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THE ANGLE 1994

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Special Thanks
The Writing Center
The Pioneer

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The Angle is a student-run publication of St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY 14618.
Typesetting and Printing by Accu-Tech Graphics, Inc.

1994

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JENNIFER CHATFIELD
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MICHAEL E. MCGRAW

The Story Of An American Soldier

Only a couple of dozen nails to go, and sure enough old Herm, right on time, waddled around the corner of his beat-up neglected house heading towards us. My brother-in-law, Scott, and I knew we would be unable to finish fixing my front porch steps without a visit from my waning but curious neighbor. Even at nine o'clock in the morning, Herm figured it was not too early to spit out a war story, or a chopped up explanation about what we were doing wrong.

"You two couldn't drive a nail in butter," mumbled Herm. "Gimmie that hammer. I'll show ya how it's done!"

"Here we go again," I whispered, catching Scott rolling his eyes full-circle as he stepped back, folding his arms, and impatiently leaned up against the house. Herm, after a grumbling, smoke-hacked cough, grabbed the hammer with his shaking hand and began pounding on the steps, missing the nail every time.

"There! Now that's how it's done. You youngins need some teachin now and then. That's your problem. It's all discipline. Why, when I was in the war... I..."

Herm never could finish that phrase. He just stumbled back across the yard, and whispered something that faded off as quick as his visit.

Herman Henry Moore, fifty-seven years old and retired, did not look like a day under eighty. He smoked two packs of unfiltered Pall Malls everyday, and usually had his first drink right after his morning eggs had settled. His skin looked rough and weathered from working construction most of his life. Tired wrinkles surrounded his dark sad eyes. He wore old black army boots, camouflage pants that didn't seem to fit right, and a faded olive t-shirt with "USS Marines" written on the left breast pocket. He wore his hair in crew-cut and insisted that all men should do the same. "Respect the military," he always said, and although the paint peeled year after year, from his rotting home and his lawn needed attention, he always took careful pride in raising and lowering his American flag. Every morning he limped out, dragging his bad leg behind him, in order to get that flag airborn. After a quick sharp salute, he then hit the bottle.

Every Friday afternoon while I cut my lawn, I could always catch Herm peeking out at me from behind a torn red, white, and blue shade that sheltered his porch from the sun. By the time I finished, there stood Herm on my freshly cut grass, drink in one hand, pointing with the other. His lawn inspections usually started the same way every time, but on one occasion he gave me quite a scare.

'What kinda job ya call that?' He said, grabbing his bum leg for support as he tripped and fell to the ground.

'Are you alright, Herm?' I said, helping him up.

'Yeah, yeah, this damn leg's got more metal in it... six rounds from the war, ya know. I mean it. We didn't have no surgery like y'all have now, ya know.'

'You must have been some soldier, huh Herm?'

'Well, I'll tell you. See this here,' he said, pointing to no particular place on his head, "got a plate in there, bigger'n your hand. Doc says I gotta live with it. That's why I'm retired, ya know.'

Before I even had a chance to respond, Herm seemed to forget that I was there. He just kept muttering about the fighting soldiers and staggered away.

'Hey Herm!' I shouted.

'What da you want?' He answered, as he fell again.

'What do you want?' He answered, as he fell again.

'I was just wondering what rank you were? I mean were you a Colonel, a General, or what?'

'I was all those things, damn it! I was a fighter.'