

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

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Imagination, Uncovered

One brilliant summer day after Daddy turned ninety, we sat on his patio, held hands, and relaxed.

This was a welcome break from talking about his Army Air Corps service in World War II, on which I'd been taking notes. A skinny, nineteen-year-old tail gunner on a B-25 in the Pacific theater, he'd survived many chilling episodes of combat. A naturally calm person, he told these stories easily and matter-of-factly. Sometimes we talked about the mundane aspects of war, like why he was holding two puppies in a photograph I discovered.

"Oh. Those were a couple of dogs we adopted," Daddy said, as if it were nothing special.

"You had *pets* there?" I asked.

"Sure." I loved how he pronounced it like a two-syllable word: *shu'-wah*. "There were lots of strays on the islands. They didn't mind if we kept them," he said, referring to his superiors. "There's an awful lot of boredom during war, Kathy. Whatever kept us busy and entertained when we weren't on bombing runs, they were glad for."

He thought some more. "We used to take them up with us, too," Daddy said.

"Where did you keep them?" I couldn't imagine.

"On the seat next to us," he shrugged.

He didn't need to tell me that the dogs provided young boys comfort. "Warmth, too," said Daddy. "It got really cold up there."

Nearby, my dog, Teddy, entertained us as only terriers can and chased a chipmunk up the gutter, then scratched away, certain he could tempt it back. My dad laughed at this comedy. We kept sighing over the beautiful day and noted that the hummingbirds preferred the hydrangea to the feeder, leaving that for the bees. His backyard, which scraped alongside conservation land, smelled fresh and green and warm. The only sounds were of the natural world, far away from the deafening roar of a B-25.

I stretched out my legs and looked at the gorgeous sky. White clouds puffed by, changing shape.

"Look at that cloud, Daddy. It looks like a map of Ireland." The cloud morphed a second later. "Now it looks like Puerto Rico," I said.

"Have you ever looked up at clouds and seen pictures of things?" I asked him. He shook his head no. "Not even when you were a kid?" Still no.

And I believed him because my father's life had been built on facing facts. A childhood of poverty, harrowing military service, the same job for forty-four years, a marriage of almost sixty, and above all, facing the ravages of alcoholism. Family, country, and health mattered before—if ever—clouds.

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I broke my hold with his warm, papery hand for a moment and pointed up to my childhood experience with the cerulean sky.

"I think that one looks like a rabbit. See its two ears, right there?" I said. "What about that cloud, Daddy?"

Some moments passed. I waited.

"A dog," he said. "I think it looks like a dog. Running."

I caught my breath. What if he had never been asked?