



The Canteen

by L.J. Chizak

Home

Fall-Winter 2013-14

Summer-Fall 2013

Spring-Summer 2013

Winter-Spring 2013

Fall-Winter 2012-2013

Summer-Fall 2012

Spring-Summer 2012

Winter-Spring 2012

Autumn/Winter 2011-12

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Editor's Note

I am packing my bags to go back to college, my senior year, and Gramps is in rewind. His doctors give him a couple of weeks; his family, me included, gives him a month or more. We know Gramps better. I want to delay my college return and visit with him every day but the family thinks otherwise. They are right. Gramps wouldn't want me missing any college just to see him die. I have spent the whole morning with him determined to tell him but I couldn't. I couldn't tell him what I have been trying to tell him for the past five years. It isn't Gramps. It isn't me. It's the thing itself.

I remember that first Saturday of the month, five years ago, when I was on a cross-town bus to the Sunrise Adult Home I had squeezed my six-foot, two-inch frame into the last seat so that only my red hair was showing. I was hugging a World War II canteen, afraid that it would bolt out of the back window at the next stop. I was gonna tell Gramps it was his. I was gonna lie.

Did I do this for a living? No way. I was an average 16-year-old kid who had never lied to his parents, believe it or not, and certainly not to his grandfather. How did I get myself into such a shitty mess? Unwillingly. Let me start with Gramps.

Gramps was eighty-five years old and lived in the house that he and Grandma had bought with his army severance. Grandma had died ten years before. To me, he was as happy as any man free of nagging women but not to Aunt Ruth, his twice divorced, red haired daughter with a cat like body and just as bitchy.

"He can't live alone anymore," Aunt Ruth declared at a family dinner as soon as Gramps was out of earshot. "You should see the place: dishes piled in the sink, clothes thrown all over, dirty laundry in every corner and newspapers, God knows how old, piled in stacks on the porch, in the living room, on the stairs."

Except for the piled dishes, she was describing my room.

It didn't bother me when Gramps and I watched a ball game in his 'lived-in' room. He knew his way around, always had a coke in the frig and a large pizza delivered, extra cheese no pepperoni. He had his own ideas about his place.

Guidelines

Contact

“If they can’t stand dirty dishes, they can clean them.”

“Right on, Gramps.”

“As for this house, they should live in the trenches, like I did during the war. Then they’ll know dirty.”

“You got it Gramps. This place is a palace. You should see my room.”

“Does your mother clean it?”

“No way! She says ‘If you want to live like a pig, go ahead but I don’t want to see it.’ She keeps the door closed.”

“There! Ruthie doesn’t understand how a man lives. She wants me to throw out the newspapers.”

“The ones on the porch?”

“Yes!”

“I’ll help you Gramps, anytime you’re ready.”

“Josh, they’re worth money.”

“Oh!”

“When I was a kid, we went around the neighborhood collecting newspapers. Everyone saved them. We’d take them downtown and sell them at 5 cents per 100 pounds. Rags were worth more, but people didn’t throw out rags. Now everything is throwaway.”

“Mom gives our old stuff to the Salvation Army.”

“Magazines! We passed them around the whole neighborhood and then saved them because we couldn’t afford the new edition. Now everything is throw away.”

“Yes, Gramps.”

“He was almost 75 when Ma got him to retire,” Aunt Ruth continued. “The doctors told him that if he didn’t stop working, he would die on the job.”

Gramps retired just when I entered peewee baseball. All of my cousins were older and married. I had him all to myself. He never missed a game. I was the only kid who had a full time personal coach and he was honest with me. Once I hit a fly ball right into Sammy Toggle’s mitt becoming the third out and the end of the game, Dad and his brother,

Uncle John, told me what a great hit that was, so strong, so straight. Only Gramps was honest with me. Sometimes, I thought, it hurt him more than me, but always the truth.

“A great hit Josh, but too direct. You hit it right to him. You gave him the out. Look for a hole in the outfield and aim there. I’ll practice it with you.”

I miss those days.

Gramps loved professional ball. He organized the annual Father’s Day sports outing –no ladies allowed. All the men of the family went to a baseball game, ate cheap dogs, and drank beer; popcorn and soda for me. We got home late. “Happy Father’s Day,” he greeted the ladies upon our return. Every time Mom and Dad went on a trip, I stayed at his house. I would miss school as he and I went off to the ballpark. While the other kids got a math lesson, I got a fielding lesson.

“When Grandma died, he became an old man,” Aunt Ruth said. “Now, he has to lie down after dinner, a little shaky on his feet. He can’t even leave the house without someone with him.”

Now we watch the ball games on TV instead of going to them. He doesn’t complain. So leave the man alone.

“We’ve got to get him into a nursing home before he falls and breaks his neck walking around all that mess,” Aunt Ruth concluded.

“Is it really that bad or are you exaggerating just a bit?” asked Uncle John, younger than his sister by 5 years, heavier and with thinning hair.

“No! Pigsties are in fashion, John,” she replied.

“Maybe he just needs a little help,” interjected my mother seeking to defuse an old sibling rivalry. My Dad, the youngest by ten years, supported her. “He loves that old house and he still feels close to Mom there. Maybe we could help out.”

Mom set up a schedule in which she, Aunt Ruth and Aunt Sue, John’s wife, would take turns cleaning the house every week while the ‘boys’ would take care of the yard work. That included me. Gramps was saved for exactly six months.

“He was lying in that cold house for two days with pneumonia before any of us knew about it,” Aunt Ruth began as soon as we left Gramps dozing off in his hospital room. “He could have died without any of us there.”

Uncle John and my father were no match for Aunt Ruth’s meticulous offensive. Every “but” was shot down, every “what if” was answered and Gramps’ fate was sealed.

“If I die, I’ll call you, as long as it’s not long distance,” came his voice from

inside the room. Aunt Ruth moved us down the corridor.

“It’s settled,” said Aunt Ruth.

Gramps would enter Sunrise Adult Home as a convalescent, then as a resident, never to return to his home. Mom got busy organizing the visiting schedule.

“Put me down for twice a month,” I told her as she made up the schedule.

“Now what day is good for you, Josh?”

“It’s hard to say. Mondays, Wednesdays, or Fridays I usually have ball practice after school. Tuesdays I work, that’s sometimes Thursdays too. Saturdays I hang out with the guys after the morning chores around here. How about Saturday mornings?”

She parent-smiled me and I got first and third Saturdays, after the chores were done. She and Dad took the second and fourth Sundays, Uncle John and Aunt Sue the first and third, and Aunt Ruth the second and fourth Saturdays to pay his bills and balance his accounts.

Gramps called the place Sunset. “This is the last stop, Josh. Your sun sets and it’s all over.”

“Downer, Gramps,” I said. “What’s up with Mr. Simon, next door, the one who yells all the time?”

“Last Tuesday, yelled himself dead.”

I remember Sunrise as an open and friendly place. I would splash through the front doors in my 505 jeans, white tee and oversized Nikes and swing through the reception area. With my I-Pod plugged into my ears, I would flap the nurses a wave to sign me in while opening the door to the residence hall. I was the darling of Sunrise visiting his grandfather. On a Saturday afternoon, most of the residents were either in town or the garden. Within ten feet, however, I crash into a wheelchair.

“How are those new teeth, Mr. Wittenberg?” I asked an old man, toothpick arms rotating a wheelchair off my foot. “Give me five,” I added as he lifted a shaky hand over a broad black smile.

“Good to see you again, Mrs. Debetto,” I greeted a fixed faced, flaxen haired lady who grabbed hold of my sleeve and pulled me toward her. “I know. Those are pictures of your grandchildren. You showed them to me last week,” and the week before that, and the week before that. Mrs. Silverstein parked her walker in the middle of the hall holding out her arms for the obligatory kiss. Her odor was strong and I signaled the nurse. I finally got to Gramp’s room.

“How'ya doing Gramps?” I asked planting a kiss on his forehead, jumping on the bed and flicking the remote.

“Had no trouble getting in? Did they search you?”

“A piece of cake.”

“Let's go Gramps,” I continued. “It's the Tigers and the Cubs, an interleague game. Have you been watching this guy Sosa?”

“They search everyone; afraid you're sneaking in a bottle or stealing something. They'll do the same when you leave.”

“No search Gramps. Now what do you think of this guy Sosa? Isn't he the greatest?”

Gramp's mind followed its own tracks. I had to work to keep him with me.

“Sosa's a light weight,” he answered. We were rolling.

Gramps' two hundred and thirty pound frame was anchored into his old easy chair as he stared at the T.V. His barrel chest heaved in and out, supporting a rock hard head, a jutting nose and satellite dish ears.

He always sat in his favorite chair next to the double bed that he and Grandma shared for 57 years. He had a long bureau filled with pictures of the family, his three children and their children. On the walls were pictures of his wedding, the Purple Heart he received in World War II and a picture of him shaking hands with President Eisenhower. The room smelled of Gramps, musty wool, old cotton, and unwashed flannel. That was the Gramps I knew, no other. Every visit we would watch the afternoon games, football in the fall, basketball in the winter, and baseball in the spring and summer.

“Everyone is talking about McGwire or Griffey breaking Maris' record. But I think it is going to be Sosa.”

“Is he good enough to break Rudy York's 18 hit per month record?” Gramps asked.

“Yah, sure he is. He's going to break 60 this season. That's why everyone is watching him today. He's the greatest.”

“Just like Ted Williams in the last game of the '41 series. Everyone was hoping that he'd make .400. Do you remember that one, Josh?”

It didn't matter that Dad wasn't even born in '41. Gramps never let those

small details stop him from telling a good story.

“Yah, Gramps.”

“How are you doing? Still playing ball?”

“Yep.”

“Gonna break 60 this season?” he added with a wink.

“No. I’m not there, yet. But I’m pitching a 5-1 so far and I’m batting .300. When you gonna come and see ‘The Kid’ play again?”

“They won’t let me out of here to see you play.”

“They would if you use the wheelchair,” I reminded him.

“Wheelchair, shmeel chair. They say I need a hip replacement. Bull! My hips are as good as they were sixty years ago when I was defending this country,” Gramps said as he shifted his weight in his easy chair. Check and Checkmate. “Your dad promised to video one of your games. Haven’t seen it yet,” he said stretching his head out to make a point.

I saw his determined profile. Mom says that I look like Gramps.

“You both have that red hair, his less and grayer, and those same sky blue eyes,” she told me once when we were talking about Gramps. “You also have the same bone structure, the same lanky walk, long arms and a real streak of determination.”

Outside of the hair and eyes, I didn’t see anything else. I had a long thin face, full of pimples. He had a long full face, usually full of stubble and my ears don’t stick out as much as his.

“Gramps,” I said changing the subject. “You need some new threads.” He always wore the same plaid shirts and green pants.

“What do you mean threads?”

“Your clothes, gramps. Your clothes are dated. They’re not with it. This is what they are wearing, baggy pants and muscle shirts.” I stretched out my arms so he could get a better look.

“That’s what I should wear?”

“Yeh! You’ll look cool and with it – in the loop.”

"When I was younger, I was cool and with it." He mimicked my words. "I cared about clothes and looks, with impressing people and fitting in. Now I just care about life. If not I would be a bigger fool than I was."

"If you say so gramps."

"Josh," he yelled as the announcer started the line-up.

"Yah, Gramps," I replied, upping the remote volume with one hand while fixing the pillows behind me with the other.

"Josh, I have a need for you to get me something."

"Sure, Gramps, anything you want," I said. His immigrant speech was reasserting itself. "Back to the game, Gramps. Sosa should be coming out soon."

"Josh, I need for you to find something for me and I need for you to promise."

"Sure, Gramps, no problem whatever," I said, still trying to get the pillow to soften the carving in the old headboard.

I felt a tight grip on my arm. He was out of his seat, unsteady but holding onto my arm. I stopped with the pillows.

"Yah, Gramps?"

"I want for you to find my old World War II canteen and for you to bring it back to me the next time you come."

"Sure. As good as done," I said as I tried to steer him back to his chair. He was steadying himself on me. He was having trouble managing reverse.

"Either your father or John has it. Ruthie didn't want anything that reminded her of the war. She was so young."

He started to turn and swung me around with him, his grip still tight. He wasn't going to let go.

"Cool Gramps, no problem. Maybe Dad or Uncle John could bring it with them the next time they come. I'll tell them," I said as I moved him toward his chair. The T.V. blared the pitching stats.

"Hell no!" he yelled nearly pushing me aside. "I ask them and they forget. John said that he would bring my old radio, no radio. I am still waiting for the video of your game, no video. So much for John and your father." I regained my grip and started lowering him into his chair.

“You I know won’t forget. Promise me, Josh. Don’t lie to me. Promise me now!”

“I promise, I promise,” I said as I felt his hand loosen on my arm and the granite determination left his face. They were playing the national anthem. He relaxed.

“Now let’s watch the game, OK?” He didn’t answer me.

We watched the game for the rest of the afternoon, but his mind did not follow his eyes.

“That canteen saw me through Omaha Beach,” he said over the announcer and cheering fans on the TV. “With Mae and young Ruthie back in the States. That canteen was my pillow in the trenches of Ardennes. It had a bowl on the bottom. That was our plate, our bowl and sometimes our shaving mugs. It was my writing desk at the Bulge when I promised Mae that I was coming back,” he paused. “Half of us didn’t.”

“That canteen is the only piece I kept after the war,” he continued. He had never told me about the trenches, his buddies, the living and the dead. “We would put our canteens together to form a large table,” he tried to show me with his hands, “and pretend that they were in a Parisian café -- dining and all, with mortars flying over their heads,” he told me with his hands as well as his voice.

“We were gods in Paris, after the war, flirting with the young dark haired Parisian girls telling them that we had cognac in our canteens.”

He smiled as he told me the story.

“I didn’t flirt,” he added quickly. “The others did. I had Mae and Ruthie back in the states.” He sat a little straighter before he continued.

“We had a reunion every five years and we each brought our memories and played cards, exchanged stories, relived Paris, the trenches, battles long forgotten except by us. We were young cocky G.I.’s again. Hadn’t had a reunion in 20 years now. They must be dead.”

I remember wishing that I had something to say to him, something to make him feel better, like he used to do for me after a bad game. But I couldn’t think of anything. I just sat there and listened.

When the ballgame was over I got up to leave.

“Now you won’t forget?”

“No Gramps, you’ll have it here the next time I come, promise.”

He gave me a hug whispering in my ear, "Thanks Josh." I left.

At dinner that evening I told Dad, "Gramps wants his canteen. Do you know where it is?"

"What canteen?"

"His old World War II canteen. That's what he talked about all afternoon. The canteen he took into Paris, the one he used as a pillow, you know. He must have a million stories about that canteen. I promised to bring it to him on my next visit."

"Oh that old thing," he paused. "I think it's in the old trunk in the basement. If its not there, then John might have it."

"I hope it's still here."

"Tomorrow we'll start looking."

After church Dad and I went down to the basement and found an old trunk. It had lots of army stuff but it looked more like Dad's than Gramps'. Rex, our Irish Setter, joined us and started nosing the boxes set around the walls.

"Hey look here, my old Army uniform," Dad said trying on the jacket and sucking in his gut. He didn't button it. Mom joined us.

"Why don't you throw that thing out?" she said. "It hasn't fit you since Josh was born."

"This uniform saw me through many a tight spot, my dear."

"Four years as the mess sergeant at Fort Bragg. What tight spot?"

"Serving army food to hungry G.I.'s. That tight spot."

Whatever she took out, he put back in. Nothing left the trunk. No canteen.

"What a mess down here," Mom added eyeing the box that Rex had searched. "The canteen might be in one of those drawers or boxes and it wouldn't hurt to straighten this place out a little."

Thanks to Rex.

Dad and I spent our whole Sunday helping Mom clean out every box and drawer in the basement.

"Well, I guess we don't have it," Mom said at the end of a long afternoon which produced two plastic bags for the Salvation Army and two more for

the garbage.

Don't have it! A whole Sunday of cleaning the freaking basement and "Don't have it." Dad was supposed to pull it out of someplace and I would give it to Gramps. Over and out. Done deal. No bother. Instead, a whole day wasted!

"Josh, you could try Uncle John next Saturday, Dad said. "He took some of Pop's things for his Boy Scout troop. I'm sure he has it."

So next Saturday I was on a bus to Uncle John and Aunt Sue's house. I had called during the week and Aunt Sue said that there might be a few places I could look. One was down in the basement, in yet another trunk. My search revealed only Uncle John's old Navy stuff, no World War II canteen.

"If it's not in the trunk, then it's up in the loft," she added.

I spent two hours up in a hot loft going through every box, but no canteen. I walked back to the bus stop dusting off my good jeans and wiping the sweat from my face.

As I walked through the door of my house, Mom was on the phone, placating Aunt Sue.

"He left the loft a mess? Oh, my. I'll get after him for that. But Sue, do you think that you could have possibly put the canteen away for safekeeping."

Mom held the phone a couple of inches from her ear and gave me the 'I don't need this' look. Mom politely thanked Aunt Sue and hung up.

"She says 'she doesn't have it, never had it, and never promised to keep it for anyone.' And," she emphasized. "That you left her loft a mess."

For a full Saturday's work, all I got were grief, a sermon and no canteen.

"Well, your last resort is Aunt Ruth," Mom added. "She was the one who cleaned out Gramps' house after he went to Sunrise. You'll have to call her." She said with a slight smile that revealed the torture I would have to endure.

Aunt Ruth is a pain. She is as nit-picky as a librarian and expects everyone to be the same. She berated me for an hour because I couldn't find my bat and ball when I was ten and staying with her. Nobody knows where everything is all the time, nobody except Aunt Ruth. I have a slim hope that she will have it. She didn't trust Dad or Uncle John with any of Gramps important things.

She answered the phone on the first ring and I asked her about the canteen.

"I inventoried and listed everything that went out of that house. You tell your father if he thinks that I swiped anything I'll mail him the inventory and he can recount it himself."

"He doesn't think that, Aunt Ruth," I said.

"I sincerely hope he doesn't think that. I cleaned out that house by myself with no help from anyone."

Everyone knew enough to stay away.

"Everything good was stored with John, your father or me. I only threw away junk. I didn't throw away the canteen."

"I know that," I interrupted. "I'm just trying to locate Gramps' canteen because he asked me to."

"Well, then ask your Uncle John. I remember him getting it for his Boy Scout overnights. If he doesn't have it, then ask your Aunt Sue if she sold it at one of her monthly garage sales. I'm surprised that she didn't garage-sale one of her kids when they were still at home."

I thanked Aunt Ruth and got her to promise to look one last time and I assured her that my father did not want her inventory.

In my gut, though, I knew that she was right about the canteen. I remember Uncle John asking about it for his Boy Scout troop and Aunt Sue's almost perpetual garage sales. I was also certain that she sold it for a few bucks.

I explained my situation at dinner that night. "We don't have it, Uncle John doesn't have it and Aunt Ruth doesn't have it but promised to look around one last time."

"If Ruth can't lay her hands on it immediately, she doesn't have it," my mother said. I felt like it was my first time up at bat and the umpire just yelled 'Strike one'.

"I'd be very surprised if Ruth finds it," said Dad, strike two. "Probably sold at one of Sue's garage sales," he added. Strike three and out.

"Then what am I going to tell Gramps?"

"That you tried the best you could, Josh, and the canteen is gone," was Mom said. "Grandpa will understand."

“But I promised Gramps!”

“Or tell him that you only had time to check your house. Next month you’ll go to John’s. By the time you run out of possibilities, he will have forgotten about it,” Dad added.

“That’s a lie, John,” Mom said quickly. “We don’t lie, not in this family. One lie just brings on another until the truth finally comes out and no one’s happy. Josh has never lied to us.” She looked at me. I nodded.

“I was only trying to help.”

“You gave one hundred and ten percent Josh. Grandpa could not ask for more than that,” was Mom’s solution.

Mom was right. I don’t lie, not really; exaggerate a little, especially with the girls; but that is expected. I especially don’t lie to Gramps. I gave 110 %. I gave up two days, plus a call to Aunt Ruth. But Gramps asked that I keep a promise. One hundred and ten percent doesn’t cut it. Their solutions are cop-outs but how do I explain that to them? My life is getting too complicated.

I had one week to go and still had no canteen. Here were my choices: I could tell Gramps that his loving daughter-in-law sold the canteen at a garage sale. There goes any nice birthday gift from Uncle John and Aunt Sue. I could tell him that it might take awhile and give him a blow-by-blow description. That was Dad’s solution. If Mom finds out, I will have hell to pay. Or I could tell him that I just couldn’t find it: the truth, not all of it but not a lie. None of them includes the canteen and that was the bottom line. I promised Gramps. I had to show up with a canteen not an excuse.

I was cursing my dilemma on the way to school when I spotted an Army and Navy surplus store. Right on! I’ll buy a canteen from the army surplus and give it to him on my next visit. I had been saving for a snowboard so I wasn’t ‘without funds’ as Aunt Ruth loved to call me. Dad had described it to me as round with an olive green cover, black cap and dark green canvas straps and Gramps’ name stenciled on the back of it. That’s it. I was home free. I would buy an old one, an authentic one, and I would put his name on the back. He hasn’t seen it in years. With his eyesight going and his memory fuzzy I could pull it off: sort of a lie but a solution. It was either that or no canteen.

I entered the store smelling victory.

“I’m looking for a real World War II canteen,” I said to the ex-GI with ‘U.S. Army’ tattooed on his forearm. “How much are they?”

“What kind do you want?” he countered.

“What do you mean?”

“I have about fourteen different types of canteens used by the military in World War II. Do you want to see them all?”

“No. I want to see just the round ones, olive green with black caps and dark green canvas straps,” I said, confident in my precise description.

“Oh, you’re in luck,” he said. He left and brought back four different canteens. “That limits it to only four. Take your pick.”

I stood there, open-mouthed. All four were round but one was larger than the rest. All had olive green covers but two were green camouflage. They all had black caps but only one had a silver security chain and double straps on the bottom. Also all had “USArmy” on the front. Dad hadn’t told me about that. If I got the wrong one it would be obvious. Gramps would know.

“This is it, eh?” I asked, hoping that he would say no and whip out another from under the counter and tell me that this was the one that my grandfather had carried into Paris on Liberation Day.

“These were the most popular styles. Which one?” he persisted.

“Well, I’m not sure,” I said retreating from the counter seeing my solution crumbling before me. “It’s one of these but I am not sure.” I was now at the door. “Thanks for showing them to me. I’ll be back.” I left before he could ask any more questions.

My solution was no solution. I couldn’t ask Dad which one might be Gramps’ because then Mom would find out and she will not let me lie to Gramps. If I ask Uncle John, he will tell Dad, who will then tell Mom, and Gramps will not get his canteen. I needed to know which canteen is his. A picture of it would help. Slam dunk, what a birdbrain! We did have a picture of Gramps in full uniform down in the old trunk. I remembered seeing it and with the canteen hanging by his side.

I raced home, down to the basement and into the old trunk. There it was, right on top: Gramps in full uniform, a World War II GI and the canteen hanging from his shoulder. It was round and green with one or two straps across it. It was too small to see any more details. I took it to my computer and put it in the scanner. I enlarged it and sharpened it. There it was, the canteen. It was the smaller size, green camouflage, with two straps on the bottom and “USArmy” on the front. It had a black cap with a silver chain attached. I had it.

The next day after school I went to the surplus store and asked to see the canteens again. The guy behind the counter brought out the four he had shown me the day before. I spotted the perfect match and bought it. On the way home, I got some stenciling that was very much like the type I saw on other canteens and a black magic marker. I stenciled

'SHERIDAN' on the back and washed it several times to 'age' it. I did it!

So here I am on the cross-town bus off to see my grandfather at the Sunrise Nursing Home with a bogus canteen held tight against my chest.

"Hi Gramps," I said as I gave him the canteen, kissed his forehead, hopped on the bed with the remote in hand.

"You found it!" he yelled grasping the canteen with both hands. He kissed it and brought it close to his face, sending his good eye into every crevice and stitch and then back again to me.

"Oh yah, no trouble," I answered and tried to take his attention off the canteen. "This is the All Star game, Gramps. The American League against the National League. The American League is gonna win; O'Neill, Bernie, Jeter and Wells from the Yankees." He wasn't listening. He held the canteen at arms length studying it.

"Hey, you really have to see this line up," I continued talking faster. "The Yankees played the Mets last weekend, the Subway Series, and O'Neill made another of his great over-the-fence catches. Just like the '96 Series."

"Where was it?" he asked, not lifting his eyes off the canteen, his fingers rubbing his name.

"Aunt Ruth had it," I blurted out. "Dad thought he had it so I cleaned up the basement to Mom's delight, but it wasn't there. Then I went though Uncle John's basement and attic. They didn't have it either."

I described my tale of woe and wandering. I played up Aunt Sue's annoyance at the messy loft, and Aunt Ruth's offer to send over the inventory. I even described Dad trying on his old army jacket, Rex and the boxes, and how Mom and Dad wanted me to give up and tell him that I couldn't find it. I told him that I wasn't going to come back without a canteen but left out the Army and Navy surplus store. He shifted his gaze from the canteen to my face. He put down the canteen. That was it, I thought. He didn't buy it.

"It wasn't in John's Boy Scout things?" he asked through his granite stare. "He wanted it when he was scout master. Made him look authentic, he said?"

"No, I really searched," I answered quickly. "He couldn't remember ever using it."

"And Sue didn't have it in a garage sale pile, did she? She'd sell anything not tied down."

"No, she said that she was finished with garage sales and that she never

saw it.”

“So where did you find it? Who had it, Josh?”

“I told you, Aunt -- Aunt Ruth had it,” I stammered, fluffing up the pillows, sinking deeper into them. “She looked again and she found it.”

“Aunt Ruth had it,” he repeated with a gentle smile on his face. “Is that right?” he asked more to himself than to me but I nodded anyway. “Good Old Ruthie probably had it filed under ‘Canteen.’ ”

“I guess so, Gramps,” I answered, rising a little to watch him. He nodded and then settled back in his chair. A broad smile connected his ears and opened wide his eyes. He then got out of his chair, faster than I had seen lately, and marched the canteen over to a corner chair. He gave it a snappy salute and said, “Welcome back.” For the rest of the afternoon, we talked baseball. When I left, he gave me a big kiss and a hug. He pointed to the chair and said, “Thanks for the canteen, Josh.”

I nodded, “No sweat, Gramps.”

Next I had to convince Aunt Ruth to lie for me. Sure, right. Well, what did I have to lose?

“You told him what?” she said at the other end of the phone. “You told him I had it! I told you I would look again but that I didn’t have it. You lied to him and included me in your lie!”

“It was either that or tell him Aunt Sue and Uncle John sold it at a garage sale,” I quickly answered back. A silence followed.

“Even though she did, he doesn’t have to know that,” I said breaking the silence. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Did he believe you?”

“Yah, I think so. He gave the canteen a salute and said ‘Welcome Home’.”

“Well then, good work Josh.”

I did it. I pulled it off.

I am just finishing packing my bags and I pick up the picture of Gramps in his army uniform. The one I had used to buy the canteen; the one I am taking to college with me. For the past six years, the canteen held a place of honor, on the chair in the corner of his room. Everyone who came to visit had to listen to at least one story about the canteen or Gramps as a young soldier.

“I wish you had never found that damn canteen,” Uncle John said to Aunt Ruth one time. Aunt Ruth just smiled. I think she enjoyed pissing off her brother more than keeping the secret we both share.

I had seen Gramps the day before. I had so wanted to tell him that the canteen wasn't his, that it was my canteen, that I lied to him but I just couldn't do it. I went into his room and he was lying in his bed, his blue eyes half open, his barreled chest heaving slowly up and down. When he saw me, he gripped my hand and we just sat there. That was all we could do.

Mom and Dad have just returned from their visit and Dad comes in to help me pack.

“How's Gramps?” I ask.

“Oh, about the same,” he replies. “I don't think it will be long now. But he let out a secret.”

“What?” I ask, the emotions of six years ago returning.

“You know he hasn't much left, materials that is,” he answers playing each word slowly. “And we don't know anything about his will. You know how tight lipped he is about his personal stuff.”

“He always was. So what secret?”

“He let it slip what you are getting in his will,” dad says with a slight smile on his face.

“What?” I ask, realizing this was just family gossip.

“The canteen,” he answers.

“Why? What did he say?” I ask still sensitive to the lie that sits in the corner.

“Well not in so many words,” Dad continues. “But he alluded to it. When your mother and I went into his room, he was lying on his bed, half awake. Your mother sat in his big chair and I stood. He woke up and pointed to the other chair. He told me to sit there but first, and I quote, ‘move Josh's canteen.’ ”

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