

*Rob Roensch*

## Veterans' Day

*Later that Morning*

**W**e stood in the parking lot of the VFW, as close together as the old men ringing the flag pole, the elbows of their salutes almost brushing their comrades' chests, cheeks, and shoulders; the pattern, not the near contact, locking them together. Like them, we were not touching but tied together as if with invisible thread, at the center of the group of soldiers' children and grandchildren who also were not touching, standing together and apart at a respectful distance from the flagpole and the ceremony.

My husband's arms folded tight, my son Kevin's arms folded tight like his father's. My arms overflowing with my daughter, silent and heavy, sack of dough with two unblinking blue eyes, eyes so young they cannot see, they can only drink.

They drink the World War II tank, dull green and scarred and immense. Neither of us would be surprised if it began to creep towards us. Someone drove or hauled the tank from whatever unbelievable universe of mud to these rolling hills of clean, dead grass. Or it fell from the sky. Either way, I can only imagine where it came from. This real weapon that crushed real men.

Her eyes drink her grandfather and the circle of old men stooping around the flag pole who, in their pressed tan uniforms in the hard wet wind, seem to be disappearing into the fog-blurred dead brown hills beyond and all around. Her eyes drink the rest of us, the children and grandchildren of the old soldiers, an impatient, solemn huddle of rain-coats and white breath in the dim day.

Watchful child, this is all I can give you.

The wet cold bleeds from my lungs to my bones. I am alive.  
 The old men are beginning to forget.  
 Watchful child, soon you will be your own. And I will be yours.

Since I was very young, I have tried to hear inside other people's minds. When there was no one to talk to me or tell me stories, I could invent the whole world and I knew everything.

The tank whispers: "They stand not looking they. We stoned on tracks dark and ripping they. Eight five men, the eight of April. Mud and mud they over they. They cannot be never fourteen. Sky in the hole we. Can't see they. Horizon we explodes they. Did not stop to black happened they. All black."

*Early that Morning, in the Kitchen*

It is one thing to take care of your family. It is quite another to scramble two and one half eggs for an ancient man sitting at your kitchen table in his paper-clean uniform staring out the window past the plastic ducks on metal stakes, past the scraped out driveway, past the abandoned silver bicycle, past even the river-smooth black road to a long beach caressed by pink waves and beyond the beach the green, wrecked French countryside. Like making breakfast for a ghost. It is quite another when the ancient man is the father of your husband, who is still upstairs, sunk in sleep. And when your daughter on your hip is thinking about crying. And when your ten-year old lovesick son is hiding in a closet again, shut in his own little dark world, mooning over a crush, thinking:

"She doesn't want to sit next to me at lunch anymore. She doesn't want to sit next to me at lunch anymore. Monica Amber Christene Tammy. She has three whole paper notes I wrote with the good pen. I have never loved anyone as much. I can touch the paper that she wrote on. Wrote to me. In purple. Monica Diana Christene Amber. When I touch the paper I can see her. Hair with sun behind it. Is there anything else in the whole wide world as perfect as Diana Tammy Monica Jessica?"

Your family is lost in their own house, and you have exactly one half-hour to gather all four into the wagon for the ten minute drive to the VFW and the ceremony, maybe for the last time. The familiar old tank you drive by every day and the old men standing as straight as their bones allow, hearing aids clicked off for the gunshots.

And you are wearing a blue bathrobe that keeps flying open.

And you are staring out the window too, past the ducks and bicycle and driveway and the small sharp black birds darting across your vision out to the road and the flashes of new cars flying by.

*The Pantry*

I open the door.

On the floor: canned beans: green, lima, baked, string, kidney, white. Unopened brown sugar. Tea tins, Kevin's Spagettios dusted with flour.

Old pots. Cookie sheets. Three bags of potatoes jumbled together like sleeping children.

No Kevin.

The ancient man is thinking:

"Where are my eggs? I'm wearing my uniform. Where are my eggs? I'm wearing my uniform. Ocean. Horizon."

He sits and stares. Kevin won't even stay in the same room with him. He is still too young to understand that his grandfather is only an ordinary person. My daughter is still too young to understand that she is an ordinary person. Her grandfather stares. His milky eyes catch her warm icy blues. She loses her dream of crying and stares and stares and stares into his stare.

I jiggle her until she breaks away from him and looks amazed up at me again. Her life is looking.

I slip the eggs onto the last clean plate with a splurt of ketchup before he asks. He asks.

Dangling from the ceiling over the table and the ancient man, my father's lamp, a patchwork of stained glass, one of the projects he took on to keep himself busy the year before he died. The colors are tan and translucent brown, thick green and watery blue, the colors of his beloved two miles of ocean beach I haven't seen in years. When the lamp is off, like this morning, because ancient men prefer darkness, the colors are like memories. When the lamp is on the colors clash, too bright, candy and vomit.

I call up the stairs for Kevin. No answer. For Kevin's father. Not even a grunt.

*Kevin's Room*

The bed neatly made, even tucked in, but the desk a wreck of papers and the plastic trees airplane model parts grow on. Sweet hint of airplane glue. Above, a

swarm of model military planes, suspended, shivering slightly in the disturbance of our breath. A heavy, hovering silence.

The time will come soon when Kevin won't be able to walk through his own room without crouching. Or he'll cut the threads. Or he'll join the Air Force and fly away.

I tear open the closet door. On the floor: moon boots, two sets of one-winter hockey skates, two shoeboxes of baseball cards, Monopoly, a ziploc bag of bits of shell from our trip to the ocean, the abandoned cub scout uniform his father bought for him, the knife and whetstone, the empty plane model boxes, the rubberbanded shoebox where he keeps the purple penned folded notes from girls.

No Kevin.

But the lost portable phone resting in one of the skates, thin as an ankle.

*Our Bedroom*

In the hall I smell my husband, sweating off a late six pack, still wrapped up in the sheets.

No part of him is touching the light.

On the ceiling above the bed a yellow, splotchy water stain the size of a hand. Once, before he fixed the roof, a rainstorm woke me by touching my face. I woke up running through a mossy forest.

"You have maybe twenty minutes."

"Unh."

"Where's Kevin?"

"His room," he mumbled. Thinking: "I don't fucking know. Five minutes peace, woman. I worked until ten last night so we could stay here. This bed I paid for last night working. Five minutes. Until then I'm playing first base three weeks ago. Last inning up one bases loaded two outs. Pop foul down the line and I'm after it. The secretaries in the bleachers on their feet Mandy her black skirt and torn pantyhose. And I'm diving and I will have it I will sliding the soft wet green."

Fifteen years ago I held his hand exactly in mine, newlyweds buzzing with fear in the bright burning reds of Las Vegas midnight.

On the floor of our closet a rubble of shoes. Several boxes of hats my mother used to wear to church. Piles of mostly meaningless insurance and tax forms nei-

ther of us had organized, though we would never throw them away. Two battered red suitcases. Extra diapers. No Kevin.

*The Baby's Room*

Small soft stars and moons floating over the crib. Scattered on the floor Kevin's old stuffed tigers and seals.

But the baby prefers her coffee stained ratty blue blanket. Prefers the blanket even to my arms.

For a few months after college, just before my mother got sick, I lived alone in an apartment the size of this room. I read books and let myself be taken to movies by men whose names I can't remember. I had a job spraying perfume on strangers at a mall with marble floors.

Now she's aiming her blue eyes through mine, thinking:

"Mommy we Mommy hold. We turn down the door and close the light and sit we. Thirsty. Sleep. We. We won't the room leaves. Never. Always we Mommy thirsty."

But I lay her in her crib anyway. I'm still in my bathrobe for God's sake.

On the closet floor stacks and stacks of grandma's National Geographics. A powerdrill missing its battery pack. A book of baby names. A framed photograph of my sister's wedding. Empty frames. No Kevin.

*Grandpa's Room*

Sour dust in the air, the shade pulled down. The thin bed and the single sheet in a snaking tangle. Dented pillows. An old writing desk that there is no other place for. A night table and lamp. A glass of water. Otherwise, the room is bare.

Kevin never goes into Grandpa's room.

On the floor of the closet, a knotted bundle of newspapers and a few sets of old uniforms, worn but clean, neatly folded. The only things grandpa brought with him from the home that my husband suddenly insisted we could not leave him at.

"He's my father. He's your father," my husband said.

And, jammed into a corner, Kevin, head on his knees. He doesn't move.

"Come on up out of there," I say, annoyed. "We don't have much time."

But he still doesn't move. I duck down and touch his shoulder and only then do I realize he's shivering. Something's wrong. "Kevin? Kevin honey? What's wrong?"

I'm on my knees then, next to him, in the closet with him. I smell suddenly new earth. Probably only mildew.

Finally, he squirms, like a baby waking up. He raises his head. His teeth chatter and his face is bright with tears.

"Kevin honey what's wrong? Is it a girl?"

"No."

"What is it honey?"

"Mommy do we have to go?"

"Your grandfather wants us to be there with him."

"Is he going to die soon?" he asks, breathless. The simple answer rises in my mind. Yes. Of course. But somehow, I can't quite say it. Kevin's looking right up at me, right into my eyes, in a way he hasn't for years. I can't say it.

"Yes, honey," I whisper and his eyes close and he turns away.

I see a funeral in his mind. A church, the pews heavy with silent people. The ceiling fans above still as pressed flowers. He's standing at the back, alone, wearing his good blue pants, his hair set and sticky with gel. At the front of the church, at the head of the long aisle, up three steps, a smooth black coffin, propped open. From the back, he can't see inside. He walks slowly towards the coffin. He is being pulled. He does not turn his head to look at the people in the pews. Finally, he comes to the front. He climbs the three steps. Then the coffin lies in front of him, open. He takes a breath, briefly glances behind him at the sunlight filtering in through the open doors. Then he turns and puts his hands on the coffin. He looks in. A body, not a person, stiff and pale with peace. He does not cry. This is not a time for crying. He leans in. He kisses my cold forehead and closes the lid.

#### *Much Later*

The old dream of leaving and freedom, standing in the door, inside and outside, a clear endless night. But now, thousands and thousands of white bright tanks floating fifty feet above the ground. One over my head. One over the sleeping house. Tanks above the road, tanks over the trees, tanks in every direction as far as I can see. My first shock is to run, to get out of the way, but I cannot move. It is all I can do to stare up at the tank above, so bright it is only a shape, like a hole cut in the paper of the night. Despite the brightness of the tanks, the night is dark. Black even. All that brightness completely contained, in the same way as a star is the point of a pin. I can feel weight pressing on me, like being underneath fifty feet of water. All I can do is stand there and look up and wait for the tank to drop.

A nightmare, I understand suddenly and I reach down into myself as into deep water and begin to pull myself up. But then, in the dream, I hear and feel my husband's warm small breath close in my ear, no snore or catch, and in the dream there is a breeze, and the tank above me sways, and I understand then that the tanks aren't floating. They are suspended. Something is holding them up. I stand again below the tank. I look up and I look so hard at the stars I can just make out strands of light attached to each tank, like what you see radiating from streetlamps when you squint. The pattern of light the stars and threads and tanks make is so beautiful I want to cry out for joy. I could live forever, just looking. Then, I realize suddenly that I'm off the ground and floating slowly up, like a balloon. Then I'm above the house, then I'm so close to the tank I can only see light. And I'm terrified, but when I try to lift my hands to swim down I can't move them. When I look back to earth, I see that same thread tied around my waist and shoulders and ankles and wrists, running from my body back into the heart of the house. I can't feel anything touching me. It's as if the thread is an imprint on the back of my eyes from staring too hard at the stars. But real. Real. And only then do I see them. The small sharp birds, black as blindness, slashing through the air below and above me like thrown scissors.

**Rob Roensch** received an M.F.A. in fiction at Cornell University and is currently at work on a novel..