

Memorial

a

Short Story

by

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High Point Sen

The logo for Silver Arts, featuring the words "Silver Arts" in a stylized, cursive script font. The word "Silver" is written in a light grey color, and "Arts" is written in a dark grey color. The script is elegant and flowing.

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MEMORIAL

My dog laughed when Ella stumbled and spilled coffee on her favorite pantsuit. I thought it was funny too, the way she hopped and squirmed while trying to answer the telephone. Bullyrag said she looked like a stupid cat with a major flea problem. We have a special relationship, my dog and I. He treats me with respect -- never tries to tell me what to do, never acts like I'm old and losing my marbles. We see eye-to-eye on just about everything.

"Darn!" Ella said, hanging up the phone. "Rachel can't come today, Dad -- and I can't take anymore time off from work. Do you think you'll be all right staying by yourself for a few hours?"

Bullyrag looked at me and held up a paw. "Hey, that was kind of insulting, don't you think? Why would you *not* be all right staying by yourself?"

The question did make me a little mad. But I didn't want to start an argument, so I told her I'd be fine and not to worry. She meant well, but ever since her mother passed away, Ella has gone overboard with her sense of responsibility for me. Yes, I forget things, but I don't need all that mothering from my daughter.

"I put paper and pencils in every room, Dad," she said, "so if you remember anything interesting, please write it down before it leaves you. Especially anything about you and Mom."

Ella was writing a family history and quizzed me constantly about the past. She thought I was slipping, I suppose, and wanted to squeeze everything she could from my brain while it was still moist. Before leaving for work, she said, "Your glasses are in your shirt pocket and your

coffee mug is right by the pot. You'll see it. I put the TV on the channel that carries Andy Griffith reruns. You like those."

Bullyrag said, "I think Dr. Ruth is going to be on Oprah today, Pops. And there's a tennis match on ESPN. We'll watch whatever we want."

I winked at my dog and Ella left. Walking back to the bedroom, I passed a line of family photographs in the hall. One photo was of Jane and me at the beach, before our first child was born. I loved that woman a lot of years -- from before that photo was taken to this very day. And I remembered enough about that weekend on the coast to provide Ella with an anecdote for her book. The most recent photograph was of me holding my one and only great-grandson. At least, that's what they tell me. I'm embarrassed to admit I don't remember the little guy.

The newspaper which I had stashed under the bed was on my mind. I got down flat on the floor, stretched, and pulled it out. It was folded to the obituaries, one of which I carefully read for the hundredth time. The address of a surviving grandson confirmed my suspicion, and the inferences which followed stirred my emotions unreasonably. The urge to go there -- to that long forgotten place -- had been building in me for several days.

"Let's do it," Bullyrag said. "But first, you've got to get up off the floor."

Getting up wasn't easy. While accomplishing it, I recalled the award I once received in gym class for doing a hundred push-ups. Ella would put that in her book if I could remember to tell her about it. Just about anything I told her would go in.

From the open front door, I saw the neighborhood begin to glisten as snowflakes floated down and spread soft white blotches on lawns and rooftops. Bullyrag and I walked to Main

Street and waited at the bus stop. A woman on the bench spoke to me, but I didn't understand what she said. My ears work just fine -- the problem is, people don't speak clearly.

Bullyrag said, "She asked you why you're not wearing a coat,"

I supposed I should have worn one, but told the woman I wasn't cold. Not entirely true, but I hadn't really thought about it until she brought it up. The bus finally came and the driver turned out to be a jerk. He pushed his open hand toward me like stiff-arming a football player and said, "Dogs are not allowed on this bus."

"Tell him you're blind, Pops," Bullyrag said.

I knew that wouldn't fly -- we didn't even have a leash. So I overlooked the driver's rude attitude, told him I had to get to Graham County, and that we would wait for another bus -- one with a driver who wasn't afraid of dogs.

He wished me lots-a-luck. "Besides," he said, "This route doesn't go to Graham County. The only buses going there, you have to board over on Broad Street."

"Boy, oh boy," Bullyrag said. "This snow's getting heavy -- and Broad Street is a long way from here."

I was determined to get where I wanted to get -- to the place where it all had happened.

"Oh, I didn't mean I wanted to go home," Bullyrag said, wagging his tail. "I'm with you, Pops. Whither thou goest, I goest."

I love that dog. We cut through the park and stopped under an overpass to shake off snow and rest a minute. Someone said, "Hey, old-timer, got a cigarette?" Two scruffy men got out from under threadbare army blankets and came over, one holding out his hand for the smoke. The other one said, "Ain't you been to the shelter? Don't you know where to go to get a coat?"

I explained that, although I didn't have a cigarette, I did have a coat, just didn't have it with me at the moment. And I had money to buy another one if I wanted to. They asked if I would kindly share one of my dollars, and when I took the money from my pocket, one of them grabbed the whole clip and they scurried away, like the rats they were.

Now without bus fare, we continued to Broad Street and followed it out of town, for what seemed like miles. I slipped in the snow and fell. It was a fortunate accident, really, because not only did I not break anything, but someone stopped their car, helped me up, and gave us a ride. The vehicle's tires spun a bit, and the windshield wipers swished frantically, barely keeping up with the falling snow. The man took us as far as he was going and let us out at a crossroad, just past the county line. I slogged ahead, compelled to continue my trek toward that once revered place. There being almost no traffic, we walked in the middle of the road.

A long time must have passed. I can't remember exactly what occurred, but I know I was in the cab of a pick-up truck with Bullyrag on my lap when I recognized the farm. "This is it," I said. "You can let us out there by the mailbox."

Set back from the road, the two story house and barn were barely visible, veiled by the shimmering snowfall like ghosts from my distant past. Bullyrag hopped through the drifts like a rabbit as we made our way up the long driveway. A wooden banister defined a large porch which ran across the front of the house, wrapped around one corner and continued down the side. A porch swing -- certainly not the same swing I once sat in, but a porch swing nevertheless -- still hung there at the turn.

Bullyrag started up the walkway to the front entrance, then saw me continue on toward the back. He ran to catch up and said, "I give up, Pops -- where're we going?"

Continuing past the house, I gazed at the barn, another two house-lengths away. As I got closer, the structure seemed to move toward me, seemed to be meeting me halfway. Its pale tan color changed gradually to a deep brown, and it loomed above me like a great ship emerging from fog.

“Stop!” Someone yelled.

A screen door slammed and a man came toward me with long, calculated strides. “Where are you going?” the man asked.

“To the barn.”

“Sir, this is private property. You can’t just . . . Hey, you’re shivering. You don’t have a . . .” His stern demeanor softened, and he urged me to come with him into the house where I could get warm while we talked.

“He’s feeling sorry for you, Pops,” Bullyrag said. “He thinks you’re older than God . . .”

The man’s wife opened the kitchen door for us as we stomped and shook off the snow. “Let the poor dog come in too,” she said to her husband.

Inside, I accepted her offer of coffee, warmed my hands on the mug and jiggled my feet to get the circulation going. I was anxious to get to the barn. But first, it seemed I had to explain myself. So I did.

“You knew my grandmother?” the man exclaimed, his mouth wide open.

I told what had happened there, and why I needed to have time to myself inside the barn. They were attractive and kind people. She left the room and came back with a coat for me to use. He went with me to the barn and opened the padlock, then waited in the doorway while I adjusted my eyes to the dimly lit interior.

My pulse quickened at the sight of the hayloft, and I stepped toward the ladder.

“Wait a minute, now,” he said. “You’re not thinking of going up in the loft, are you?”

“You agreed to give me some alone time,” I said.

“Yes, inside the barn -- but not in the hayloft. I can’t allow it. I’d feel responsible if you had an accident. Climbing that ladder straight up like that would be too dangerous for a man your age.”

“Here we go again,” Bullyrag said. “More insults,”

Yeah, it was aggravating. I was scampering up and down ladders before this kid was born. Even before his father was born. I’d paid my dues and earned my rights, so I walked over to the base of the ladder and started to climb. He grabbed my hips and held me back as I tried to lift my foot to the second rung. I glared down at him. We locked eyes for what seemed a full minute, until he finally said, “All right, if it’s that important to you. But I’m going up right behind you, in case you slip.”

The ladder was as old as the barn itself. Streaks of rust trailed from square headed nails, and holes in the wood appeared here and there where knots used to be. We made our way up together, his chest pressed on the backs of my thighs, the side of his face against my rump. Getting off the ladder at the top was tricky. I leaned way over the top rung onto the floor, slid my chest forward and walked on my forearms until my feet found solid support.

We then negotiated the next fifteen minutes. He would give me privacy by waiting on the ground floor at the opposite end of the barn, and I would call him when I was ready to start down. Descending was going to be scary, so I agreed to his help -- although it was somewhat demeaning. I wasn’t a wimp, and hated to appear like one.

I sat on a metal bucket, rested and caught my breath, The smell of hay was pleasingly lusty, the barn as quiet as the snowfall. The remains of a pitchfork with a broken handle and bent prongs lay beside a rusty old license plate. A few stacks of hay at the other end were skimpy compared to those in my memory. Back then, bountiful bales of the grassy fodder had been piled high and extended all the way to the rough-hewn posts just before me. It was there, under those sloping timbers, that my paradise had turned to hell.

My girlfriend and I were sixteen, neighbors and classmates -- together as much as our world allowed. When apart, our hearts stayed connected, and we attended each other's dreams at night. "She was your Juliet and you her Romeo," Bullyrag said, down on the ground floor,

Yes. We were lying there on a bed of hay when her father crept into the loft and confirmed his suspicions. It was like a bomb exploded between us. I was banished from the property -- not allowed to speak or even write to her. She was sent to another school. I never knew where, and I never saw her again. The sudden end of our relationship seemed like being buried alive.

Time healed my heart and life went on. I eventually married, raised a family, and achieved some success in various business and civic interests. Through many decades, these memories had been folded and tucked away in some shrouded corner of my mind -- released now by the obituary and my presence in this place, this harbor of my youthful sweetness and pain.

Having never even known her married name before reading it in the obituary, I had no desire to attend the funeral service at the church. But in this hayloft, I paid my respects -- added what only I could add to the memorial. My eyes closed and my head bowed.

How long the silence lasted, I can't say, but it was shattered by the screaming of a siren. The sound slurred to a stop between the house and the barn. The grandson ran and flung open the

barn door. He yelled for me to stay away from the ladder, then stepped out of sight into the glaring snow.

I looked through a wide crack in the siding and saw two police cars and an ambulance.

“My God, what happened?” Bullyrag said. “Was there a murder? Someone get bitten?”

Several policemen entered the barn, along with a medic, and, and -- I couldn't believe it -- my daughter. Looking down at the group, I said, “Ella! What the dickens are you doing here?”

In a teary, stumbling voice, she said, “Dad, I think the really important question is, ‘What are *you* doing here?’ There’s been a silver alert out for you -- everybody searching all over for you most of the day.”

“A silver alert for me?” I said. “That’s ridiculous. I haven’t been lost.” They got me down from the hayloft, and tried to talk me into the back of the ambulance. The whole thing was absurd. They wouldn’t let Bullyrag get in with me, so we had a big argument and I wound up in the back of a police car with my dog in my lap and Ella beside me.

Everybody was acting like I’d lost my mind. Just because I forget some things, people think I forget everything. That’s irritating. I remember plenty. I heard one cop tell another that I talked to my dog. The other one said, “That’s not so unusual. I talk to my dog.”

Bullyrag stood at the window, his hind feet digging in my thighs, and said, “I think the really important question is, ‘Does the dog talk back?’”

Ella hugged me, told how worried she’d been, then looked me sternly in the eye and said, “How did you get way out here, Dad? And Why? Was there a reason, or were you just confused? It’s so bizarre that you were up in a hayloft. How did it happen?”

I winked at Bullyrag and said, “I don’t remember.”