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The Story of An American Soldier

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

"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."

Cover Page Footnote

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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!”

“There 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...”

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 Mall's 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 airborne. After a quick sharp salute, he then hit the bottle.

Every Friday afternoon while I cut my lawn, I could always catch Herm peaking 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.

“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.”
With the exception of Herm's daughter, Agnes, nobody ever came to visit the old man. Agnes only came about five or six times a year. She never brought him anything, and her visits always ended with a loud screaming fight that I could hear from any room in my house. The only time Herm ever actually knocked on my door was after Agnes came to visit, and his conversation never made much sense.

"Ya wouldn't happen to have the Daily would ya?" Herm asked, in a soft tone.

"Sure come on in Herm, I'll get it for you:"

Herm hobbled in, teetering his way past me, blinking unremittingly to try and adjust his eyes to the light, and filling the sober air with the harsh scent of Johnnie Walker red.

"She ain't but nothin. Ya know that?"

"What's that Herm?"

"Why, she doesn't know what it's like. I'll tell ya that. Rich fancy husband. She don't even work, ya know! They're lazy, that's what it is."

"Who's that Herm, your daughter?" I asked him, handing him the paper.

"She'll be sorry one of these days," he said, avoiding the paper and my question, while walking back out the door as if he had forgotten where he was and why he came.

Only two weeks after that night, I had the opportunity to see just how sorry Agnes did feel for Herm. A small tear slowly grew large, sneaking down the side of her cheek as she greeted the dozen of us who showed up for Herm's silent service. There were no war decorations and no military salutes on this day, but later that evening, to my surprise, Agnes knocked on my door and handed me Herm's American flag.

"Here Michael. Dad didn't get along with a lot of people, but he was awfully fond of you:"

"Thanks, Agnes. He sure was proud of the Marines."

"Well, it probably cost him his life. Ever since he failed the physical forty years ago, and found out he had Polio, he kept drowning his disappointment in the bottle. Cost him his job, a lot of family and friends, and unfortunately now this. We keep trying. Thanks again, Michael."

The next day, I took three steps back from the tall silver pole and watched for a moment as the flag I raised half way blew strong and steadily in the wind. After a quick sharp salute, I made my way back to my yard and began to cut my lawn.

DAWN M. WHITED

Untold

I never saw a butterfly at night until I walked with you.

I never danced with such delight until I twirled with you.

I never laughed with all my heart until I smiled with you.

I never felt my soul connect until I laid with you.

I never knew what love could be until I longed for you.

I never hurt with the sense of loss until I had lost you.

I never saw a butterfly at night until I looked at you.