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The Death of the Hero

Lawrence L. Lee

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After the dull, remote bell had stopped ringing within the house, I stood there before the door, rocking on my heels, waiting for the quick footsteps inside. It was a long wait. I was in no hurry, though; there was no pleasure in my visit. Somewhere in the house, I thought, Mrs. Spears must be readying the old woman for the visitor, though they could not know who it would be. I tried to remember all the innumerable travelers of romance, come back to tell all, come back to describe the death of the hero. And it was I who must tell the old lady, the proud, fierce, frightening old lady, how her son had died, died not a hero, but not a coward either, died not caring to live, his eyes expressionless, his closed throat choking him to death. He had been no symbol of dark evil, like Conrad's Kurtz; I had no need to explain him away, to lessen him. Not, at least, to his mother. Not a lessening of her son to the pride and ancient beauty of the woman. But he had been no adventurer. A homesick boy, dying in the green jungle among the savage flies, his body stretched lax on the canvas cot in the tent hospital, and somehow, through some horrible magic of mistake and misunderstanding, the word coming back through the reports and telegrams and voices that he had died, not there, but far to the north, in the furious, incessant action of, at least to us, gaudy, useless war. And it was now for me to find some formula that would explain to the old woman, explain and clarify, make the dead boy a hero or at least a soldier. He was dead, buried, all the forms complete. But she was alive still and her memory had sat on my shoulder as we had lowered him into the red earth.
The steps came, the hurried, sharp steps approaching the door, and Mrs. Spears opened the panel for me. She was old now, almost as old as I remembered her mistress to be, but different in being gray and shapeless and dulled. For a moment she did not recognize me; the last time she had seen me had been five years before and I had been a thin, puzzled boy in a baggy uniform.

"Tommy," I said, "Tommy Ashburn."

"Good God," she said. It was no oath. "Come in. She's expecting you."

"Yes," I answered. "My mother told me."

I followed her down the dark hall, followed her through the double doors into the dark, high-ceilinged parlor, the room for occasions of state, the room for announcements, explanations.

"Wait," she said.

And once more I waited, waited in the quiet for the old woman to come to hear of her only son, her only child. Her face came up before my eyes, the face she had worn the day we left, unyielding, stiff with pride, the web of tiny wrinkles unbreakable. Sitting in her wheel chair at the station, she had called her son from the uneasy rows of excited soldiers, called him and kissed him publicly, something she had never done before. He had gone to her diffidently, his face white, his hands trembling. And she had smiled, saying, "We are good soldiers." We had believed her, thought that her son was a good soldier, and yet had known that he had been neither good nor bad, had been only a boy dying of a disease.

I was standing at the west window, staring through the thick curtain at the autumn orchard, when the whisper of the pushed wheel chair came through the far door. I turned about to face her, with the light over my shoulder, and she was white and thin and bent, twisted symbol of bereaved motherhood, and the memory of her pride dissolved into a tight ball of doubt.

Mrs. Spears, her mouth opened in a wordless cry of prayer, turned about and went, leaving the old woman and me to stare at one another across the bare ten feet of floor between.
"Sit down, Tommy," she said.
"Thank you," I answered, fumbling my way into a chair. She spun her wheelchair about so that she could look at me. Her white hair was pulled back tightly from her face; her skin was still the web of rigid lines that held her expression to its mask.
"How are you?" she asked.
"Fine," I said.
"You look tired."
"Yes, I am."
"You've been away from home a long time."
"Five years," I answered.
"Yes," she said. "I know. Five years." She was quiet for a while, and I waited for her because I was again afraid of her as I had been when I was a child, afraid as I had been the day she had looked at her son and me after we had been caught stealing chickens. And he, her son, trembling, had clutched my hand and stared at the floor that day. And I, even in my fear, had been sorry for him.
"Have you been unhappy?" she asked. Her face did not change; only the mouth moved.
"Yes," I said.
"Was it bad?"
"Sometimes."
"But now you're back."
"Yes."
"And you are happy?"
"Perhaps. I don't know. Perhaps later."
Over her shoulder I could see the owl that her son had killed and stuffed. It sat inexorably severe on a bar extending out from the wall, still holding its place of honor, proud figure of the old woman's past, proud shield of her son's youth and perhaps promise. The yellow, glass eyes stared back at me blindly, shallow and motionless, and I could not look at the old woman.
"War is a dreadful thing," she said.
“Yes.”

“And people must die.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“I am not sorry.”

I did not understand. I leaned forward, furrowing my forehead.

“Our family has been proud,” she said.

“Yes.”

Her father had fought in the Civil War, her husband in the Spanish-American War and the First World War. I remembered her, long ago, standing beside her husband’s coffin, looking down at the uniformed man. She had looked at him impassively. I had been young, but even then I had known that she was a proud woman. And I was to tell her how her son had died? He who had huddled behind her as she stood over the coffin? He who had wept and had been stared at by his mother until he had drawn himself erect?

“Yes,” she repeated, staring at the floor, “people must die in a war. If we had had another son . . .” She looked up at me, suddenly smiling with her mouth. It was a dreadful, gray smile. “Perhaps you think me foolish. But you must admit that it’s somewhat extraordinary.”

“Of course,” I said. I was afraid of her still; the years were an illusion here.

She picked up the cane that lay across her lap and drew a circle on the bare floor between us and then she broke the circle by dragging the cane across it. “I had great hopes for him,” she said.

“I know,” I answered. He had struggled hard in school, desperately, for her—for himself, rather, as a defense against her. He had learned a great number of facts and had been praised by his teachers. But, once, almost crying, he had confessed that she had never yielded, had accepted his report cards and had signed them silently and that was all.
"Now," she said, "tell me how he died. I want to know so that I may have that memory at least. All the memories possible."

I looked at the floor, attempting to build up again the circle which she had drawn. The question was there now; where was the answer? Both truth and lie were to be elaborate scaffolds, perhaps too intricate for my comprehension, and somewhere in the maze I might meet her coming from the other side, coming upon me unawares and seeing the tiny nakedness of my wish to deceive her. I mulled the lie again, and felt it go limp and uneasy in my hands. But the story was that she never left the house, never spoke to anyone. I studied my lie slowly, carefully.

"Go ahead," she said. It was not prompting; it was permission. I looked up at her, looked past her to the emotionless eyes of the owl, and in that moment I began to speak to it, to her, and then I sucked in my breath, bewildered. I could not tell it, could not tell her, the gray flat truth, not before the memory and the hope, even if they had, perhaps, meant nothing.

"I don't remember too well just when it happened," I said. "They still held Rabaul when we landed on New Britain. We went up the island, up the east arm, towards Rabaul, behind other American troops, and then we stopped for a long time and didn't move, stopped and didn't do much except build roads and once in a while send a patrol out into the jungle to chase strays. It was boring and we all hated it and we got very homesick. And, then, sometime towards the end of the year, I suppose, we were sent north again, up to replace another outfit. We were being sent up, I think, to get a little seasoning before the invasion of the Philippines. And so we met our first action. We were cowards, all of us, I suppose, and it's not easy to remember with any pleasure."

The old woman held out her palm to me, stopping me. She leaned forward, speaking a little slowly, a little harshly. "You were all cowards?" she asked.
"Yes," I said. The importance of the lie rested there in my hands, but I could not force myself, here, to conjure up a hero, to make the quick brushes and horrible fears of that slow crawl up the island into a gallant, meaningful advance of brave men. Her son had already been dead for months at that time; how could I lift him up to wave frightened men ahead to die with him? The slow, hot jungle of fear had had its heroes, but it was not for me to create another now. Was she asking it for her son's memory or for her own.

"Yes," I said. "We were all afraid. There was little fighting, but men were killed just the same. There was also, apparently, very little to fight for."

"Ah?" she asked, drawing back into her wheel chair, her lined face becoming even more rigid with her insistence. She tapped at the floor with her cane. I looked at the cane rather than at her. The crucial moment of the lie, the question as to whether her son were to be a hero or just a man, threaded itself into my body, drew me tight. She waited, tapping gently, nodding her head with each tap. She had not insisted that I expand my statement, but her question hovered there between us and I could not ignore it.

"Very little to fight for, we thought. It was hot and wet and we were dirty and tired and afraid and all we wanted to do was come home and be clean and not afraid. And he was like the rest of us. He was young, too, you must remember."

"I do remember," she said. "He was very young. He still had his life. I don't blame him."

"Then you must not blame us either. We had never seen anything like it before, and we knew, even then, that we would see much more of it before it ended. We were afraid and we had little faith."

"Did you lose faith in God?" she asked. And now I was sure that she was not reproving. Her voice was more gentle, the insistence gone.
“Sometimes,” I said.

She tapped at her knee with her left hand, the hand free from the cane. “Yes,” she said, “that I can understand. I almost lost faith myself, and I had much less reason to, I suppose.” And then she looked up at me, her face hardening again. “Go on.”

There was no thread in my labyrinth. I must stand on tiptoe and attempt to peer over the top of the walls. If I met her eyes looking back at me, well, that was the chance I had to take. This was the second time I had come to the same thought. Now, however, there was no return. I was snared in the deception as well as she, but how was one to play false with the waiting face across from me? Perhaps, already, she had perceived the tenuous artifice of my lie, the coggery involved in my already thrown dice.

“We weren’t cold as they were in Europe. Perhaps we weren’t shot at as much. But fear is present no matter where you are, and perhaps it’s more present or at least more concentrated at night in the jungle, because it isn’t native to us. Houses can kill you, but they can’t frighten you to death.

“It was not even on a patrol that it happened. I suppose that makes it somewhat ironic. The company was in reserve, just waiting.” I stopped there, looking at her. She was very quiet, not moving. I felt, almost, that her face had become whiter, but there, in the dim light, I could not be sure. She was staring at me with fixed, round eyes.

“Yes?” she said, her voice dry, metallic, clicking in the quiet room. Once she had been involved in politics, had run for and had won a post on the city council. In those days her voice had been smoother, less direct, less shocking, but even then she had had her way. I could not resist her.

“That night we had parked the trucks down in a little hollow. The captain, however, sent me and my squad up the hill a little way, perhaps three or four hundred yards. We took a truck with us, parked it on one side of the ravine which ran down to the hol-
low, set up a machine gun on the other side. Your son was with us. He and I and two others stayed near the truck. The other four were with the machine gun."

"When did this happen?" she asked, sharply, abruptly.

"I don't remember exactly," I answered. "It's been so long. What was the date on the telegram the War Department sent?"

"July, 1943."

"Then that was when it happened," I answered.

She leaned forward to stare at me, and I thought that, for a second, she was going to slide out of the wheel chair. I half rose to catch her, but she shook her head.

"You said the end of the year," she reminded me.

"Yes," I answered, "but it's been so long. Sometimes when I think back I'm off as much as a year. Things happened about the same time that seem a long time apart."

"Perhaps that's so," she said. "Go on."

She had, now, said this, or something very like it, three times. There was no echo in this third time of the other two. They had been imperative and sure, and this time the command was quiet and dulled, and I could not keep from staring at her face. There was, however, no betrayal of emotion. There was nothing for me but to interpret the tone as her expression of fear before the impending death of her son. And I, who was to kill him there, for her, became cold and shivered.

"It grew dark rather rapidly. It grows dark rather rapidly in the tropics." I halted, remembering the body of her son after his death, beginning to swell and bloat almost within the hour. And he, too, had become white, almost as white as she, but he had been brown with the sun.

"And then—?" she insisted. She rapped the cane against the floor savagely. "Why don't you hurry?" Her voice rose, became, for the first time, violent. Before it had been pressing, but had carried no threat.
And I, in return, grew angry too, weary with my lie, weary with her weight. "Because I can't hurry. Because men die much faster than one can tell about it." But this, too, was a lie, for her son had died slowly, wretchedly, without honor, without reason. I wanted to cry to the white face that it was all fraud and imposition, but I could not for fear that the face would be overwhelmed, for fear that only honor could hold her erect.

She sat back again, almost effacing herself in the gloom of her wheel chair. "I'm sorry, Tommy. I think I understand your problem. Perhaps even better than you think I do. But remember that I'm an old woman who has lost her family, who has only the memory of her husband and her son. I must have all my memories; I must have them all boxed and sorted and immediate to my touch, even the false ones."

"And I'm sorry too," I answered. "But you must let me go at my own pace."

"Of course." Her left hand, still on her knee, was trembling so much that I could see it across the distance and the dim light of the room.

"We expected nothing," I said. "There weren't supposed to be any of them in the area. They were supposed to have been well cleaned out. And so we weren't too alert. I was sitting beside the truck, sitting and doing nothing else, and your son was beside me, talking to me about something, something I can't remember. He, like the rest of us, was afraid and unhappy and he usually talked about home; I suppose, then, he was talking about home."

"Home?" she asked, slowly, almost stupidly.

"Home. Mothers, fathers, sisters, girls . . ."

"Did he have a girl here?"

I halted then, my lie pushed aside by her question. "No," I answered, "I don't think he did." No, he had had no girl. He had lacked the courage perhaps. I did not know. Yes, I did know.

"Ah, he should have had one," she said.
"He was afraid of what you would say," I answered, putting my thoughts into words, brutal because she had been old and unyielding and had held her son in her palm.

"Yes," she said. "You're right." Her voice was spiritless, but it grated still, cut the silence with sharp teeth not by tone or force but simply by habit. The path to which she had led me opened invitingly, led off into a broad meadow of escape from which I could stop to look back at my lie with the pleasure given by distance; but now intent upon making the structure of the lie secure, I turned away from the help, turned away to the voice, turned away and built again, built because I could do nothing else, not for her but for myself. And, at last, for her son.

"He talked about home, like the rest of us. He wanted to come back. He wanted to rest. We all wanted to rest. We were always tired, tired with fear, tired with boredom, tired with work, tired with doing nothing. God knows, we were tired of everything, tired of everything."

"And you are still tired?"

"Yes."

"And yet you can come to an old woman, can't you, and tell her how her son died?" There was a thin edge of meaning in the words that whipped at me, made me look at her. She was staring at me still, once more rising up in her chair. "You are a good boy, Tommy."

"Thank you," I said. I wanted to make the words light, but I could not. I avoided her eyes, once more staring at the owl, the empty, lifeless owl that was now meaningless, perhaps; except to her.

"You remember when he shot it, don't you?" she said.

"Yes. It was a great day."

"A great day. We were proud of him. He was very young."

"Yes."

"He was very young to know how to mount the bird."
"Yes." I nodded. He had so wanted to please his mother.

"And, however, when he died he was young. Too young to have changed much from the boy he was. Is that not so, Tommy?"

"Yes." All this was true, but she had not known the boy he was.

"Was he the same boy when he died, Tommy? Was he content; was he in love with life; was he brave?"

The question twisted itself in my bowels, made me lean forward. He had been none of those things, perhaps, and yet, he had been no real coward, no more than the rest of us. But he had died in a way that made him nothing, made him without significance. I took my lie and stared at it, forced it into existence, into life.

"Perhaps he wasn't content," I said. "He couldn't have been too content—he was in the army. He accepted it as well as he could."

"Do you mean he wasn't a good soldier?"

"No, I don't mean that. I mean that no one is a good soldier. You've got to have robots for that, robots that have no interest in multiplication." The last words came without premeditation, came with sarcasm hidden but still there.

"Then what was he?" she asked.

"He was your son. He was in the army. He was capable, I suppose, of making a choice in regard to how he was to live and to die. He made his choice."

"How did he make his choice?"

There was no freedom from the answer. No matter where I turned, I found her waiting, waiting in my lie, waiting for me to form the hero in the air before her, waiting for me to wave my hands and cry "abracadabra." I folded my hands together in my lap and leaned back into the chair, avoiding, this time, both her and the owl.

"He made his choice in the only possible way he could. He chose what might be called a sense of honor over the life he was leading." Who could call me a liar then? Perhaps her son had
chosen death, just as he had, through some alchemy, been denied life. What was the truth and what was not?

"Yes, but how?" She had leaned forward again, resting her two hands on the cane. Her nose thrust outward from her face, curved, sharp, rapacious, threatening.

"By dying."

"Yes, I know he died. I want to know how he died. I want to know how my son died. Tell me, Tommy. Tell me everything."

"We sat there in the dark, waiting for nothing in particular, not even waiting for our turn at sleep. We weren't afraid because, as I have said, there was nothing to be afraid of. Someone, across the ravine, loaded the machine gun. I could hear the bolt come back and slide forward. You have to do that twice in order to load it. That made me look at my carbine. It was against the tire beside me. Your son had his rifle over his knees.

"Well, we waited still. One of the fellows with us crawled under the truck and went to sleep or at least tried to go to sleep. After a while we didn't talk any more. We just waited.

"Then, of course, was when it happened. They had come down the ravine, between us and the machine gun. One of them threw a grenade. It went under the truck. Neither I nor your son was hurt then. The fellow under the truck... Across the ravine they let loose with the machine gun, shooting at the darkness, just shooting, never touching anything, although whoever was shooting must have simply hung on to the trigger. Your son and I lay on the ground. I prayed and I suppose he did. I couldn't reach my carbine. I don't know whether he had his rifle or not. Finally the machine gun went quiet and someone yelled at us but we didn't dare answer.

"Another grenade came over. I could see it. Their grenades sometimes spurted fire. When it went off it filled my leg with innumerable little pellets. I couldn't move. I thought I was going
to die. I told your son to run for help, although God knows that help was already on the way. The machine gun was going again and I wasn't sure he heard me. But he got up and ran, and when he ran they shot him, shot him as he ran."

My whole creation was there between us now, a maze of shining lies that glittered and spangled in the gloom. And now that it was built, I looked at it with pleasure, with pride in my ability to create such an artifice out of memories that were so disparate, so meaningless one without the other. Her son had died, but I had given him life again. And I had killed him again, so very neatly.

"Is that all?" she asked. Her mouth was open as though she needed air.

"Little more. In the morning we carried him down the hill and buried him. At least they carried him. They had to carry me too."

"Would you like some tea?" she asked.

I started. The question, so irreconcilable with what I had been talking about, clashed down about my ears almost as though it were bringing my building down with it. She waited, staring, unblinking. I nodded my head, unable to answer, unwilling to trust my voice.

"Mrs. Spears!" she called. We waited without talking until Mrs. Spears came. "You may bring the tea, Mrs. Spears."

"In a moment."

The old woman continued to stare at me, still unblinking, her wordless mouth open, rigidly open. I could say nothing.

Mrs. Spears brought the tea, rolling it in on a little table which she stopped beside the old woman's chair.

"That'll be all, thank you," the old woman said. Mrs. Spears went out again, backing through the door behind the old woman, her face puzzled and unhappy.

The old woman poured the tea and held a cup out towards me. I went across to get it, afraid before her eyes. She gave it to me,
however, and let me return to my chair, and then we both sat in
the long silence, drinking the tea, she staring at me, I shifting my
eyes from her to the naked floor and then to the owl behind her.

“How did he die?” she demanded abruptly, dropping her cup
to the little table with a lonely clatter.

I stared back at her, trying to force my lie upon her. “As I told
you,” I said. “How else?”

“I don’t know how else,” she said, her voice rising. She gripped
the cane across her knees, pressing it down with both hands.

I had no retreat, no manner of evading her. And I was too
weak, too vacillating. There was nothing to do but persist and
persistence was suddenly absurd, suddenly vain. The effort was
empty; it was terrifying. If, in my sin of goodness, I were to be
caught, it would be more than pain. It would be evil. But where
was the evil: the construct I had achieved, or she, furiously rip­
ing it apart? Or either?

She came forward in her chair, and the network of lines in her
face suddenly flashed out of the gloom. My hands came up in­
instinctively. I held them out to her, the palms stiff, stiff but in
reality paper, and I turned away, trying to feel the light upon my
face.

She sighed then, a rustle of wind in the darkness, and I watched
her sink backwards into the chair, a gray fish slowly dropping
downwards into the sea, down into the impenetrable, blue-black
water. It was absurd, it was vain.

“You would lie to an old woman?” she said.

“No,” I said. “No.”

“Yes,” she said.

I was revolted with the whole thing, with the insubstantial pag­
eant of my creating, with her melancholy wish to know, to know,
and her inability to believe. Did she then wish to have this as her
food but found it unpalatable?

“How can I believe you?” she asked.
“Why not?” I said, struggling against my need to confess, to have done with it all.

She shifted her body, lifting herself with her thin arms. I waited tensely, squeezing the teacup in my hands.

“It was kind of you,” she said. “You can’t remember dates, but you can remember everything else.”

“Yes,” I said. “But that’s simple. It’s nothing. It’s a psychological peculiarity.”

“Yes,” she said in return. “I believe you.” Her hands, in her lap, fluttered up and down.

I set the teacup on the floor, hearing, in its jiggling rataplan of noise, the swaying tip and crash of my lie, and then I looked at the floor, seeing the building lying dead and cold there between the old woman and me.

“My son was a soldier and a hero,” she said.

“Yes,” I answered.

She turned her wheel chair about slowly and then, with one great sweep of her cane, caught the owl just at the neck with the tip. There was a burst of feathers and the head flew off and, sailing across the room, crashed into the glass door of the china closet against the far wall. Glass tinkled. The owl’s body toppled reluctantly, revolved on its bar until, with a whisper of air, it fell, fluttering, to the floor.

“My God!” I said.

She whirled back to me, her cane in the air, her mouth open. But once again she collapsed back into her chair, only her hands alive with their incessant white quiver.

“How did he die?” she repeated.

“As I told you,” I said.

“No,” she said, “the truth.” Her cane tip came up before my face and I swayed with it. “He was a coward,” she said. “He died running away.” Her voice rose and trembled.

“No, my God, no!” I cried. There was no light in the room, no
escape. How had he died? Had she killed him? "He caught some damned disease and died from it. He died before we ever saw any action. It was all a mistake."

"You lie again!" she screamed.

"No," I said, "no."

"Yes, yes, yes!" She pushed herself towards me, the one hand attempting to propel the wheel chair, the other waving the cane. Her mouth was wide open now, her thin, white hair falling forward across her face.

"Please," I said, "please." I stood up and caught the cane away from her. She had no strength. She was rigid in her chair: old ghost of memory. Mrs. Spears, coming into the room behind me, caught me by the arm, crying, "Go, go, go!" I shook my head. The old woman stared at me. "That is the truth?" she said.

"Yes," I answered.

Her teeth gleamed then. She must have meant it as a laugh, but it was a twisted gurgle of sound. "He died running away," she said.

I let Mrs. Spears push me out the door. Shaking, my heart beating heavily, I went down the hall to the front door, hearing, there behind me, the hiss of the old woman's breath.