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The Shroud

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Van Camp Street was always cool in the summer, the giant elms shielding it from the hot summer light, an impenetrable shroud that arched over the street like a cathedral ceiling of green, leaving it in semi-darkness."

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The Shroud

By Doug Mandelaro

Van Camp Street was always cool in the summer, the giant elms shielding it from the hot summer light, an impenetrable shroud that arched over the street like a cathedral ceiling of green, leaving it in semi-darkness.

We would sometimes sit under one of the elms at our end of the street, watching Peter Miller caress his Vette with an old chamois cloth, watching him rub the glossy red skin of the car to a mirror-like finish so that it reflected the green dome of leaves overhead, and we would talk, the way men forget that boys talk. That summer, as the summer before and the summer after, we talked of the war and whether we would go in just a few more years, if it would still be there, if it would ever end.

"When does Peter have to go?" I asked.

"Day after tomorrow," Paulie said. "Wonder what he's going to do with the Vette?"

"Probably take it with him," I said, laughing.

"I hope he doesn't have to go to Vietnam," Kip said.

"You think he'll have to?"

Paulie nodded. "My dad said they're going to send more guys over this year," he said.

"Maybe he'll go to Canada."

"Never," Paulie said. "Not Pete." Paulie adored Pete, who always went out of his way to treat Paulie like a younger brother since Paulie's brother Joe had been killed in a car wreck a year before.

"A lot of guys are going there," I said.

"Not Pete," Paulie said. "He's no coward."

"Well, anyway, let's do something beside sitting here all day," I said, trying to change the subject.

That Van Camp Street could possibly exist without the elms, monuments to its antiquity, that without warning the trees would die, as if their affinity with the street demanded that much, seemed

incomprehensible.

My father was the first to notice that the trees had begun to change, that they cast softer shadows as the shroud thinned and light began to pierce the covering branches.

"See how thin they're getting," he said, pointing to the branches overhead from our nightly position on the porch.

"Maybe they're just getting old," I said, watching the orange dot on his cigarette light up his tired face and then arch over the porch rail to smoulder in the grass.

"No, it's more than that. I think it's the Dutch Elm disease."

He stared into the trees, watching the moonlight come through the once solid dome of branches, listening to the murmurs from other porches along the street, listening to the voice that grunted the day's events from the flickering television inside the house.

And then, like everynight the voice brought news to us, his face grew angry and disgusted. "If you ever did what those damn punks are doing I wouldn't care if they bashed you head in with a club either. Long-haired punks."

"I guess they're just doing what they believe in, dad."

"Oughta drag them all off to jail," he said.

You didn't argue then, when he became irrational, clinging to the old values and traditions he'd been brought up with. You tried once in awhile, just to see if anything had changed, knowing even before you began that nothing had.

We sat quiet for a long time.

"Things will be different now, I suppose," he said sadly. "Without the trees the street just won't be the same."

"Isn't there anything they can do, dad?"

"Not from what I've heard. They just cut them down to keep it from spreading."

"Maybe they'll plant new trees, healthier ones," I said.

"By the time they've grown I'll be long dead," he said, getting up.

The summer passed quickly, the trees gradually becoming more sickly, Van Camp Street still not accepting their fate. With the season half gone, the first trucks came up the street, stopping at the far end.

We watched from our elm, and the chainsaws from there sounded a little like the buzzing of the locusts in the trees, magnified. All of Van Camp Street came out together, walking up to the end of the street to the noise and fumes which now filled the once quiet air. As if to administer last rites we gathered near the trucks, away from the falling diseased branches that lay on the pavement next to the amputated beast, away from the swath of light that stretched across the street now where none had been in years.

The old Van Camp Street told how small the trees were once, the younger Van Camp Street listening, nodding, everyone shaking their heads once in awhile and saying how terrible, how sad, the street just wouldn't be the same. The very young Van Camp Street stood quiet, listening to the saws buzz and the falling branches hit the ground, thinking the new trees could be just as nice.

Mrs. Miller got a letter from Peter and he said he was going to Vietnam. She cried sitting at our kitchen table, her husband patting her on the back softly, helpless, my father saying there, there Martha, the way people do and, he's a good boy and God wouldn't let anything happen to him, and he looked at my brother and flashed his eyes quickly in disgust and my brother walking out shaking his head.

The swath of light became wider as the trucks moved closer each day to our end of the street, the shroud now covering half of the street with cool darkness, the other half flooded with the hot light of the summer sun.

Each day we sat under our great elm and watched the progression, smelling the drifting smell of sawed wood and combusted gasoline and the dripping sap that lay on the street in sticky droplets. The remains of the trees already cut, huge trunks and stubby leafless branches, cast strange shadows in Van Camp Street's new light.

As I watched the new shadows falling on the streets, I thought of Victor Van Camp, who they

always told of at street gatherings, the young Dutchman who had found a forest of elms here on his walks through the town he virtually owned, deciding here he would build his home and raise his children, here he could create a place for his fellow immigrants, a place away from the poverty and uncertainty of the old land and the stinging prejudices of the new.

And so, armed with his fortune earned with cunning and sweat and a little blood, armed with a crew of men, he began the long process, the delicate task of clearing away the trees, building the long line of houses under the already forming, carefully planned shroud of elms. He paved the street and brought in electricity, helped the first people move in, provided loans and advice, and began construction of the mansion that stands at the center of the street.

And at every gathering they tell how when the first World War began, and his native land felt the threat of violence and invasion, he left the completed mansion and Van Camp Street, gave instructions to his work crews and his people, and boarded a ship for Holland. They tell how he was killed one year later in the forests of France, and how his body was returned to the haven of elms he had created and set to rest in the backyard of his empty home.

As I stared into the shadows, I wondered what he would have thought if he could see what had happened to his trees, his carefully conceived shroud, now disappearing, now slowly being pulled away from the street, revealing it to the harsh summer light.

I sat on the porch alone now, the windows shut tight behind me, the television silent. Now familiar voices sounded far away, I not wanting to hear but hearing, knowing the little cigarette ashes that glowed from across the street, bobbing up and down and back and forth in disgust or pity, also heard and knew. I wanted the voices to stop, stop, stop, please God make them stop.

My father's voice would rise above my brother's, his in turn becoming louder, the orange dots across the street shaking back and forth, knowing, embarrassed.

"How can you disgrace this family?" my father shouted, "How can you do this?"

"You care more about your damn good name than me, don't you?"

"Ok, Pete Miller's going, what's he going to

think?" my father said. "Come on! You and him are supposed to be such good friends. What's he going to say?"

"Pete knows we look at things differently," my brother said. "We've each got to do our own thing."

"Your own thing, your own thing," my father said, mocking. "More long-hair bullshit!"

"It's useless. Ma, he doesn't understand. Make him understand."

"Get out of my sight," my father said. "You're a disgrace."

"I feel sorry for you, dad."

"I asked you to leave," my father said. "Get out of here and remember, you'll not be welcome here again. I won't have a coward in my house."

Doors slammed, the voices became quiet. I went in to comfort my mother.

Van Camp Street took on a new appearance in the light. The ancient houses now looked so much older than they had in the semi-darkness of the fast disappearing shroud. They needed painting and repair, something to reconcile the past to the present, to find a medium between the stateliness of antiquity and the decay of old age.

It became clear to all that the Van Camp mansion needed work. The beautiful tulip gardens, which had flourished under the direction of Miss Elizabeth, Victor's only daughter and last survivor, were now full of weeds, much more unsightly in the brightness of the sun. The bushes which surrounded the house, the ivy that threatened to smother the dirty pane-glass windows, the grass that had popped up between the red-bricks in the sidewalk and driveway, all needed trimming. Since Miss Elizabeth's death, we took on the burden of caring for the house, but now, in the harsh light of day, we saw more work was ahead to restore the mansion to its former elegance.

As summer came to an end, only five of the great elms stood untouched. The ceiling of green was all but gone, the now visible sky cloudy with the approaching autumn.

The trucks still moved closer to us, the chainsaws becoming louder, the noise of the cracking, falling branches and the shouts of the work crew becoming clearer. Across the street from our place at the elm, the Vette looked dull and dusty, its red skin fading in Peter's absence, and we knew he would just cry when he came back and saw it like that, but he never did.

Peter Miller was the first from Van Camp Street to die in war since World War II. Korea had returned alive all those it had taken, some physically scarred, some mentally, but all alive.

We were allowed to go to the funeral, it was my first, and the casket was closed. My father hugged Peter's father for the first time I could remember, and so did Kip's father and Paulie's and many fathers. My father said my brother had wanted to come so badly, and he did, but that he was visiting relatives out of state, which he wasn't.

They buried Peter with the veterans of all of the wars, and it rained throughout the service at the canvas covered hole, the flag on top of the casket which they folded into a heart-shape getting soaked in the new fall rain. When I saw Paulie holding back tears and Peter's mother crying that kind of cry that tears right through you, I cried.

When we came back to Van Camp Street in the long parade of cars, everyone went over to the Miller's to have coffee, but I didn't go.

We walked home from school quietly that first part of the fall. Peter was still in our minds, although not all of us were that close to him. But it was that kind of feeling you get when someone who was there, always there, isn't anymore and never will be again. The emptiness and melancholy stays until something else, some new thing needs the space those feelings have been taking up. You forget how much you miss the person, or at least tuck your sorrow away and let it be for awhile, and when you think of it again it won't be half as sad because it will be memory, and we only keep good memories.

Once in awhile I would receive a letter from my brother with no return address, and I'd compare it to my mother's when my father was at work; it was our secret. When my brother's draft notice finally came, my father tucked it away in a drawer without a word.

On the day they cut up our tree we gathered together on Paulie's porch and were silent, just watching the large bucket lift the man with the glimmering saw into the tree, watching each limb fall to the sunlit ground below, not saying anything, just watching, looking down Van Camp Street at the row of limbless beasts, at the diseased branches heaped in the truck, at the Vette, still fading, still pale, colorless in the September light.