

THOMAS D. PRAINO

The Cave of Clay Urns

When I entered the room, Uncle Joe was lying in a hospital bed. The other bed was vacant, neatly tucked, squared away, and with its privacy curtains drawn back the open space gave me the feeling of just an ordinary family visit. My mom, his sister, was massaging his feet. Despite their last spat, maybe they were more alike than they thought they were different, or maybe it was the shared experience of still living near the city they grew up in as children of immigrant parents, their native city where the only thing remaining for them of it was the noble name of that unsafe place. You see, Uncle Joe's wife divorced him many years ago and his children were not there; they lived in another state. My father was sitting in the corner nodding in agreement with whatever Uncle Joe said, just like the times when Dad was free from some week-end family tasking and would sit in our small kitchen with them during a visit. My father and he marveled that even after fifty years they could still recite their service numbers once stamped on their military ID tags, the silver-colored metal tags soldiers wore on a chain around their necks.

Since I had arrived, and it was getting late that snowy evening, my parents decided to return home to take care of the dogs. When they left, we were alone.

"Johnny," Uncle Joe whispered to me, "do me a favor. You were a medic. Go out there and ask my doctor if I have a chance or is this end. He won't tell me."

"Sure, Uncle Joe. I'll get an answer for you." I strutted out of the room to get the information he wanted, as though it were a simple Army Reserve field exercise.

He asked me to do something for him, the first time in my life that he asked me to do something important for him, and he trusted me to get it done.

As soon as I turned the door, I spotted his doctor down at the nursing station. He was an elderly man, an old-time doc. I talked to him once, years ago, about the illness, but he dismissed my question and said it was a matter of patient confidentiality. This time I was determined to get the truth; the thought of leaving someone to such doubt and uncertainty for so long just didn't seem right. He was dressed in a dark suit, pen in hand, writing his notes and orders in a black notebook binder, his white coat to his left, half hanging off the countertop. I walked towards him. The counter was festooned with an evergreen wreath, and at its corner sat a bowl of red-striped peppermint candy canes and a tiny Styrofoam snowman. Further off to his right, two nurses stood behind the Christmas card adorned counter murmuring to each other. One had a stethoscope draped around her neck, and she was drawing a clear liquid out of a vial with a syringe.

In a soft voice, so no one else could hear me, I introduced myself.

"Doc, what's the story with my uncle? Is there any chance for him?"

The urologist stopped writing and answered me with that hurried tone typical of surgeons.

I stared at him. We stood frozen in silence, and then I nodded and glanced down the corridor. He turned back to the binder, put his head down and continued writing. I walked back to the room to give Uncle Joe the information he wanted.

As a new Army Reservist, I was never in combat like Uncle Joe, but he was a warrior, a Marine. He fought the Japanese in World War II. Since his childhood, he had been a body-builder, and he used to tell me that sometimes he did a thousand push-ups a day. When the war broke out, Uncle Joe joined the Marines at 17. He told me about the harshness and the strict discipline of basic training, difficult even for someone as strong as him, and the time they had to dry shave as group punishment he said brought tears to his eyes. Recalling his stories, boot camp seemed to have made a more lasting impression on him than those maggoty rations he had to eat on that island he didn't remember the name of. As a man, he always enjoyed a sporting grapple, never smoked, and he didn't like a phony or a liar.

One summer day, long ago when I was an adolescent and his hair the color of coffee in a white ceramic mug, we went to the park after my karate practice. He leaned against the gunmetal-gray bark of a silver maple tree and we sat on the grass in the shade, drinking the cold, thick, vanilla milkshakes he bought from Dairy Queen. The day was placid with the whisper of a fountain-sprinkled mallard pond, the sky a coral blue, and the air was fresh with the scent of butch cut grass. He said if I practiced everyday I'd do well. I told him I wanted to learn how to break a board with a punch.

He took off his green-tinted, aviator sunglasses, a fashion carryover of his private pilot license days and his student pilot lessons from a German flight instructor who showed him chandelle flying in a post-bellum sky. He slid his glasses into the black, soft case attached to the pocket of his white, short-sleeved shirt. His shirt pocket had a couple of mechanical pencils clipped to it, probably to solve some mathematical equation his supervisor would challenge him with at the factory, even that just another sporting grabble between his micrometric precisions with prints, dies, and the tool press.

“I know you think you’re strong,” he said, “but remember there’s always someone stronger than you.” He clenched his fist, and held it up, the thick-boned hand of a machinist. “In boot camp, I saw men stronger than me. I saw a Marine let another Marine punch him in the neck. The guy took punches in the neck, Johnny!”

Sipping my shake, I glanced at his clenched, broad-boned fist, imagining the power in his punch.

“I saw all kinds of men do incredible things,” he said. “Sometimes out of strength, sometimes out of courage, sometimes out of pure cruelty. Just to be cruel.”

As a youth, I was always enthralled by his war stories, his memories. Fighting in the Pacific islands, he said he was awake for many nights on the acrid, gun-smoked beaches, lying in the sand, holding his M1 rifle, drowsy, but afraid to sleep because the enemy might sneak up and kill him. As the long days passed, he said he was so tired that he didn’t care about dying anymore; he just wanted to sleep.

On one island, he never named, he said the Marines were ordered to search for the enemy in the caves on the cliffs. They headed toward the cliffs. The Army can’t do nothing he grumbled.

In one of the caves, he and another Marine found urns with cremated remains. They smashed an urn, and with their combat knives they dug out the gold teeth. His buddy pummeled another urn, and then in a crescendo, they both smashed all the clay jars against the rock and filled their pockets with gold. Satisfied, the two started to walk away with their pockets filled with loot.

“Suddenly, before exiting the cave,” Uncle Joe said, “I felt a chill. My body shivered. I stopped. I emptied my pocket of all the gold teeth and handed them to my buddy. Here, take it all. I don’t want it. The other Marine looked at me—confused why I gave him all the gold.”

He stirred the bottom of the waxed cup with the straw, mixing the soft, vanilla ice cream, and sipped it until the white cup with its mute, red-lipped icon gurgled like a penetrating chest wound.

“Searching the caves was dangerous,” he said as he crumpled the empty cup and placed it into the paper bag. “We were walking along a mountain path over the jagged rocks to another cave. I was looking up for snipers. My buddy grabbed my arm—he pointed down. My next step would have been on a land mine.”

After the war, they offered him, a young man of twenty-one, a promotion to stay in; he said it was enough.

As I slowly walked back along the hospital corridor honeycombed with open doors of other patients, the public address system announced that visiting hours were over. It wasn't that his nurse with a stethoscope draped around her neck had passed by me and told me that visiting hours were over; it seemed like a robotic voice from above, remote. My legs felt like I was walking in sand. I thought about our Sunday trips to Chinatown, the good luck red of the restaurants and eating shrimp fried rice with chop sticks while he talked about jujitsu moves, meditation, and the power of mind over body. It must be true, strength body, mind might.

With the information he wanted, again I entered his brightly lit hospital room. He turned his head to look at me. When I was half way between the threshold and his bedside he sat up straight.

“Did you see my doctor?”

His voice sounded firm and resonant to me as it sounded that summer day sitting in the shade of the silver maple tree. As if his voice could conjure up torch-lighted, far-off images, his memories flickered in my mind. Slowing my stride, I stopped to stand next to him.

“Yeah.” I felt short-winded.

He lay down.

“Did you ask him?”

I nodded. We were alone. He wanted to know the truth. I gazed at him lying on his back, dressed in a thin cotton hospital gown that covered his body, a plastic patient ID band wrapped around his right wrist.

“What'd the doctor say?”

His face, white-peppered with a day old beard, seemed ashen under the wintery, fluorescent lighting, a lighting that doesn't like shadows. Looking into his eyes beaming from his face, beaming like two chestnuts on a snowman's face, I remembered that day when he gave me his combat knife to keep, his old combat knife with U.S.M.C. metal stamped above the hilt. The knife felt heavy when I held it, the leather stacked handle worn smooth, the steel matte finished blade sharp enough to carve the teeth out of anyone's skull, a knife heavy enough to crack any clay-footed idol. He never carved his name in rock when he was in that

sacred cave, but his stories seemed to be painted in my mind like black and ochre Paleolithic paintings that only come to life in the glow of a campfire, that only come to life with the shadows of the cave onlookers.

Still desiring his respect until that moment could no longer be prolonged, I gave him his answer.

“The doctor said there’s always a chance.”

Uncle Joe smiled. He looked up to the ceiling and exhaled a deep breath. “Good.”

“Do you want me to call your son?” I said.

“No.”

“I got to go and pack for my flight tomorrow. See you when I get back.” I kissed him on the forehead. “I love you, Uncle Joe.”

His expression changed to one of bewilderment.

The next day, I had to leave for an overseas business trip. My mom called me long distance and said Uncle Joe died around midnight on New Year’s Eve. He seemed his normal self when they saw him last. She paid for the funeral; my father found a veteran’s cemetery in the southern part of the state. She said his children flew in for the burial, and his son received the flag.

I’ll never forget that night when I entered his hospital room and then exited never to see him again, wondering if I should have told him the truth, the truth he wanted to know, or was it better not to know. He lay there smiling at me when I left, a smile like the ones on victorious soldiers coming home after a war. I remember him lying there, believing me, as the colorless liquid flowed in orderly manner, drop by drop, sliding single file out of the belly of the one liter bag through the plastic tubing, concealing the Japanese soldier low crawling behind him, all concealed within the tolerances of the plastic tube’s thin bore, drip dropping, silently, a clear solution.

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