

GARY MCLOUTH

Signs

RONNIE PULLED THE LONG DIRTY THING FROM his shoulder pack and laid it out on the sand. I knew what it wasn't. A snake. A rubber hose. A connecting tube for electrical wires.

"Ain't that some shit." Ronnie knew what it was all right, but in the way he tossed it on the ground I had the feeling he wasn't going to pick it up again. "So, you're first two guesses are way off; number three, and you're out!"

My father practiced this ritual that used to piss off my mother no end. On the anniversary of his return home from Saigon, he'd head out to his retreat in the woods with a six-pack of Chinese beer and be gone all day. When I was a kid he wouldn't let me go with him, and he had a way of looking at my mother so she wouldn't want to go with him. I remember the echoes of wood splitting and the steady whack-whack of the axe. It would be dark when he came to the back door. For seventeen years it was the same picture: Dad's hair matted over his forehead, covering half his ears, red-rimmed eyes, a shot kind of expression in his face, his broad shoulders sagging under the sweat-caked and clinging T-shirt. At least I knew school would be over and summer would officially begin the next morning. On the eighteenth anniversary, Dad didn't come in from the woods.

The media center covered half of our family room wall, and as brightly colored images of Humvees and tanks flashed by in the distance, little children ran across

a chewed-up street at the near edge of the screen. A crisp British accent described the battle field. The children were the new refugees: barefoot, “tattered and small” lost among the bombed-out buildings of the settlement. They caught the attention of the camera for those quick seconds of the report before the studio back-drop of the Chicago skyline wiped across the screen and the ad dropped in: an egg-shell colored Lexus cruising across the Golden Gate.

I thought of my father as a young man, maybe just after his sophomore year in college, two months before he decided to let the draft catch up with him. He’d be downshifting into the entrance ramp, pressing the accelerator mid-way, dropping the rear end into the belly of the first curve and then slipping into the fast lane, one foot on the clutch, the other on the gas, synchronizing, he’d aim the old Indian head into the bulls eye of the long suspended corridor to the other side. Vroom!

The doctor had to use the three-cell flashlight to follow the path out into the woods. He let me go with him, but I could sense his anxious doubts. He was the only man my father really talked to, and the doc’s slow progress down the path seemed to confirm something only he suspected. He wept when the light beam showed what my father had done to himself with the axe. It was a “decisive” slash, he said, as if to no one. The light danced away and we found the way back to the house by zeroing in on its glow through the new leaves of the close growing trees. He told my mother of Dad’s tragic accident with the axe. “Bled out,” was how he put it.

Ronnie grinned at me as if he’d just gotten away with murder. “Go ahead, if you’re wrong the third time, you own it.”

A formation of choppers leaned into the azure sky and I looked up at them as much to make sure they weren’t targeting us as to wish I were on one of them. I looked back down at the child’s intestine, knowing in that way you wish you didn’t, exactly what it was. I felt like wrapping it around Ronnie’s grimy neck and choking him with it. Then he’d own it, just like he did now, only it would own him back.

It was a scene that returned whenever it wanted to. Nothing distracted me from it for long. It was the TV picture I couldn’t flick off. When my wife bounced into the room with good news about the baby’s tooth, or when the bigger kid dragged me outside to play ball, I could reflect the excitement, the goodness, but I couldn’t feel it. I could touch my bigger kid’s perfect little rib cage, but it was someone else’s

hands making the contact. I could hear myself shout encouragement; words of affection floated out of my mouth like bubbles, and they popped silently above his head across the lawn.

The officer asked me to touch my nose with the index finger of my right hand. I felt silly and resolute at the same time. Walking a straight line, lifting my foot, stretching out my arms, eyes closed. Okay. I knew he wouldn't nab me. DUI. Fine, maybe headlines on page two, but not tonight. I learned one thing in the army. You can be drunk but you can act like you are not. The officer shot his light into my eyes from very close range.

"You passed all the exercises," he said, "but you're drunk as a skunk. Get back in the car and drive straight home. I'll be following you."

I could see what my father got out of splitting wood. You really have to let the maul fly; visualize the head driving all the way through the center of the target to the ground. If the round sections were dry enough, the wood popped open with a satisfying crack, but greener wood or a long knot can stop a maul with a dull thud. Breaking through to the ground then becomes a contest of wills. A couple of hours, whaling away, swinging a ten-pounder, wrapping and rewrapping your hands around the hard oak shaft, can be hard labor, exhausting. What starts out as fairly straight forward and rote technique morphs into a game of hitting the sweet spot where it lurks within easy reach, disguised in radiating rings from core to cambium. It stares up at you like a golf ball. You can hear it dare you: "hit me, little man, go ahead, hit me."

My wife knows the story about what happened to my dad, but she didn't know him. She doesn't like my wood splitting routine much more than my mother liked my father's, even though she claims there's no connection between the story and me in her mind. I wonder if there's any connection to two wood burning fire places and me splitting wood in her mind, but I don't bring it up often. It's a losing argument all the way round.

I watch the news programs, the talk shows, the staged panel discussions that feature experts and pundits. It's entertaining sometimes, and always depressing. I must like to be entertained by depression or else I would spend evenings doing something else, I guess. My father hung out with his buddies at a joint near the bowling alley where his high school team was a perennial league leader in strikes and spares. I think they also lead the league in draft beer consumption after hours.

They all joined the US Army after graduation, all except my father who won a scholarship at a small liberal arts college in New York State. My mother couldn't tell you where it was, exactly. She met him at a homecoming dance for new vets, the closing act at the bankrupt bowling alley.

I decided a long time ago not to spend my life locked inside my own head. I'd tell my story. I'd lie with my woman all night and share my dreams. I'd go out into the world and bring back good news. If I had to fight in a war, I'd keep my morals, be proud of my country, myself. You know, do good things. Even if I ended up right back where I came from, I wouldn't judge it as a failure to make the world a better place: just the opposite. What better place to better than your home town? I still think that way, most of the time.

"You gotta walk the talk," Ronnie used to chant when we were on patrol. "Talk tough, walk tough." If you learn what that's about, exercise it like a mantra, like muscle memory, it's hypnotic. It gets you through tough times and out of tough places, but when you're in easy times and places, talking tough makes a big echo that swallows you. I learned one thing in my two years in college; I could talk the talk. In the army I learned to walk it. When I'm splitting wood, it all comes together sometimes.

I see that intestine lying on the dirty sand. There's a hum in my eyes, and far off across the phantasmagoria of this place, a tall willowy figure swings a silent axe. Snowflakes big and white as Frisbees fall through the bare trees. I know these visions and these woods are competing realities in my head, and I line up the eye of a fat chunk of maple with the blunt tip of the maul. I can purge the face of that kid looking for his guts if I swing hard enough. And, I can still walk the talk so that if I ever see Ronnie again, I can spit in his eye and go home.

GARY MCLOUTH earned a Doctor of Arts in English at SUNY Albany where he won the President's Distinguished Dissertation Award for *Death and Other Frustrations*. He has published fiction in *Red Rock Review*, *ELM*, *RE:AL*, *Cimarron Review*, *Limestone 2007*, and others. Poetry has appeared in *Buckle&*, *Adirondack Life*, *The International Poetry*

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