

Remembering Ray

BY: FN Wright

Ray was a freckle-faced, red haired boy my age. We lived in the same neighborhood in a small town just south of Memphis. Ray lived with an elderly couple everyone, including myself, assumed was his grandparents. I lived with my mom and though there were other kids in the neighborhood Ray and I were best friends because the other kids were older than us.

There was a war going on and all of the men in the neighborhood were away fighting the Japanese and Germans though none of us kids were old enough to know what that meant at the time.

Ray's dad had been a carpenter and there were two tool belts hanging on a wall in the small garage behind the house Ray lived in. All of the nails and tools except for one hammer were missing from the tool belts.

Some days Ray would drape one of the belts over his shoulder (they were too large to wear around our waists) and I would drape the other one over one of my shoulders. We would then walk over to an abandoned shed set way back from the houses in a field near a small creek.

We would then pretend we were carpenters and hammer away on the inside walls of the shed. Ray was real good about sharing the lone hammer. Some days I would hear Ray hammering away in the shed and though I wondered why he hadn't asked me to come along I never asked. Something about the hammering those days sounded different and almost angry so I let him be.

Ray's grandparents were really nice and whenever Ray and I were playing in his back yard his grandmother would invite us inside the house. During the summer she would fix us ham salad sandwiches and iced tea or lemonade. When the weather began to change with fall approaching she would fix us hot chocolate to go along with the grilled cheese sandwiches she would make instead of ham salad.

One summer afternoon as we ate there was a knock on the door and in came Ray's mother. Like my mom she was a pretty lady but had reddish-blond hair and fair skin whereas my mom was a brunette with brown eyes and dark skin because of the Indian blood in our family.

I had a dark complexion and my hair was almost as dark as mom's but for some reason I had very blue eyes. Years later I would learn it was because my biological father was blond-haired with blue eyes.

Ray's mother was carrying two large bags. They were like grocery bags but larger, fancier and had carrying handles. I'd never seen bags like that before. She placed them on the floor next to the chair Ray was sitting in, gave him a hug and kissed him on his cheek. "Stand up and let me see how big you are now," she said brightly

Ray stood up but looked grim instead of happy. "Come sit next to me on the couch," she continued and tell me all about what you've been doing." There was no sincerity or interest in her voice whatsoever, "and introduce me to your friend."

He sullenly followed her over to the couch without introducing us.

I could hear a car parked in front of the house with its engine running. Fifteen minutes later the driver began honking his horn, impatiently. I looked out the window and saw a shiny convertible, its top down and a frowning man behind the wheel honking more insistently now.

Ray's mother gave him another peck on his cheek and said, "I have to leave now, son. I'll see you next month." As she was leaving I saw her give Ray's grandmother some money.

Tears were streaming down Ray's face as he picked up the two large bags and said, "Lets go Cole" and headed for the back door. He stopped to get the tool bag with the hammer from the garage then led me to the shed where we often pretended we were carpenters.

With the tears still streaming down his cheeks Ray placed the two bags on the sturdy work bench inside the shed which was probably as old as the shed itself and the only thing the owner had left behind when he abandoned it. No one in the neighborhood could remember who had owned the shed it had been abandoned for so long.

Then Ray began pulling out the toys one at a time and smashing them to smithereens. If one was still in the box the box got destroyed right along with the toy. His face was red with anger and now I knew what he had been hammering on the times I wasn't invited to join him in the shed we now called "our shed."

When he was finished he picked up everything and put them back in the large bags. I followed him to the creek where we walked upstream to a place where the trees were the thickest. I noticed many of them had the remnants of bags hanging from the limbs. "My Christmas trees," he mumbled without humor as he dumped the destroyed toys and boxes in the creek. "Here," he said, handing me one of the bags, "you can help me decorate. Pick any tree you want."

When the war ended all the dads came home except for mine. Ray and I became even closer. One afternoon we went down to the creek, sat on a log and talked after one of his mom's visits and the destruction of more toys and hanging bags on his "Christmas trees."

"My mom's new husband drives her down from Memphis where they live once a month and she gives money to the people who take care of me," Ray said, "They aren't really my grandparents."

"Really?" I said, surprised by the news. "They sure act like grandparents and I can tell they love you."

"More than my mom ever will," Ray bitterly said."

Two years later my mom married a man she had met after the war. I don't remember why I wasn't at the wedding but I was scared he'd be like Ray's new dad and not like kids.

I went down to Ray's and told him my mom was at church getting married he didn't say anything. "Maybe I can come live with you if my new dad doesn't like kids," I said hopefully, "We could be brothers then."

"Nah," Ray said, "My mom probably married the only man in the world who doesn't like kids"

When I heard horns honking and the clatter of tin cans and old shoes attached to the bumper of the car carrying my mom and new dad I knew they were going to the house for the reception.

"Come on Ray," I said, "Lets go see if my new dad likes kids!" I was still scared but excited too.

"No," Ray said, getting up and going into his room, "He'll probably like you but not me," he said, closing his bedroom door behind him.

As scared as I was I ran down the middle of the street for our house yelling at the top of my lungs, "I HAVE A NEW DAD! I HAVE A NEW DAD!"

My fears had been unfounded. My new dad not only liked me but loved me and treated me as if I was his own son. However, Ray refused to be my friend no matter how hard I tried to maintain our friendship. I once I told him, "Come on Ray, please come meet dad! He loves kids and I know he would love you. I bet you could come live with us and then we'd be brothers."

Ray just walked away from me and soon afterwards dad bought a 300 acre farm just outside of town and I would end up going to a different grade school than Ray when we were old enough to go to school.

The first thing dad gave me was his old ball glove and I would go on to be a pretty good second baseman and relief pitcher. I was small but quick; what they used to call a "rabbit" back then.

Even after my sister and younger brother were born dad treated me just like them and loved me just as much. He was always reminding me that I was the big brother and had to always take care of them. I couldn't remember ever calling him my new dad.

As much as dad needed me around the farm he encouraged me to follow my dream and play baseball whenever it was that time of year. I made the varsity baseball team my freshman year was just how good I was getting to be.

My dream was to play for the St. Louis Cardinals but I always found time to help dad around the farm. I would pass Ray in the high school hallways between classes sometimes but he would only nod his head and keep walking.

Ray was still living with his grandparents and was a loner. His first car was a Hudson Hornet and he dated a girl from a high school out of town. Then, during our senior year his grandparents were killed by a drunk driver while taking an early evening walk. They left him the house and a good sum of money in a trust fund including every dime his mother had been giving them all those years.

The town and city officials were quick to take action against Ray because he had no legal guardian even though he had never been in trouble, was almost eighteen and graduation was just a few months away.

When I told mom and dad what was happening my dad's eyes teared up and he quietly said, "I'll take care of that boy son. You tell your friend not to worry." I had never told them Ray had quit being my friend because I was afraid it would hurt dad if he knew why. Years later I realize dad probably knew all along.

One morning as I parked my Chevy pickup in the school parking lot Ray approached me. He gave me a big hug and said, "Tell your dad thanks. I don't know what he did but whatever it was worked." Then he walked away.

"Ray!" I blurted out, "did you ever find out what happened to your dad?"

Without turning around Ray said, "He was killed on Guadalcanal. Did you ever find out what happened to your other dad?"

"He had a nervous breakdown while in the army. I guess he's in a mental institution. Mom never said much more than that and I never asked. I have the only dad I need."

"He is a good man. You got lucky."

Graduation ceremonies were held on the high school football field. Ray and I were the only two who weren't wearing those ridiculous robes and hats. I had a little rebel in me too. He looked over and grinned at me.

After we got our diplomas I saw a man and woman approach Ray and realized it was his mom and her husband. He gave Ray something then turned and hurried away. To a new convertible I wagered in my mind.

I expected to hear a horn honking at any moment but Ray's mom simply kissed him on the cheek and hurried away. I walked over to congratulate him. We shook hands and he said, "Follow me."

We walked to the parking lot to a new red Corvette convertible. "Do you believe it?" he said, "That so-and-so my mom married had the nerve to give me this." He then handed me the keys and title and said, "It's yours."

"Ray," I protested, "I can't—"

"I don't want anything from that man and I will never own a convertible. Besides, I leave for boot camp in two days. I joined the Marines. Your dad is going to take care of the house and things while I'm gone. I feel like your brother thanks to your dad and am sorry I shut you out of my life all these years. It'll never happen again. I love you."

I told him I loved him too and watched him walk away. Soon after that I signed a minor league contract with the Cardinals. During my second season I received a manila envelope from mom and dad. It contained 'greetings from Uncle Sam' and a brief note from dad advising me to join the Navy or Air Force as soon as possible.

I informed the team manager of my situation and headed straight to the nearest Navy recruiting station and enlisted. After boot camp in San Diego I was sent to school to become a Radarman.

After making PO3 I volunteered for the SEALs. Though I was only 5' 8" tall and 155 pounds I was one of 5 of in our class of 28 to make it through BUD/S I received my Trident with pride and would end up doing five tours in Vietnam after some more extensive training.

I was torn between the SEALs and the Cardinals but extended my enlistment four years which led to my fifth tour. I was wounded for the third time but this time the wound had shattered my left femur and knee and both my dreams. There would be no more SEALs or Cardinals' in my future.

While recuperating in the Naval Hospital in San Diego I received a letter from dad. In it was the news Ray had been killed at some place called Khe Sanh during a mortar attack and they prayed I was well. I shed my tears then wrote telling my parents I was well and in San Diego awaiting my discharge. I had never told them about my experiences in Nam and never would.

I received a medical discharge and was amazed at what a good job the doctors had done. I had a slight limp and some ugly scars and there would be no way I would ever play pro ball again but I would go on to play many years of semi-pro baseball.

When I married Ray had made me his beneficiary and left me everything, including the house he grew up in. Dad had taken real good care of the house and Corvette that he had stored in the barn while I was gone.

Dad and I went to the barn one morning and as I uncovered the Corvette he said, "You saw a lot over there, didn't you?" I nodded my head yes. "I see you have a limp," he continued, "end of your baseball career?"

"Yep," I said, "Though I think I can still play semi-pro."

"Any plans other than that?"

"I think I'll move into Ray's grandparent's house," I said, "and try writing. With my pension and with what Ray left me I'll be okay. Plus I want to help you around the farm if that's okay with you."

"Your room will always be here," he said, leaving the barn.

I fired up the Corvette and drove it to the west end of the farm. I opened the gate that gave entry to a long un-used, rutted, dirt road. The road led to an abandoned gravel pit and rock quarry in a thick stand of trees.

The rock quarry had filled with water over the years and was estimated to be at least one hundred feet deep. I knew the trees and distance from the house would mean no one would hear what I was about to do.

I removed the sledgehammer I'd placed in the trunk and began smashing that Corvette to smithereens just as Ray had done to all those toys when we were growing up even after our friendship was put on hold for so many years.

Bitter tears streamed down my cheeks as I imagined beating that man who didn't like kids, his mother and those often unseen faces who had killed Ray and ended my dreams in Nam.

When I was finished destroying the Corvette and all it stood for I pushed what remained of the chassis and engine on the tires I had left untouched into the quarry. Then I spent hours making sure not one piece, no matter how small didn't get thrown into the quarry; and though I knew that some would float on the surface I also knew the elements would eventually make them disappear.

Then I took the one thing I had spared which was the steering wheel and hung it from a tree limb.

THE END

F.N. (Fred) Wright was born & raised in South Central Illinois. He left home at 16 & at age 17 enlisted in the Navy, serving with the Naval Amphibious Forces for four years. He is a Veteran of the Quemoy-Matsu Crisis & the Vietnam War. He is happily divorced & currently lives in a small trailer somewhere in the mountains of Southern California. He currently owns two Harleys & a souped-up 1968 El Camino.