

Chosin Reservoir

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SNOW

First the snow: lots of it. Heavy and wet and blinding to the naked eye on a sunny day. Except there haven't been any sunny days. Sun just disappeared. Gone. Left. There is only a great mass of gray clouds. They see shades of gray in them when it isn't snowing: dark-gray, purple-gray, silver-gray. Slate.

They think about home. Some of them think about the snow there, too. Even those from the Northeast said it was never this bad. Didn't have to carry a gun there either. Could pass from one place to another without a squabble.

SOLDIERS

They used to be many more strong. Eighteen of them in the squad left now, the tallest six-foot-four, six-six with his helmet on. Almost half are married; half of them have children. The oldest is thirty-nine-years old. The youngest is nineteen. Walter Earle will write a book about his experiences in Korea, call it *The Chosin Pass*, dedicate it to his buddies.

There are South Koreans here, too. And African-Americans. And Hispanic-Americans. Southerners. Every one of them hungry and cold. Several have frost bitten toes and fingers. Right now, each, wishing only for a little fire. But the smoke...

WHERE THERE'S FIRE

The enemy is out there. An officer with a pair of binoculars could spot a puff of rising smoke from miles away. It takes too much fire to heat cans of beans. Sometimes they light a quick one to warm toes or fingers, the ends gone numb. They put their fingers in their pants, between their crotches, blow on them with their warm breath. Some are tempted to lie on the fire. *It will not burn, they say.* They wonder about charred skin. Charred meat. The smell of flesh being cooked, tasted.

In the night, they huddle against a hill. During the day – when the wind moves across the pass, carrying with it bits of ice that sting the face like needles, like daggers – they can't imagine the cold getting colder. But they know with darkness comes a different kind of cold, a lonely cold.

On clear nights the full moon sometimes keeps them company. One by one their frozen mouths guess at the pictures: *a dog, a cat, my wife, my child. A fire-breathing dragon.*

The Devil.

HANDS

Walter Earle's daughter keeps a journal. She writes in it nearly every day. She writes in June of 1951:

Father lost both hands in the Korean War. I was twelve when he returned with both arms chopped off just below the elbow. He came home with artificial limbs attached to chicken-wing arms, rounded on the end, smooth and shiny like small bald heads. At night he'd lay his arms on the bedside table

like one would a watch or a piece of jewelry, nearby for safekeeping, ready to be reapplied or put back to use.

Pure metallic rods attached to his elbows and extended down to pink-colored fingers, joint-less and tubular. The space between the arm rods acted as a window, framing empty air.

JOURNAL

Walter Earle finds the journal one morning. He reads this entry while sitting on his daughter's bed.

August 15, 1951

For weeks I lay in bed at night thinking about Father's hands. I wondered if any doctor had tried to save them. Where were they now? I imagined they were on the ground crawling through tall grasses, jumping precarious boulders, or hiking grand mountains – the spires sharp and continuous. The hands relentless to find their host swam bogs, rivers, lakes; the fingers stretching out like arms, splashing in the waters with brisk untiring strokes.

HOMECOMING

It was winter when Walter Earle came home from the war. Her mama prepared for his arrival by hanging streamers from the ceilings in loops of varying sizes. She made flowers from papier-mâché, cutting the paper in two-foot squares, and with long fingers – sharply pointed with bright red nails – she folded the ends, tucking in more paper, creating layer upon layer of pleated blooms that resembled roses. The paper flowers were painted yellow, red, and orange.

When her father walked in the door all she could see were his

artificial hands. They seemed so pink and rigid. They were hugging gifts made pretty with white tissue paper and thick red ribbon. He laid the presents down clumsily on the sofa, some of them falling to the floor. Her mama rushed over to hug him. She watched as her Father's new arms pointed straight out, unable to close around her mama's body. The metal rods left creases in the shoulders of her dress.

The last time she had seen her father was a year ago when he hugged her with strong, flexible arms that could squeeze her breath away. Now, as he held her, his tall frame bent over, the wool of his soldier's cap tickling her face, she felt the strength of his body give way, as if afraid to squeeze too hard. She hugged his neck and smelled the spicy after-shave. With her fingers, she felt the familiar muscles of his upper back.

"My, you've grown," he said as he straightened up, nudging her back so he could get a better look.

"Yes," she said, and she felt an urge to curtsy. Instead, she turned around and her dress moved out as she turned in place.

He smiled. "I remember when you used to do that as a small girl." He moved his hands out in front as if to clap, but his hands thudded together like the plastic hands on a baby doll. Embarrassed, he tucked them to his side.

"Welcome home, Daddy," she said.

SCHOOL LESSONS

In school, Walter Earle's daughter looks up Korea on the map. Such a long way away, she thinks. It seemed impossible for her father's hands to swim that far.

Sometimes she dreams about her father's hands lying helplessly in the jungles of Korea, crying out for help. The hands are lying on their backs; the fingers moving vigorously in the air like spider legs trying to right themselves. The hands are marred with wounds and old scars. Occasionally, a soldier will stride down a trail, heading straight for the hands, his head moving from side to side, missing what is on the ground. The hands are as big as tarantulas, but the soldier doesn't see them. They struggle to turn over, but the dream always ends before the last step is made.

MEMORIES

She is six years old, and they're sitting at the kitchen table.

"Put your hand in mine," her father says.

His palm is extended, pink and white at the same time, large and pudgy from doing finger pushups. She lays her hand upon his and immediately it disappears. She thinks, there are times when small things appear to be no more than background, like a lone ship on the ocean, a bird in the sky – her hand was like that. Slowly, finger by finger, her father swallows her hand completely.

"It's gone," he says.

She could feel her father's heart beat because his thumb was on the pulse of her wrist. She sensed the pressure of her own blood shifting.

"Do you hear it?" he asks.

She giggles. "Yes. It's like hearing the delicious sound of your own inside."

SNAPSHOTS

She looks at pictures of him when he is sixteen. He wears black shoes with white socks, long cut-off shorts that reach below the knees, and a short-sleeve shirt, the tails hanging out. He has the same grin, younger, of course, but more prominent in a way, less hidden by adult age. He has dark eyes, deep blue in color; they smile, but behind the smile is a certain knowing, almost clairvoyant. His hands appear smallish, thin, boyish, not the hands she will come to remember as a young girl.

In one picture, her father is holding his hands in the air. They're hugging each other above his head. He is sitting on the seat of his bicycle; the edge of the orange, banana shape protrudes between his legs like something grotesquely large, comical. A baseball mitt, looped over the handlebars, dangles from the wrist strap. Her father is wearing black-framed glasses too large for his face. His head is covered in brown curls, like a prince or cherub from a renaissance painting.

STORIES

Her father tells a story of when he went ice fishing with his father on a cold afternoon in Michigan. They drove out onto the lake and walked about twenty yards from the car. He watched his father cut a two-foot diameter circle into the ice and then with a sharp instrument pluck the ten-inch thick round out of the frozen water. He marveled at the existence of an entire lake frozen underneath one continuous ice cube, he tells her. This was a big deal to a boy who, only a year later, moved with his family to the coastal plains of North Carolina.

He also tells her this: to fear the silence of cold.

But not all cold is silent, he says. Out on that lake, so many years ago now, a car went down, was sucked under the water like a predator taking a hapless victim. He was there that day, her father says. He and his father sat perched on two padded stools, fishing silently. His father puffed on his pipe, sending rings of sweet smelling tobacco smoke in the air, and sometimes he pretended too, to be smoking like his father, cocking his head back and blowing warm air into the cold. His father would smile at his miming son.

There was another Father and his son. They were fishing not more than two hundred yards away. In the cold quiet their voices carried over to where they sat. But their voices were not loud. There was stillness about their voices. The car of this Father and son was not far from where they sat fishing contentedly, a lot closer than where their own car was. Her father will always remember the sound that cracked ice makes. It's like the sound of lightning splitting the air, he tells her. The ice cut a swath around the car, like a moat, and it balanced there a moment, then fell into the water and was sucked below. The man and boy looked over at them; their frosty breaths visible even from where they stood. Simultaneously, they hung their heads.

Like something concrete and irrefutable, she tells him: "They had parked over a pressure ridge."

CHAPTER 8

After he finishes the book, Walter Earle places it on his desk beside the picture of his war buddies. His daughter thumbs through it one day, starts reading on page 124.

I lost count of the month. The year. I wondered if Christmas had passed. I barely knew the difference between night and day. My feet stayed frozen all the time. I could have beaten them with the butt of my rifle and I don't think I would have felt it. Our parkas seemed to invite the wind inside.

One morning we moved up to three thousand feet, along the eastern slope of the Taebeck Mountains. Last night we had **engaged** the enemy for three hours, and in the morning we found Wilson dead. Sergeant Dox ordered us to bury Wilson right in his foxhole. Some of us wanted to carry him, but Sergeant Dox said that we might get him on the way back out, but I knew we wouldn't.

The weather was miserably cold. I felt it mostly at the end of my nose. I could have cut the very tip of my nose off and I don't think I would have felt the loss.

We didn't stop moving until dark fall. We commenced to dig trenches. It was hard digging in the frozen ground. The frozen ground was like rock. I smoked cigarettes and ate hard crackers for supper. Someone had boiled some water, but it was nearly frozen by the time it got to me.

That night I dreamed of the sandy soils of home, of tall tobacco, of sweat, and sun that stayed high in the sky forever. Occasionally, I heard the whispered voices of my buddies, and sometimes I pretended it was my daughter talking or my wife, Lilith. If I concentrated hard enough, I could picture them at home, sitting down to Sunday dinner. I could hear the cicadas chirping outside the screen door. It was hot in the kitchen from chicken having been fried on the stove, and a pie in the oven. A coconut pie maybe, or cherry.

I thought about food a lot on top of that mountain ridge. But mostly I thought about staying alive. I thought about staying warm enough to come

home with all the parts that God gave me at birth. I'd look at guys during the day and see that their cheeks had a funny color, like something beyond cold and red, kind of blanched, like something pulled out of a deep-freeze. Some had skin turning dark, as if bits of gravel had become imbedded in the gnarled confines of their puckered foreheads or cheeks. I knew that if I tried to take off my gloves, I would never get them back on again.

I think back on those days, especially those few miles along the Toktong Pass, when our retreat back between Yudan-ni and Hagaru-ri, and then the long trek to Koto-ri, and all the fighting that took place on the Main Supply route. How did we survive? I think. And when did I know that I would lose my arms? Early on men were fighting the sickness of being too cold. They would drift out on the Chosin, losing formation, like lost birds straying from the flock. The cold had gotten to them, making them dizzy with feeling and fever. They didn't like being redirected and sometimes we pulled them back, slapped their faces to awaken their senses. The Chosin was like glass. And we'd slip and fall and sometimes I'd wanted to laugh, and I knew, too, that I was close to losing my own sanity.

About halfway to the port city of Koto-ri, I thought, some thirty miles away from the Yalu River, I couldn't feel my arms, and I knew that I would lose them.

EPILOGUE

A rush of falling snow; a steep ridge shorn on the edges of cold mountains; a frozen reservoir, lake; wind that moves insolently through wanting clothing; nightmares of hordes of Chinese coming out of hidden places in the dark; the ways of miscalculating generals, some bent on victory; thoughts of death, of cars plunging headlong to

the murky bottom; pictures of little girls holding their fathers' hands. So that when she grows older, Walter Earle's daughter comes to accept her father's artificial limbs. But in the folds of her memory, where children see their fathers as forever young, when remembering the sweetness only youth knows, she can picture her father's hands. They're caressing her with their long, puffy fingers, clean and shiny at the end, palms round and soft in the middle, the calluses a mildly greasy protrusion. The knuckles are rounded and brushed lightly with a coat of blond hair. His hand envelopes hers so that it isn't at once a shake but a union of balled flesh that moves up and down and keeps on moving, like the persistent movement of clock arms – up and down, up and down, up and down.... □