

The Death of a Thousand Soldiers



It was my twelfth birthday and what I really wanted was to be sixteen like my brother was about to become. The year was 1948 and all was well with the world. Well, almost so, but there was the little matter of the "1000 Soldiers" made of brown and green plastic lying in a cellophane bag in Mr. Bulware's store window. With these and those already in my possession, I would be able to wage World Wars I and II simultaneously with all participants accounted for.

They cost the impossible amount of \$2.49, which cut two ways. My twenty-five cent a week allowance couldn't come close to touching it, but the price put them beyond the reach of anyone else, so it was a stalemate Mr. Bulware enjoyed because it meant that I would come see him every day to pass polite conversation while I checked to see that all was well with my troops.

Because my brother's and sister's birthdays were in the winter when school was in session, theirs took on a more formal aspect. Mine was in mid-summer and therefore informal and in consequence there was not a lot of preparation involved.

For the past two years, Mom and Pop, my brother Lamar, sister Weezie, the Cummings girls who were her friends from across the street, Roland Wilhelmy, my age, who lived next door, and Hattie our cook made up the celebrants at my birthday. It was not an elaborate deal. In the late afternoon, as convention had it, I would dig a pit for the fire and collect driftwood; Weezie and her friends found sticks that Lamar sharpened to hold weenies and marshmallows over the fire; and Hattie made potato salad and marshalled the ingredients. Then, we'd be all ready.

Two things were a little different this particular year. To begin with, Pop hadn't been able to get away for vacation so far during the summer, and this was to be the start of his two week respite

at the beach. He was to catch the San Diegan from Los Angeles and arrive in Oceanside at 3:18. Mom was to pick him up and bring him home, an exciting prospect. The other was my secret.

It was my habit to make rounds; that is, drop in and visit everyone at St. Malo once each day, except for Mrs. Keith who lived in the big house at the top of the hill and never came outside, and Colonel Joy who was too important to be disturbed.

I especially liked dropping by the Forve house where the three girls, Helen, Ann, and Tibby (who ranged from 20 to 30 years in age, though I'm not sure in which order) lived. Best was the early morning while it was still cool. They were partial to fires that were warm and cheery, and I'd bring some driftwood from my collection and we'd have toast and jelly and tea and talk about distant places or perhaps other times. I think they were born to the wrong century or perhaps millennia, but it mattered not except they were my friends and I wanted the best for them.

Then there was Mrs. Wilhelmy who was roly-poly, smelled of ginger or peppermint or something equally nice. She was a magician who could turn flour into incredible things, kept cats that snuggled into laps and purred incessantly, taught Roland and me how to smoke eucalyptus leaves, introduced us to the lost-wax casting process, and in general liked boys and didn't mind them getting into a little mischief now and then.

Mrs. Duque was baking when she wasn't cooking the fish that Mr. Duque brought to the house, so I could count on something delicious served on cobbled Mexican earthenware plates with picture of donkeys and angels and slender women in mantillas. Each had a story rooted in the flinty hills north of Guadalajara. One of my favorites was how Miguel spilled berry juice on his white Sunday shirt and cried and cried until his Madrina -- Godmother -- dyed the shirt to match the stain, making him easily the most visible and envied boy in town. Sometimes Mrs. Doerr would rattle the back door "to drop off some lemons and I'm on my way," but after three protests, she would come and sit down to talk about "the next time we go to Ibarra."

[Forty or so years later Harriet Doerr was to write a book titled *Stones for Ibarra* published in 1984 winning a National Book Award that year, for First Work of Fiction. Her second novel, *Consider This, Señora*, was published in 1993, and a collection of short stories and essays, *Tiger*

in the Grass: Stories and Other Inventions, followed in 1995. A television adaptation of *Stones for Ibarra* was presented by Hallmark Hall of Fame in 1988.]

Well, my secret was that I had invited a few extra people to my party--about twenty to pin it down a little more precisely-- though I hadn't bothered to keep count. Essentially, it was anyone under twenty-five or maybe sixty years of age who was on my daily route. It had to do with my friends, though I suspect one could search for ulterior motives. Had it been otherwise, I'd have asked Mr. Bulware, but that would have been contrary to purpose.

Secrets are hard, and I almost told Lamar and Weezie and Hattie about my surprise, but I decided against it because I didn't want to spoil their fun. As for Mom, I felt a soft twinge because I meant having to deal with more people, but I was still in the "God-will-provide" stage of life when I assumed that the number of hotdogs would rise to meet the challenge of mouths without undue stress.

I could see it all in my mind's eye - a party that included all my friends without recourse to age or station. Instead of worrying about consequences, I went about preparing a larger fire than usual, selected and cut a bunch of extra weenie sticks, and hid them in the ice plant.

At a little after three, Mom, with Lamar and Weezie in tow, took off for the train station and I headed over to the trestle to put a penny on the track and wait for the train that would beat Mom from the station by at least five minutes. Not surprisingly, the San Diegan was late--almost fifteen minutes late--so by the time the train came and gone and Mom and Pop and Weezie and Lamar arrived home, a significant crowd had gathered at the fire.

Pop went inside while Mom stood around looking perplexed. Lamar went over to Ann Forve and returned to explain the situation. Mom and Lamar got back in the car and high-tailed it up the hill. I thought that maybe they had a surprise of their own for me.

They returned presently and, with Hattie's help, hustled a bunch of boxes and sacks into the kitchen. After a bit, they came out to the beach with platters full of weenies and buns and potato chips and pickles and marshmallows. The party was on.

"Where's Pop?" I asked when he hadn't come out of the house.

"He's not feeling well," Mom answered, and when I made to go in to see him, she firmly suggested I not bother him at the moment.

Hot dogs moved at a brisk pace, washed down with Coca-Cola and chased by charcoaled marshmallows -- crunchy and gooey, acrid and sweet all at the same time. At last, the sun became a Japanese lantern as it dipped into the sea and I began to open my presents.

Florence Hopper gave me a green helmet with elastic mesh for holding camouflage leaves. Wally Rowe, who went to Princeton and smoked a pipe, presented me with a cartridge belt and canteen. From the Matthiesens came a sturdy lensatic compass, but best of all was Tibby and Ann and Helen Forve's brightly wrapped package containing my "1000 Soldiers".

My day was complete. The surprise had been a surprise. We sang songs with Ralph Waycott and Johnny Matthiesen playing guitar and ukulele; watched as the seven-eights moon rose over the Von Platen's roof; and finally, as it began to get chilly, we made fireflies with the coals and doused the embers in the sand.

"Go get in bed," Mom told me, signaling that Pop was still not to be disturbed. "I'll be there to tuck you in in a moment."

Lamar and I shared a room, and usually, despite his being four years older, he would go to bed earlier than I, so I was a little surprised when he wasn't there. No matter.

I carefully placed each of my wonderful new gifts on my window seat, visualizing how and where I would arrange my legions the next morning. I was still at it when Mom came in.

"It's too late to give them all back," she began, speaking as if from a great distance. I wasn't sure she was talking to me, or what she was trying to say.

"We've decided that the best thing is to give them to the poor," she said gravely, and I knew what she meant by that. A shiny fire truck with pedals on my sixth birthday went that way soon after school started because of a campaign to give toys to the less fortunate. It happened on other occasions as well but they were less memorable than the fire engine which still had the new on it. In any event, and with no further comment, she scooped up the presents and left.

The matter was never discussed again, indeed, left in the same limbo that held the fire truck. I didn't see Pop the next day or the next and, when it became apparent that I was in disgrace, I made myself scarce by staying at my secret place on the slough.

"How's the war coming?" Tibby Forve asked as I headed out past her house.

"Fine," I answered with a big smile, shamed by the lie but propelled by loyalty. "Well, I'm off to attack some German trenches, so I'll see you later," I added with as much bravado as I could muster, but it was hollow because I knew that my practice of making rounds had come to an end.