

School was finally out and I was standing on a picnic table in our backyard getting ready for a great summer vacation when my mother walked up to me and ruined it. I was holding a pair of camouflage Japanese WWII binoculars to my eyes and focusing across her newly planted vegetable garden, and her cornfield, and over ancient Miss Volker's roof, and then up the Norvelt road, and past the brick bell tower on my school, and beyond the Community Center, and the tall silver whistle on top of the volunteer fire department to the most distant dark blue hill, which is where the screen for the Viking drive-in movie theater had recently been erected.

Down by my feet I had laid out all the Japanese army souvenirs Dad had shipped home from the war. He had been in the navy, and after a Pacific island

invasion in the Solomons he and some other sailor buddies had blindly crawled around at night and found a bunker of dead Japanese soldiers half buried in the sand. They stripped everything military off of them and dragged the loot back to their camp. Dad had an officer's sword with what he said was real dried blood along the razor-sharp edge of the long blade. He had a Japanese flag, a sniper's rifle with a full ammo clip, a dented canteen, a pair of dirty white gloves with a scorched hole shot right through the bloody palm of the left hand, and a color-tinted photo of an elegant Japanese woman in a kimono. Of course he also had the powerful binoculars I was using.

I knew Mom had come to ruin my fun, so I thought I would distract her and maybe she'd forget what was on her mind.

"Hey, Mom," I said matter-of-factly with the binoculars still pressed against my face, "how come blood on a sword dries red, and blood on cloth dries brown? How come?"

"Honey," Mom replied, sticking with what was on her mind, "does your dad know you have all this dangerous war stuff out?"

"He always lets me play with it as long as I'm careful," I said, which wasn't true. In fact, he never let me play with it, because as he put it, "This swag will be

worth a bundle of money someday, so keep your grubby hands off it."

"Well, don't hurt yourself," Mom warned. "And if there is blood on some of that stuff, don't touch it. You might catch something, like Japanese polio."

"Don't you mean Japanese *beetles*?" I asked. She had an invasion of those in her garden that were winning the plant war.

She didn't answer my question. Instead, she switched back to why she came to speak to me in the first place.

"I just got a call from Miss Volker. She needs a few minutes of your time in the morning, so I told her I'd send you down."

I gazed at my mom through the binoculars but she was too close to bring into focus. Her face was just a hazy pink cupcake with strawberry icing.

"And," she continued, "Miss Volker said she would give you a little *something* for your help, but I don't want you to take any money. You can take a slice of pie but no money. We never help neighbors for cash."

"Pie? That's all I get?" I asked. "Pie? But what if it makes her feel good to give me money?"

"It won't make *me* feel good if she gives you money," she stressed. "And it shouldn't make you feel good either. Helping others is a far greater reward than doing it for money."

"Okay," I said, giving in to her before she pushed me in. "What time?"

Mom looked away from me for a moment and stared over at War Chief, my uncle Will's Indian pony, who was grinding his chunky yellow teeth. He was working up a sweat from scratching his itchy side back and forth against the rough bark on a prickly oak. About a month ago my uncle visited us when he got a pass from the army. He used to work for the county road department and for kicks he had painted big orange and white circles with reflective paint all over War Chief's hair. He said it made War Chief look like he was getting ready to battle General Custer. But War Chief was only battling the paint which wouldn't wash off, and it had been driving him crazy. Mom said the army had turned her younger brother Will from being a "nice kid" to being a "confused jerk."

Earlier, the pony had been rubbing himself against the barbed wire around the turkey coop, but the long-necked turkeys got all riled up and pecked his legs. It had been so long since a farrier had trimmed War Chief's hooves that he hobbled painfully around the yard like a crippled ballerina. It was sad. If my uncle gave me the pony I'd take really good care of him, but he wouldn't give him up.

"Miss Volker will need you there at six in the morn-

ing," Mom said casually, "but she said you were welcome to come earlier if you wanted."

"Six!" I cried. "I don't even have to get up that early for school, and now that I'm on my summer vacation I want to sleep in. Why does she need me so early?"

"She said she has an important project with a deadline and she'll need you as early as she can get you."

I lifted my binoculars back toward the movie. The Japanese were snaking through the low palmettos toward the last few marines on Wake Island. One of the young marines was holding a prayer book and looking toward heaven, which was a sure Hollywood sign he was about to die with a slug to a vital organ. Then the scene cut to a young Japanese soldier aiming his sniper rifle, which looked just like mine. Then the film cut back to the young marine, and just as he crossed himself with the "Father, Son, and Holy—" *BANG!* He clutched his heart and slumped over.

"Yikes!" I called out. "They plugged him!"

"Is that a war movie?" Mom asked sharply, pointing toward the screen and squinting as if she were looking directly into the flickering projector.

"Not entirely," I replied. "It's more of a *love* war movie." I lied. It was *totally* a war movie except for when the soon-to-be-dead marines talked about their

girlfriends, but I threw in the word *love* because I thought she wouldn't say what she said next.

"You know I don't like you watching war movies," she scolded me with her hands on her hips. "All that violence is bad for you—plus it gets you *worked up*."

"I know, Mom," I replied with as much huffiness in my voice as I thought I could get away with. "I know."

"Do I need to remind you of your *little* problem?" she asked.

How could I forget? I was a *nosebleeder*. The moment something startled me or whenever I got over-excited or spooked about any little thing blood would spray out of my nose holes like dragon flames.

"I know," I said to her, and instinctively swiped a finger under my nose to check for blood. "You remind me of my *little* problem all day long."

"You know the doctor thinks it's the sign of a *bigger* problem," she said seriously. "If you have iron-poor blood you may not be getting enough oxygen to your brain."

"Can you just leave, please?"

"Don't be disrespectful," she said, reminding me of my manners, but I was already obsessing about my bleeding-nose problem. When Dad's old Chevy truck backfired I showered blood across the sidewalk. When I fell off the pony and landed on my butt my nose

spewed blood down over my chest. At night, if I had a disturbing dream then my nose leaked through the pillow. I swear, with the blood I was losing I needed a transfusion about every other day. Something had to be wrong with me, but one really good advantage about being dirt-poor is that you can't afford to go to the doctor and get bad news.

"Jack!" my mom called, and reached forward to poke my kneecap. "Jack! Are you listening? Come into the house soon. You'll have to get to bed early now that you have morning plans."

"Okay," I said, and felt my fun evening leap off a cliff as she walked back toward the kitchen door. I knew she was still soaking the dishes in the sink so I had a little more time. Once she was out of sight I turned back to what I had been planning all along. I lifted the binoculars and focused in on the movie screen. The Japanese hadn't quite finished off all the marines and I figured I'd be a marine too and help defend them. I knew we wouldn't be fighting the Japanese anymore because they were now our friends, but it was good to use movie enemies for target practice because Dad said I had to get ready to fight off the Russian Commies who had already sneaked into the country and were planning to launch a surprise attack. I put down the binoculars and removed the ammo clip on the sniper rifle then aimed it

toward the screen where I could just make out the small images. There was no scope on the rifle so I had to use the regular sight—the kind where you lined up a little metal ball on the far end of the barrel with the V-notch above the trigger where you pressed your cheek and eye to the cool wooden stock. The rifle weighed a ton. I hoisted it up and tried to aim at the movie screen, but the barrel shook back and forth so wildly I couldn't get the ball to line up inside the V. I lowered the rifle and took a deep breath. I knew I didn't have all night to play because of Mom, so I gave it another try as the Japanese made their final "Banzai!" assault.

I lifted the rifle again and swung the tip of the barrel straight up into the air. I figured I could gradually lower the barrel at the screen, aim, and pick off one of the Japanese troops. With all my strength I slowly lowered the barrel and held it steady enough to finally get the ball centered inside the V, and when I saw a tiny Japanese soldier leap out of a bush I quickly pulled the trigger and let him have it.

*BLAM!* The rifle fired off and violently kicked out of my grip. It flipped into the air before clattering down across the picnic table and sliding onto the ground. "Oh sweet cheeze-us!" I wailed, and dropped butt-first onto the table. "Ohhh! Cheeze-us-crust!" I didn't know

the rifle was loaded. I hadn't put a shell in the chamber. My ears were ringing like air raid warnings. I tried to stand but was too dizzy and flopped over. "This is bad. This is bad," I whispered over and over as I desperately gripped the tabletop.

"Jaaaack!" I heard my mother shriek and then the screen door slammed behind her.

"If I'm not already dead I soon will be," I said to myself.

She sprinted across the grass and mashed through a bed of peonies and lunged toward me like a crazed animal. Before I could drop down and hide under the picnic table she pounced on me. "Oh . . . my . . . God!" she panted, and grabbed at my body as I tried to wiggle away. "Oh dear Lord! There's blood! You've been shot! Where?" Then she gasped and pointed directly at my face. Her eyes bugged out and her scream was so high-pitched it was silent.

I tasted blood. "Oh cheeze!" I shouted. "I've been shot in the mouth!"

With the dish towel still clutched in her hand she pressed it against my forehead.

"Am I dying?" I blubbered. "Is there a hole in my head? Am I breathing?"

I felt her roughly wiping my face while trying to get a clear look at my wound. "Oh, good grief," she

suddenly groaned, and flung her bloodied arms down to her side.

"What?" I asked desperately. "Am I too hurt to be fixed?"

"It's just your *nose problem!*" she said, exasperated. "Your dang bloody nose!" Then she pressed the towel to my face again. "Hold it there tightly," she instructed, "I'll go get another one."

She stomped back toward the house, and I sat there for a few torturous minutes with one hand pressing the towel against my nose and breathed deeply through my mouth. Even through the blood I could smell the flinty gunpowder from the bullet. Dad is going to kill me, I thought. He'll court-martial me and sentence me to death by firing squad. Before I could fully imagine the tragic end of my life I heard an ambulance wailing up the Norvelt road. It took a turn directly into Miss Volker's driveway and stopped. The driver jumped out and sprinted toward her house and jerked open the porch door.

That's not good, I thought and turned cold all over. If I shot Miss Volker through the head Mom will never believe it was an accident. She'll think I was just trying to get out of going to her house in the morning.

I lowered myself down onto the picnic bench and then onto the grass which was slippery from my blood.

I trotted across the yard to our screen door. I was still bleeding so I stood outside and dripped on the doormat. Please, please, please, don't let me have shot her, I thought over and over. I knew I had to say something to Mom, so I gathered up a little courage and as casually as possible said, "Um, there happens to be an ambulance at Miss Volker's house."

But Mom was a step ahead of me. "Don't worry," she said right back. "I just now called down there. She's fine. You didn't shoot her if that is what you are thinking."

"I was," I admitted. "I thought I shot her dead!"

"It wasn't that," she said, now frowning at me from the other side of the door. "The shock from hearing the rifle go off caused her to drop her hearing aid down the toilet—I guess she had it turned up too high."

"So why'd she call an ambulance? Did she get her arm stuck going after it?"

"No. She called the plumber, but he's also the ambulance driver so he made an emergency call. Really," she said with some admiration, "it's good that people around this town know how to help out in different ways."

"Hey, Mom," I said quietly before going to wash my face at the outside work sink, "please don't tell Dad about the gun accident." He was out of town but you

never knew when he'd finish a construction job and suddenly show up.

"I'll consider it," she said without much promise. "But until he returns you are grounded—and if you do something this stupid again you'll barely live to regret it. Understand?"

I understood. I really didn't want Dad knowing what had happened because he would blow a fuse. On top of him not wanting me to touch his stuff he was always trying to teach me about gun safety, and I figured after this gun episode he might give up on me and I didn't want him to.

"Here," she said, and handed me a wad of tissues so I could roll them into pointy cones to plug up my nose holes. "And before bed I want you to take a double dose of your iron drops," she stressed. "The doctor doesn't want you to become anemic."

"It's just a nosebleed," I said glumly.

"There may be more to it," she replied. "Besides, given that stunt you just pulled, it's in your best interest to do exactly what I say."

I did exactly what she said and cleaned all my blood off and took my medicine and went to bed, but firing that rifle had me all wound up. How could that bullet have gotten into the chamber? The ammo clip was off. I thought about it as I tossed back and forth, but

couldn't come up with an answer. Plus, it was hard to fall asleep with my nose stuffed with massive wads of bloody tissue while breathing through my dry mouth. I turned on my bedside lamp and picked a book from one of the tall stacks Mom had given me. She did some charity auction work for the old elementary school over in Hecla which was closing, and in return they gave her a bunch of books including their beat-up Landmark history series, which had dozens of titles about famous explorers. I was a little too drifty in school so she thought it was a good idea that I read more books, and she knew I liked history and adventure stories.

I started reading about Francisco Pizarro's hard-to-believe conquest of the Incas in Peru. In 1532 Pizarro and fewer than two hundred men captured Atahualpa, the Inca chief, who had an army of fifty thousand soldiers. Pizarro's men fired off an old flintlock blunderbuss and the noise and smoke scared the Inca army and Pizarro jumped on Atahualpa and held a sword to his neck and in that very instant the entire Inca empire was defeated. Amazing!

Pizarro then held Atahualpa hostage for a ransom of gold so the Incas brought Pizarro piles of golden life-size people and animals and plants—all sculpted from solid gold as if the Incas had the Midas touch while

they strolled through their fantastic cities and farms and jungles and everything they even gently brushed up against turned into pure gold. But no one will ever again see that life-size golden world because once the conquistadors got their greedy hands on the gold they melted it down. They turned all those beautiful golden sculptures into boring Spanish coins and shipped boatloads of them back to the king and queen of Spain, who loved the gold but wanted even more.

Pizarro then raided all the temples and palaces and melted down the gold he found and sent that back. Still, it wasn't enough for the king and queen. Pizarro even dug up the dead when it was discovered that they were buried with gold. He had their jewelry melted down and sent back to Spain. But it still wasn't enough. So Pizarro's men forced the Inca people to work harder in the gold mines. They melted the gold ore and sent that back to Spain, and when there was no more gold Pizarro broke his promise and strangled the Inca king. He turned the Inca people into slaves and they died by the thousands from harsh work and disease.

Finally, one of Pizarro's own men sneaked up and stabbed him to death because he thought Pizarro was cheating him out of his share of gold for helping to conquer the Incas. Gold had driven the conquistadors crazy and they ended up killing themselves and all of

those poor Incas. It was a really tragic story. I just wished I had been with Atahualpa and his army when the conquistadors fired off that blunderbuss. I could have told Atahualpa that I had fired off a rifle too and that it was scary, but not to panic. Then we could have ordered the Inca army to capture the gold-crazed conquistadors and saved the Inca civilization, and history would have been different. If only . . .