

## Wilderness House Literary Review 15/1

*Dan Sklar*

### Movie War Story

You get the call from your brother in New York at 9AM. It is sunny and cool and April 4th. Things happen fast when your father is ninety-six and in the ICU. You live in Massachusetts, the closest to Portland, Maine, so it falls to you to go up there. You cancel classes and get to Portland at 12 noon. After one wrong turn, you see the hospital, park the car, find the ward, sign in, get the name tag, and go to the room past all the other patients with wires and tubes and monitors and thick white mittens to keep from tearing things out. He's got all of that too. He is propped up in the bed, sleeping, breathing, snoring, cloth on his forehead, no teeth, head of white hair sticking up, feet uncovered by the sheets. You see the scars on his legs. You cover them. The nurses couldn't handle him in Augusta, so they sent him to Portland where he was sedated. He kept ripping out the tubes and saying, "Why won't you let me die? Why won't you let me die?" even though he refused to sign the do not resuscitated document. "I'm not signing that damn thing." He stopped signing things at ninety-two. He was angry about old age and let everyone know it.

This was a guy from Brooklyn who flew in the U.S. Air Corp over Germany in World War II and was shot down and parachuted into the middle of a lake and swam to shore holding onto his new boots. He was not going to give up those boots. He was twenty-two years old, lean, square-faced, black hair, wet, alone, cold, bleeding, and hiding in a barn in Germany. Of course, he was found by a German girl, red hair, freckles, maybe seventeen. Either she would love him or turn him in. She brought him apples and cheese and bread and wine. She cleaned out his wounds. She gave him her father's old blue suit and a hat and shoes. He put the boots in a satchel and strapped it over his shoulder. She gave him a bicycle. It was the only means of transportation out. He kissed her many times before he left, and she kissed him the same. It was like in a movie, only it was real. She drew a map of a way out. He had to memorize it. They figured no one would suspect a bicycle rider in a suit with a fishing rod.

Now he was on morphine and off medicine and intravenous. Your brother gave the O.K. The nurse says it could happen anytime. Your father was ready. He was unconscious. He wasn't coming to. You tell him you are here. You tell him you love him. You thank him. You tell him it's going to be all right and wonder why you said that.

He didn't get far up the hills and winding road when he turned around. He couldn't stop thinking about the German girl. He knew the chances are he would get caught. The risk was worth it--her face, her neck, her love. He was reported missing in action. Shot down over a lake in Germany. He didn't think of the telegram his mother and father would get in Brooklyn, how they would break down, how his sisters would cry. But you cannot hide a human for long. The German girl's parents did not want to get shot. Soldiers came and took him to a prison camp. The girl cried in her room with lace curtains.

The war was over. In Brooklyn, he didn't leave the house for six months. His crew didn't make it home. They were all killed when the

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plane was shot down. He put the boots in the closet and thought about the German girl. Then he threw the boots away.

It's like a scene in a movie, father dying, son sitting bedside, nurse comes in. You see the scars on his arm. "Go get some lunch," she says. "I'll call you if anything changes." You figure she has control of the morphine somehow. You get an egg salad sandwich at the cafeteria. You eat half of it and go back. You ask the nurse if he can get a better room when he wakes up. She says sure but she doesn't think he will. His breathing is quiet now. You check his pulse--it's barely there.

In Brooklyn, his father bought him a new suit. He left the house and joined the world as it was. Job, marriage, children, apartment, better job, house, bigger house, business trips, new job, divorce, new wife, all of it.

A tall, thin man comes in with a blue standard poodle on a leash. He gives you a card with a picture of the dog. You put it in your pocket. The dog and the man look alike. You pet the dog; his tail is wagging. "*Travels with Charlie*," you say, and the man smiles.

At 3:13 PM, April 4th, sunny and cool, your father stops breathing. You kiss his forehead and say goodbye. A doctor pronounces him dead. You try to open a window, but they are sealed shut. The nurse hugs you. Her eyes are a dark color you have never seen before. You call your brother to tell him and for a moment cannot talk. You tell him your father just died. You walk back to your car and drive through Portland and home. You guess that maybe he was thinking about the German girl when he died.