

Family Legacy

Winona Bennett Cross



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By

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Dedication

With utmost respect and gratitude, I dedicate this story to all Veterans—past, present and future—and to their families who, in their own way, also serve. May God bless you and yours for generations to come.

Family Legacy

Sam unlocked the door and held the screen to prevent the tell-tale squeak from waking his wife. He dropped into the paint-chipped porch glider to pull on his boots before going for a walk. Any other day the chill in the air, the sounds of birds, and the sweet scent of honeysuckle and roses would have energized him. The past week hadn't been ordinary, life would never again be the same.

He trudged up the knoll along the same grassy path he had walked for more than fifty years. Each step required great effort and concentration. His body betrayed him, it felt as if each leg and arm was encased in cement. His breath seemed wasted. Lifting his head he saw the friendly remnants of the old barn. Tears sprang to his eyes but didn't spill. He cleared his throat trying to rid himself of the stone lodged there. His arms tightened around a package he carried close to his chest and clutched it tighter as the barn became closer.

Standing in his favorite place he leaned against the massive trunk of a two hundred year old oak tree. The rough bark relieved some of the numbness surrounding him. This had been his playground when he was a boy. He had watched his father and grandfather work in the fields and the barn. Old and new memories collided and flashed like broken kaleidoscope glass in his mind. Favorite toys, games . . . the memories vanished when a familiar noise brought him back to the present. He lifted his head and smiled at two squirrels chattering warnings and flashing their fluffy tails at him. Funny how a simple and genuine smile could conjure up such guilt during a time of raw grief. Tearing off a chunk of bark he peeled at the layers and ground them into small bits with his bare hands.

Walking around the tree, his breath hitched, he clutched at the place on his chest where his heart filled with such intense grief it stole the beat. He fell to his knees in an outburst of sobs. The roots that snaked around the tree and on top of the ground cradled and comforted him just as they had since he had been a boy. The same place, the same tree had also comforted his father as a lad. And, his own son.

Sam reached down, picked up a stick, and drew meaningless designs in the dirt. Images of his favorite toys came alive. G.I. Joe, Tonka trucks, slingshots, and

cap guns. There was never a time in his memory that three wooden blocks and a toy rocking horse didn't hold court on the mantle of the three generation home his grandfather had built after immigrating from Scotland. The scars left by teething babies marked the toys in several places. Then, his son, Charles, had played with Legos, balls, and hand held games.

Thinking, thinking caused more pain but Sam couldn't stop. His thoughts bounded from the changes the family home had seen to a single conversation with his son. He remembered every word and gesture. How is it that a person can forget so much but recall the most difficult of times in startling detail? Isn't that always the way it is?

"Dad, I need to talk to you. Let's sit under the tree." Charles Stewart paled but held his chin high.

Sam wiped his face with a faded blue bandana and released the shiny bay gelding he had been shoeing. "Sure, son. What's on your mind? A girl? School?" Sam sat between the old roots and patted the ground beside him.

Charles chose to stand. He paced in front of his father. "Dad. I wanted to tell you that I enlisted in the Army today."

"You did what? What do you mean you joined the Army? Why? You're making good grades in school. There is no draft anymore. I don't understand." Sam's chin dropped to his chest and he started to stand.

Charles leaned down and put his hands on his father's shoulders before he could get up. "Dad, our country is at war. Our family has fought for this country and our freedoms since they came over from Scotland. Grandpa was in World War II, you fought in Vietnam. There's a Purple Heart and Silver Star hanging over the mantle to prove it. I have to do this, Dad."

"Oh, Charles . . . look at the family cemetery over there. Some of those graves belong to men killed in war. I do not want to bury you." Sam's voice escalated then fell before he felt the onslaught of tears building from his core, from his soul. They choked him. Words, no more words would come. He was helpless and knew there was nothing he could do. It was done.

“I’ll come home, Dad. Don’t worry.” Charles pulled his father to him in a close hug.

Sam saw his reflection in his son’s eyes. He was shocked at how much he had aged and shrank in a matter of minutes. He felt fragile for the first time in his life. “Son, I’ve fought and I’ve killed. I know about war. There’s nothing glorious about it. Is this official?” Sam shook his head trying to rid himself of the flashbacks of his own horror.

“Yeah, it’s done.”

“Does your mother know?”

“No, sir. I want you to be with me when I tell her.” Charles allowed his shoulders to droop. He stared at the ground, then sank to the ground.

Sam realized Charles’s thoughts had turned to his mother when he sat beneath the comforting oak. “Why didn’t you talk to us first?”

“You would have said no and tried to talk me out of it. I’m a Stewart. I love this country, I can’t stay away from what I feel is my duty, just because I make good grades.”

Both men were silent. They sat, shoulders touching, staring at the ground.

“You’re right, son. You’re right. Promise to stay safe. Don’t be a hero.” Sam broke the silence.

“Dad, I’m not going to be G.I. Joe.”

Sam smiled and stretched. “All right, let’s go tell your mother. She’ll cry, then she’ll cook. Decide what you want for a special meal.”

“That’s easy. Chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes, milk gravy, green beans, salad, biscuits, and banana pudding with sweet tea.”

Sam snapped back to reality. He was crying. The ominous awareness of the uniformed and somber officer walking to the door flashed before his eyes. He and his wife were having morning coffee. He saw again the look of disbelief, the flash of hope in his wife’s eyes, the beginning of the tears and her animal like scream when the officer spoke with a crack in his voice, “We regret to inform you...”

Shaking the memory away he wiped his face and slowly stood. Looking to the east, he began the short journey to the family cemetery. Sam knelt before a mound of red Oklahoma dirt covered with a variety of flowers and ribbons. The cloying scent of funeral flowers and colorful tangled ribbons made him weak. His knees buckled when the sun bounced the gold words 'beloved son' from a white ribbon.

A temporary Veteran's Administration marker identified Charles's grave. It read PFC Charles Josiah Stewart, U. S. Army, Desert Storm, Iraq. Sam removed the cloth from the package he carried. Saying a prayer he placed the tri-fold flag he had accepted just the day before on his son's grave. "You did good, Son. Your buddy, Lemonhead, the one with yellow blonde hair and a sour attitude showed up. Even with a chest laden with medals he couldn't stay at attention. Told me you took the bullet for him."

Sam gathered flowers from the fresh grave and placed them on the resting places of other fallen Stewart heroes and family members.

He returned to the grave and offered his son a sharp, crisp salute. Bending down he retrieved the irreplaceable flag and began his journey back to the warm house.

His beloved wife and two young daughters walked toward him. An amber glass of iced tea glistened in his wife's hand. When their eyes met Sam felt the strength of family surge through him. He realized in that moment that everything would be fine, his family would live on. Strong and resilient. Iced tea, something so common, held a promise he couldn't deny. Grieving would continue, memories would linger, but love would be as fresh as ever.

~ *The End* ~

About Winona Bennett Cross

Winona (Nona) is a retired nurse (due to a disability) who spent her nursing career working in women's and newborn health. She wore every cap from staff nurse to manager to educator to bereavement counselor. Nona is married, has two sons, two daughters-in-law, and two of the cutest granddaughters on the planet. She loves horses to distraction and obsession. At the age of 65, she finally became the owner of a mini-horse named Flynn.

Everything Nona writes is family driven. The conflicts often have psychological components and the settings are wild and beautiful and she loves hearing from her readers!

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