

A Friend To Outlive

by Jason Neubauer

If I think really hard, I mean really hard, maybe I can remember when I was born. I think maybe I can remember what it felt like, coming from that warm, wet environment out to the cold world, my first greeting a slap on the ass from some young hopeful fresh outta medical school. Of course, that's just a bitta wishful thinkin', at this point I can barely remember what I had for breakfast yesterday let alone such a historically insignificant thing all those decades ago. I think it was bran muffins. Breakfast that is. Although I am sure bein' born isn't much different than the way a muffin might feel bein' taken from a warm oven.

Nowadays my free time is too abundant and I've lost count of how many hours I've wasted sittin' here on this damn bench under the same tree. At least I know the tree's put up with it longer'n I have, and'll be here a long time after I'm gone. I could learn a lot from this wooden friend of mine about bein' stoic through ages of goin' unnoticed. I do get a little bitta pleasure watching children run the way I used to out there in the park . I'm old enough now to get away with that. If I was younger, say in my 30s or 40s or even 50s, people'd say I look suspicious sittin' here watchin' the kids. No one pays attention to an old man sittin' on a bench. Whod'a thought I'd end up here?

No, I can't remember bein' born I guess, but I think I do remember some of my childhood so long ago. I remember when I used to see old men sittin' under trees and I'd think they were creepy and I wouldn't look at 'em cause my friend Billy told me that they snuck into people's houses at night and hid in their closets and that's why they always smelled like mothballs and cedar. I was full of piss and vinegar back in the day and Billy and I would spend afternoons hunting for snakes and frogs. Sometimes we'd catch a frog and feed it to a snake just to watch it wriggle around. Young boys take such

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delight in seein' small animals suffer and I often wonder why. Especially the ones that don't make a lot of noise about it. A nice, quiet frog'll put up with all sorts of pain without making a singel noise in protest.

We'd sneak through the creeks and mud and if one of us saw a snake slithering into the bushes we'd scream "SNAKE" and leap upon the poor animal with kitchen knives clenched in our fists. We had a collection in our treehouse of snakeskins and dried frog carcasses that we'd gathered over the years. We were mighty proud of that collection and spent three or four summers makin' it bigger and bigger. Old man Schultz told us that if we let him have two or three of the skins he could make belts for us. He wa the only old man besides our grandfathers that didn't scare us because he used to cut our hair for us for free as long as our parents would have him over for dinner every so often. He used to be a barber once when he was in the army. He said he was in a war in Cuba and he'd tell us about meeting Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders and how Teddy taught him to make things out of snakeskin. He said a lotta people didn't know it but the former president was also a taxidermist. I don't think I ever learned old man Schultz's first name. He didn't have a wife and said he'd never been married but that he thought he might have one or two children somewheres over in Cuba. We gave him some of the skins one summer to make us belts and he died the next day, hit by a bread truck coming through town. We never got our belts but the man at the church let us put some snakeskins in his coffin and the whole town got together enough money to give him a real nice burial in the churchyard.

"You ever seen a dead body?" Billy asked me the morning of the viewing.

"Naw, I don't think so. I don't remember seein' my mom but dad says I did," I answered with wide eyes.

My mother died about two months after I was born from complications. I don't remember her at all but my dad says I was there when she passed and that she died really peacefully in her sleep. After that the widow up the street used to watch me during the day for my dad when he went to work and I'm told that sometimes he'd leave me with her for a few days at a time when he'd go out hunting. They talked a lot and a few years after mom went to sleep they got married and we were happy enough. She called me her sonny and I called her momma and I didn't even know until I was nine that she wasn't the one who carried me. She used to let me stay outside with Billy later on the nights when dad got really drunk and she'd call me in early to listen to the radio with her on the nights he didn't. Sometimes during the day when we didn't have anywhere to be we'd have picnics down at the creek and Billy would come out and we'd show her and dad where we found the snakes. After I found out she wasn't my real mother she used to tell me that God gave her a different set of insides and she couldn't have children and that it was His plan to have it that way so that she could be my mother. I'd have to say that I loved her if anyone bothered to ask me.

I can't say as I remember exactly when or how Billy and I got rid of that collection of trophies from our youth, all those reminders of our hunting trips through the woods, but I suspect it was about the time we started letting girls come up into the treehouse. I guess I was maybe fourteen by then, which would have made Billy fifteen when we brought Ethel and Mary up there and they let us feel their young breasts. That was the first time I kissed a girl and Ethel told me I was good at it. She said she kissed two boys before me and I was better at it than either of them had been. When I asked her who they were she told me a real lady never tells and smiled at me beautifully. Lookin' back I realize she was fulla shit and probably havin' her first kiss too but it was a nice boost to my young manhood. Later that same week Billy went all the way with Mary up in the tree house and told me how good it felt and that I needed to try it as soon as I could.

I asked him if he thought Mary would let me go that far with her and he said she might but that I'd better not because Mary was his and I should try it with Ethel instead. I told him Mary was pretty just to compliment him and I didn't really mean anything by it, but he took it the wrong way and then he pushed me. I started pushing him back and we ended up in a big fleshy ball, locking our legs around each other the way our wrestling coach in school had shown us and trying to hit each other with our fists. I guess I didn't even know what I was tryin' to hit him for, 'cept he was tryin' to hit me and when those fists flew at my face I knew I had to do something. We tumbled around all assholes and elbows in the dirt for a little bit until Ethel came up and asked us why we were fighting. We stopped and sat there panting for a little bit staring at each other and said we didn't know. She asked me if she could go to the treehouse with me and Billy winked and smiled. I lost my virginity that day and Billy and me never got along quite the same after that.

The treehouse fell down a year or two later and Billy started driving. We'd go out in his father's Model A on the weekends lookin' for something to do and pretty soon I'd start takin' a little whiskey from the bottle my dad kept in the kitchen each day so that on weekends I'd have collected enough for us to drink. At that age just a little bit was enough. We'd take Ethel and Mary out into a field where Billy and I would light a fire and the girls would go behind the bushes and get undressed and we'd all have a good time skinny dipping in the pond and drinking and fucking our young little hearts out. Ethel was so pretty back then and she was so crazy about me that I thought there was nothing else outside Lackawana County. For about a year every Sunday morning the four of us would show up at church fighting off our katzenjammers and tryin' to stay awake. Lookin' back, it was pretty funny.

After graduation Billy said he wanted to go to college and become a teacher. He and Mary got married at the chapel and moved away with him while he went to school. So Billy went off to college and I

was left wonderin' what to do with myself. His father was a lawyer and still knew a lot of the faculty at the school he had gone to, and of course could afford to send him there too. My dad was a miner. I had a high school diploma, which in those days was worth a lot more than it is today. Some of the most successful men outta the first half of the century didn't have a week of college education. Problem wasn't a lack of education on my part. Problem was a that we were just coming outta that damn depression and even though folks were starting to spend money again, there were just no jobs in Old Forge. My dad told me he could get me a job in the mines, but I didn't want to come home every night the rest of my life coughing out my lungs and covered in soot the way he did.

Ethel told me she wanted to get married since we had been together for so long, but I was only 18 and hadn't been anywheres yet. Dad said I was too much of a smartass to be a good husband anyways and I should join the Marines and learn some discipline the way his daddy did, and see the rest of the world before I settled down. Ethel cried when I told her I thought he was right. I told her I wanted to be able to make a decent living if we were to be husband and wife and thart if we were gonna raise a family I wanted to learn to be a man so I could be a good father someday. That seemed to make her feel a little better. Before I left I took all the money I had saved up from my job down and Grady's drugstore and bought her the best ring I could afford. It wasn't much but she said it was more'n enough and that she'd be waiting for me when I got home.

The sergeant I had in boot camp told us that we were all shit and that it was his job to turn us into men.

When I heard him say that I knew I had come to the right place, especially after what I had said to Ethel about learning to be a man and everything. I wanted to come home after servin' my country and have her look at me with pride and impress her with my uniform. I knew I was gonna be a good Marine and that I could outshoot

everyone else in basic. All those years back home with my dad's old carbine had given me plenty of practice and I could pick off a jackrabbit from fifty yards out. I knew I was gonna learn to be a man really quick.

My first couple weeks I learned marching in a line and painting the floor of the latrine. They showed me how to peel potatoes, too.

One day I walked up to the sergeant during mess and told him I was glad he was my sergeant but that I wanted to do more than peel potatoes and march and paint floors. He told me he understood and that he'd have something for me that night. Well, I waited and lights out came and I went to my bunk and figured he'd forgotten, and that I'd just wait and see what came around the next day. That night a little before midnight there was a loud bang, bang, bang in the barracks and it kept goin' and goin' and the lights came on. Sarge was in the middle of the room with a trashcan and an MP's baton and told us all that I'd asked him for something to do and since he was feelin' generous he was gonna give us *all* something to do and "make sure ya thank Private Mueller later when we're back from our ten mile run and yer all makin' breakfast for the resta the company."

I wasn't a popular guy in basic.

I did make friends with a guy named Harwell who said it was a dumb thing for me to do but the sarge didn't have to be a wiseacre about it. Me and Harwell, Johnny was his name, used to share cigarettes all the time and talk about our girls back home. He was gettin' engaged to a girl named Nancy and was going to stay in the military for a good long while. He showed me the ring he had bought her and I told him it musta' cost a lot, but he said he knew a jeweler right outside of Buffalo where he lived who made it for him cheap. I told him I didn't know what I was going to do but I didn't think I'd stay in the Marines more'n a few years and he told me I was an idiot to pass up on a steady job and a uniform. He said that married men

who made it through OCS got to live in houses on bases for free and that if I wanted to be a family man I'd better think about that. He was older than me and had been through college though, and I'd have to make my way through college too if I wanted to get into OCS. I knew that was pretty impossible.

By the time we got out of basic it was around November of '41 and if you know your history at all, you know what was about to happen.

I was still eighteen and stationed in Hawaii for a year. The following month, when those damn planes came to Pearl Harbor and bombed the shit out of it I was in Kaneohe Bay at an air station not too far from Pearl. You may not know this, but those nips hit us before sinking the Arizona. The flew over the air station and dropped a few on us and then made it out to the harbor miles away before we could even sort out what the hell happened. It all could have been avoided if those Navy men at Pearl had more faith in American ingenuity. The radar there picked up the Japs while they came in for their attack but back then radar was still brand new and the operators didn't trust it much. They shrugged it off as a glitch until a little before six that morning when the sailors there started dyin'.

Grady let Ethel call me from his drugstore when word got back home about what had happened. I told her I was okay and hadn't seen the bombs fall, even though I had. She said she didn't want me to go to war of course, but I told her I didn't have a choice if that's where Uncle Sam wanted me. I told her the same thing my drill sargeant told me, that I was the property of the United States government now and I would do what I was told. Secretly I suppose I kinda liked the idea of goin' overseas and seein' the war. Harwell and me had been keepin' track of all the action goin' on over in Europe and on the Pacific and we knew then that there was no way we'd be stayin' out of it. I was still full of idealism and too dumb to know it was idealism. I didn't even know what the word meant for chrissakes. I was ready to ship outand the day before I was

supposed to leave some crazy lance corporal got drunk and ran over my foot with his car. He crushed all the bones in it and I never quite recovered from the injury, both to my foot and to my pride. I still walk with a limp.

They bandaged me up pretty good at the base hospital and kept me there for a good little while and told me that I wasn't gonna make it to fight in the Pacific. After my medical discharge I went back to Old Forge and Ethel was there waiting just as she'd promised. When I got out of the taxi she rushed up to me and threw her arms around me and I was in my uniform and it was great. I felt like a man for just about a second and then I had to use a crutch to get home. Ethel told me she was going to wash up and that I should come over to her mom and dad's for dinner. I wen thome, which was only about fifty feet from where the cab dropped me off and when I walked in dad was sittin' in his chair lookin' like he hadn't slept in years and I could tell by that familiar smell that he'd been drinking a lot. I asked him where mom was and he just shook his head like he didn't wanna say. I'd hafta guess that I knew then before he said anything else that she was already in her grave. She'd gotten a case of the pneumonia that past winter and didn't survive it so once again dad was on his own and just took to the bottle somethin' fierce. that night Ethel said she hadn't written to me about it cause she didn't want me to worry about dad and didn't think I could use any bad news since I was goin' off to the war and everything. I told her it was wrong of her not to tell me and that Mildred, that was mom's name, always told me that when you didn't tell someone the whole truth about something it was just as bad as an out-and-out lie. I never did quite forgive Ethel for keepin' mom's death from me and we never got married on account of it. Dad lost his job and Grady gave me a job as a manager at his drugstore, which was right there on the corner at First and Market. Grady was a friend of dad's since they were boys and said that he had seen some action in the first war and I wasn't missing anything good at all and to count my blessings. Hank, who lived on the other side of Old Forge never made it back

at all. He joined the army when the U.S. went into the fight and we heard he was gunned down somewheres in France and they sent home his remains to be buried. The war was just about over by then and dad got worse and finally died of liver failure. I had been putting flowers on Mildred's grave every Sunday until then. Now that dad was dead I laid him in a grave next to her and I haven't been back to see either of 'em since.

I inherited the house from dad and slept in his old bedroom. It was a man's bedroom, not like my old room with the small furniture and small closet. My old room now had my Marine foot locker in it and some starched uniforms hanging in the closet. I took out a bunch of the things I used to keep in there, little boy's books and baseball cards and the like, and set them on the remains of me and Billy's old treehouse and doused them down with some kerosene. An old snakeskin curled up at the corner of the fire and just kind of peeled back into ash. It really smelled to high heaven.

Billy moved back a little while after dad died, but he preferred to be called William by then. He had gone on to get his doctorate in education and became the principal at our old grade school. We passed in the street sometimes and would nod a friendly but forced hello to each other. Mary had lost her figure aafter giving birth to their three sons. She didn't seem to wanna have anything to do with me and I'm sure it's because she and Ethel were still friends. Ethel'd no doubt told her that I'd broken her heart, spurned her, gon back on my word. I imagine that Bill and I would have had more to do with each other if he wasn't tied to Mary, or maybe we wouldn't. We sure didn't seem to have a whole lot in common by that point. He was wearin' suits everywhere he went and didn't smile a lot anymore. Of course when a man has as little to smile about as I did back then he doesn't have much business worryin' about whether or not another man is smilin'.

I started gettin' used to drinkin' coffee every morning and wearing a

fedora every time I left the house. I didn't see any excitement in watching snakes or frogs and when some kids from around my street built a treehouse in the woods out back I shook my head and thought to myself how dangerous it was and that if they were my kids I'd say a thing or two about it. I saw Bill telling his son as much one day when he caught him trying to climb up into it.

Ethel didn't have a place of her own so she still lived at her mom and dad's house, and stayed in the same front room she always had. I used to sneak up to her window at night and she'd know it was me because I'd tap three times and then wait a few seconds and tap three more times. It was our code and she'd come to the window in her nightgown and sometimes I'd coax her out into the night and we'd walk down by the graveyard where it was always so dark and quiet and peaceful, and we'd hold hands and look at the big white moon.

I didn't much care for the graveyard anymore now that so many people I knew were layin' in it.

I passed Ethel's parents place every morning on the way to the drugstore and it took a little while but eventually she stopped peekin' out the blinds at me while I walked past. I think she got the idea in her head somehow that we'd make amends and I'd finally swallow the little pride I had left and marry her, and then we'd live happily ever after the way I used to tell her we would when we were out at the pond lyin' naked under the stars. Sometimes you just can't take a thing back though. I know it was wrong and I shoulda' married her anyways and let bygones be bygones. I had grown used to the grudge though and the resentment I felt was pigheaded and stupid, but so was I. I lef tmy father die because because he hadn't told me about Mildred, and I guess I decided that she was gettin' off easy. I kept ignoring her and she finally stopped lookin' at me all together and Bill and Mary wouldn't look at me either when I saw them in the street or down at the store. It's probably all for the

better. Every time she looked at me until then it felt like there was this hole burning its way into my soul.

Ethel ended up marryin' Herb Jones who Bill and I used to bully around at school. He always used to have a short fuse and we'd get him going really good just to watch him lose his head. It was kinda' funny when we were kids. I 'member this time he was walking in the hall at school and Bill came up behind him and tripped him so he'd fall on the floor. Well, he jumped right back up and spun around so fast you'd think he had wings. Right as he was bringing his leg back to kick Bill I came up from behind him from the other side and tripped him again and he fell flat on his ass. Boy, he sure lost it then. He started screamin' and hollerin' that he was gonna get us and just to wait until after school. Always just words though, he never did anything.

Every once in a while I'd see Ethel in the store and she'd have strange bruises on her arms and sometimes on her cheeks too. Rumer was she was like Mildred, couldn't have kids of her own, and that made Jonsey mad and he'd drink too much and get rough with her. Over the next couple years, she just kept gettin' harder and harder lookin' and one night old Jonsey hit her so hard she swallowed some of her teeth and choked to death.

Day after word got out about what happened I wake up to this knock at my door and when I open it who d'ya think is standing there but my best boyhood pal Bill? He told me that he and some of the other men in town were going to get together to teach Herb a lesson and they decided that they'd wait until after the funeral out of respect for the dead. He said if I was going to look at myself in the mirror every day for the rest of my miserable life I'd damn well better join them after what I did to Ethel.

Three days later, after they put poor Ethel into the ground, we all

got together and beat Jonsey to death out behind his own woodshed.

I don't suppose we meant to kill him. just to give him soemthing to remind him that he couldn't get away with what he'd done. I remember thinkin' to myself that it was strange how quiet he was through the whole thing. Like he knew he had it coming to him and nothing he could say would stop it. He just kinda stood there and let us hit him and after we knocked him over enough he lost the strength to get back up and finally just lay there, and a little bit after that he lost consciousness.

We kept hitting him until his shoes came off and when we finally stopped, old Jonsey wasn't breathin' anymore.

He'd told everyone in town that she'd fell and hit her teeth on the table and that he tried to save her but we all knew better. Sheriff Tilford said he knew there was no way Jonsey would be able to prove innocence with the evidence that she'd been beaten, but that he'd hate to see the whole thing tied up in the courts and then see him back out in public after a few years. We weren't afraid of the law that night though. Sheriff Tilford was there with us helped us cut up Jonsey and put his body parts in the old dump at the edge of town. Grady was there too and got sick all over himself so we told him he could go home and we'd take care of it. Sheriff Tilford said the rats'd take care of the body and that Herb didn't have any family that'd come looking for him. I'd bet his skeleton is still out there somewheres in that old dump in pieces.

After that night I could stand bein' in that town anymore. A young doctor who wanted to open up his own practice came into town and I told him my place was for sale and there was enough room for a small family. He and his wife had a son who looked to be about six years old and I told them the woods out back had snakes in it and to be careful lettin' him back there. The words were strange in my

mouth and I had to stop and really think hard to remember when I used to chase those snakes and pounce on top of them. They bought the place in spite of the snakes and bought most of the furniture with it.

I went back to the graveyard one more time before I left to say goodbye forever to poor Ethel. The pastor watched me with a scowl and I left quietly without sayin' a word. I left on a train for New York City that same night with no plans and enough money to live on for at least a little while, maybe a year if I really tightened the belt. I was hoping that'd be enough time for me to find work and make myself a little more comfortable. I was so unpopular in Old Forge by then I didn't remember what it was like to have friends. Grady was the only one who didn't seem to want to spit on me every time he walked past me and I knew he'd be dead soon, bein' as old as he was by then. The train ride took me through the countryside northward and there were dozens of open fields and mountains and it just made me sick. I said goodbye to Pennsylvania and I was tired of country living, and all those fields reminded me of the promises I made to Ethel back in our field all those years before. I was about 32 then and I still had life in front of me. I was a little humbled by all that had happened and a little less sure of myself, losin' a lot of the confidence of youth, but I still had life in front of me.

I got off the train in New York City and I was overcome with a feelin' of bein' small. All those people in such a small space together really put things in perspective for me. I didn't think it was exciting, not the way I may have years before. I had grown used to small town living, and the change was a shock to say the least. As a younger man, I always dreamt of bein' famous and for everyone to know who I was. Regardless of my shock though, I found comfort in the anonymity of that crowd. I didn't want to be famous anymore, and the idea that I was someplace where no one knew me and no one knew about the things I'd done made me feel strangely safer in that new surrounding. I wasn't a spurning young lover or a failed Marine.

I wasn't the manager at the drugstore or part of a murdering lynch mob. I was just another damn animal in the herd.

I made it past the crowd of people and out to a news kiosk next to the train terminal where I bought a newspaper and started lookin' for a place to stay. My suitcase was on the ground next to me when I paid for the paper and was gone by the time I bent down to pick it up again. In the rush of people there was no way I could spot who had taken it, but I had kept my cash in a money belt under my shirt and had only lost my clothes. The rest of my belongings, the ones I hadn't sold, were back in Old Forge and I had left some money with Bill to send them along as soon as I found a place of my own and told him where it was. He told me he'd do it just so that he and the rest of the town wouldn't have to see me again and that it'd be good to have a respectable family livin' in the old house.

I found a hotel. Don't think I remember the name of it but it was pretty dirty and I could've afforded something much nicer, but wanted to make the money I had last as long as I could. I was walkin' down the street the next day from the hotel lookin' for work and there was a butcher's place that had a help wanted sign in the window. I had butchered animals before, not just snakes and frogs but real animals with meat on them, besides Herb Jones. The man inside asked me if I was an immigrant and I told him I wasn't. He asked me if I had any schooling and I told him that I'd graduated high school and then went into the Marines. He lightened up a lot after I said that and then told me to come back in the morning at five and he'd have work for me, and then he said "Semper Fidelis, Marine" as I walked out the door. I guessed he was a Marine too. It was around '56 by now though and there were a lot more of us stateside by then.

I ate a sandwich for dinner at a Jewish deli near the hotel and had a nice cup of coffee there the next morning on the way to work. Rab, the Marine I had spoken to the day before wasn't there and another

guy let me in. He asked if I was the leatherneck Rab had told him about and I said I was, and he told me that he was a Marine too and that he and Rab had been on Iwo Jima together. He said his name was Joe and he asked me if I'd been in the shit. I told him about my injury.

"No shit? A fuckin' corporal? That's criminal, takin' a good man like you outta commission."

He was friendly enough and I carved up a few sides of beef before Rab showed up. Rab shook my hand when he came in and said he was glad I made it and the last guy they hired never showed up on time. I asked if the last guy had been with them on Iwo Jima.

"Are you kiddin? Nah, a Marine'd bother to show up on time."

Later that day I asked Rab if there were any good places to rent anywhers around. He asked where I was staying and I gave him the name of my hotel.

"That shithole? You gotta be crazy. Yeah, there's a place not too far from here my sister-in-law lives at. She's widowed so she has a place to herself, but this geezer just died and his place is empty. I'll take you by there tonight when we knock off."

I thanked him and wondered what happened to his brother, but thought better of askin'. The rest of the day went by pretty quickly and both Rab and Joe seemed to be pretty pleased with the work I'd done. I had learned how to butcher when my dad'd bring home a deer he'd killed on a hunt or a chicken from the farm up the road. We'd butchered a few head of cattle tooone summer when the old man who owned that farm passed on and they auctioned off his livestock.

We left the shop about six thirty that night and Rab told me to follow

him. He saw my limp and asked me if I'd been injured in the war and I told him the same story I told Joe about the drunken lance corporal and he said about the same thing Joe had said. The building was only a few blocks and we went in so he could introduce me to his sister-in-law. She opened the door and before Rab could even say a word, I knew what her name was. That ring on her finger was Harwell's ring and I asked if her name was Nancy. Well, Rab looked like he'd seen a ghost and I asked if his brother was Johnny Harwell.

After explaining to him that Johnny and me had been in basic together and that he'd shown me the ring, Rab told me I'd never have to worry about finding another job and I was welcome as part of the family as far as he was concerned. Nancy didn't say much and seemed a little embarrassed so I didn't talk to her for a while after that. The super of the building was a man named Adam Rosenberg and Rab said he also owned the building. He was a Jew and the super who lived across the street was an anti-Semite. They were yellin' at each other and in the ruckus I don't think he had much time to consider whether or not he was gonna let me move in to the vacant apartment, so I decided to wait and talk to him the next day about it. He didn't seem an unreasonable man, just seemed to have a lot on his mind at the moment. Rab told me to come to his house for dinner and I met his wife and two kids and they seemed to be happy enough. He told his children I had known their uncle John and they kind of nodded politely the way little ones do when they don't really give a damn about somethin'. They were young teens and probably too young to have met him depending on what year he'd died.

The next day at the butcher shop Joe told me Rab was sick and wasn't gonna be in. He said he had called him that morning and so Joe and I did all the work and at the end of the day I asked him about Rab and what was wrong with him. He told me he'd eaten something that didn't agree with him the night before. Well, wouldn't ya know it but like I said I had eaten at his place too, so I

gettin' worried that I was gonna' get sick, and that made me think about how lonely I was at that point in my life because I didn't even have a doctor who knew me and everyone who ever cared about me was either buried or busy with their own families and didn't care for me anymore.

Well, once a man starts feelin' sorry for himself it's time to take a step back and look at what he's lost. I thought hard about that and realized that what I'd lost was an old town that didn't hold anything for me anymore 'cept a graveyard full of family and lost love, and an old buddy who wanted to send me my things so he wouldn't ever have to see me again. That made me feel a little better I gotta say, cause it made me realize that I was at least moving forward and any good memories I had in that town died the day I got back from the Marines.

As you may have guessed, like so many other people who I knew back then, Rab died soon after that of a heart attack. He thought he had a really bad case of heartburn and that he could rest it off in a couple days but it turns out he was having a mild attack and then he had a bigger one a few days later. We were in the meat locker in the back of the shop and he told me to help him get a side of beef down from one of the hooks. We lifted it off the hook and I guess his knees buckled or something when the pain hit him cause he toppled over. Well, I couldn't hold that side of beef all by myself, so down it went right on top of poor Rab. He died there in the cold all covered in beef before I could get help to him. Joe said it wasn't my fault and that Rab'd want me to stay on at the shop. By this time I'd gotten into that apartment a little ways away and Mr. Rosenberg told me he'd give me a good deal, seein' as how I knew another one of his tenants so well. Nancy eventually started sayin' hello to me in the hall when we passed.

One day when I was comin' home from work there was a deliveryman waiting at the door with my things from Old Forge and I

gave him a dollar and half to help me move them into the apartment. Aftert I got things situated I started unpacking some of the boxes and I found a snakeskin in one of 'em. Bill must've put it in there, but there was no note or anything else so I never did figure out what to make of it. My door was open and Nancy was coming home and stopped in my doorway. She told me that Johnny had written to her about me a few times and that she was glad I had been there to be his friend. I told her about the sarge and how he made us run ten miles in the middle of the night and blamed it on me and that Johnny was the only one who had stayed friendly with me after that. She laughed and said that sounded a lot like Johnny and then she started cryin' a little and went home. I still didn't know when or how he died.

There was a hooker who always stood outside the building and Mr. Rosenberg told us to shoo her away if we ever saw her and that he didn't want her around. Rumor went around the Frank, the guy who managed the place across the street, had paid her before to stand there and mess up business for Mr. Rosenberg. I was walkin' home from the market one day and Mr. Rosenberg was yellin' something at her and pointing across the street. I figured he was just telling her to get lost the way he usually did so I didn't think anything of it until he reached up and slapped her right across the face. She kinda yelped like a dog and he slapped her again and pushed her and this time she fell down onto the pavement. Now, I don't agree with whorin' and I think that girl was dirty and didn't belong there, and I was tired of her propositioning me every damn day.

But don't forget, I also once killed a man for hittin' a woman before.

She had gotten up and I walked straight up to Mr. Rosenberg just as he was reaching back to hit her again and I grabbed his hand and told him that was enough. I don't know if he knew who it was behind him or if he cared, but he spun around and hit me square in the face. I fell over backward and there was this flash of light when I hit the

ground and he started kickin' at me. Well what could I do? I managed to get up and hit him in the gut and he doubled over. I started to walk up the stairs and he told me I had the rest of the day to get my things outta the apartment. The furniture I had was too much to carry so I gave a lot of it to Nancy who didn't have much to begin with. She was thankful and said that God would watch over me and I'd done the right thing. Never did see Nancy again after that.

I moved back to the hotel I had stayed at about a year before and thought I'd find another place to move into later that week. I still had my job with Joe at the shop and enough money saved up so that I wouldn't have to worry about it at all. Mr. Rosenberg had a lot of friends though and most of 'em were building owners and supers like him. He made sure that word got around that I was a troublemaker and that if anyone rented me a place they were treading in dangerous waters. That hooker must've found out somehow that I was staying at the hotel cause all of a sudden she was hangin' around out in front and waiting for me every morning. She told me a few times that she'd let me take her up to my room and wouldn't ever make me pay for it. I let her get away with saying that a few times and then I told her she was nothing but trouble and had better clear off and let me be. It had been a long time since I'd been with a woman but some lines I just won't cross.

Joe told me he'd keep an eye out for a place for me and in the meantime said I was welcome to his place and there wasn't a lot of room but he did have a couch. I thought it sounded mighty nice of him and I took him up on the offer. He was right about not havin' a lot of room but the couch was comfortable enough. He said Rab had gotten the place for him through a cousin of his and that when they were on Iwo together is when they decided they were gonna go into business together. Joe was originally from somewheres down south, Georgia or somewheres in the Carolinas, and Rab was from upstate, which I already new cause Johnny told me he was from Buffalo. I

must've stayed there in that small place with Joe for about three months or so, which seemed like three years, until another place opened up a few doors down from him. The super at that place said he'd heard I was trouble but I'd been okay for the few months I'd stayed there with Joe and just to watch myself, and if I didn't start any shit we'd get along just fine. His name was Harold and he didn't seem to get along with anyone. I suspect the man didn't even like himself.

That place was over on Delevan Street. It was around the end of March in '58 and the old lady who lived upstairs from us must've fallen asleep with a cigarette or something because Joe woke me up at about ten thirty at night and said we had to get out because the place was on fire. Seven people died there that night and another fifteen or so were injured from the fire, and Harold was one of the ones that was killed. Joe's place was completely gone and mine was half burnt. I didn't have anything in it that belonged to me really, just some clothes and they got the fire out before it reached my closet. All of the furniture had been there when I moved in.

Joe said we'd have to stay in the shop for a while and I took some money and bought a couple of cots from the Army and Navy store and Joe and I stayed in the back office for the time being. He said if he didn't know better he'd swear I was a jinx. He said before I showed up, Rab was still alive and he still had a place to stay and that all of that had changed.

A week went by like that and we got some new places out on the edge of the neighborhood because a friend of Harold's owned a building there and said he wanted to take care of Harold's customers. Joe said it was more likely that he just wanted to make a buck. I didn't care as long as I didn't have to sleep on a cot anymore in that cold office.

We did all right. The shop did pretty good business and I asked Joe

one day why he never had a family.

"Joe," I says, "how come you never had a wife and kids?"

"Aw hell," he says, "you see me as a daddy?"

He said that when he was kid down south his daddy used to lock him in the barn and make him sleep with the animals if he didn't do his chores and that one time he beat him so bad that he ran to his uncle's place to get away from him. He said his uncle touched him places he knew wasn't right and made him touch his privates too. Then he got really quiet and said that he'd never told anyone that before and that no matter how good a friend I was to him, if I ever told anyone else he'd kill me.

A few years went by and Joe and me were doing pretty good. I didn't have a lot of friends but I was making a good living and some days I didn't even think about Ethel or Bill or even killing Jonsey. Every once in a while Joe'd set me up with a date so that me and him could double and once or twice I actually got to wake up in the morning with a woman next to me. Every so often Joe and me'd go see a ballgame too and get really drunk and wonder how in the hell we were gonna get home. Like I said though, I was makin' a decent living, gettin' up in the morning and working, havin' a nice dinner and gettin' to bed early.

In '63 when that war broke out over in the Gulf of Tonkin, Joe and me would stay up late sometimes listening to the news. He said he was glad I didn't have to make it over to see the fighting twenty years before. For the first time in my life I realized I wasn't a kid anymore and that I had adult memories that were twenty years old. Joe looked a lot older than I did. He was only five years older, but he looked a lot more than that. Over the next couple years when I got into my forties, the kids started doing things that made me and Joe just shake our heads. The boys started wearin' their hair long like a

girl's and they starte listenin' to music that didn't make much sense. They'd drive around and play that noise real loud and sometimes we'd catch one of em' out in front of the shop with a sign that said meat was murder. Those damn kids didn't know the first thing about murder, and I wanted to tell 'em as much but thought better of it. I still haven't learned how to drive a car and back when I was their age I'd never even heard of television. Seems life was simpler back then and what people don't think about is that what we lacked in machines and inventions we had to make up for with plain old horse sense.

Well one day I was workin' in the shop, this would have been about '67 or '68, and I happen to glance out the door and I'll be damned if I don't see old Bill stridin' past like he knows where he's goin'. So I step out onto the sidewalk, he's gone past me by now you see, I step out and I holler after him and he turns around and just for a second he smiles when he sees it's me. That flicker of friendly across his face brought me back years through time to an age where me and him used to grab at snakes and talk about old men like they were ogres sneakin' into our closets at night. Just as soon as it was there though it was gone, and his face looked like it turned to stone and he said he didn't have time to chat very long. He told me the school had gotten a music program and he was supervising a field trip to see the symphony play. I asked him how Mary was he said she was fine in a really short sort of way and didn't seem to want to say anything more.

I told him I missed him sometimes and he said he didn't miss me much at all and that nobody ever talked about me or Mildred or dad anymore. It was like I never lived in that town at all he said. I think he probably could have spit in my face and pushed me over right about then and it wouldn't have hurt so much. I didn't let him know he'd gotten to me though and I smiled and told him it was good to see him anyways and then I went back into the shop and that's the last time I ever saw Bill. If I had to guess, I'd say they all blamed me

for havin' to kill Jonsey. None of 'em had clear consciences and they hated me cause I was the reason for what we had done. If I'da married Ethel like I'd promised, I'd still be in Old Forge and Jonsey might still be alive and none of those other men'd have to live with killin' him.

Come the end of that war over there in Asia, Joe and I had just about saved enough up to retire and he said it was time to sell the shop and live out the rest of his days easily. He said he wanted to sell it in the next three years or so but he wouldn't do it if he didn't have my say so. I told him it was his shop and if he wanted to sell it I wouldn't stand in his way, and that I'd gotten a nice nest egg saved up for myself too.

Joe eventually lined up a buyer and it was a little later than he'd wanted to. By now I was into my fifties and it was 1978. He was a little over sixty. He sold the place and told me that he wanted to give me some of the profit since I had helped keep it open for so long and I told him I didn't want the money, that I had more'n enough to live on and I'd be fine. We spent most of our days together anyways and our money was kinda common between us. It was like we were brothers, he used to say. We played cards a lot and sometimes went fishin'. I finally bought a television set and we barely ever turned the damn thing on.

In the early 80s Joe was walkin' down the street and got hit by a bullet from this kid who was drivin' by and tryin' to shoot some other kid. They never caught the little jerk either. Joe'd gone out to get us some sandwiches and he was walkin' down past our old shop, which is now a store that sells those damn dirty magazines and movies. He was a Marine who survived Iwo and thrity years of workin' his fingers to the bones and it all ended with some little shit who had a grudge against another little shit.

He left everything he had to me in his will and I gave him a really

great burial in a plot near Rab's. Of course by this time I was pretty much an old hat at buryin' folks. I been more or less by myself since then and I don't like it much but I think I prefer it to havin' friends around here. I'm in the big city as a country boy, born and bred, even after bein' here so long. People 'round here don't understand what that means. Sometimes in the middle of the night when it gets really quiet, which doesn't happen very much around here, I close my eyes and just sort of...I dunno...fantasize I guess. I'll think about bein' back in my old room lookin' out the window at Billy's house wonderin' if he's awake and how many snakes we're gonna catch the next day. Sometimes a particular smell'l catch me off guard and bring me back to that azure pond where Ethel was so pretty at night and her young skin had never known the touch of a fist yet. Back then nothin' could touch us, boy, we were golden. Now I've gone'n started cryin'.

I come here to this part of Central Park nowadays and sit here on this damn bench cause if you sit just right all you can see is grass and trees and the children. There's no skyscrapers and there's no cars or paved roads, and you might as well be back in Old Forge in the 30s when it was still pure and I was a happy boy from a poor Pennsylvania family.

I'm an old man now and I can't control when I piss anymore and my stomach hurts and my eyes can't see very far and sometimes I forget where I am and I get scared. All my joints ache and my ears ache and my lungs hurt and I can't walk without a cane and I can't sleep unless I lock the deadbolt and I wanna go home.

I wanna go home and I never wanna grow up to be an old man who hides in the closet and smells like mothballs and cedar. I wanna go to the graveyard and not know any of the names on the headstones and hold Ethel's hand and look up at the big white moon.

I don't wanna know how it feels to put someone I love into the

ground anymore. I don't wanna know how to carve up an animal's body and sell it for money, or how to carve up a man's body and hide him in the trash. I don't wanna stay home while Hank from the other side of Old Forge gets shot in France, and I don't wanna meet the widow of someone I made friends with in the Marines.

Too many hours nowadays wasted under this tree starin' out at those other trees. At least this tree's put up with it longer'n I have, like I said.

A man's got to have at least one friend to outlive him after all.

