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Memorial*

by James Calvin Schaap

The whole time they rode out to the cemetery, Lew Van Dam talked and talked and talked, the steam chunks around his words filling the pickup. Out front, a south wind snatched up corn leaves from the frozen fields and sent them dancing across the blacktop, but inside Van Dam's chatter was the only movement in the solid cold air. On and on he went, Wiley thought, as if the man were afraid of silence.

They'd walked out of church together after the funeral, and Lew told him they might as well ride out to the committal together since both their wives were staying behind to get lunch ready. All the way out there, Lew Van Dam bitched: how his fuel bills were killing him; how even after forty years on the farm, he gets shaky nervous come spring when everything has to get in on time; how a man might as well get out of farming altogether if he can't make a decent living; how he's got nothing anymore but nitrate poisoning bad enough to kill a cow. Kept jabbering.

He finally quit when they got to the cemetery and joined the thirty people or so already out there, a small crowd, with the temperature what it was and Henry Minnard, the dead man, having no real family to speak of. The snowfields to the south put an icy edge on the wind that snapped the plastic shelter so hard it seemed as if it might shatter and leave the retired farmers and the color guard, all bundled up, nearly defenseless against the cold ridge where the cemetery overlooked town.

Wiley stood in the back in his snorkel jacket, the fur zipped up tight in a tube around his face, while Lew, hands in his pockets, scrambled up front in his wool dress coat, as if he had to be in the middle of everything. It was so cold they just scratched the whole taps thing, the color guard simply standing at attention instead of walking out in front of the hearse. The minister's lips turned purple as he chopped off the words, Henry Minnard's wife standing in front shaking in her sister's arms.

From the back of the crowd, Wiley watched Lew Van Dam bawl. County Cattle Feeders chairman, fourteen hundred prime Iowa acres, and what not else, Lew Van Dam stood there and cried. Once the preacher finished, the Legion commander gave Lew Henry's own flag, neatly folded, and Lew gave it to Henry's widow, a sugary edge of frozen tears around his eyes, then hugged her, his breath trumpeting over her shoulder like a steer's.

On the way back to church the whole story came out how Lew claimed he knew Henry Minnard so well that it just about killed him to have to see that

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shiny casket and lay him sown forever in that field of frozen death, how the two of them became buddies forever during the Second World War.

“I can tell you everything, Wiley,” he said. “I can tell you because you’ll understand. *You* been in the service. You know, don’t you?”

Wiley shrugged his shoulders and let the man rattle on in the cold.

He said how he and Hank Minnard were together right from the start, from ’42, from the day they left Sioux Falls; how they stood side-by-side when they were issued uniforms, how they did everything together.

“Motor pool, both of us,” Lew said. “We followed the front from Normandy across the Rhine, fixing every last piece of army hardware—jeeps to deuce-and-a halves to tanks. All through Europe—’44 right through until we got out,” he said. He stopped talking to take a drag of his Winston. “Paris, France?” he said, “Shoot, I been there. Germany?—I seen it all.”

Wiley did a tour in Vietnam. Out in 1971. He’d always thought there wasn’t much to say about it. Everything had been said or written. Even TV shows now. He’d done it, that’s all. The rest of them could say what they wanted to, argue forever, but at least he could say he’d done it. He’d been there. Their daughter Mary Lynn did a paper for a school report, and he told her some things; she was even proud, he thought.

“We went through the whole thing together, see?—Hank and me—start to finish.” Lew blew on his fingers. “Darn, Wiley, you put a man like that in the ground and you start to wonder if those times weren’t the ones that really counted—back there in Europe. We did it—the two of us.” His nose was running, so he leaned over to pull out a hanky. “Shoot, that was something, but you know it, too—don’t you?”

“I didn’t even know you and Hank were that close,” Wiley said.

“Close?” Lew said, throwing that hanky on the dash in front of him. “What do you mean, *close*?” He locked his hands up around the top of the steering wheel. “You live with a guy for three years—eat, sleep, and drink with him—you read each other’s love letters, you work your butt off, up to your elbows in grease, and all the time—every last day—you’re saying to each other how great it’s going to be someday to sit out on the back porch on a perfect warm night in June, knowing the whole crop is in down in the ground, every last seed is warm and wiggling.” He sucked some air through his teeth and sniffed. “You got dreams is what I’m saying. That’s what you live for. Who cares about Paris?” He blew warm air in his fingers. “*You* know that, Wiley,” Lew said. “I don’t have to tell *you*. You been in service. You been in war.”

Wiley sat across the seat with a hand up over his mouth as if to hide his breath.

The kids were still in school when he and Carolynn got home, so he told her how Lew had cried out there in the cold, made a spectacle of himself, and what he’d said on the way home about the two of them and the war.

“What’d you tell him, honey?” she asked him.

He scratched at his fingernails. “He’s the guy that did all the talking,” Wiley told her. “I didn’t have time to get in a word.”

“You didn’t tell him anything?”

“I didn’t have a thing to say.”

He could tell by the way Carolynn put down her coffee spoon that somehow she’d wished it were different.

“It’s good that you could be there to listen,” she said. “Probably he needed somebody to say all of that to—somebody like you, who’d been through it.” She looked up at him almost sadly. “You know what I mean,” she said, begging him with her eyes like she could, asking him to talk.

“Of course, I know what you mean,” he said, looking out over straight lines of corn stubble peeking through the snow on the field west of the house.

“Hank must have really been a buddy,” she said. “But it’s a funny thing because you never saw them together that much—not the couples, I mean.”

He was thinking how it might be a wet spring with all the snow, how the yard would be full of mud.

“I suppose you get close to a man like that in the service,” she said, “going through it together.”

He got up from the table and took out a cigarette from the pack he kept up by the bills above the refrigerator. He didn’t smoke much any more, not in the house anyways, not with the kids harping constantly.

“You have someone like that from Vietnam, Wiley?” Carolynn said, “Somebody?”

He lit the cigarette, pulled the ashtray from behind the envelopes, but let it sit up there out of the way.

She picked up the scissors and cut a coupon out of the paper. “You had buddies, didn’t you?”

“There’s guys I wouldn’t mind talking to sometime,” he said, “but I wouldn’t go out of my way to see them and I don’t think they’d do any more for me.”

“Nobody?” she said, “really?”

Faces he remembered, and the names that went with them came up like magic in his mind, one after another. Hibbard would be bald as a buzzard now, and Flannary always wanted to sell cars in Little Rock, where everybody talked just like him, he said. “Maybe,” Wiley said. “I just don’t think about them much.”

“What do you remember?” she said.

Pronster was going to go to college for the women. Meredith said he wouldn’t go back to Columbus for nothing. Alaska, he said. He wanted to be a wilderness man, coonskin cap. All Wiley really remembered was the farm, coming home to Iowa. “You know,” he said, “nobody has time to sit out on a porch and watch the crops grow—not in farming nowadays. It’s a cutthroat business now.”

She looked up at him strangely, the scissors in her hand.

“It’s something he said,” Wiley explained, “It’s just one of them hundreds of things Lew said coming back.” He didn’t want to explain. “Just nevermind.”

Carolynn turned the page and looked up and down the columns. “Did they have the whole army rigamarole out there? Tillie said that Henry had asked to have the whole thing—shooting the rifles and everything,” she said.

“Too cold,” he said, “thank the Lord.”

“I guess it comes with being in the service—did you know that?” she asked. “All that has to happen is that somebody has to ask for it. You don’t pay a thing. You just have to ask for it.”

He knew the kids would smell the smoke when they came in, so he doused the cigarette. “Carolynn,” he said, “if you love me, don’t order any of that junk when they put me in the ground.”

“Don’t even talk that way.”

“I mean it.”

“I just wondered,” she said.

“Promise me,” he told her.

“Wiley,” she asked, “why is that so important? Why do you have to forget so hard?”

“I was a medic, you know, mostly behind things. I didn’t have it so bad.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing. It’s twenty years ago,” he said. “And it gripes me no end when guys can’t forget it, as if that’s all that ever was in Vietnam. It gripes me no end, Lynn. Shoot, I was there and everything, and it’s nothing to hang your hat on.”

She sat there waiting for him to go on. Outside, he could finish a smoke, he thought. In the barn, he had to nail up some pens for his sows. He pushed open the folding door to the back hall and raised his eyebrows at her, then shrugged his shoulders before going downstairs to get dressed for the barn.

* * * * *

In late May the sun stays up all day long and air warms up the ground so you can smell life stirring. In the shadow of three old pines out front of the cemetery, Wiley sat on his knees setting out Memorial Day geraniums at his parents’ grave, a job that fell to him in ’83, when they buried his mother out there beside his father. He dug out the holes and dropped in the geraniums, threw a little water over them, and looked around for the kids, whom he shouldn’t have brought along but he did anyway because his father had always taken him out there too, the day before the holiday. Half a cemetery away, they were riding graves as if they were ponies, playing leapfrog, row to row, even Danny, the eighth grader, who looked up every once in a while to check his father, to make sure that he could get away with what he somehow already understood was a kind of sacrilege.

He jammed the empty pots into the box, along with the watering jug, and stuck it under his arm, then stalked the kids. It was purely by accident that he ran into Lew Van Dam, who, like half the town, was out there putting in flowers.

“I don’t suppose I could twist your arm into marching on Monday?” Lew

asked from all fours. It wasn't the first time that he'd tried to recruit Wiley into marching with the Legion.

"I don't even have a uniform," Wiley told him.

"I can get you a cap is all you need," he said.

Wiley tried to call the kids. "Look at this here," Lew said, pointing with his trowel. And it wasn't until that moment that Wiley realized he was standing at the grave of Henry Minnard, no stone yet, only an engraved brass marker stabbed into young grass growing on the mound like fine hair. "I told his wife I'd take care of this for her," Lew said, pointing to the marker and the new flowers. "She still don't have her feet on the ground yet. They only had each other."

"I'd think you had enough work out here just with your own family," Wiley said.

"Hank *is* family," Lew said, sitting. "Listen, you don't have to join the Legion to march along. It's just the numbers, you know—we keep getting smaller."

Wiley looked back at his parents' grave. "It's your parade, Lew," he said. "I told you that before. You and Harry. It belongs to you guys. It's your war."

Lew packed dirt around the pots. "That's crap," he said. "It's for all of them out here," he said, pointing around at all the stones with flags. "Look at them all." Then he stared up at Wiley, as his own father might have. "The trouble with you Vietnam guys is all you can think about is how bad you had it. You think you're the only ones who had it bad." He jammed the trowel back in the dirt and wiped the sweat from his temples with his jacket cuff.

"I got to get my kids," Wiley said.

"Whole cemetery is named after your relative—Harry Lammers, the Great War. You knew that, didn't you? 1918—killed in France in a trench, in the mud."

His grandma's only brother, he remembered. Somewhere his father had a picture of a doughboy surrounded by his mother and father, a yellowed picture full of pride. Somewhere that picture was buried in his parents' things, somewhere.

Lew squirmed around until he got to his knees. "Look," he said, "Hank never had no kids—you know that." He pointed down at the marker. "My son Fred was born when we were somewhere way out in France. I remember the letter. There was this lull," he said. "The Krauts were already pulling back to the Siegfried Line, and all they left behind was some stragglers to slow us down. Not a whole lot to do. That's when I got the letter." He leaned back and sat, one hand behind him. "We got the most beautiful boy you've ever seen," he said, raising his hand as if he were reading the letter. "She wrote me right from the hospital, and I swear I smelled it." He held his fingers to his nose. "So Hank here says that it'd be wonderful to see them together, Tillie nursing little Freddy. 'Imagine that,' Hank says, 'Tillie in all that white bedding, sitting up and nursing that new baby.' He knew what I was feeling, just like that boy was his—like we had one mind. *You* know what I'm saying—you

know. You been to war.” He pointed at the gravesite with the trowel. “It’s part of me in there,” he said. “You wait till you lose buddies.”

Couldn’t stop talking, Wiley thought. Just couldn’t shut up, had to go on and on.

“I was with him when he died, you know,” Lew said. “Tillie come right out to the field to pick me up. She told me that Marge had called from the hospital. Those women knew what it was between us.” He cupped a match in his fingers and lit a cigarette.

“He went fast, you know. I tried to talk about times in France, but when he went it was so quiet in that room, you could hear dust settle.” He looked around the graveyard. “I sat there holding his hand,” he said, “and just like that it was over. Nothing said. Just silence.”

Wiley watched the kids climb the steel fence near the pines. “But that’s the way it should have been,” Lew said. “Back there in France, all around us there was war, and we used to hear it all night long, the bombs. But always there was this silence between us—the big-mouth wops from New Jersey and all them city guys in the motor pool, and us two hick farm boys, with monkey wrenches, and we never had to say a thing. Both of us knew just what it was we were dreaming, see? *You* know what I’m saying.” He put a hand down to his knee and pulled himself to his feet. “I don’t have to explain to you.”

Wiley felt his hands shiver as the words tipped out. “I don’t understand a word you’re saying,” he told him. “You go on and on and on like I know, but I don’t.”

Lew slapped off grass clippings. “You’re lying,” he said.

“You don’t have a clue, Lewie,” Wiley said. “We’re talking about a whole different world.”

Lew dropped his cigarette in the soft dirt of Hank’s grave, then stepped it out. “Maybe it was,” he said. “You don’t know, you weren’t there.” He kept his foot down. “But you still know what it’s like—better than somebody who never went—”

“I don’t know,” Wiley said. “I never had all that good buddy stuff. It wasn’t the same.”

Lew let it sit there for a minute, and then he pulled himself up to his feet and brushed off his knees. “Maybe that’s true, but you know what it is to have dreams,” he said, pointing his finger like an old preacher. “You know what it is to be in the middle of all that and still dream about the smell of good land. Doggone, you know—just like he did.” And he pointed to the grave.

When Wiley got home, the smell of coffee made the air rich inside the house. The kids stayed outside in the sun.

“Anybody else out there?” Carolyn said with her back to him.

“Couple dozen people at least,” he said.

“Talk to anyone?”

He remembered so clearly how he’d tried to tell her everything in those let-

ters, how what he'd written seemed even then like holy scripture, how he'd put everything in.

"Boys behave?" she asked.

"Lew Van Dam was out there," Wiley said, swinging his jacket up over the back of a chair. "I ran into him again."

She turned to him and grabbed the towel off her shoulder, then started drying her hands. "What'd he say?"

He waited before sitting, stood there at the table with his hands on the two points of the chair. "He said he wanted me to march tomorrow," he told her, "for the holiday, for the Legion. You know."

"Again?"

"He doesn't understand," Wiley said. "He's so way back, he doesn't know anything."

"Know what?" Carolynn said.

"It's all behind me," he said. "I tell myself I got you and the kids and I got this farm and all of that's history and there's no sense celebrating anything that couldn't be celebrated then."

"All of what?"

"All of that time over there."

She kept at him with her eyes. "What'd you tell him?" she said.

He pulled out the chair just as she pushed coffee over the table toward him. "I told him no. I told him I wasn't going to walk in his stupid parade."

He looked down at his hands and saw his fingers shake.

"You're jealous of him, Wiley," she said. "Down deep, you're really jealous of him and Henry, aren't you?"

He crossed his legs and slapped at the dirt on his knees from when he'd knelt out there at his parents' grave.

"He gets you upset somehow because it wasn't the same," she said. "Is that what's bothering you, Wiley?"

"I was out there with a hundred thousand guys and none of them cared like they did—none of them." He looked around out the windows, away from her. "There was this one time," he said, "we were coming back from Phu Tai on the log bird when we came up on the APC that just got hit." He took a long sip from the coffee. "The chopper got called down for the wounded. They told us to get out the bodies. The thing was incinerated. The guys inside were burned to the seat frames. We had to scrape them out and put what we had there into body bags."

Carolynn sat with her cup up to her lips.

"Three days later I saw the names on a casualty sheet. I mean, it surprised me they all had names—you hear what I'm saying? They had names and places they were born, and I was almost surprised." He stopped for a minute, forcing her to look at him. "I never had a Hank Minnard, Carolynn, if that's what you want to know."

"Nobody?" she said.

“Some lived and some died, but we were all short-timers. You put your months in and got back to the world. That’s all. None of this holding hands junk.”

“What did you have?” she said.

“Nothing,” he said. “We didn’t have nothing at all like that. All I had was a sense of getting myself out—and you. Maybe all I had was letters—your letters, and what’s back home. Nothing else.”

“You had me?” she said.

He looked at her hair, lighter now, less kept, cut shorter, and at her eyes, the way lines from the corners spread into the edges of her temples—at the spots in her skin where he once imagined her so perfect, his wife, now a mother. She was part of him now, part of a whole different story, nothing close to what she was back then, the dream he had over there, the image of Carolynn.

“I remember this one Sunday morning in Saigon,” he told her. “I sat on a park bench in the middle of town and all I wanted to think about was you back here in church. I thought about your arm,” he said, amazed that it came back so effortlessly out of nowhere, as if it had suddenly been unearthed. “Can you imagine that, Linnie, your husband sitting there thinking about your arm, just your arm?”

She held her cup of coffee in both hands.

“I could feel it, really, I could feel your arm in my fingers. I swear it.” He held out his hands in front of him, rubbing his own fingers. “Crazy, isn’t it? Can you imagine your husband somewhere a thousand miles away getting off on your arm—how soft it was?”

She pressed her lips together tightly in a smile.

“I sat there feeling your arm in my fingers and at the same time I was repeating the words of the twenty-third Psalm—‘The Lord is my Shepherd.’ Like church. ‘I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.’ All of that. I kept going over it, trying to force it into my soul almost.” He looked up at her. “That’s really dumb, isn’t it?”

“Like medication,” she said.

“I suppose. Carolynn Folkert’s arm—”

“My arm—”

“Yeah,” he said, “*your* arm and the twenty-third Psalm in the middle of Saigon on a Sunday.” He brought his hands up to his eyes and laughed. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Why?”

“I remember I could feel things stop in me, all the nerves just quit, everything shut down when I’d think about you. My nerves went soft as fur, and all the time I was trying to repeat the words of the Psalm. It made things quiet.”

“He restoreth my soul,” she said.

She was something of yours from another world you knew existed only because you had this vision memory, he thought. He didn’t have anyone else, only her. “Linnie, I loved you a lot,” he said.

“More?” she said, smiling.

“I said things in those letters that I guess I don’t say anymore,” he told her. “I remember how I could pour it into that pen—you know, writing. I couldn’t do that anymore.” She held one hand up beneath her chin as he talked, and her eyes suddenly seemed dreamlike, almost the way he would have imagined her back then, twenty years ago. “Listen,” he said, “it wasn’t just your arm I thought about over there, I’ll tell you that much. I thought about the rest of you too—every sweet inch, baby.”

Her eyes fell slightly. “It was all so different, wasn’t it?” she said. “I mean, from what we are today—better, almost.” She brought down her arm and stretched it out toward him across the table. “Here,” she said, “hold me now, like then.”

He put one hand on her wrist and the other over her elbow, pinched softly, then spread his fingers and ran them lightly over her skin, stopping intermittently to squeeze. Dim blue veins ran up from her wrist and disappeared into her flesh. The bones on the back of her hands rose from her skin like tight wires, but all around him the streets filled with little people begging him to buy, bicycles pedalled all over through the constant Sunday morning chatter of a language he’d almost learned to hate.

“Like this?” Carolyn said. “Is that what you mean?”

If he pressed her flesh just soft enough he could really feel her there in his hand. “The Lord is my Shepherd,” he said again, “I shall not want.”

He heard her breathing thicken. “I used to cry,” she said, “because I worried so. I never told you how much.”

“We got hit on patrol somewhere once,” he told her, “and the radio guy went down just on the other side of the hill, the box was squawking—I could hear it, the buzz, the garbled noise.” He kept his left hand on her arm, raised his right hand to his eyes. “When I tried to get up, they kept shooting, and I was scared. I knew the radio guy was down, but I couldn’t move, Linnie. I couldn’t move. I was the scared medic.”

She put her hands over his.

“Four hours I listened to that squawking. He was dead.”

“You never told me,” she said.

“It was the crying that made me sick last winter,” he told her. “It was Lewie Van Dam’s crying out there in the cemetery that did it.”

“You never cried?” she said.

“I cried so hard I don’t have a drop in me,” he said. “All night I cried. You see me cry now, Linnie?” he asked. “You ever see me with wet eyes?”

She looked down. “You’re too strong—”

“Strength, shoot,” he said. “I’m too scared.” She pinched his fingers. “I buried my parents, Linnie, both of them. Don’t you dare say I didn’t have occasion.”

She reached up and took his arms in both her hands. “You couldn’t tell me that?” she said. “In all those letters, in all these years?”

“Some people can go on and on,” he told her. He pulled himself back and stood. “I got chores to do.”

On Memorial Day he was out in the field, rotary-hoeing in the sixty north of the house, roaring along in fourth gear, kicking up dust beneath the hard edge of soil, smashing it into pieces down the straight lines of corn, when he came to the far edge, where his father had always said years ago an immigrant church stood, long before his time, on a flat spot at the very corner of his land. Every year he'd kick up something, maybe a brick, hard and square in the soft ground, maybe a square chunk of wood, blackened by rot, maybe something shiny, buried or burned decades ago.

And that's where Carolynn saw him late that morning, standing beside the tractor in his coveralls, the cab door swung open, looking down at something in his hand. Cheryl, all decked out in her band uniform, was driving them back from the holiday parade, the boys in the back seat in their scout uniforms. Carolynn sat in the front, along the road.

“What's Dad doing, Mom?” Danny asked.

She couldn't see exactly what he was holding, but if she could have, she would have seen him scraping the dirt off a piece of porcelain from some old church plate, a scrap of white he'd unearthed from the ground, some remnant of a church that once stood out there full of huddled people with hope years ago, something not even a memory anymore.

But she could see from his stooped shoulders, from the way he held something precious in his hands, his head bowed over it, that her husband was remembering something he thought he'd forgotten. He was alone out there in the field on Memorial Day, the tractor's noise crowding everything else out of him, and he was thinking about something she, his wife, couldn't give him, even though she wanted to so badly, something he'd simply have to find for himself—maybe out here in a broken field of corn stubble, but maybe not here yet either, maybe not for years, she thought, this certain kind of peace.