

MIKE HARDEN

My time came the year I turned sixteen. I was sitting at the dining room table when some flip comment brought a sharp right from my father, carrying with it the dare to finish the matter outside. It was his “pantywaist” taunt again, but it incited only pity from me. Anger he could deal with. At most it would cost him a tooth or two. But not pity.

That incident with my father changed us. He gave grudging acceptance to my coming of age. In return, I recited psalms to a god I no longer believed omnipotent. It was an uneasy peace. Even after I had graduated from high school and left home for the service, it was awkward for my father and me to absolve ourselves and each other of transgressions real and imagined. Still, etched clearly in my consciousness is the memory of an autumn afternoon in 1968 when we tried to make our peace.

We had gone hunting together. Had it been an earnest search for game, the afternoon would have been wasted. But in reality we were saying goodbye. I was leaving for Vietnam, and though terms of endearment from male to male came as hard to my family as ordering from a Portuguese menu, he was trying to say something.

We sat in a clearing deep in the woods at opposite ends of a fallen tree, cradling unfired rifles in our laps, watching dusk sponge the last light from the October sky. The tension was unbearable. I longed to see some movement, any movement, in the brush so I could raise my gun and break the silence. When it became too much, we rose, made our

way back to the car and began the trip home.

Nothing was said until he turned onto the river road. Then, gripping the wheel, staring as though he were addressing not me but the bumper of the car ahead, he managed, “I want you to know I’m proud of you, always have been. If there was a way that I could take your place for you, you know I’d do it. I’ll miss you. I’m not much good at it, but I’ll try to write.”

He did. His letter, soiled and dog-eared, is the only one I kept from that time.

I never understood how much he missed me until, many years later, a friend of his recalled an incident that occurred in a tavern while I was gone.

“Your old man was shooting pool,” the friend remembered, “and some loudmouth farmer—big, strapping guy—was standing around talking about Vietnam. I could see it was bothering your dad, but he didn’t say anything. Finally this guy, who had a boy about your age in college, said, ‘Well, you’ve got to keep some of the smarter ones home so they can run this country.’ He never knew what hit him. Your dad was across the pool table before I could grab him. He was only half this guy’s size, but he had him pinned on his back on the shuffleboard machine with a pool cue across his throat, trying to choke him to death. It took four of us to pull your dad off of him.”

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