

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/1

Charles Hayes **Kicking It All In**

AS THE SUNLIGHT REFLECTS OFF THE BRASS INSTRUMENT, causing some members of the small gathering to squint, the bugler stands at attention and plays *Taps*. There are no surprises in these scripted sounds and actions that have been honed for decades.

His mother dead from cancer, Johnny has only me and a few of his high school friends here for his burial. Enough people, I suppose, for those who run these shows of honor and sadness to make a buck.

It's what he wanted. Never able to grasp the things I tried to tell him, he was still a good kid, but just plain humble. It was always about something greater than himself. Sacrifice or struggle was almost as alien to him as pride. Johnny was simply what he was, a good boy who naturally wanted to help others. Easy pickings for the war mongers drumming up moralistic jargon about a greater good. If only he could have seen it in a more critical way. Like his enlistment was more about furthering the career of others than any greater good. But Johnny had no capacity for that kind of insight. That would have required a feeling for dishonesty. Too trusting, my boy. After losing his mother, his natural anchor gone, he was no more than high cotton to those assholes.

Sitting near my boy's casket, I see the young uniformed man approach. Proffering the folded flag with white gloved hands, he dips to almost one knee in front of me, like a curtsy to royalty or something. Looking at his eyes, which are fixed on his flag, I wonder where he will spend his evening liberty while my boy lies cold in this ground covered with crosses. I take the flag for Johnny but in my heart I hate this symbol and the people who dress it as worthy of my son's life. I wish this garish spectacle over with so I can say goodbye to my boy.

Holding the flag to my chest, lest I sling it to the ground, I watch all the cute precise closing turns and steps of this charade. At the same time I try to show a little appreciation to Johnny's friends for coming. But half of them, I know, went with him to that God awful recruiter and his tales of honor, service, and adventure. That makes it tough knowing that, for them, Johnny's death only brightens their tokens of luck, with nary a regret for the hand they had in it. Just a metal fragment with Johnny's name on it is all that it is to them. The kind of reasoning that the adventurer always offers up. Or the plain decadent.



Wheeling my chair over to Mary's grave, I try to avoid the other markers all around but my vision is not so good when I am weeping. I hit the marker next to Mary's, throwing me forward, out of my chair, and causing me to scrape my forehead on the ground. Having had my legs blown off in a Vietnam sewer paddy, my nubs are not much help when it comes to regaining my chair after a fall.

Getting back in my chair is tough but, with the help of a nearby monument, I manage. I am just able to reach down and touch Mary. I tell her

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that Johnny is on his way. And that, after much thought, it seems only right that I come as well. She seems to understand.

I remember how she priced my legs as not worth enough to kick it all in. We always had a lot of fun using words that suggested I still had legs. Our humor would make Johnny laugh as well. And we moved on. I tell her it's not like when she left and told me that I had to take care of Johnny. She understands and doesn't hold it against me that I couldn't make him see. She says that such things, done by those so keenly sharp at what they do, would have been a challenge for her as well.

I wheel around and straighten what I can reach of her place, then, using the monument again to lower myself out of the chair, I finish the job by rolling around on my nubs. My place next to her needs not much tending. The one stone is for both of us and I'm already on it, with only the date to be inscribed.

Rolling to my face, I spread my arms over Mary and lie with her until the sun is almost down. Then, my resolve firmed, I regain my chair and wheel back to my van.



I return to the Veterans Cemetery while there is still a touch of dusk left and wheel my chair, under a half moon and a beginning blanket of stars, back to Johnny's grave. The dusky purple of the early evening lends a somber and calming feeling to this place as I tilt the chair over and hit the grass. This throws both the folded flag and sidearm from the small backpack on the rear of my chair. Taking the folded flag and standing it against the white marker, I pick up the 45 automatic that I led my platoon in Vietnam with, check the chamber and clip, and wobble-roll to the foot of Johnny's grave. Holding the colt with both hands, I put three shots into the flag, the gun rocking me back with each shot. I reach forward and lay my hand on Johnny as I put the barrel just past my lips, pointing towards the roof of my mouth, and pull the trigger.

Standing in a booth almost a mile away, a uniformed sentry hears three shots echo across the dark interior of the Cemetery. He picks up his landline to the guard shack and says, "I just heard what sounded like three gunshots, wait a minute, ... make that four gunshots out in section D. Want me to drive out there and check it out?"

"No that's ok," comes the reply, "we got another burial out there tomorrow morning. That will be soon enough."

"Roger," replies the sentry. "I pulled one today. Nobody out there going anywhere anyway. Out."