Taboo

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Soldiers

In the late fifties, my boyhood friends and I hid from Nazis. We lived in Tempe, Arizona, at that time a small farming and college town with a single, hooked main drag running south from the dry Salt River bed, which marked the community's northern edge. World War II little more than a decade past, swastikas and Nazi salutes fired our imaginations far more than the newer, less tangible Commies. When we played war, we looked for secret hiding places, the safest being in Grady Gammage Jr.'s home. With broad concrete steps up to a front porch enclosed with tall, narrow, multipaned windows, this dignified two-story house was unlike any other I knew, probably a Queen Anne or Anglo-territorial from the turn of the century. All my other friends lived in one-story ranch-style houses like ours.

Grady was the college president's son, the shortest boy in class, with fine black hair, parted on the side and greased to a lacquered shine, perfectly combed, as if painted on his head. I remember his face as always serious, the deep-set dark eyes and long thin nose producing angularities most people's faces take on later in adulthood. His house was the traditional President's Family Residence, at the heart of the Arizona State College campus. When I'd visit on Saturdays, an aging housekeeper whose accent made me think her German-born, and whom Grady called Gram, would fix us ham sandwiches with the crusts sliced off; she'd place these, with small cups of canned fruit and glasses of milk, on the tiny table-and-chair set in Grady's playroom. He had one whole room set aside
for toys, and a substantial, carpenter-made tree house, right on the
property, so unlike the rickety scrap-wood structures made by my
older brother and his friends in the cottonwoods that stood along­
side canals in town.

After lunch, Gram safely out of the way in the kitchen wash­
ing dishes, we’d tiptoe to the house’s central staircase. In the wall
along the upper level was what Grady called his secret door, behind
which rose a set of steps, a passageway into complete darkness
where we’d hide from the Nazi storm troopers.

Each time Grady led me to this door, I was thrilled by the
secrecy and danger, by the enormity of what was at stake, life or
death, which we comprehended only vaguely.

The passageway itself was so dark, no matter how long we
waited for our pupils to adjust, we saw nothing but absolute black,
a blackness that pressed up against our eyes. We’d touch the wall to
steady ourselves as we walked a few steps up. Then we’d sit and
whisper about whom we’d lock out and whom we’d invite to join us
and thereby save. After several minutes of this, we’d creep back
down and listen at the back of the door, making sure no one was
on the stairs before slipping out.

Another game we played just once. We were now eight. I don’t re­
member if it was a weekend or holiday, but I was home in the morn­
ing when a call came. Could someone bring Boyer to play with
Grady? the caller asked. His father had died of a heart attack, and
Grady would be spending the day at a house near ours.

I contemplated the gravity of this news, the first human
death of my life, as I rode in the back of our car. I ran my hand over
the seamed blue surface of the car seat, and tried to imagine life
without my father or mother, a desperately painful fantasy. Grady
met me at the front door. His eyes were not red from crying; his voice was steady. But I could tell he held himself in absolute reserve. Some invisible force maintained the expressions of his face, the modulations of his voice, in a middle, controlled register.

In my memory, the day unfolds without adults; no doubt I was so absorbed in my own thoughts, I failed to take notice. I don't recall who took the phone call, who drove, or why I sat alone in the back seat of the car instead of in front. I don't recall who, other than Grady, was at the house, a low, red-brick bungalow, or how Grady and I found our way to the back yard. There, both of us in a kind of trance, we played with small toy soldiers and did not talk about his father's death. We dislodged with trowels, and then lined up in two parallel columns diagonally at the center of the lawn, bricks that had circled, ornamental, several tree-wells. Then we marched battalions of army men along the brick roads.

When we got to the roads' end the first time, I was at a loss. There was no purpose to this game. We didn't have a story to go with it. We were simply doing things mechanically to keep ourselves occupied. After a pause, Grady commanded, "March back." And so we did.

At home that evening, I lay down in the cool grass of our back yard, staring up at the sky. And as the stars pierced through the growing darkness, I imagined eternity, my body hurtling through space without end, the Earth tiny, insignificant, forgettable. That night I awakened in bed sweating with fear, the sensation of an empty endlessness coursing through my limbs. The mystery and absolute finality of death had gripped me.

I didn't believe in a hereafter. I was raised without any traditional religious training. My parents had once been Mormons, my mother from a Mormon pioneer family, her mother's father fleeing U.S. marshals, settling finally in Mexico to practice polygamy in the late nineteenth century. But my parents, before I was born, stopped attending church. For years church elders dropped by unannounced
to discuss Scripture and bring us back into the fold. They seemed like comic figures to me in their uniformity—black slacks, white shirts, long dark ties, their voices steady and too sincere. Their faith struck me as something quaint left over from distant history. If I was home alone when they knocked, I wouldn’t answer. I’d run giggling from the door to the bathroom, where, by standing on the edge of the tub, I could see them out the high window. I grew to think of religion and everything associated with it, including religious painting and music, as slightly foolish.

The week of Grady Gammage Sr.’s funeral, which I did not attend, to regain my equilibrium when seized by death terrors, I created, as if by instinct, my own ritual, a private exorcism. The ritual would prove useful—and necessary—for many years.

Running to my room, lying on my back on the bed whenever the fear struck, feeling as though my body were hurtling through space, through infinity, I’d chant, “Mary had a little lamb whose fleece…” I’d stiffen my arms at my sides, my hands clenched into fists, and shut my eyes tight, chanting the whole verse over and over under my breath until my consciousness was so absorbed in the rhythm and music of the poem, death could find no place in me.

Gradually, I’d feel as if my body were returning, falling from space now toward Earth. Aware finally of where I actually lay, bound to the planet, my arms and eyelids would relax a little and I’d begin an internal journey. My body would feel as if it were shrinking, or as if I had two bodies, one inside the other. The inner body would grow smaller and smaller, falling into my real body, into the inner space of my own empty self. I’d begin a new chant to call it back, a counting chant: “onetwothreeonetwothreeonetwothreeonetwothreeonetwo…”—until the words were pure sound, a filament of sound running through my veins.

At a point of near unconsciousness, I’d explode into a standing position and walk frantically to and fro in my bedroom, shaking
my hands and head to expel the evil feeling of oblivion, anxiety draining from my muscles. If it was night, I could now lie down and sleep. If I'd suffered a daytime terror, I'd look for somebody, anybody I knew, and strike up a conversation in hopes of reentering the normal, unself-conscious rhythm of life.