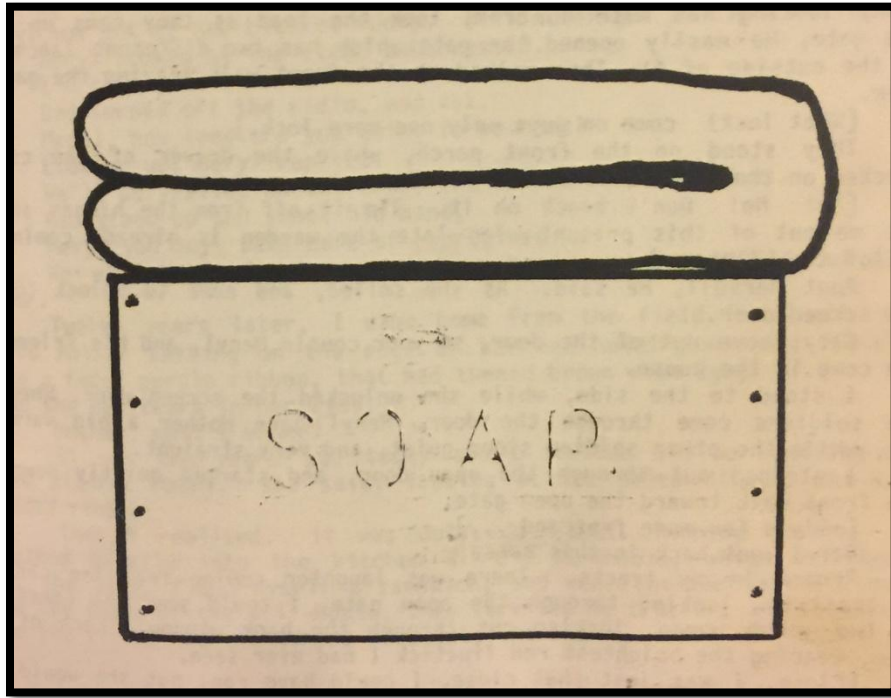


DUST

THE PICNIC



It was a beautiful day on North 6th Street and I was setting on the floor holding my rubber ball, looking out through a new and very sturdy screen door. (Lately that seemed to be as close as I can get to the great out of doors.)

R.E. has been allowed outside to play with the Methodist preacher's son, Wesley, from across the street, while I could only watch from behind the screen door and through the new yard fence that Dad had just built. (I suppose he's afraid Bob and I will escape and Mother might try to shoot us again. I wish I had the freedom of those big four year old boys who are taking turns running up and down the side walk, pulling R.E.'s new birthday train, which he has tied a string to just like the Trent boys have done with their cars.)

Suddenly there was a sound of a car horn. R.E. and Wesley ran over to the new fence, standing with their backs close to it while a large black car pulled up to a stop at the curb.

Both front doors of the car opened and out stepped two smartly dressed soldiers.

(Maybe, they've came to set me free.)

The soldier who had driven the car and had a gold bar on his funny looking hat with no brim took the lead as they came up to the gate. He easily opened the gate which has two different latches on the outside of it, then walked up the front walk leaving the gate open.

(What luck! Come on guys only one more lock.)

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They stood on the front porch while the driver of the car knocked on the door.

(No! No! Don't knock on it. Rip it off from the hinges and let me out of this prison! Too late the warden is already coming out of the kitchen.)

"Aunt Marvell," he said. As she smiled and came to unlock the new screen door.

Gary, move out of the door so your cousin Meryl and his friend can come in the house.

I stood to the side while she unlocked the screen door. When the soldiers came through the door Meryl gave Mother a big warm hug while the other soldier stood quiet and very straight.

I stepped out through the open door and started quietly down the front walk toward the open gate.

(Only a few more feet and ...) "Gary! Get back in this house."

Frozen in my tracks. There was laughter coming from the car at the curb, looking through the open gate, I could see the faces of two young women looking out through the back window. Each of them wearing the brightest red lipstick I had ever seen.

(Close, I was just that close, I could have ran, but she would probably send the army after me. She's Aunt to the army you know.)

Back in the house Meryl was talking to Mother while pointing toward the car where the young women were. Mother turned around and went into the kitchen again with me following close behind to see what she was going to do. Taking a box down from the cabinet she started packing a few precious rations from the cabinet into the box. Then returning to the living room, Mother placed the big box on our divan, saying, "Just a minute Meryl."

Going into her bedroom she soon returned with the new blanket that she had just finished quilting, laid it on top of the box of rations and turned to Meryl.

You young people have a nice picnic and swim out at the river, but be careful, there's quicksand in that river, and Meryl, don't snag your daddy's car on a stump!

"We'll be careful Aunt Marvell." Meryl said, as he picked up the box with the blanket. Then turning around the soldiers walked out the door toward the car at the curb.

Stopping at the gate to look back, Meryl showed a big smile, and said, "Thank You."

Later that evening someone knocked on the front door. Mother went to open the door and Meryl stepped in handing her the box. Setting the box down she pulled out a very muddy blanket. "Oh! Meryl, you got my new blanket muddy. I'll never get it clean again."

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Meryl looked at the floor embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Aunt Marvell."

Dad turned off the radio and ask, "Meryl, how long are you going to be home?"

Looking up, Meryl replied. "We'll be leaving on the troop train in a couple of days."

Dad stood up and shook his hand. "Meryl, you boys take care of yourselves."

"We will Uncle Frank." he said, as he turned and walked out the door.

Twelve years later I came home from the field for lunch to find Mother setting on the edge of her bed holding a dried flower and a faded purple ribbon that had turned brown with age, and she had tears in her eyes.

Mother, what's wrong?

"It was ten years ago today and I scolded him for getting my new blanket muddy." she said, looking at the dried flower and the faded ribbon.

Then I realized it was July 27, 1954. Turning around, I walked quietly into the kitchen of the farmhouse where we lived at the time, fixed myself a sandwich and went outside to eat lunch in the shade of the well-house, then serviced my tractor and returned to the field where I worked late into the night.

II Lieutenant Meryl Umbach
From Weatherford Oklahoma
Killed in Action
July 27, 1944
France

Out there on a silent windswept hill, above the dusty western plain, there stands a marble stone. Mute testimony of that soldier boy, who filled the gap, so far from home. A memory in the dust.

Thank You Meryl.

With Love, Gary.

DUST