

The Walk to the Cemetery

The elderly, silver haired man was woken by the bright beams of sunlight streaming through his window. His eyes fluttered open and as his mind focused, and he was suddenly wide awake at the realization of what today was. The man, slow with age, got out of bed and dressed, putting on a simple shirt and jeans. He clutched his cane as he limped out the door of his small house and began to walk along the dirt road.

The man knew the winding road well, and as he approached the place where the road split, he stopped. He stood beside the tall, rusty sign that labeled each road. The arrow pointing left said “Cemetery”, while the other, pointing right, said “Town”. The old man knew the road by heart, after stopping there for one day each year. He let his mind wander, going back to a time that wasn’t troubled by the thoughts of war.

“Robert, stop, before you drop the eggs!” Robert’s older brother, John, yelled. John’s short blonde hair shone brightly in the sunlight. Robert, a thin little light-brown haired boy, skidded to a stop on the dusty road, gasping for breath. He leaned against the pole of the new sign and waited for John to catch up. The brothers were heading back home from town, after getting some groceries their mother had sent them after.

John paused at the sign for a moment, then suddenly tapped his brother and cried out, “Tag, you’re it!” Robert carefully set down the egg basket and chased after his brother. The laughing boys ran around and around, using the sign as the ‘base’. Their low ankle boots were covered in the dust they had stirred up. After a while, they grew bored of the game and knew that their mother expected them home soon. They grabbed the eggs, which were also covered in dust, and then they were off again. Robert walked along side his brother, laughing at the jokes and stories John told as they walked home.

The old man smiled at the memory. He had been happy then, without a cane, without a care in the world. But that was before the war. He turned left at the cross roads and walked slowly past the grassy hills that lined the dirt road. He remembered when he and his brother had gone sleigh riding on those hills in the winter. They would always have to jump off right before they reached the bottom, so they wouldn't run into the icy water of the pond there. They had made the best snowmen together. *Good times*, the old man thought, *good times*.

As the man walked, the hot sun beat down on him, but the wind kept him cool. It carried the leaves off the trees, scattering them across the road. The sky was clear, just like it was when his brother had left their family, packing his bags and setting off to join the many others who wanted to fight for their country.

“What will I do while you're gone?”

“I'm sure some kids from school will play with you. Don't worry, I won't be gone long. I'll be back before you know it!” John gave his brother an encouraging smile before walking out the door of their little house. Their mother stood on the porch, her long hair and blue dress billowing out around her. She was waving and wishing him luck as he jumped in the back of an old pick-up truck filled with other men. Robert joined his mother and they both watched sadly as John bounced down the road, out of sight. Robert looked up at his mother and saw the tears that glistened in her green eyes.

The man quickly shook the thoughts out of his mind and kept going. That day was permanently etched in his mind. He saw his mother's teary eyes every time he closed his own, and his brother's proud face as he walked away that saddened him even more. He regretted not hugging his brother more tightly, never letting go until he agreed to stay with them, but he knew that there would have been no changing his brother's mind.

After walking a little while longer, the old man saw the faint outline of a the tall cemetery gate come into view. He stopped when he approached it, and fished an old skeleton key out of his pocket. He

was one of the very few people remaining who still had a key to open the gate. The grass was terribly overgrown, except for one path that was kept cut. He passed by many mossy tombstones adorned with flowers and dirty American flags, and tall crumbling statues of angels. Finally, he arrived at the place he had sought after.

It was the only neat place in the cemetery, having a clean, faded marble tombstone with a bench beside it. The old man took a seat, and gazed at the tombstone. There were no flowers, but one flag stood on top of the stone, waving gently in the breeze. "Happy Birthday, Brother," the man whispered into the silence, bowing his head.

"It's been another year without you," Robert said, remembering the tragic day clearly.

Robert and his mother sat watching television one evening, almost four years after John had left for the army. A loud knocking at the door interrupted the soft static of the evening news. They shared a confused look before his mother got up and opened the door. A man, dressed in a clean, formal army suit, stood there, standing straight and tall. Past him, a large truck waited in front of the house. Robert jumped up quickly, but he realized all too soon that the man wasn't his brother, and that the news he brought couldn't be good. The man held out a letter, and after Robert's mother took it, he saluted. He took off his hat, lowering his head and backed away.

With shaking hands, Robert's mother opened the letter and pulled out the papers, her eyes scanning them quickly. She collapsed on her knees and Robert hurried to her side. Sobs racked her body as he held her. He tried to stay strong for her, but when the realization hit him, it was too much for him to bear. Tears slid down his face, just like their sleds had slid down the packed snow of the hills. It felt like the world was crashing down around him. Robert was vaguely aware of the army truck rumbling away from their house, but of one thing he was certain. His brother wasn't ever coming home.

Robert sat up and wiped the tears from his eyes. John was always there for him, so even though he was gone, Robert vowed that he would never forget him. Some said that he needed to get on with his

life and let go, but he knew that no one would understand. The bond he had shared with his brother was strong, and no matter how much time had passed, John would never stray far from his thoughts.

The old man stayed for a little while longer, sitting on the bench in the cool air. The sun started to go down, so he said his goodbyes before heading back home. *Goodbye for now, brother, I'll see you soon,* Robert thought, before slightly limping with his cane out of the old cemetery and locking the gate behind him. The noises of the night kept didn't bother Robert because he knew the road so well that even when it was dark and the sky was filled with stars, he was still confident in getting home safely. Crickets chirped all around him, keeping him company on the long walk. When he finally reached his little, old house, he gladly went inside, tired from his day.

As he got ready for bed, he couldn't help but think of what his brother would have been like if he had survived the war. *Surely he would have been a far better man than me,* he thought, *I know I would've been a better man with him by my side, helping me through.* Robert hoped that when he saw his brother again, hopefully in heaven, that John would greet him and say, "I'm so proud of you! You did well brother, you did well."