Remnants

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"Would you like a flag on the casket?"
"I hadn't really thought about it."
"Well, if he was a veteran, he has a right to a flag. I personally think it's rather nice to have a flag draped over the casket."
"I guess so, then. Yes, he should have a flag."
"We'll need a copy of his discharge papers then."
"His discharge papers?"

It was the end of the fourth inning. The White Sox or the Cubs—it didn't really matter. The score was 8-0 in favor of the other guys. It was getting hot out, and the grass needed cutting.
"You know, even when you wrote to me from Germany, you never told me what you did in the Army."
"How many years has it been? Hmm, it's been long enough now—by quite a few years."
"Long enough?"
"I couldn't tell anyone—not even you—for ten years after my discharge."
"You're kidding. What'd you do? Top secret stuff?"
"I was a weapons specialist. I cleaned nuclear warheads."
"They do that? Bombs need to be cleaned?"
"Can't drop a dirty bomb. Seriously, though, we scraped corroded uranium off nuclear warheads."
"You did? Really?"
You know, even back then—'53, was it—they weren't very big. I mean they were heavy and all, but a single man could carry a warhead on his back. They had it so one man could assemble a whole bomb in the field. Let's see, it was in three parts, basically..."
"But you cleaned them?"
"Yeah. We rode down in elevators, down into the caves. We had cards that we had to wear on our uniforms that measured the radiation levels, our exposure. We had to punch in with the cards before we could enter restricted areas. And we'd punch them on our way out."
"No kidding? You really cleaned bombs?"

"I don't even know if I have a copy of his discharge papers."
"If you could look for them this evening and give me a call, because we
really have to see them before we can put the flag on the casket.”

“Of course, I know we asked for copies of all his military records when he first got sick. They were looking for connections back then. We must have them around because we talked about how he failed his physical fitness test at basic training.”

“Yes, I remember basic myself. Went straight from basic to the big war.”

“But, you know, we might not have the discharge papers; a lot of his records were destroyed in a fire.”

“They were in St. Louis, then?”

“Yes. We could only get what they had in Washington.”

“I know. Was he in the Pacific? I know a lot of those records—the ones from the testing in the fifties—were down in St. Louis. Wiped out the whole third floor.”

“No, he wasn’t in the Pacific. I don’t think so. No.”

“Well, this won’t be a problem. If you can’t find his discharge papers, I’ll see what I can do first thing in the morning, because we really have to have them.”

“I’d appreciate that. But I’ll look tonight.”

“Fine. Now, what about flowers for the casket? Maybe a nice spray of roses from you and your daughters?”

“Yes, that sounds good.”

The leaves were turning. It was his daughter’s birthday—sweet sixteen. He’d made sure she got the sixteen pink sweetheart roses with the sixteen sugar cubes attached by sixteen pink ribbons. He hadn’t bought them himself, of course, but he wanted her to have them just as they’d planned. Both girls had come to see him, and now they were at their grandmother’s waiting to cut the birthday cake and claiming frosting flowers.

“But I wasn’t supposed to get the first shot until tomorrow.”

“Well, the doctor left orders on the chart to start chemotherapy this afternoon.”

“No, I specifically asked that it wouldn’t start today. Not today.”

“Well, I can take it away then.”

“Honey, don’t you think you might as well go ahead and take the shot as long as she’s got it all ready?”

“Well, I really didn’t want to start today.”

“It’s okay if you want me to take it away. It’s your decision.”

The three—husband, wife, and nurse—looked at each other and then at the brownish-red syringe. “No, it’s all right. I might as well have it now.”

“Okay, then just relax. I don’t want to spill any of this because it kind of
tells the finish off the floor."
  "Is it going to hurt much?"

  "Do you know how much you’d like to spend on the spray?"
  "I don’t really know. I have no idea."
  "Well, they can run fifty, seventy-five, or hundred, or a hundred and twenty-five dollars."
  "A hundred and twenty-five. Might as well."
  "That’s a really good choice. We’ll get a beautiful spray for that. Some greens and baby’s breath. It will look very nice. Would you like any ribbons—maybe ‘Dad’ or ‘Loving Father and Husband’?"
  "No. I think it will be fine without ribbons."
  "Fine. Yes, that will be fine. Now, if you would like to bring a rosary or something in with his clothes, that’s fine too. Or a crucifix. Sometimes, with men, a crucifix is nice instead."
  "Well, his family always uses rosaries for this, but I think a crucifix would be better. I think that’s what he’d want—the black one from Ireland."
  "Yes, that sounds fine. Something personal will mean more to everyone."
  "Yes, I think so too. He never really prayed the rosary—you know, not since he was a kid probably. Of course, he had one, probably his mother’s. But a crucifix would be good, don’t you think?"
  "Yes, good. You know, something more personal. Now, you’ll also have to bring the clothes in tomorrow."

It was New Year’s Day and it had been snowing. They watched the snowflakes drift past the seventh floor window all afternoon. A month before, they had probably watched the rain out of the same window. The girls had brought two snowballs when they had visited, but they had melted into styrofoam cups.

  "Maybe I could bring some of your old pajamas in. It might help you feel better."
  "No, the hospital gowns aren’t so bad."
  "Are you sure, honey? You’re always so cold now—with your hair gone and the medicine and losing all this weight. And maybe you’d feel better in flannel pajamas."
  "The hospital gowns are easier. I need to change so often with the vomiting. And, besides, it’s easier with the bedpan and everything."
  "Of course."
“Maybe you could bring in my robe, though. And maybe my slippers.”
“Sure, honey. I’ll bring your robe and slippers tomorrow.”
“The orange robe.”
“Are you sure? The orange one has some holes. The red one is newer.”
“No, the orange one. And the slippers with the rubber soles. The floor is slippery—it’s hard to get to the chair.”

“Yes, I’ll bring in one of his jury trial suits.”
“It’s dark, then?”
“Yes, I’ll bring the one with pinstripes. He always looked very good in that one. Of course, he lost a lot of weight.”
“That’s all right. We can always pin it. Of course, you’ll need to bring a shirt and tie in with the suit.”
“Yes, of course. A shirt and tie.”
“We’ll also need underwear, socks, and shoes.”
“Underwear?”
“Yes, and socks and shoes. Some places don’t do it this way, but we like to.”
“Yes, of course.”
“You’ll need to have all of this—the clothes and the crucifix in by ten in the morning.”
“That’s fine.”
“And the discharge papers. If you don’t find them, give me a call tonight. Otherwise, just bring them in the morning.”
“Yes. That’s fine.”
“We’ll take care of the rest. Do you have any questions?”
“No, nothing right now.”
“I guess we’re finished for now, then. If you think of anything later, if you have any questions, just call. But I think we’ve taken care of everything.”
“Yes. Thank you. Very much.”
“If there’s anything we can do, let us know.”
“Yes. Thank you. Nothing right now.”
“I’ll see you in the morning then.”

The crocuses were peeking out even though the snow hadn’t melted completely. Easter would be late this year.
“Do you hear the cracking when I breathe?”
“I’m sure it’s just congestion, honey.”
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“When I was eleven, my grandmother died. She had the same rattle.”

“Your lungs are just congested today.”

“Yes, it’s congestion. Now, let me take your blood pressure.”

“How is my blood pressure?”

“It’s still low, but it’s come up.”

The rattle continued into the afternoon. It wasn’t a wheeze, but a dry crackling as if things were brittle inside and clicking together as he breathed. She had sent the girls home.

“I can’t remember anything.”

“It’s okay, honey. I love you. Everything’s going to be just fine. Just relax.”

“It’s very low now. His pulse is weak too. I called the girls.”

“I’m not sure where I am anymore. Are you taking my pulse?”

“I love you. It’s all right. Just relax now. I love you.”

“I love you.”

“Everything’s going to be all right. It’s all right. I love you honey. Can you hear me? I love you.”

“No pulse. I’m not getting anything.”

“I love you.”

“Nothing.”

“Everything is all right now.”

“He’s gone.”

“I love you.”

They both let go. She felt like very old autumn, and the crackling was gone.

It is the day of the funeral. Everything has gone well. She had found the discharge papers. Roses from the spray were passed out to the women at the gravesite. It was just how it should be. She had sent everyone home; the girls went with their grandparents back to the house. She stopped back at the funeral parlor to get her car.

“The spray of roses was beautiful. Thank you so much.”

“I’m glad you thought so. It did look very nice. I was a little disappointed that some of the roses began to wilt, but I’ll have a word with the florist.”

“Well, I was pleased with it. I was...it all went very nicely, I thought.”

“Yes, I think so too. The Mass was beautiful. I know you had a big hand in planning that. Something personal like that means so much more to everyone. I do hope you were pleased with everything here.”

“Everything was fine. Yes...the whole thing.”

“Well, if there’s anything at all we can do, let us know. If you need more thank you cards for the floral arrangements or if you need anything else or if you
just have some questions, be sure to call.”

“There’s nothing more you can do right now. You’ll be billing me soon?”

“Yes, soon. Well, if there’s anything at all we can do...”

“No, nothing now. But thank you. I was pleased with everything. I guess
it’s over now. I guess I can go home now.”

She drives through the cemetery on the way home, but she doesn’t stop.
There is nothing to stop for. The headstone isn’t even picked out yet; they only
sink them four times a year. She goes home with the folded flag, the red rose,
and the black crucifix beside her in the front seat. She carries them into the
house, puts them in a plain brown box, and closes the lid. She sits on the edge
of their bed and cries.