

CONSTANTINE EVANS

Legacy

MY SON IS UPSTAIRS WRITING TITLES for short stories. His plan is to write 500 titles and then, when they're culled and refined, he'll write the stories around them. His overall plan is to publish ten stories a year—one every five weeks—for fifty years and live on the income from the stories themselves and the occasional sale of movie and TV rights. He'll use the remaining two weeks of each year for revising or, more likely, replacing titles as time passes. He told me, "You can't predict the future, Dad. Like if I have 'Where's My Krazy Glue' listed there's no guarantee that when I get to it forty years later anybody will even know what Krazy Glue is. If they do, fine, but you see my point? Like right now I could never have 'Philco radio,' or 'P-38' in a title. See what I mean, Dad? You have to think of the future."

My son can be obnoxious, but he's not lazy. He's writing titles all the time. He always carries a little notebook with him, that and a bunch of Bic pens—or as he would say forty years from now, what's a Bic pen? Anyway, a bunch of pens. He got the idea of titles from I think Raymond Carver's or Flannery O'Connor's stories—you know, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please" or "A Good Man Is Hard To Find"—that sort of thing. Believe it or not, he apparently gets a lot of his own inspirational titles from me. It kind of gets on my nerves sometimes. I say the least little thing and out pops the notebook. You know, "What's For Supper?" One time I started to say, just to see that notebook spring into action, "Your Fly Is Open," but his mother, seeing my game, stopped me with a look.

I wondered where he got the Philco radio and P-38 until I remembered the stack of old magazines in their cedar chest I inherited from my father and still keep in the basement under my woodworking bench. They date back to World War Two. My son must have perused some of them, looking for titles or suggestions for titles,

or knowing how he operates, to get a long running start on the pulse of the times. Or maybe I let something slip out. I don't know. Anyway, that made me think of my father again. Only towards the end did Grandpa Carl talk, and not much then, about the War—by which of course he meant the Second World War. That's when I learned he flew P-38s, Lockheed's sleek twin engine death-dealer with four 50-caliber machine guns and a 20-millimeter cannon in the nose. But he was no "Ace"—no five kills to give him that title, and in fact no kills at all. Remarkably, he flew 650 combat hours in the South Pacific and never saw a Japanese fighter, or bomber, or even a floatplane nosing around to see what we were up to. Nothing, I'd think, Here's a guy, at an age not much older than my son's present age, who experienced 650 of the most intense hours of his life—it must have seemed like 650 lifetimes—waiting for some "Jap," as the magazines would say, to kill him—or waiting for the 650 ways the P-38 could kill him—and for all that he could have spent the War in the public library in Ames, Iowa. How did it make him feel afterwards? Cheated of glory? Relieved? Or maybe he felt like he said everyone else did, just glad the goddamn War was over. There was an unwritten rule in the whole family never to talk about the War.

I wish my son would write his grandfather's story—there'd be his 500 titles! But he's so stubbornly caught up in the here and now, and what with the new millennium only a decade ahead, Grandpa Carl has gone the way of the Philco radio. Still—still—what's the harm in that? Scribbling titles, I mean. Better than doing drugs or running up my car insurance by taking out guardrails. Yet I wanted to know more. Like when he planned to get cracking on the stories, and especially about the stories themselves—like where a given title would take him. I never felt comfortable asking him directly—and this irritated me—but once I did indirectly. I was sitting on the couch watching TV when I felt between the cushions and came up with a quarter. "Look what I found!" I said. My son looked over at me and said, "I've already got that one." That's when I asked him what the story was about.

"I don't know, I haven't written it yet."

"Well, what do you think it might be about?"

All he said was, "The list isn't finished," and turned away.

I'm still not completely sure how his system works, but he's so touchy about it I never pushed for details. Like, he'd get his golden 500 titles set, write the first ten stories, and then make any subsequent modifications of the title list (now down to 490) during the remaining two-week interval, right? But suppose he wrote a really terrific story only to discover its title (and hence the story) had lost its cultural purchase? It was obsolete. That'd be tough. But then again he's just a fifteen-year-old kid with a kid's harebrained scheme. It's just a phase—and now that I think about it, it'll be a pleasure to see him get rid of that notebook, not be so distant, so detached, so secretive.

Writing 500 titles couldn't take that long. I'll bet that after awhile anyone could develop a sense of what might last, culturally considered. But maybe not. Like my son said, you can't predict the future. Suppose—and this would be terrible—that instead of writing one story around a passé title, he discovered that he wrote 10 passé titles and their stories! He'd have lost a whole year. The whole program would be thrown off big time if this kept up—and given today's rapidly shifting culture, it is highly likely it would. I truly doubt if he realized what a potential hole he had dug for himself. Then I remember he also said, "Dad, you have to think of the future." So that's what I'll do. If he should suffer a setback I could help him, at least save him some time. I'll jot down titles myself, but never where he can see me at it.

I don't obsess about writing titles. I write them at random intervals, mostly to kill time at, say, a doctor's appointment, or an airport, or at lunch, preserving them on whatever scrap of paper is handy at the moment. Then, when I get around to it, I type each title at the top of a sheet of typing paper—only the title, like on a manuscript, and leave the rest of the page blank. That would make things easier, more efficient, for my son; he'd only have to type in the story. I hasten to add that I have no magic number in mind, no mystical 500. As I said, I write titles at spare moments and then type them on separate sheets of typing paper. Actually, writing titles is simpler and easier than I thought. I find them in "Help Wanted" columns ("Loan Officer"), ads for used cars ("Zero Interest"), menus ("Today's Special")—really all over the place. It gives me an odd, expansive sense of connecting with things that I have never experienced before—certainly not as a claim adjuster; it's both exciting and unsettling. The pages are starting to pile up, so I've decided to keep them with the magazines in the cedar chest.

He made his mother save all those *Life* and *Look* and *Collier's*. "For the duration," he told her. He'd read them when the War was over, when he got back. They were, although no one ever said it then or afterwards, his lucky charm. If they were here, he'd be here, too. Meaning on Earth. It worked. That's why I'm here now. That's why my son is.

He never read them, of course. The end of the War meant a new life. He looked forward, not backwards, and had to adjust to a strange and yet familiar world that looked nothing like the South Pacific's world of men and planes and sudden death, of alarums and excursions. Medical school was his future because he suddenly had one. Instead, I read them. Read them all, cover to cover, July 1943 to December 1945—his duration. How at home I was, reading them, the way they brought back a vanished world, its terrors, its trivialities, its P-38s and Philco radios. When, down there in the basement, I finished the last of them, I felt joy—my boy-father was alive, he had made it. I felt as if he were my own son—or I were his mother, that poor woman who wondered if each issue would be the last. I felt as if I had made it,

too. I read them last year, two weeks after he died. It seemed right and necessary. Helpful after that first week.

My father flew out of bases in New Guinea. His squadron flew sweeps across the northeastern area towards Rabaul, where the Japanese had a huge base. The sweeps were designed to intercept any enemy fighters going after our raiding bombers, protecting their flank while keeping alert for any planes they'd send against our airfields. But nothing ever happened. No one really knew why or even thought about it. "We were just dumb kids," my father told me. "There was no other world. Only the War."

That's really about all, except for a family matter, he said. In fact, I only found out about the magazines in the cedar chest after he died. The reading of the will was the first time I heard of their existence. Furthermore, it was only after I started writing titles that I figured out that his mother had saved them and that he told her to. I have no positive proof, of course, but I am quite certain that was the way it was. Sounds like my grandmother for sure. It was odd, though. My father was in medicine, science, so it was odd that, even at twenty-two, he would place faith in magazines, charms, talismans. He never carried a rabbit's foot. I saw him walk under a ladder—he was painting the house—and never bat an eye. He was the most rational man I ever met. Even when he was diagnosed and knew that sixty-eight years would be it he just went about his business, which for him meant protecting children for as long as he could. But then, until quite recently all I knew was that my father was a pediatrician. I also knew that he had been in the War, had been somewhere in the Pacific, but I never would have guessed as a fighter pilot.

The P-38 served in all the theaters of war, but had its greatest success in the Pacific. Powered by two 1,475 horsepower Allison engines, it had a maximum speed of 414 mph. Famous fighter pilots—Dick Bong, Tommy Lynch—flew it. But even the hottest pilots had their luck run out. Lynch was killed making a routine strafing run on some fuel barges with no Japanese aircraft around. It was a setup. Hidden ground fire. His plane exploded just as he bailed out. I read all this stuff, everything about the Pacific War, after my father's death.

I first found out about my son's short-story career from his mother. My wife's a high school English teacher, so she always encourages anything literary. She'd say, "read this" and I would; she's the one who put me on to Carver and O'Connor and did the same for my son, too. After my father died, and I had finished the magazines, I didn't read any fiction. As I said, I read World War Two and aviation histories centered on the Pacific War. Given my magazine background, it's not surprising that I quickly became something of an authority on the subject. I learned

that each year of war compresses ten years of aviation progress—it must have been exciting to be an aeronautical engineer in those days. The P-38 accordingly underwent perpetual modification of its basic design, each modification designated by a letter of the alphabet. The P-38H, for example, was a wonderful fighting machine—a far cry from earlier versions. All belligerents did the same thing with their planes, everybody trying to catch up with everybody else. But the compression of time meant that time was running out for the Japanese. The Japanese would continue to produce excellent machines, but eventually not enough factories to build them or enough qualified pilots to fly them. Most of their best aircrews had been killed, but none by my father.

A doctor dying, and that doctor my father, it didn't make much sense. For some reason you think doctors live forever, or never get sick. If they did die or got sick they must have been bad doctors. That doesn't make much sense either, but then it never occurs to you to ask who your dentist's dentist is. My grandmother's death, on the other hand, had a certain logic. When my father told me that six months after he got home his mother had a breakdown from which she never really recovered, a family mystery was solved. It also provided another reason why talk about the War was taboo—hidden, like the magazines.

Hidden—*his lucky charm*. Before he died my father told me about being a fighter pilot, a few things about the P-38, but nothing about the magazines or that he had willed them to me. Not then. I see now that his talking first about the War was an introduction to them. And what were the magazines if not the chronicle of the years that gave my father's life meaning and direction and purpose, that gave him his clear-headed humanity, his caution and his courage? His lucky charm held true—he had a child to leave the magazines to, and that child would read them cover to cover. This modest man, this pediatrician, this father, trusted me. Writing titles made it all plain as day.

I have no war stories of my own. College deferments, or a good draft board, or just luck kept me out of Viet Nam. My wife once told me that Samuel Johnson told Boswell, "Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier." Perhaps so. Anyway, recalling those words a few weeks ago gave me an idea—actually, more of a revelation than an idea. I built a scale model of the P-38. It had been decades since I built a model of anything, so I took my time. I spent hours in the basement constructing it, after first carefully reading the directions, judiciously selecting Testor's model paints to ensure historical accuracy, and consulting hobbyists for the finest brushes and the best glue. I worked with a surgeon's skill and an artist's touch. Applying the decals became a delicate act of homage and I rose to the occasion. The result was beautiful, although it was easy to predict what the salt air and high humidity of the tropics could do to the paint. I had

also purchased a map of the South Pacific, mounting it above my work area. I put colored pins at the places where we had air bases, and during the glue-setting, paint-drying intervals charted the progress of the War in New Guinea. I even guessed, with I think considerable accuracy, where the flanking sweeps were. Staring at the finished model I clearly imagined my father's squadron just missing contact with a large Japanese formation. That was very disappointing. Believe me, he was more than ready for them—scanning the skies above, below, around, and especially behind him for telltale black dots. He did have a close call once. The port engine quit on take-off. Luckily, he remembered to reduce power on the good engine and shut down the bad engine. Sudden squalls were another problem. But he always made it back in one piece, the plane too. I saw it all, heard every sound, heard every word. All 650 hours of it. And then I looked up, and just like that, the War was over. I put the P-38 in the cedar chest and closed the lid. I went upstairs and there was my son in the living room, watching a basketball game. The only thing I could think to say was "Hi," although it sounded more like "Thank you." It didn't matter. My son was absorbed in the game.

The bible for a pediatrician was, and according to my doctor, probably still is, *Nelson's Pediatrics*. My father kept his medical books in his study and his journals all over the house. But he never talked about his work—about what he saw could happen to little children—and, anyway, medicine didn't interest me. I have the books now, and after my son's short story scheme emerged, I did thumb through *Nelson's*, but by then my son was too old for any concern I might have had to look anything up. I'm not even sure what I would have looked up. All I know is that my son is still writing titles, and I've stopped writing them. I never counted them, but there's a big stack in the cedar chest, right under the P-38, and if something happens to me he'll find them there because he'll be the next person to open it.

I remember thinking as I came upstairs: Who knows what a father leaves a son? What legacy. Magazines, P-38s, titles? And then: Maybe my son will stop writing titles too, or maybe he'll start writing their stories, when his turn comes to close the cedar chest. Or maybe my son, his hand still touching the lid, will suddenly look up—and I'll know this even from beyond the grave—and see a title that's a keeper.

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