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FORUM

FAREWELL COMRADE

Terri Maue

The man in the coffin, the body in the coffin, was not he. For one thing, he needed a cigar. Those thin, colorless lips clamped tightly together would have told me he was dead even if all the other clues had been absent.

His lips were what I remembered about my husband's Uncle Harold. In life they were thick and red and always cradling a wet stub of unlit cigar. I had nearly always gagged to look at it, a fat brown stump, slobbered all over at one end. But the way he held it absently in the drawn-up corner of his mouth might have also contributed to the other thing I remembered about him, the hint of a smile that made him always look slightly bemused.

He died of congestive heart failure at 80 years of age. Resting with him in the coffin was a white baseball cap. It bore the statement: You can always tell an old German, but you can't tell him much. He got that cap earlier in the summer, when all the relatives gathered to celebrate the four uncles who were the reigning patriarchs of the family. That snapshot—four old men in limp tee shirts and baggy pants, seated side by side in a row of lawn chairs, squinting in the July sun beneath identical ball caps—will be a treasure now.

We were crowded together in the funeral home. I was ill at ease, in the company of mostly strangers, participating in a tradition that held little meaning for me. This display of a dead body, arranged in repose as if it were merely in a bedchamber, the hinged coffin lid no more than a tucked and folded canopy. The strange juxtaposition of its still form with groups of people talking about their jobs and vacation plans, catching up on the news with each other while children darted among their legs. The awkward, unstable balance, ebbing and flowing throughout the room, between the public face of sympathy and the private questions and fears.

I would be cremated. Let people gather informally and spontaneously around my picture or an empty chair; let them sing or cry—anything but this forced parade of civility and restraint and denial.

Like most visitors that day, I sought shelter quickly in an island of familiar people. After a quick look at the body from a discreet distance—after all, I hadn't been close to him—I let myself be wrapped in the mindless exchange of pleasantries with my husband's mother and his siblings. An eon went by, and I had begun to wonder when I might respectably leave when I noticed seven or eight men, mostly elderly, clustered near the coffin.

One of them—over the crowd I could see only his gray head and large lined face—began to address the assembled mourners. He said that they, the members of Harold's Catholic War Veterans post, did not think of Harold as having died, but as having been reassigned. I lost the rest of what he said, as a fog of literary revulsion filled my head. I think it was something about going to a much more desirable post, where they would all join him someday.

Then a small, frail man knelt at the bench near the coffin, as the gray-headed man announced the recitation of the rosary. The kneeling man began to speak the prayers rapidly, in a high thin tone, and the crowd responded at the same pace, their many voices melding into a low rumble. I remembered what I didn't like about public Catholic praying; there was no time to reflect upon what was being said as the words rushed over one another. But I wanted to contribute my good will, so I prayed mostly silently and at my own pace.

The recitation complete, the little man stood up. The first man barked, "Cover," and all the men settled their soft folded caps on their heads. I noticed the stars on some, the embroidery on others. These were World War II veterans, a dwindling number who had just lost another of their own. I thought about how soon all of them would be gone. Then the war—the Great War—will truly belong only to the history books.

The veterans had formed a line and were filing past the coffin to pay their last respects. Lost in my own thoughts about the passing of history, I watched idly. I was musing about how it wouldn't be long before my generation and I were 'the old ones' leaving and being left, when a clear, firm voice snapped me back to the present. One of the veterans had paused before the coffin and brought his right hand up in a salute. "Farewell, comrade," he said. After a moment, he lowered his hand and passed on.

I was suddenly dizzy.

"Farewell, comrade." The words caught me like a slingshot wraps a pebble, and for a weightless moment, their power coiled around me. Then I was catapulted, hurled into a cacophony of images, sounds and feelings. Smoke and flames, explosions and cries of pain and terror, the fleeting sweep of sweat and chills. My heart seized in my chest. A terrible grief washed through me, for the blasted remnants of human beauty and horrifying reality of human cruelty, arrogance and greed.

Farewell Comrade

War.

These men had gone to war. They had seen men die, and each had known squarely in his gut that he also could—very easily and oh so quickly—die. And these few had survived. They had come home, built families and careers, sired children and loved them. They had lived their lives, and they had honored as best they could all those who had made such lives possible. I shivered as the thought finished itself—all those who had made *my* life possible.

Up until this moment, Uncle Harold had been just an old guy in my husband's family, a guy with a slightly disgusting habit of hanging a cigar stub out of his mouth. I had almost begged off coming to the funeral home today. After all, I really did not know the man.

It had made no difference to the young boy at war that he had not known me.

The gray-headed man, whom I now thought of as the post commander, was speaking again. He thanked us all for coming; he said Harold was a good man, who was always willing to help in whatever way he could. I noticed that the commander's left hand was missing. As he talked, he folded his right hand over the stump at the end of the forearm. The position seemed natural and unaffected by embarrassment. I wondered if he had lost his hand during the war. I wondered what else he had lost. What else Uncle Harold had lost. And had never made a fuss about.

The commander finished his remarks and the group of veterans filed out of the room. Around me, the buzz of conversation picked up again. I looked at the unnatural face in the coffin. I heard someone say, "He needs a cigar." Several people laughed.

A life had ended, it seemed. Uncle Harold had gone on to his next 'posting,' whatever that might be. But, as science has proved, nothing is lost; it only changes form. If one is lucky, or is paying attention when the opportunity comes, one might actually get to see it happen. →

Terri Maue earned a Ph. D. in English with a Specialty in Creative Writing from the Union Institute. Dr. Maue is the Cincinnati (OH) Center Faculty Chair and Humanities Chair for the Extended Campus. She has been with Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University since 1999. Her poems, short stories and essays have appeared in national, regional and local publications.