such weakness one more indignity to add to than the proddings of doctors? Still, I aimed to capture the moment.

Late that night, my sister's blood platelets fell so low she had to go to the hospital emergency. From a similar episode a few weeks earlier, my brother-in-law knew she needed an immediate plasma transfusion. Although our flight was early morning, I was glad to accompany them to the Ottawa General Hospital.

After a cruelly long wait, near midnight my sister was given a curtained bed and was connected to an IV drip. My brother-in-law and I took turns sitting in the single chair at her bedside.

There was a ticking sound as the IV bag dripped yellowish liquid into her bruised wrist.

"I think I'm got about three months now," she said at one point. "But I'm just getting tired. Tired of all this. "That's the way I feel now. "

She spoke those words calmly— but in resignation. It was not her usual tone…

The enormity of her suffering defied grasping. Still, I sensed that her greatest torment was her fear of becoming a burden to her family... She knew her teen kids were both struggling to maintain the semblance of normalcy. But piano, hockey and friends could not lessen the abnormality of a dying mother. Most painful to my sister in those final weeks must have been the thought that her family desperately needed a return to 'normal' routine...

Another memorable moment that night was when a blonde female intern came to check the IV. She had a French novel in a pocket of her scrubs. While adjusting the flow, the intern glanced at the colonel on the other side of the curtain. My brother-in-law was staring stoically into the middle distance. The intern appeared to be curious in the spectacle of a virile young man attending a dying wife.

At around 2:00 AM, my sister and I sat in the waiting room while my brother-in-law warmed up the car.

"I'm so glad you were here with me tonight." She reached to hold my hand. "Don't worry about coming down for my funeral. Just remember how close I was close to you and your beautiful family."

I squeezed her fingers in assent.

Early the next morning as MT and I waited with our bags by the door, she came down into the hallway. She gave MT a hug and whispered endearments. As for me— we had had our farewell at the hospital so there was nothing more to say. I patted her frail shoulders. Drawing arms into the sleeves of her bathrobe, she turned back into the dark hallway.

That would be my last glimpse of her.

****

Eight: Abide with Me

1

Just a few weeks after my father's funeral, my middle sister died. Unlike him, she was spared the IC ward—even spared the hospice. She died in her own bed with our elder sister at her side...

My wife called me at work. Even though I was braced for an inevitability—the news was a punch in the throat. I had to get a sub for the rest of the evening.

We had talked with my late sister on the phone the weekend before. I videotaped that call. In a sleepy voice, she said she was looking forward to the visit of my wife and middle daughter, TE. They had tickets booked for a visit the following weekend at the start of the March school break.

"*Bring some games and we'll have fun together, honey,"* she had said to TE.

When she heard her aunt had died, 9½-year-old TE spent an hour alone in the dark garage before falling asleep on her bedroom floor. She would never forget the aunt who once told her that she remembered feeling overlooked as a middle child...

The funeral was just four days later. I first thought of my late sister's words at the Ottawa hospital only three weeks earlier: '*Don't worry about coming down for my funeral.'* I felt that TE ought to attend with my wife. It would not have been difficult to change the dates of their earlier booking.

But my wife insisted that both she and I needed to go. "Your mother expects you," she said.

"How do you feel about it, honey?" I asked TE the following morning. I had the phone in hand and the booking agency on hold. "Do you want to go to your auntie K.'s funeral or should I use your ticket? It's your choice, honey."

"You go," she said.

My wife arranged with the eldest daughter of a friend to housesit the kids for the three days we would be away. We flew to Ottawa on a Thursday midnight for the funeral on the following afternoon.

2

In my state of near exhaustion, the following day was a blur of unsettling impressions. The sharp reek of the lilies in the funeral wreathes was no less eerily *déjà vu* than the St. Hubert Chicken sign on the ugly main drag of the Ottawa suburb of Orleans, viewed from the backseat of our funeral limo...

Before the service at the Grace Presbyterian church, my wife and I accompanied family members to the funeral home. Regrettably, I did not join my nephews and older sister's husband who respectfully waited in the ornate anteroom. Instead, T. and I followed my sister, brother-in-law and mother in viewing the open coffin. My elder sister linked arms with T. and I. My mother, glassy-eyed, was behind us. It was her second visit. My widowed brother-in-law stood solemnly at the foot of the coffin.

The body was in a red dress. It was one my middle sister had apparently worn in her twenties— her more carefree years before settling down.

"She loved that dress," my older sister murmured.

I touched the cold hand. It felt like a violation of the living person. Yet I could almost hear her cheery voice: *'If it gives you something nice to remember— go ahead, dear!"*

That evening after the funeral, my wife stayed up with the others, sipping wine and chatting in the kitchen. I excused myself early and went downstairs to the pull-out bed in the rec room...

Lying in exhausted sleeplessness, I felt the strangeness of the absence of my sister in a house that so deeply bore her design. Apart from the funeral wreathes in the parlour, the place looked exactly the same as it had three weeks earlier. The shelves and nooks held the same photos and knickknacks, exactly as she had arranged them.

Her traces were everywhere. Some magazines in the rack by the sofa had her underlining in the margins. Even the fridge magnets were positioned by her absent hand. More traces of her were in the bathroom medicine cabinet: a tiny hair on a pink razor's edge and a fingerprint in a jar of Noxzema ...

Yet it occurred that all those traces were temporary. My brother-in-law will probably find it too painful to live for long in a place so fraught with memories of his late wife. Eventually, he will want to sell the place and move on. The new owner will never know that a person who loved this house drew her last breath in the master bedroom...

There came to mind the motto so often seen on African buses and taxis: '*No condition is permanent'*... In my fatigue, it seemed a consolation that in the sweep of time, a pyramid is as temporary a trace of a deceased person as is a fingerprint in cold cream...

3

At the breakfast table the following morning, my mother talked nervously about my late father. She was not prompted by any questions from those present: none from my wife nor from my two older nephews. My poor niece, barely twelve hours after her mother's funeral, understandably looked benumbed. My mother seemed eager to fill the silence. Amid the nibbling of toast and scrambled eggs, she blurted on:

"Do you know he went AWOL before he went overseas?" She nodded at me. "He ran back home but his father brought him back to the camp in Nova Scotia... He had to spend a few days in jail in Halifax. He went back to his training and was sent overseas with the others... His younger brother said that even in the camps in England before the invasion, he acted funny... He was always gettin' beat up by the other soldiers. He got awful mouthy when he drank, ya know."

In a phlegmy voice, she told a story she'd heard about my father in France soon after the Normandy invasion. He apparently got so drunk on brandy obtained from a farmhouse that he was too hungover to drive his jeep. A fellow soldier had to take over duty for him. That soldier was supposedly killed when the jeep was struck by an artillery shell…

She paused for sips of coffee. "His brother B.'s wife," she went on, "claims that that man's son once met your father in the Fredericton legion. She said he threatened to kill him. It's a lie, of course!"

It was uncertain whether she was merely gossiping about the mendacity of an estranged sister-in-law or revealing information too sensitive to be aired before the old soldier's passing…

My eldest nephew, expressionless behind owlish glasses, munched a bagel. Seemingly sensing discomfort, my mother attempted to leave a redeeming impression:

"His mother told me he was a quiet child— hardly spoke. But once he asked his father for some seeds for a garden. He grew a vegetable garden behind the house— a real nice one. He never told me that story himself... He was a good carpenter, too, Made some lovely furniture." She sniffled. "He didn't finish high school but he wasn't stupid, ya know. When he wrote his IQ tests in the army, they offered him to take officer training. He didn't think he could do it. He had no self-confidence— that was his trouble!"

Blinking, she took off her glasses then rubbed them on a drooping sleeve of her bathrobe. Her blue eyes were rheumy.

The story of the supposed confrontation in the Fredericton legion was jolting but I tried not to show any reaction. Head down over my plate, I could almost hear words blubbered in the middle of the night, three and a half decades before: '*That's what I am— a goddam coward!'*

"You think there's enough hot water left for a good shower?" My mother asked, creaking up in her chair. Sighing, she moved towards the stairs.

A silence followed her departure from the table. There were no further attempts at small talk to break through the funereal pall. My niece sat with eyes downcast. Sadly, she would take years to come to terms with her mother's early death. My nephews could not have been shocked by their Nana's revelations, having already heard her grim monologue on the morning after their grandfather's funeral. Perhaps they were not really listening.

Still, they knew that their grandmother was beside herself in grief for their late aunt (*'I just lost half of my heart!*' she had sobbed as the hearse pulled away from the church). They would never have thought she was disrespectful to the memory of their Papa. Her talking jags about the old soldier perhaps seemed like a grieving old woman's attempt to let go of just one part of her suffering...

4

I have wondered whether in the weeks after his funeral, the old soldier was in my mother's dreams as often as he was in mine:

Typical among those episodes was the one in which my father catches me attempting to sneak away in the middle of the night from the old house. In my haversack is his precious deer rifle: *"You little bastard— how dare you!"* he roars… In another dream, I stand over his hospital bedside, where he lies shrunken as a Peruvian mummy: *"This goddam pain,"* he croaks, *"the morphine doesn't do nothin'!"*

Then there is the one in which I meet him on the deck of the Makadavic Lake camp. I brace for him to lunge at me, but instead he slaps his sides, grinning maniacally. "*You think I'm helpless, don't you?"* he raves. *"Watch me—I can run, I can jump—I can fly!"* That sequence ends with his cartwheeling over the railing…

It has occurred that in no dream of my father have I ever looked him directly in the eyes...

One rainy afternoon early that spring, I was driving to work when the hymn '*Abide with Me'* was discussed on CBC radio. It was noted that the hymn was not, as legend has it, the last piece of music played on the sinking Titanic. However, it is among the five most requested hymns for funerals in the British realm (along with M. Python's '*Always look on the Bright side of Life.'*)… It was apparently written by a nineteenth century Scottish cleric, one H. Lyte, just two months before his death. That grimness of numbered days is certainly reflected in its lyrics: *'Change and decay in all around I see; O Thou who changest not, abide with me.'*

It couldn't have been those words that appealed to my mother. She probably chose the hymn for my father's funeral not because of any affinity he might have had for its lyrics. Rather it was probably the music she was touched by. Indeed, when its organ chords

welled up on the car radio, even the eyes of a hardened non-believer moistened...

Soon thereafter in a pre-dawn reflection over the boiling kettle, there wavered up a crystal-sharp image of my father. He was in the garage (*circa* mid-1960s) skinning a deer suspended from the rafters. He was pulling down the hide with his left hand while deftly working the blade with his right. All the while he was softly humming to himself. In snapping back to attend to the teapot—it occurred that moments like those were probably as close as the old soldier ever got to bliss...

On another drive from work (with the radio switched off) I suddenly heard my father clearing his throat in a bedroom doorway.

"What's going on here," he asks, *"a three-ring circus?"*

Hearing an uncommon gentleness in the deep voice, my two sisters giggled in their bed while I stood up watching from my crib. That was either a dream— or one of my earliest memories...

I then thought of times I'd switched on a bedroom light to hush up my three fledglings who were rolling around like bear cubs... Could there really have been such a scene in the distant past when my father felt similarly blessed?

"A three-ring circus," I whispered to myself in a pang of sadness...

In those same weeks, I sometimes wore my father's brown tweed cap brought back after his funeral. One evening I had it on while hurrying up the back stairs of the college. In catching my reflection in a fire door window, I was startled. In the hunched figure loping forward there sprang to mind my mother's description of the old soldier in the weeks before his death: '*He'd lean forward and almost run to get up the stairs!'*

I had always assumed that only my late sister resembled him. That seemed a certainty in an unforgettable moment when she jumped off a diving board into East Grand Lake, New Brunswick, *circa,* 1963. In breaking the surface gasping for air— her face looked exactly like that of my father. At that moment at the age of eleven, I was sure that I neither looked like the old soldier nor bore any of his traits...

But in the moment on the stairs at the age of forty-five, I was struck by the possibility that I had been wrong…

5

In a phone call that spring, my mother complained about doing the post-mortem tax return: "You'd never think the government can come after you when you're underground!"

I did not mention that in earlier getting a form to prepare my own income tax, I had morbidly plucked up from the rack at Canada Revenue a copy of *"Preparing the return for a*

decreased person'. It confirmed what had already been suspected. Doubts aside of the continuance of a 'soul' beyond mortality— there is something of an afterlife as a consumer/taxpayer. But what consolation in that?

In the same call, my mother spoke of her unusually heavy spring-cleaning.

"Took me three days to clean the junk from the cellar," she said. "Me doin' all this work and him lying out there in the vault with his hands folded! He was never good at practical things. He admitted that at the end."

In late May, my mother wrote to inform that my father's body had been removed from the cemetery vault and planted ("committed" in religious parlance) in their designated gravesite. Her letter included an illustration of the tombstone she had ordered. On the left side, an eagle flew over a tree under which rested an antlered buck and a fawn. In the middle was a pond with two swimming ducks. On the right side was an open book, disproportionately large, propped against a tree. Presumably representing a bible, it bore the words: *'Rest in Peace.'*

Of course, my mother chose the design knowing that her remains would eventually be interred under the same slab of polished black stone. At the top of the design, her name was inscribed alongside that of my father. The dash that followed the year of her birth would await the chiseling in of the final four numbers.

A scribbling under the picture indicated that she had saved $650 off the regular price of the tombstone. The saving was likely not insignificant in her choice.

That memorial would not be among the more notable in a village cemetery given to fancy memorials (*e.g.* a marble fiddle and a granite jeep). Still, it would be respectable and inconspicuous. Such inconspicuousness, it seemed, would have met with the old soldier's approval…

6

That same month I signed a contract to teach English in Dubai. After only eight months in a new neighbourhood, I was preparing to uproot my family again. Even though I had a job to come back to— in normal circumstances I would never have taken on the attendant risks and uncertainties. But my circumstances were far from normal. The move was less in pursuit of tax-free fools' gold than a bid to escape morbidity...

In July 1997, a few weeks before our departure, my mother flew out to British Columbia for a visit. I was teaching full-time during her weeklong stay, so she spent most of her time with my wife and kids. She was disappointed in our impending move to the Arabian Gulf but passed no judgement in our presence. She did talk a lot about my late sister. One evening after supper she described their living together in Saint John, New Brunswick, in the 1970s:

“I can still hear the dear thing’s high heels coming in late at night,” she sniffled. “I can still hear her say: *‘Don’t worry about me, mom!*”

Another time she spoke of her hope that her son-in-law in Ottawa would agree to interring some of my sister’s ashes in her village cemetery.

“We bought two other plots next to ours,” she said. “There’s room for you there, too, ya know.”

I should have told her that the prospect of ‘coming to rest’ in a Kolkata sewer would give me greater comfort. I could only hope she noticed my ashen face.

She spoke little about the old soldier— that is until the evening she had a couple of glasses of wine with supper. Her comments to T. and I after the kids had left the table were curious enough to take notes of it afterwards.

She first spoke of an incident that occurred on a visit to her rural Carleton County home soon after their marriage:

“Your father always had a temper. I remember we went to a party up home at my sister’s. There was a French girl there. I went into the living room and caught him feeling up this French girl’s leg. Up and down,” she made gestures. “Up and down... When I told mamma, she said I should have gone back to the kitchen and sat on another boy's knee...”

I was reminded that my grandmother thought my father lucky to have survived the war— unlike my mother’s eldest brother, buried in Italy. According to my mother, her mother also felt that whatever any soldier endured in war gave him no excuse for mistreating his wife.

“He woulda killed me for that,” my mother continued. “He was awful jealous— always accusing me. He said I went to bed with every man in town. He beat me so bad once I had to stay in bed for a week, black and blue all over. I had to tell people I fell down the stairs."

Across the table, I thought of the photo of my parents taken after their marriage. He was only twenty-six and she barely nineteen. Neither could have imagined their cruel mismatch would last for more than a half century...

With little transition, she shifted from an event of 1946 to one just a year before my father’s death:

"The winter before last, he nearly froze himself to death. He could never handle his liquor. Took off drunk on his snowmobile from RF’s [their next-door neighbour’s son] camp on the lake and took a wrong turn at the fork. He ended up in the woods overnight in the middle of March. He wandered up and down the road at three o’clock in the morning. Poor Cleo froze her paw. The feeling never came back in one of his hands.

After that, he didn't touch a drop of liquor again. But he wouldn't let anyone around him enjoy a beer, either. Wouldn't let me bring it into the house. You remember how miserable he was about that last summer, don't you?"

Then, just as at the breakfast table in Ottawa, she respectfully concluded on a positive note:

"Whatever bad things you could say about him, he was honest. He wasn't materialistic— like certain people we know." She scoffed— but left the person in the insinuation undisclosed. "He never talked about people, either— he hated gossip."

"Are you talking about Papa, Nana?"

It was perfect timing for MT to come up from downstairs into the dining room.

"Yes, darlin'," said her Nana. "You want to have some dessert with me? Call your brother and sister and we'll dish up some ice-cream."

Fortunately, the only one to have openly wept at her grandfather's funeral heard only the laudatory remarks...

7

Heading off to Dubai in July 1997 ranks high among my most foolhardy decisions. There is some consolation in realizing the consequences could have been worse. When we got back in July 1999, we did not find our house trashed— even though our tenant had skipped a few months' rent. I got my old job back with the same lousy shifts. The kids were back in their former schools without having missed grades.

Yet by going away, I lost the opportunity to advance my education by which I might have escaped teaching classes for which I was tiring. Then my B.C. college's refusal to extend my two years leave forced me to break the three-year contract with the Dubai college. That resulted in missing out on the tax-free lucre. Yet the uglier consequence of the sojourn in the sandbox Disneyland was the ruin of a marriage...

In the subsequent three years before our divorce, my ex-wife and I endured separation under the same roof. She lived upstairs and I in the basement of the house I had dreaded to partially own. Sometime during the first few months of that hideous arrangement— my mother called to happily announce her engagement:

"You know H.," she said. "He worked with your father. He's so good to me."

I had only a vague memory of a custom's officer with a bulldog face. She said he was a widower without children of his own. He was also a member of her congregation.

"His wife died at only fifty of a heart attack. You might remember her father. He was a

custom's officer, too. An old fellow with an iron hook— he lost his arm in the First World War."

"No, that must have been before my time," I said.

"H. said he won't marry me unless I change my name. What do you think?"

"Whatever makes you happy," I said flatly.

"H. is such a lovely man. Last Sunday after church we went out the cemetery and put a Legion cross on your father's grave. He paid for it."

Listening without comment, I wondered whether in hunching over the grave, my mother's fiancé had heard any rumbling from below.

"We've set the date for November 27th."

In her call a few weeks thereafter, my mother gave details of her upcoming nuptials. She said it would be a small church wedding. Only my elder sister and brother-in-law and a couple of her friends would be attending. She described her wedding dress and matching shoes. She would presumably be exchanging vows at the altar adjacent to where the old soldier's coffin had lain two and half years before.

"We don't expect you to come all the way down," she said.

But she did expect my blessing. I could have at least asked to congratulate her soon-to-be hubby. I said nothing. Even from a house of pain, that want of generosity was inexcusable...

Perhaps I was momentarily possessed by the ghost of the old soldier— seething in his 'betrayal'. Yet I was no Hamlet, my father's old workmate no Claudius nor my mother a perfidious Queen Gertrude. She was just a long-suffering old woman trying to snatch a little pleasure from her final years…

In a call the following April, my mother spoke of flooding in the village caused by torrential rains. She mentioned that in the village cemetery, some graves had caved in.

"They told me not to go up to the graveyard until they took care of it," she said casually. "But I don't have to worry. It's perpetual care, ya know!"

In hearing her report, I had a grotesque image of the brown coffin heaved up lengthways in the mud. If the lid had come unhinged— would there have been confirmation that the corpse had indeed— rolled over?

Over the next few years, my mother called less often. I hardly ever called her. When we

did talk on the phone, I ignored her husband— even knowing he was usually listening in the background. Yet my mother unfailingly sent Christmas boxes and never missed birthday greetings. Her letters included photos of cruises or trips to Florida. The elderly couple also took foursome excursions with my elder sister and her husband. My mother seemed proud to display evidence of the late-life luxuries she deserved...

She continued to welcome my kids on summer visits. Closest to her Nana, MT went to New Brunswick most often. Working every summer gave me the excuse to decline the open invitation...

After two years of bitter negotiations, my wife and I had wrangled out a separation agreement. I had no inclination to fight for the possession of the house. Indeed, an enormous weight was felt to be lifted in my signing it over to her.

I moved into a low-rent complex just a few blocks away. My kids were reluctant to invite friends to the place but still stayed there half time. I believe they would have insisted on that even without the joint custody agreement. However shabby the environs, at a difficult time in the lives of both their parents, perhaps I offered them some semblance of stability.

Yet that did not lessen the guilt of jointly passing on to my kids, memories of domestic warfare. I had to wonder whether that was due to some karmic legacy of my childhood home…

8

"These are some of Papa's things that Nana wants you to have."

In August 2004, when MH (then twelve) was returning from a visit with his grandmother in New Brunswick, he was carrying an extra bag. Nearly eight years after the funeral, I was to find out which keepsakes of my father would be falling into my custody…

As soon as we drove back from the airport, I crouched on the living room floor with my son and zipped open that extra bag. Inside was a bulging green garbage bag and two grocery bags, both tied closed. At the bottom of the bag was a manilla envelope.

The biggest bulge in the garbage bag were my father's old hats. There were four fedoras of 1960s' vintage and a blue cap with a Legion insignia commemorating his fiftieth anniversary D-Day tour.

Then there was a small rolled up rug— one which the old soldier had hooked in his convalescence. It was not the swastika rug my mother had described on the night after his funeral. The rug I was inheriting appeared to have been hooked without political inspiration. It was red and white with a yellow shape in the middle marked with red Xs. It might have passed for South Pacific tribal art.

Rolled up in a Sobey's grocery bag were two pairs of Stanfield long underwear, presumably unused. Wrapped inside those was a vial of old coins and an envelope of banknotes from occupied Europe, *circa* 1945. In the same envelope was a notepad sheet in my father's careful handwriting identifying the denomination of each coin and bill.

Along with the World War Two era money, were Ziploc bags of smaller items: two broken Timex watches, a brass Custom's badge and a slightly rusted tin compass, likely found in the woods.

'*I have to make room for this junk?'* was my first guilty thought…

The other grocery bag had a mothball odour. Inside was the navy-blue Nazi sailor's tunic from his metal box of war souvenirs. Rolled inside that was the notorious Nazi flag he had taken on his return trip to Normandy. I spread it out to reveal the swastika.

"That's weird," said MH.

Wrapped at the centre of the Nazi flag was the iron cross. With a little jump in the chest, I pulled it out by its ribbon from the plastic pouch. It felt as sharp and cold it is had around my neck in that troubled week of the summer of 1967. My mother had probably assumed I wanted that creepy thing most of all…

"Nana said you should have Papa's medals," said MH, pointing to the khaki bag that was probably army-issued, six decades before. Laying aside the iron cross, I opened the drawstring.

Inside was my father's grey soldier's pay book, his certificate of discharge from the army and a Credit Union bank book from the 1960s. There was even the original deed to the second family house that dated back to the 1920s. All were his 'precious' documents locked for decades in that grey metal box at the back of his bedroom closet…

At the bottom of the khaki bag were his World War Two service medals. Remembered as tarnished pieces seemingly tossed carelessly into that drawstring bag, it was surprising how they shone. Three of those I later identified were the 1939-1945 star, the volunteer service medal and a World War Two service metal. I presumed he had them spruced up and fixed to a bar in preparation for the fiftieth D-Day anniversary tour. Maybe that refurbishing was also in preparation for their being pinned on his coffin... I was surprised— and a little nervous— that my mother would entrust them to me.

MH, who had been watching me curiously, suddenly spoke up. "I almost forget. Nana sent this letter with the stuff." He dug into his carry-on bag and handed over her note.

'We're selling the house in the fall, so we have to clean everything up,' she wrote.

My daughter had earlier mentioned that her Nana and her husband planned to move away from the village—probably to Fredericton. The note confirmed it. For my mother, such a

move would be an even bolder break from the past than her remarriage...

She stated that she had intended to send a box of my father's things earlier: '*But with all the terrorism, I didn't dare send them through the mail.'* She added: *'Some things we had to get rid of.'*

I took *'some things'* as a reference to the swastika hooked rug. Her pronoun *'we'* suggested that it was her hubby who got rid of it—probably along with the copy of '*Mien Kampf'*. As a Legion member, he may have felt he was protecting the honour of a fellow veteran. Still, the Nazi flag and the iron cross had been spared...

My mother's note concluded with the advice: '*Do what you like with the rest of the stuff but keep his war medals in a safe place'.*

I had already decided on their custodianship.

"I'll put your Papa's medals in my safety deposit box," I told MH. "When you get older, you can take care of them, OK?"

Although preoccupied at that moment with opening his grandmother's tin of cookies—he nodded.

Before dropping off my son at his mom's place, I stopped off at a 7-Eleven. We sat in the parking area with the car windows open while MH slurped a slushie.

In the following minutes, I tried to give some context to the strange collection of things his grandmother had sent. I told him the anecdotes about the lost iron cross and the packet of marijuana my father caught in the mail.

"Do you think I was a bad kid?" I asked as we pulled out.

"That's pretty typical teenager stuff," he said.

"I just hope that we won't have to go through shit like that in the next few years. I think we'll stay pretty close, right?"

Considerably more mature than I was at twelve, my son gave an affirmative slurp.

Alone that night, I looked again through the objects my mother sent. Why did she think I would be interested in the Nazi souvenirs? It seemed that she still took me as the fifteen-year-old who stole the iron cross... Yet for the divorced guy in his fifties, the possession of Nazi artifacts was no more welcome than a shrunken head from a vet of the south Pacific... Did I have the stomach to unload the vile things on some Nazi memorabilia site? Would that be any easier than to just throw them away? I realized I was stuck with them...

As for the war medals— I did not need them as reminders of his wartime service. It was not out of callousness that I never wore Remembrance Day poppies. Mine were worn throughout the year—but invisibly...

Then, in a flicker of the dark side of his spirit, I imagined how he would have felt about his medals stuffed in a plastic bag by his remarried wife clearing 'junk' in preparation for selling his house. He would likely have felt that his medals coming into my hand no less dishonourable than their ending up in the trash. He would probably have imagined my mother taking that decision only out of revenge…

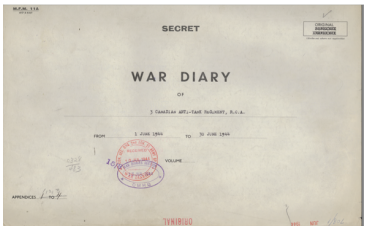
After that shiver of paranoia, I felt more committed to handing the medals over to MH, as soon as he was of age. Most appropriately, MH was the only one of the old soldier's grandsons given his grandfather's name. Tellingly, my son's middle-naming was as much his mother's choice as mine.

I had almost forgotten the manilla envelope at the bottom. In opening it, I immediately recognized the photocopies of my father's war letters. My mother must have forgotten she had sent me copies of them before he died. In the envelope there was also a cyclostyled copy of the letter sent from Scotland to my father's clan forbear in New Brunswick in the early nineteenth century. I already had a copy of that, too...

Still, I would take a closer look at them….

****

Nine: Wartime Letters


SECRET

WAR DIARY

1

I have no idea how many letters my father wrote home from Europe from 1941-1945—nor all those relatives to whom he had written. The copies sent from my mother were only of eight letters sent to the same sister-in-law.

I would never have guessed that that aunt and my father had been wartime pen-pals. I remember her typically in tartan ready for curling—always friendly and often tipsy. Her husband (my father's oldest brother) was not so friendly— especially in my teen years when I loitered with fellow delinquents on the steps of his hardware store. Still, brief Christmas visits to my parents from that aunt and uncle were marked by jolliness over drinks. I recall that only because in their presence, my father seemed uncommonly at ease.

Perhaps something of that ease was reflected in the candour of his wartime letters to that sister-in-law. Like millions of relatives on the home front, perhaps she regarded the correspondence with a soldier a contribution to the war effort. In any case, she kept some of his letters and gave them to her son.

I first received copies of my father's letters to her about a year before his death. The copies were apparently given to my mother by the (then) middle-aged nephew who was once the little boy whom my father asked after in a few of those letters.

The faintness of those first Xeroxes seemed as challenging as reading hieroglyphics. Still, the discernible details were intriguing. Questions were raised which could have been starters for an interview of the old soldier. Sadly, that opportunity was lost during the unhappy visit of July 1996...

The photocopies MH brought back from his visit with his grandmother in Aug. 2004 were much clearer than the first. Not only were they easier to read but they were even faithful to the tints of the original paper and ink. A few had the colourful letterheads of the Salvation Army or Red Cross, which provided the writing paper...

2

In a closer reading of the recopied versions, I took some notes:

The earliest, dated February 26th 1941, was sent from an infantry training camp near Truro, Nova Scotia. In the looping longhand of the McLean's Modern Method of penmanship, the 21-year-old wrote of camp hockey matches and visits to the area's movie houses (*'sure are swell places'*). In that first letter— my father's store of superlatives barely exceeded *'swell'* and *'grand'*.

One detail of historical interest is his reference to the assemblage of Canada's Third Infantry in preparation for sailing across the Atlantic: '*The whole division is not here yet. They are coming in from all over the country... The crowds are getting larger…*' He signs off by informing '*I am going on fire picket duty tonite…'* My father's tone is of a young recruit proud of his entrustment with a soldier's duty…

If adjustment to camp life had been brutal, he gave no hint of it. There was no way of knowing what he'd experienced in the previous year of training. Along with observing the official advisories, there must have been some self-censoring in that letter of 1941. If he was getting into fights with other recruits— as my mother had said she'd heard—that would be the last bit of gossip he'd want circulate back in his home village…

3

His two letters from *'somewhere in England'* in the spring of 1942 were written in a hospital ward.

Reading them brought back a nearly forgotten story of my father's injury during a training exercise in England. As he once told it, a vehicle backed him into a wall, breaking his hip. He spent several months in convalescence. He was always a little secretive about his veteran's pension. It wasn't much— but he seemed guilty in receiving it for an injury not incurred in battle…

The March 17th letter begins with thanks for parcels received: *'Boy was I ever excited today. Two boxes from home came in for me... Your fudge was real good, it sure tasted like home...'*

Along with gushing gratitude for the treats, he makes a practical request: '*there was one thing missing in the boxes which I wished mother would have sent, that is soap.'* He goes on to mention rationing coupons and shortages in the hospital tuck shop. He then strikes a note of gloom that sounds familiar: *'I have been 9 weeks on my back... I don't know why it is taking so long...'* He despairs about being able to rejoin his anti-tank unit: '*They may be out of the country by the time I'm ready to go back'...*

Yet he takes a jocular turn, telling his sister-in-law that he misses his older brother's (her

husband's) home-made beer: '*I have been on wagon for some time—but I will make up for it.'* Over the following five and half decades he would hold to that promise…

In his one reference to larger events beyond his ward, he notes: '*The war sure looks bad, doesn't it? Sure hope they can drive those japs back when they make their attack on India...'* No doubt any newspapers that circulated in his ward would have reported the recent conquest of Singapore, the bombing of Darwin, Australia, and the surrender of the Dutch East Indies to the 'Japs'. The heartland of the British Raj, though, was to hold firm...

In a final turn of levity, he speculates on what he was missing back at home: '*Today is St. Patrick's Day. I suppose the mickeys will be going to town tonight at the dance.'* At the age of twenty-two, the irony would have escaped him that his little anti-Irish slur was written on donated stationery with the letterhead of the Knights of Columbus…

In his letter of April 24th, he reports that he is on his feet and on the path to full recovery. He describes a walk taken outside the hospital grounds: *'Yesterday morning I was down to the river, saw Lady Astor's home, it is a regular castle...'*

Interestingly, that detail identifies his location. 'Lady Astor', was Nancy Astor, the first Conservative female member of the British parliament. Wikipedia informs that her former estate— today called Cliveden House— is on the Thames, west of London. It is near the village of Taplow, not far from today's Heathrow Airport. In the war years, Viscountess Astor and her husband were benefactors of the nearby Taplow hospital, a "state of the art" facility for soldiers run by the Canadian Red Cross.

In discovering that Lady Astor was known to be both anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic, it occurred that during his convalescence at Taplow, my father might have been slightly infected with a right-wing Tory virus. In any case, his brush with the ruling class was notable. I was surprised that he'd never talked about it.

In the same letter he describes an even closer brush with the upper crust: *'Three of us* [sic] *boys were invited out to tea.'* The invitation was extended by a Mrs. Charington, a local lady who volunteered at the hospital. Tea in her garden must have seemed like a scene from *'Mrs. Miniver'*, a popular film of the same year. '*Her* [sic] *and her husband took us around and showed us the different flowers... We had a maid wait on us... She was a typical English maid, too...'* One can imagine the wide-eyed Canadian boys following a Greer Garson-like lady around the flower garden.

When a few years thereafter, my father first saw the farmhouse in Carleton County, New Brunswick, where his young wife grew up— perhaps he was teased by a memory of that flower garden in Buckinghamshire...

4

My father's letter of July 1942, written on Salvation Army stationery, was sent from a

military holding unit near Guildford, south of London. He informs that he was sent there upon release from the hospital. He reports that he is taking a *'military transport'* course while awaiting his further deployment. That detail reminded me of his war story of nearly running over an old man on a bicycle when he was driving a military truck through Nijmegen, Holland...

Having been several months away from his anti-tank unit, he is still not sure whether he will be called back: '*I have heard you have to go to whichever regiment that needs men at the time you are ready.... Well, I won't mind so much because I have been away so long I almost forgot the boys back at the 105th...*'

His apparent ambivalence about rejoining his unit, once again brought to mind my mother's comment about him not getting along with his fellow soldiers. Perhaps at that point in July 1942, he would have been relieved by a transfer away from a unit of mostly his fellow New Brunswickers...

He goes on to describe meeting up with one of his brothers, assigned to a different unit but also training at the time in the south of England. He writes: '*We had a grand time talking over old times... We spent the afternoon lying on the grass in the park it being a swell day...'*

In his letter of 1945, he would describe a surprise visit from the same brother at a farm in Germany. My father writes of meetups in England with both his brothers in uniform. The armed services no doubt encouraged such morale-boosting visits between brothers in the field.

The one he met at the Guildford Park, would be the uncle my mother would call in desperation one night in the early 1960s. Watching that uncle swinging a board at my father's head, I could never have imagined that in a park in England eight years before I was born, they had had *'a grand time'* together…

In the same letter, my father mentions how he had just celebrated Dominion Day, Canada's national day, for which all uniformed Canadians in Britain were apparently given leave: *'Another guy and I went to Guildford and spent the day there...We met a couple of girls and enjoyed ourselves very much...'* In this and in subsequent letters, he seemed eager to impress upon his sister-in-law that he was enjoying the fringe benefits of the soldiering life. Foremost among them was dallying with free-spirited English girls.

He concludes that letter in gratitude for the three cartons of cigarettes he'd received in the previous two weeks. Two were from *'mother'* (never referred to as 'mom', 'mum', or 'ma') and another from the home village Red Cross. The third was from a female cousin whose fate would come to entwine his in a rather macabre manner. In the coincidence of their both dying in the winter of 1997, their coffins would lie together for a few months in the home village cemetery crypt awaiting spring burial...

5

The letter sent eight months later in the winter of 1943, was distinctly nostalgic: *'I hate the cold damp winter they have in this country,'* my father wrote*. 'It wouldn't so bad if they had a bit of snow… I would give anything to see a good snowstorm...'*

He was surely not alone among Canadian boys in dreary English winters, pining for landscapes of dazzling white. Perhaps the others also dreamed of home girls as pure as the snow of the true north. In the next paragraph of that letter, my father avows: '*You don't want to worry about me bringing a lassie home with me after the war... I have been out with a few of them over here, but still they are not as nice as our own Canadian girls.'* He then asks his sister-in-law about the teacher of his 7-year-old nephew: *'I always thought that E.C. was pretty nice.'*

A generation later, there was no middle-aged teacher in the village with her name. Perhaps she had already moved on before my father got back home. Maybe like the farm girl he was to wed in 1946— E.C. had also 'married up.'

His sister-in-law must have responded to his questions about the village's marriageable inventory. His comment in this letter seems an attempt to clarify his earlier jest: "*You say a lot of the young girls at home are either married or getting married... I guess us* [sic] *fellows over here might as well keep our eyes open for a little English wife as the girls at home will be all taken by the time we get back (Ha Ha)'*

The ending of that letter of March '43, shows that the 23-year-old must have been keeping up with war news and developing opinions on current events. *'Berlin got hell from the RAF the other night... The paper said it was twice the raid of London's biggest during the blitz...'* It also seems that army-training was nurturing in him, a new-found pride in being more than just a British colonial: *'I guess there were a lot of Canadians in on it... Well, it's time they were getting a taste of it, don't you think?'*

A little date-checking informed that two days previous— on March 1st 1943— a joint US and Royal Air Force had bombed Berlin in a thirty-minute raid. By the end of that week, German radio reported 486 dead and 377 seriously injured. It was the heaviest single air raid on Berlin to that date.

That news possibly made wild snowstorms and maidens of the north country fair, seem closer...

At the beginning of his letter of September 1943, my father laments the paucity of mail: *'Mother sent me 1000 cigs about two months ago which I haven't got yet... Mail is scarce I guess they can't spare the shipping after the invasion of Sicily...'*

Some of that mail from home—along with his mother's cigarettes— could have come to rest on the bottom of the Atlantic. Throughout 1943, Allied shipping in the North Atlantic

was frequently harassed by German U-boats. Several ships were torpedoed...

Earlier that year, he had returned to his anti-tank regiment which was then stationed somewhere in the south of England. In September 1943, there were hundreds of thousands of Allied troops in southern England preparing for the invasion. While there were no marks on that letter of a miliary official censor (as would be in his letters from Europe) troops were no doubt advised to write nothing about camp location or training exercises. As a wartime poster slogan warned: *'loose lips sink ships!'*

The main topic of his letter of September 1943 was on his summer leave. He describes a visit with the older of his two brothers who had come down from his camp in the north. They were London when the brother came down with a flu and had to be hospitalized... With his brother's visit cut short, my father takes a solo excursion north to Blackpool, '*England's Coney Island'*. He reports that he had there: "*a real good time with all the amusements.'*

He follows that with a short description of an educational tour to Hampton Court Palace, in Richmond on Thames. In schoolboy fashion, he summarizes what he learned: *'It is an old castle first built in 1530 by Cardinal Wolsey, after he died King Henry VIII lived there will all his different wives. It was marvellous with all the paintings on the walls...'*

'Marvellous' is a word I'd never heard my father use. (It also shows that by 1943, his adjectival range had expanded beyond 'swell' and grand'). As with his signing off one of his letters with a '*cheerio for now'*— it appeared that a bit of Olde England was rubbing off on him...

The final paragraph of that letter is solemn: *It's been four years since this war started...It really can't last much longer. Germany can't* [last] *the way it has been getting it from the air lately... They say Hamburg is almost completely levelled...'*

In conclusion, his thoughts turn wistfully homeward: *'I suppose you will have some great trips up lake this fall hunting with the motorboat... Maybe next fall I will be home to go hunting...'*

That was more a wish than a prediction. A year later he would not be hunting deer in New Brunswick but dodging mortar fire in Normandy in the first weeks of Operation Overlord...

One might surmise that training leaves similar to those my father described in his letters from England before the invasion, were widely enjoyed by the troops amassed there. A few months thereafter, many of them would be stepping into hellfire. It probably seemed cricket to the brass that the lads get a few jollies before the send-off...

6

On the Government of Canada Collections website, I recently came across the once-secret war diaries of the 3rd Anti-Tank Regiment, R.C.A. (Royal Canadian Artillery). That regiment included the 105th Anti-tank Battery in which my father served.

In monthly logs between May 1944 and December 1945, every day is chronicled in a terse paragraph. The daily reports include details about weather, location, logistics, enemy engagement and casualty statistics… Digitized to a PDF format, these documents are freely available for downloading. Back in the mid-1990s, when my father would have loved to see them, these regimental diaries were probably still on microfilm in a dusty archive.

While the entire trove is fascinating, my curiosity first fell upon June, 1944. That was the beginning of the invasion and the month when my father wrote one of his only two surviving letters from the war front.

The regimental diary entry for June 6th put to rest my old question about exactly where my father was on D-Day. The diary notes: *'Weighed anchor at 0700 hrs. and with a company of a vast armada of other shipping, proceeded out of the Thames Estuary and down towards the straits of Dover…'*

So just as my father's acknowledged in the phone call a week after his return from the fiftieth anniversary ceremonies, on D-Day itself he was on-board a transport ship. Yet he never mentioned that the channel crossing had been so hairy. As stated in the regimental diary: '*German channel guns on the French coast opened up and fired four rounds at the convoy. The ship immediately ahead was hit. The second round fell just off the bow of our vessel…'*

After the report of that close call, the diary continues: '*Remainder of day uneventful with convoy running parallel to the English south coast. Much speculation and interest in news that the invasion of western Europe commenced this morning… Continental maps distributed and all ranks received their briefings...'*

The regimental diary entry for the following day describes the landing of the 3rd Anti-tank Regiment on Juno Beach: '*Weather bright and sunny. Our convoy arrived off beaches at approximately 0800 hrs.... Everything appeared very quiet except for desultory firing from warships anchored offshore. Personnel were off-loaded into LCAs* [landing craft] *to make the run onshore... Column marched to assembly area 4 or 5 miles inshore. Little of interest was noted except columns of German prisoners and the odd sniper still active...'*

Not included is reference to "the smell of cordite"—my father's most enduring memory of the landing. Another interesting detail in the log for June 7th is that the 105th battery, my father's unit, was delayed until early evening before coming ashore: '*the 105th*

[battery] *did not land with assault wave owing to unloading difficulties...'* That detail corresponded to my father's claim of having been stuck in low tide.

Yet the 105th battery would soon get a taste of whatever 'action' was missed in the first thirty-six hours of the Juno Beach assault. Of their first night ashore, the regimental diary records: '*We were very heavily bombed during the night which kept everyone in slit trenches most of the time...'*

In the ensuring weeks and months, as described by the regimental diary, few nights would be undisturbed by incoming shells…

7

In the entry for June 22nd 1944, the regimental diary reports: *'Area lightly shelled during evening… but fortunately the rounds were falling some distance away...'*

Perhaps it was during a break in the shelling on that evening in which my father wrote his letter. The blue-tinted aerogram is heavily marked by the pencil of a censor whose signature is at the bottom. That letter begins:

'*Have been in France now for over two weeks... Things are rather quiet where I am today which is a change as I am about* [blotted out] *miles from the front line... Had a few close calls up there the shells were hitting all around us...* [blotted out] *with the exception of a few shrapnel holes in the truck we got out of it OK...'*

What he might have noted in the blotted-out paragraph was that the shrapnel were from the 12th SS Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend* [Hitler youth] which his regiment was fiercely engaging.

Incidentally, Kurt Meyer, the fanatical commander of the *Hitlerjugend* tank division, would be eventually convicted of war crimes and would serve several years in New Brunswick's Dorchester Penitentiary… That location was likely chosen given that one of Meyer's most intrepid opponents in the Battle of Normandy was New Brunswick's North Shore Regiment which my father's regiment supported.

In that same week he described close calls, the 3rd Anti-Tank regimental diary notes: *'All batteries undergoing sniping, mortaring and generally being kept occupied...'*

In his war stories, my father spoke of having been both a driver and a radio operator. Given his gunner's rank— he was probably assigned more of the former. When at the front, my father was probably behind the wheel of a miliary vehicle, pulling big guns (*'6-pounders'* or *'17-pounders'*, according to the Juno Beach Centre) into position or delivering ammunition… Drivers rarely threw grenades or engaged in hand-to-hand combat but among the 907 Canadians killed in the Normandy campaign there were certainly a few drivers...

In the second paragraph of his letter, my father shifts to the landscape: '*It is farming country around here… the little villages are old fashioned with narrow streets…'*

According to the regimental diary, that farming country where my father's company was located on June 22nd was probably near the village of Villons-les-Buissons, just to the north of Caen.

'I sure wish I was able to speak French,' he writes. That admission reminded me of his refusal to utter so much as a *'merci'* to a gas station attendant on rare summertime passages through northern New Brunswick. His openness to the language of *Les Normands* in 1944 did not, unfortunately, translate to an openness towards the language of *Les Acadiens* of his native province, twenty years thereafter...

'*We manage to get a little milk and a few eggs once in a while. The French people are always willing to sell you them if they have any at all… They sometimes won't even take your money...'*

In a break from field rations (referred to in the day as 'compo packs') a scrambled egg would have been a luxury. In his World War Two memoir, Farley Mowat, described a typical army ration meal as: "Tins of M&V (unidentifiable scraps of fat and gristle mushed up with equally unidentifiable vegetables); canned processed cheese which tasted like glue…"

'Treats' in the ration packs, apparently included cigarettes and hard tack candy. My father once complained that it had been the hard tack and slabs of tasteless chocolate that had ruined his teeth...

Still, more gruelling than the army rations in those days of combat would have been lack of sleep and want of a shower. Yet my father's only veiled complaint in that letter is about the monotony: '*All the days are alike over here... If you want to know what day* [of the week] *it is you have to ask about 3 dozen guys before you can find out...*'

That observation on the drudgery of war is common. The troops in Normandy were not hunched in trenches like the soldiers of World War One, but they must have experienced similar agonies of waiting— interrupted by the gut-wrenching terror of incoming shells...

In his letter of June 1944, my father gives no hint of fear… Perhaps that was in awareness of the censor's pencil. He does leave his sister-in-law with a few intriguing details at the end of his letter. It would be generous to call the following paragraph 'Hemingwayesque' but the tone is remarkably journalistic:

'*I am sitting in the truck writing this letter.... I can see a little graveyard across the road. They're mostly Canadians buried there... I watched them bury two there this morning... They were killed last night by trench mortar... I guess the casualties weren't as heavy as they expected...* [Censor blot out] ... *I sure will be happy when this is all over and we are back home again.'*

The writer of those lines was not the boy who in training camp three years before— scarcely knew what he was getting into…

8

My father's final letter from the front was written on March 9th 1945 from *'somewhere in Germany.'*

The regimental war diary indicates his company's location on that date was near the city of Wesel. At that point, the Canadian Third Army had pushed southeastward from Nijmegen, Holland, up to the west bank on the Rhine. For the previous weeks in 'Operation Blockbuster', the 3rd Anti-tank Regiment would have fought against heavy resistance. Around the time my father wrote his letter that operation was at a climactic moment— with the German army retreating across the Rhine.

On March 9th, the regimental diary reports: '*2 officers wounded by shoe mines. Put on one hour notice for follow-up operation on the Wesel bridge…'* Still, on the following day, the report was not about a follow up operation on the bridge, but rather: '*The regimental hockey game left for Antwerp to play in the Canadian army hockey schedule...'*

So, in the background of pursuit of a retreating German army and preparations for an army hockey tournament that my father wrote his longest surviving letter. It begins: '*I left on leave. Well, it's all over now and I am again back on the front line…'*

Before going into details of his leave, he tells about the surprise meet up with the same brother he had last seen in Guildford two years previously. His brother searched him out when his own regiment, the Cameron Highlanders, were traversing the sector where the 105th battery was encamped. The brother got a sentry to guide him to my father who was asleep in a barn... My father reported that that he and his brother had had *'quite a talk'* in the hours before his brother's outfit moved on.

That uncle, as previously noted, I remembered chiefly for a scowl. Of course, what a child took for animosity could have been indigestion. I wondered again if on that night (*circa* 1960) I saw the two drunken brothers aimed blows at one another's balding heads either of them had thought of that meetup in a barn in Germany a decade and a half before...

In the second page, my father begins a detailed description of his leave back to England. It began with a train journey to a 'leave camp' in Holland. There, the soldiers *'get a shower and a change of clothes... a new shirt with collar and a black tie and any other equipment you need...'* I took *'equipment'* as a wink for the furnishing with prophylactics... ...

He remarks on the VIP treatment accorded by the Dutch: *'You have your supper before you leave, Dutch girls serve you, they give you a haversack lunch to take with you on the train...'*

Of course, those girls knew that Canadian boys were still fighting for the liberation of Holland and that the Canadian government was giving refuge to their royal family in exile. Some of those girls were probably also on the lookout for a marriage ticket…

My father then notes his luck in getting a cushioned seat on the overnight train through France to the ferry at Calais. Regarding his first crossing of the English Channel since the D-Day flotilla, he effuses: *'Sure looked good to see those white cliffs of Dover!'* The pampering continued on the train from Folkstone to London: *'On the train you could get tea, cakes and sandwiches, the English girls served it to us, it was good to hear an English girl speak again...'*

It was plain what was foremost on the mind of the young man describing his adventure. As soon as he (and unnamed fellow soldiers) got to London: '*we made for a pub and get a pint of that good old English bitter...'* He did not have to wait long to hook up: '*met with a girl there who was really nice...'*

My father goes on to describe the following days of sight-seeing in the company of the girl called 'Kay'. They visited the Tower of London, the Tower Bridge and Regent's Park Zoo... They even saw a play which featured Vivien Leigh: *'I didn't care much for it,'* he admits, '*but the girlfriend did.'* While no makes no mention of the name of the play, a few Google clicks determined that he probably saw Thornton Wilder's *'The Skin of our Teeth'*, a production at the Piccadilly Theatre in which Leigh was performing in the winter of 1945.

I don't recall my father's ever mentioning this detail— nor any other anecdote about that trip to London. In the uniform of a soldier returning from the front— that leave must have seemed magical. In the drabness of later years, perhaps he preferred to forget it...

As for 'Kay', he concludes: *'I had a letter from her yesterday wrote* [sic] *the day after I left. I told her I wasn't much of a writer and she would probably never hear from me again... But would be nice to look her up again if I ever get back to England...'*

So again, he gives his sister-in-law the impression that British girls come easy but are just not his type. In 1945, his fantasies were apparently still fixed on a Canadian girl— 'innocent' and uncorrupted by war...

Regarding the granting of the leave itself, on December 4th 1944 his regimental diary reported: *'All ranks bucked up by BBC news that all British troops who served in theatre since D-Day will be given 7 days leave in England. It is hoped that the term 'British' includes Canadians...'*

Up to that that date, there are numerous notations in the diaries describing recreation (*e.g.*

movies, booze and sports) provided in the pauses between the slogging campaigns. Still, by late 1944, the British and Canadian generals must have determined that the boys who had fought since the Normandy invasion deserved a longer break. That reward sharply contrasted with the Nazi's methods for keeping their troops "hard as Krupp's steel." Yet by late 1944 the Allies, in growing superiority, had the luxury of extending carrots. Despite unexpected setbacks (*e.g.* the Germans' pushback in the Ardennes) there was growing confidence that the war in Europe was nearly won.

On January 27th 1945 the regimental diary notes: *'English leaves very popular. Leave train and services reported to be very well run...'* Perhaps returning leave-takers were asked to write reports. My father might have been repeating to his sister-in-law details he'd already written up for his officer.

Only the last page of that eight-page letter of March '45, does my father describe the situation at hand: *'We are staying at a German farm here, there is about a dozen civilians still here most of them say they are either Poles or Russians. The old farmer is the only one who claims he is German and says he hates Hitler and the Nazis, of course he would say that now...'*

Maybe it was at the farm where he got his iron crosses in a trade with Canadian cigarettes… It might have also been within those days that he got his reprimand for "fraternizing with the enemy..."

As that old war story (forgotten until reading the letter) goes: he is in a cellar guarding German civilians. Bottles are being passed around of which he is partaking. A young officer, newly arrived from Canada, suddenly appears in the doorway: "*The little bastard who never heard a shot fired claimed I was 'fraternizing with the enemy'!"*

My father never spoke of the upshot of that accusation. The upbraiding could not have resulted in a formal charge. He had no stain on his military record and got an honourable discharge. Otherwise, he would not have got a veteran's opportunity to write civil service exams…

At the bottom of the last page of that letter of March '45, in running out of space, his script shrinks but his voice becomes terse and clear:

'The latest news I head is that the yanks are over the Rhine at Bonn...and have a bridge head 5 miles deep and ten miles wide... That sure sounds good, possibly the war will end any day now, the Russians have started another big drive...'

Just as with his letter from Normandy, his glimpse of the historical moment is left for the last page... This last letter left me tantalized by what was missed in his letters lost...

9

As noted earlier, the 3rd Anti-tank Regiment was not at the forefront of the Juno Beach

assault. Yet as dramatic as the landings on D-Day certainly were, the Canadian forces most ferocious battles were in the weeks that followed. In the liberation of Normandy—village by village— close to 5,000 Canadians died...

In those weeks, the 3rd Anti-Tank regiment provided critical support. From Normandy to the push though Belgium and Holland, the battery in which my father served— the 105th Anti-tank— also directly engaged the enemy in numerous instances. Just as an example, the following notations in the regimental diary in the month of July 1944 are among the references to the operations of his battery:

July 7th: One troop of 105th still getting considerable German attention at Carpiquet [near Caens].

July 13th 105th battery shelled in the morning one OR killed and 2 wounded

July 20th: 105th moved across the River Orne

July 22nd: 105th went into position in Vaucelles [near Bayeux]

July 25th: 105th in depth at Mondeville [near Caens]

In late October, when the Canadians were pushing into Holland, the 3rd Anti-Tank regiment which primarily served as a backup for infantry, were tasked with clearing sections of the canals in the approaches to Antwerp. On November 1st 1944, the regimental diary notes: *'Today is notable in the history of the regiment as it is the first time that the regiment has been called upon to take on a full-scale infantry attack.'*

According to the regimental diary, the 105 Anti-tank battery were assigned to dislodging the Germans from a sector of the Sluis canal. That action was certainly not as hellish as the bloody direct assault on the Germans by the Canadian Black Watch in Walcheren Island a few kilometres to the north. Yet even without having experienced the Normandy campaign—in Holland in the fall of 1944— the boys of the 105 Anti-Tank battery would still have got enough of hell to last a lifetime...

How many letters my father wrote amidst that hellfire, I can never know. Perhaps mail was restricted for security concerns during those weeks of fierce combat.

His two letters from the theatre of war provide only slender evidence of the extent of battle he experienced— but they are certainly more historically reliable than fuzzy memories of his war stories...

I can't help regretting missing the opportunity to 'interview' him in July 1996. Of course, even then I would not have had at hand the recently come upon information. I can only imagine asking him specific questions about references to the activities of his battery found in the regimental diary.

I would guess that by 1996, many of those details would have been long forgotten or blurred in his memory. As he wrote in his June 22nd 1944 letter: *'All the days are alike over here.*'

Still, memories of some events of which he'd never spoken—even in middle of the night monologues— would surely have been triggered by descriptions in the regimental diary. For example, how could he have forgotten driving in convoy through Lille, France in on August 25th, 1944? As the regimental diary describes that event: '*The French civilians in Lille show their enthusiasm by lugging great jugs of cider and bouquets of flowers to the roadside. These they distribute freely whenever a convoy stops. They shout 'Vive les Canadiens!' We reply 'Vive le France!'*

Maybe he suppressed that memory. The tossed bouquets of Lille could have been more tormenting than the stench of German corpses...

10

That possibility has led me to recently doubt one of my oldest assumptions about my father: that he was psychically damaged by the war… That assumption was held not only about my father— but about other vets who couldn't handle their liquor and who sometimes terrorized their families... I still think that my father harboured something of "the worm that never dies" but suspect that in his case— the larvae that hatched out in the 1950s could well have been embedded prior to the war.

That is not to deny that night sweats and pounding of the bedroom wall were probably due to war flashbacks. Neither to be denied is that his meandering thoughts spoken aloud while drunk was in effort to unburden himself from dark memories... Still, his "close calls" could not have been as traumatic as a World War One gas attack in the Somme— let alone a concentration camp in eastern Europe...

As closely as I can read, I cannot detect in his wartime letters hints of a soldier suffering from trauma. On the contrary, I hear a voice of confidence—especially in the last letter. In March 1945, my father sounds optimistic that the war was nearly over, and he would survive it. By having held up through the previous months of hellfire, the 24-year-old likely felt that he had proven himself worthy of manhood by any measure. Perhaps he felt ready to take on any challenge. As far as I can gather, that was the attitude my father took back from Europe to Canada in 1945...

Along with fellow soldiers, he had probably been assured by his officers that the folks back home were intensely proud of their service... Still, before heading home, soldiers were probably advised not to expect thrown bouquets nor the hometown beauties falling at their feet...

They did probably hope for a recognition that they were not the same boys who shipped off to war. As for the hometown folks themselves— why shouldn't they expect their lads to fit right back in?

As for the girls— pure as the virgin snow? After the first homecoming dance— in the back seat of a borrowed car—perhaps they seemed as easy as those in cellars in Germany. Perhaps the only difference was in the method plying— pints of gin as opposed to cigarettes...

As for my father— he still got back to the woods. That would have been his greatest consolation. It was probably hunting and fishing as much as family that held back his temptation to "light out." He probably would never have been at ease living in territory where the names of the game fish were unfamiliar...

If he was war-haunted, that may not have been so much by flashbacks of pounding mortar. Perhaps harder to dispel than nightmares was the taunting of finer worlds glimpsed. Back in his New Brunswick village, a tour of an English country garden or a walk around Piccadilly Circus with an English girl on his arm must have seemed like memories of some lucky stranger…

Thicker-skinned vets grasped that the Legion was the place where wartime memories could be shared with a few comrades...Yet men like my father chose to remember in silence— except in binges when jagged bits came spewing out...

I recall hearing that in his first months back home in early 1946, my father worked again for his older brother, the husband to the sister-in-law to whom he wrote his letters. For a few days, he might even have worked in the casual job that boys from his village did when they needed quick money: shovelling snow on the railroad extra gang...

If he was still depending on such labour when he learned that he got an innocent young waitress "in trouble"– I cannot imagine that news was received with joy... But he did do the honourable thing. Despite the yearning for marriage with a Canadian girl he expressed in those letters to his sister-law-law— I would guess that it took on his responsibility with some taste of ashes in the mouth...

On August 3rd 1944, the 3rd Anti-tank regimental diary reports of an inspection of the troops by the commanding officer, Major General Keller. In the speech that followed, the C.O.: *'thanked all ranks for magnificent effort after 56 days of continuous fighting...'* By that time, the regiment had successfully completed the Normandy campaign and was soon to push on into Belgium and Holland. The diary recorder further comments:

'There is a great feeling of pride in the regiment tonight but it is pride tempered by wisdom and by sorrow…We have passed a milestone in history that we have helped to make... We recall with pride the part we played at Buran and Carpiquet... We look to the future determined to profit by passed experience and pray that we may serve with the courage and resolution of those who have given their lives in the campaign…'

I wonder whether some memory of that speech ever came back to my father... If so,

standing proud among fellow soldiers in France at the age of twenty-four must have been painful to recall. I imagine he would have doubted that he had kept the faith as urged to do— that is— kept it honourably enough...

Perhaps it was due to some sense of self-betrayal by which his war medals in the box at the back of the closet were left for so long, tarnished. Maybe it was in that bitter spirit that he once muttered at the TV documentary proposing that Canada should remove all border posts with the USA: *"Yeah, tear them all down. Piss on it!"*

Perhaps all that— and more disillusionment— led to the eventual hooking of a Swastika rug... I only speculate—I can never know.

****

Ten: A Little Unravelling

1

In September 1967, one of my teen friends was speeding on the twisty road outside our village. When he failed to make the last curve before the cemetery, his father's car ended up on its roof in the ditch. He was unhurt, as was another buddy and I who crawled out the smashed back window. We missed a boulder by about a yard.

By the end of that afternoon, village rumour had it that I was in a coma. Around the same time, I was walking into my dooryard where my father was standing by his car. Instead of the expected scolding for risking my neck, he asked me if I was alright. He shook my hand. He then told a story of his roll over with a carload of boys near St. Stephen, New Brunswick, thirty years before...

"It's the kind of thing that puts a scare into ya, eh?" He chuckled.

In that rare moment, my father seemed to make some connection between my teen misadventures with memory of his own. He even seemed pleased that I was more resilient than might be expected… Significantly, this incident happened two months *after* I lost his precious German iron cross. Hadn't that been the transgression that permanently sealed our estrangement? There may have been other times thereafter when we interacted with a semblance of ease— instances overlooked or forgotten. Memory, of course, is selective. Historical accuracy often requires revision of the timelines that fit one's story...

I recalled that incident in the dooryard soon after coming upon another letter my mother included in the same envelope that contained the newer copies of the war letters. It was written to me from my father in July 1963. He was responding to my plea to be rescued from a summer camp in Grand Lake, New Brunswick. In the same looping slant of his war-time pen, it read (with minor deletions) as follows:

Dear F.,

I guess it is about time I was writing you... We received your letter the other day. You sure are quite the letter writer. You do a better job at it than I do.

You're lucky to be where you are because there isn't much going on here. I've been working the four to twelve shift taking the car almost every day so I wouldn't be around to take you swimming...

By now no doubt your mother has written you about K. going to the hospital. We took her in last Sunday. she seemed a little worried, not knowing what they were going to do to her. On Monday we were in again and she was getting more used to being there… We don't know how long K. will be in the hospital. It might be quite a while but they think they will be able to help her. We sure hope so....

She will be pleased to get letters from you as you write such a good letter. Maybe by the time I get my vacation she will be out.... If K. isn't out of the hospital by then, I wouldn't feel like going too far away without her....

Princess is doing fine. She isn't housebroken yet but she's getting better as she just goes on the newspaper we put out for her. You will see a big difference in her as she is growing every day…

Don't get too lonesome. We do miss you.

Dad

That long forgotten letter was one the few ever received from my father. Most notable was its gentle tone. There was even a reassurance that the pet dog had not been blinded by the recent eclipse of the sun, as I recall having been worried about. That was five years before poor Princess's brutal euthanasia…

Dominating my anxieties in July 1963, though, was a sense of betrayal. Despite tearful protest, my parents had sent me to a Rotary Club-sponsored camp for "handicapped children." I felt especially betrayed by my father. When the Rotarian prosthetist who fitted my fake arm told him the camp would be "good for me," my father seemed eager to please him. I would have quite happily gone to a 'normal' summer camp— but one only for crippled children? It seemed my father was deliberately rubbing my face into something I feared and loathed… In reflections of later years, I would draw analogy between my father's compliance with an assumed authority and that of parents of certain children in Nazi Germany...

Yet the 1963 letter suggested an underlying reason why I was sent off that summer. My absence for a few weeks probably made it easier for my parents to attend to my middle sister's needs. Meanwhile, the crippled children's camp was *free*—that had to be the clincher for my father...

Only in reading the letter, did I remember that my middle sister had been in hospital while I was at that dreaded camp. She was barely thirteen when struck by a debilitating autoimmune disease which would periodically flare up for the rest of her life. That condition may have masked an earlier detection of the cancer that in her mid-forties, would take her life...

2

Reading that letter from July 1963, prompted a digging into of my bankers' boxes for another letter. That was one my father wrote to my eldest daughter on January 29th 1996, almost exactly a year before he died. His letter was in response to her request for some information for her Social Studies project on family history. Again, in a hand as steady as that of the young soldier who penned the war letters, he writes:

Missed talking to you on the phone last night but your Nana told me all about what was said. Glad to hear you you're enjoying the snow you had recently, sliding etc. I was quite pleased to hear that you are interested in family history. I'm sending along a bit of literature, on my side of the family… F., you have read it all before as I believe you mother sent it to you some time ago...

The letter I am sending was sent to my great-grandfather from Scotland... It was only a few years ago that I found his grave and gravestone in the old graveyard by the river just before Fredericton. My brother and I visited the house where he lived in the 1800s... The owner took us all through it. it had a plaque on the side since it was an historical building. I believe it is still there today…. You can keep all the material I am sending as we still have copies here.

At present, your Nana has nothing on her side of the family. She will probably find some soon and send it to you.

Love,

Papa

The old soldier's reference was to the copy of an 1838 letter sent to his presumed forebear recently emigrated to New Brunswick. Written by an uncle in Wishaw (near Glasgow), Scotland, the letter is mostly dour advice for "getting on" in the material world while serving a Presbyterian deity. Two copies of it were later included in the bag of my father's souvenirs sent by my mother in 2004. It was hard to guess what a Grade Six student (as MT was at the time) would have made of the letter. As family history, it is decidedly dreary…

Yet his letter to MT deserves to be part of family history. It shows a devotion to a grandchild utterly in contrast to other elements in his story. It is not that evidence of a doting grandfather glosses over those ugly episodes of earlier years. Still, it seems fair enough that what transpires in the final chapter should leave a greater impression than what came before…

In that thought, I remembered how my mother talked about the old soldier after his passing. After revealing a few unsavoury details, she tried to leave a positive impression. An approach worthy of emulation?

3

As my mother noted at our table the summer after he died– the old soldier had always been honest in his dealings. I would also grant her that he was not materialistic. He loved his camp, his truck and his hunting rifle— but did not covet the things of others...

He was frugal—sometimes in extremes. When denturists were not covered in his medical plan, he fixed own bridgework with epoxy glue. Yet in his sunset years, he was exceptionally generous. Most of the tickets for my kids' summer visits to New Brunswick were paid for by their Papa. Of course, there was his generous legacy gift which provided for a downpayment on the house (a joy to my wife and kids—however it seemed to me, a poisoned chalice)...

He was a robust man— especially for one who did not earn his living by his hands. Until diminished by cancer, he could tramp all day in the woods (Accompanied more often by a pint a rum than with a sandwich). Before the dawning of environmentalism, he practiced 'conservation.' While his greatest pleasures were in rod and gun, he was scornful of those who took more than the legal limit of fish or game. In speaking of sighting a ten-point buck or hooking a landlocked salmon, his eyes would shine...

He was introspective. He seemed to have a brooding awareness that inclined him to depths which he feared to explore. He bore his grave thoughts in silence— except when bingeing and talking to himself.

Some of redeeming qualities seem to have been paired in opposing dualities with weaknesses. His low self-esteem seemed to be his modesty, turned inside-out. His hatred of bullshit and small talk had a flip side in his social unease. His paranoia seemed to be his sensitivity— in dark mode.

My sister's eldest son once compared his grandfather to the Thomas Hardy character, Michael Henchard, in *'The Mayor of Casterbridge'*. Henchard, the successful grain merchant in his middle age, lives in eternal self-punishment for his drunken abandonment of his wife and infant daughter in his distant past. Similarly, even in the bounty of his later years, my father seemed to dwell in guilt for past sins— real or imagined…

4

After reflecting on all this, the mystery of the swastika rug remains. Why did he make it?

Ideology aside, the simple explanation may be that it was his response to general advice given in his cancer rehab therapy… As once described by my mother, the old vets in his clinic were guided through a range of exercises and activities designed to help them "think positively." They were encouraged to shed their usual inhibitions and to be creatively daring in crafts like rug hooking, which my father particularly took to… Perhaps he waited to take up the challenge to be *daring* until to got to his camp porch, a few months after leaving hospital. For a World War Two vet, what could be more daring than crafting a swastika?

What of his hanging the Nazi flag on the outside railing of his hotel in Caens in 1994? The details of that alleged incident, heard *sotto voce* from my mother, are vague. Perhaps one day I can ask my eldest sister about the episode. She also accompanied him on Fiftieth D-Day Anniversary tour… As far as I could determine, his stunt was an awkward attempt at black humour, muddled by over-medication…

Still, not to be dismissed was his deeply held 'fang and claw' ethos and latter-day curiosity in '*Mein Kampf*'… Yet it kept that all that to himself. There is no evidence that he was ever captive to some sinister allegiance.

In the end, he took no greater pride than in his wartime service. He could not have felt such pride without accepting that the cause was just and the right side won.

5

Like so many vets, my father carried on through the decades with most appearances of a 'normal' life— but there was always "something going on under the surface".

That phrase was used by American journalist, Tom Matthews, in describing his own father. He was being interviewed on the PBS *Newshour* about his book: '*Our Father's War*: *growing up in the shadow of the greatest generation',* (2005). It is apparently based on interviews with the sons and grandsons of World War Two vets. The common thread is the continuing impact of fathers now old or deceased on their post-war generation children.

Matthews spoke of how he felt he could never measure up to the expectations of his brow-beating father, a vet of the Italian campaign. Several others whom Matthews interviewed for his book spoke of similarly anguished relationships. Most memorably in the TV interview, Matthews claimed that those fathers: '*…passed their psychic scars on to their children.'*

I have always assumed (rightly or wrongly) that I bear little physical resemblance to my father. Yet in struggling with suspicion or want of self-confidence— it has never seemed coincidental that the old soldier exhibited these same weaknesses. While kicking myself for a bad decision, I often imagine his scorn... When he appears in my dreams—he is angry or accusatory. Is that psychic scarring?

Whether that is the case or not is or not— hardly matters in middle age and beyond. Whatever damage is done— is irreversible and the worst of it— ancient history. What does matter is the extent to which such 'scarring' is carried forward. So far, mercifully, my children show resilience...

Meanwhile, why be it assumed that only scars and weaknesses have been passed on? Having something of the old soldier's stoic strength would be an honour…

6

'We all do wrong, don't we?'

Those were his last words he said to me before I left his driveway in July 1996. All these years afterwards, I am still not sure how that tag question of my father ought to be taken... Sadly, I wonder how that last moment in his physical presence could have been better handled...

Just a week before, my middle sister and her family departed from that same driveway. The video of that final farewell, taken by my daughter, shows my late sister in her last face-to-face moments with my father. They talk softly before a final embrace. The camera records a dignified expression of sorrow and love...

A hug would never have come naturally between my father and I— that was not what was missed. What I do regret is my choice of words that elicited his response:

"Sorry for whatever wrong you think I did here," I had said, extending my hand. He winced.

The '*you think'* made my statement seem like an accusation. Those words– and my tone– –probably seemed an insinuation that any "wrong" I did was only in *his* mind... Even if it were a bid to depart in truce— it must have sounded insincere.

Still, if only the '*you think'* had been avoided, we might have parted with a firmer handshake. Perhaps even our eyes might have briefly met. That would have been enough for a truce...

Instead, I was left with: *'We all do wrong, don't we?'* It seemed like a rebuke from the Scottish Presbyterian uncle of his great grandfather...

We did exchange pleasantries on the speaker phone several times in the following six months. Those exchanges were cordial enough—but as always—words were chosen to hide more than to reveal...

If asked to recall my most touching memory of my father— I would speak of a springtime fishing trip taken with him when I was about twelve. We tramped for what seemed hours through alder swamp to a remote stream. So as not to spook the fish, we crept the final yards to a beaver-dammed dead-water. While I was still baiting my hook, he pulled up the first of several fat trout we would catch that morning. When unhooking that first one, he rolled it over to display its pink belly.

"Look, it's a pure native," he whispered. "We sure are in luck!"

In that instant of shared excitement, we both smiled.

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Afterword:

The son of the aunt to whom my father wrote the wartime letters gave the originals to my mother before he died. After my elder sister gave the letters to me, I handed them to MH. My son has always been interested in his grandfather's war service. He had already put his Papa's war medals in a frame for display on the wall of his law office…

The German sailor's tunic, the iron cross and the swastika flag are still wrapped in plastic at the bottom of one of my drawers. The disposal of those abominable souvenirs (including my carved piece of ivory from Africa) will be left for children... The rug hooked by my father resides in a corner of my workroom. However hideous the pattern, it sometimes warms feet on the coldest days...

Two years ago, I got DNA results from *Ancestory.com.* Several of the DNA matches that showed on the paternal side established with near certainty that 49.7% of my biological inheritance was contributed by the old soldier. Any doubt of that was never due to distrust of my mother's word on the matter. The little worm of uncertainty of my paternity was rather imbedded in ravings of ancient nights... Yet after all these decades, a different result would not have mattered. There was never any question that for better or for worse—I could conceive of any other father-figure than that of the old soldier...

My mother outlived my father by fourteen years. When she fell and sustained the stroke that led to her death at the age of eighty-three, she was tragically alone. Her story remains to be told. Perhaps my eldest daughter, who had such a special bond with her, could do that telling proper justice…

-2023 *(Based on journal notes from 1996-1997 and first draft of 2006)*