

Smiler

By Dennis Kelly

“Hey kid,” he coughed out at me from the mint green armchair, “I’ll take it neat.”

As he spoke a rare shaft of late afternoon sun bounced at odd angles through the dimly-lit garden level apartment and caught my great uncle across the face. The mix of dusty light and smoke rising off his Chesterfield cigarette formed a sepia haze around his head. For an instant, his death pallor complexion regained some youthful color, reminiscent of the once handsome Marine war hero. Ludwig was his real name, but he went by Smiler. If Smiler earned his name based on congeniality, it was an attribute long vanished.

“Neat?” I asked.

“Christ kid, what are ya, sixteen? And you ain’t got a clue. I had been on three continents by the time I was your age. It means no ice. I got no time for watered down drinks.” Smiler’s self-observation was spot-on. At seventy, he was a broken-down alcoholic with terminal emphysema.

Smiler had recently drifted back to Saint Paul after a twenty-year absence and proclaimed on his sister’s door step, “This is the end of the line.” Grandma greeted the prodigal with a straight back and gnarled fists dug into her hips. “So aren’t we the fortunate ones to end up with your pickled bag of bones,” she said, blocking the threshold. Smiler landed at the Gilbride Apartments, a rundown, red brick, three-story building on Snelling Avenue. Facing the noisy street, security bars on the windows, the place met Smiler’s most significant needs: cheap, furnished, and near a liquor store.

He was a cranky cuss, but the demeanor of this tall gaunt man with a full shock of white hair, was secondary to my considerations. I needed a refuge from a mother on

amphetamines and five younger siblings. Home life was a tinderbox and everyone in it a walking match stick. The only entrance requirement into the old man's place was my willingness to be on call, fake ID in hand, to shag his Haven Hill whisky and non-filter cigarettes. Smiler liked drinking companions, even if they were a bunch of delinquents.

On weekends, Smiler's place became party central. At times, we packed up to fifty kids in that one-bedroom apartment, spilling out into the hall and up on to the sidewalk. There were only two rules: stay out of Gunnery Sergeant Smiler's chair and don't drink his booze. Many a night, he would be slumped deep in his chair, sound asleep as the party raged around him. Other nights, the booze energized him to hold court and take us on fragmented journeys.

"The Germans gassed us in Somme, hit us with Big Bertha in Lyon, but we held 'em at Verdun and along the Hindenburg and took 'em at Belleau Wood." He'd wave the cigarette attached to his blue-veined hand, spreading smoke through the scene, enhancing his recollection. "Christ, just boys and getting hammered for what? So some Jodi sonofabitch can steal your girl? Wilson and the Kaiser sipping Champagne over five million smoldering bodies and I get to carry this god dam hackin' cough for the rest of my life." Raising his arm, he'd move it forward sharply in a mock salute. He'd lean back in his chair, eyes watery, hike his glass to signal a refill, and continue, "Kid, your grandma and I once swam across the river in October. Took a bonfire to thaw us out." As the thread of loneliness invariably wove its way through his accounts, he would abruptly clam up, pinch his cigarette, and stare steely-eyed into his unfinished story.

Thankfully, it was the landlord who found him that Friday, heart-attack or something. The funeral at Saint Luke's was a small gathering. Just immediate family and five of my friends who'd hung out at Smiler's that I pressed to be pall bearers. As the incense

burner swung over the casket, I removed a small military pin from my pocket. The image cast on black metal depicted a spread-winged eagle perched on a globe, its eyes angry and its beak ready to strike, the talons gripped at the hemisphere. Smiler had unceremoniously given it to me a few weeks earlier. Removing a thick rubber band from the Don Diego Cigar box, he'd walked his long tobacco stained fingers through the contents, pushing past old coins, a VFW poppy, a *Stevenson for President* button, and yellowed letters. Toward the bottom of the clutter he chased the military pin into a corner, plucked it out, and held it up like a prospector examining a gold nugget. "Here kid, this is for you," he said holding the memento between his fingers, "It's taken me down this twisted road as far as it's gonna and I come further than a lot of them boys. Some folks would say, further than I should of." Seeing my face twist into a question mark, he sunk back in his chair and busied himself with the cigar box.

My grandmother's muffled cry, primed my tears and I realized the pin was more than gratitude for booze running. It was meant to signal a passage for me as it had for Smiler; albeit a kinder one. He was my age when he joined the Marines only to have his boyhood innocence stamped out and his manhood sculpted in war. The service ended with a scratchy tape playing *Amazing Grace* as we proceeded to the back of the church. Walking alongside the casket, I threw off my teenage slouch, stood straight, and moved smartly. My friends, picking up on my new sense of purpose, fell in step behind me. Semper Fi Smiler.

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