

2-27-70

-A Short Story

by

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This is a true story. The portrayed events took place as I remember them.

For Jan, Nicole, and Scarlett

February 27, 1970 – a day I always remember for both good and bad reasons. That day was Tat’s 58th birthday, and every year, the family woke to the aroma of fresh bread and birthday cake baking in the oven. *Tata* was dad in Polish and “Tat” was how we referred to my dad. Mom worked in the dress department of Federal Department Store on Harper Avenue, and always arranged to have the day off to prepare a special family dinner and birthday cake. If Tat’s birthday fell on a weekday, Mom waited for all the kids to return home from another grueling day of Catholic school, before decorating the dining room. Our arrival by three o’clock always gave us more than enough time to finish before Tat got home at five.

We had fun helping Mom with the special decorations, which she brought out and reused every year – birthday signs, banners, garland, two pop-up table centerpieces, balloons, and finally, a dozen small blue candles for the top

of a chilled sheet cake. Mom's only investment, other than time, was the cost of a small bag of balloons for us three kids to blow up.

I will never forget when my younger brother, George, first started helping us. He was a remarkable sight, struggling to fill his rubbery spheres. We first noticed his eyes growing wide and then pushing outward from their sockets as he attempted to blow up a balloon. My sister, Christine, gasped, thinking they might pop out. His cheeks expanded to a level unseen in the past, and his beet red face darkened the more he exerted himself. Yet, the small balloon refused to expand and let his breath gain entry. This scene was the personification of the great Louie Armstrong when he performed live on the Ed Sullivan Show back in '69. Christine and I laughed hysterically at little George. Just when we thought he might succeed, we heard a "Pfft" sound, and watched as the limp piece of rubber fell to his feet. Quite determined, George tried several more times before finally giving up. All at once, he started crying and plopped himself down onto the floor, his face bathed in humiliation and defeat.

When Mom heard the crying, she called out a warning from the kitchen, insisting we help our younger brother if we knew what was good for us. Not wanting to experience

her wrath, Christine and I quickly stretched and started a few balloons for him. Content with his success, he soon discovered that it was more fun to fill them halfway and release them like rockets through the air.

A large bowl of Mom's potato salad, our family favorite, chilled in the fridge. Her special recipe included chopped eggs, sliced hot dogs, tomatoes, pickles, parsley, and mayonnaise, mixed in a pot of cooked potatoes. Every year, I tried sneaking a spoonful of this delicious concoction before dinner, but like the Lay's potato chip commercial said, "Betcha can't eat just one." The voices in my head always encouraged me to take another spoonful, because it was so good. I limited myself to three spoonsful as that amount missing from the bowl was barely noticeable. Whenever Mom caught me, she usually smacked me across the knuckles with whatever she had in hand. Once I reached my teens, the heel of her shoe became her weapon of choice. The target was usually my back, shoulders, or head, and after a single whack, that spot stung terribly and welted to a pink and purple bruise. Still, it was worth the risk.

At four o'clock, Mom returned to the kitchen to prepare the evening meal. Within fifteen minutes, a mouth-watering aroma permeated through the house. When peeking into the

kitchen, we could see Mom standing at the stove working her magic. Heating up on the left burner, Polish sausages bounced around excitedly in a five-quart pot of boiling water over medium heat. On the right side, an assortment of pierogi (*Polish dumplings filled with a choice of sauerkraut, cheese, or potato*) filled a fifteen-inch black skillet. Two dozen of the small wedge-shaped pieces simmered in a sea of steaming butter. Mom usually cooked all three varieties, but since they were unidentifiable, it was always a crapshoot when trying to pick your favorite from the skillet. If you selected wrong, you were stuck with your first choice. Our house rule was that once something was on your plate it had “cooties,” and no one wanted to trade for it.

The stage was set, and we were ready to pounce on Tat when he walked through the front door. Most of the time we did not allow him the chance to even take off his coat, but he loved the attention. His birthday was our favorite day of the year, next to Christmas, of course. We prepared handmade cards and other simple crafts as gifts.

Unfortunately, on this day, seventeen plus years of tradition ended. At six a.m. on a school day, my mother startled me when she yelled up the stairs. “Johnnie! It is time to get up. We are waiting.” The door at the bottom of

the steps closed and I heard her footsteps walking across the kitchen floor toward the front of the house.

I rose quickly and sat on the side of the bed; my head felt like a rock and the room spun slightly. I remembered tossing and turning all night, trying unsuccessfully to fall asleep with so much on my mind. I was lucky to get a couple of hours of rest.

As I made my way down the stairs, no smell of fresh bread or homemade birthday cake wafted through the air. Instead, I heard subdued chatter coming from the living room; it sounded like the whole family was there, although I had no idea why.

Oh yes, remember at the beginning of the story I said that this date held both good and bad memories? Well, 2-27-70 was also the date I became a soldier in the U.S. Army, and it was my fault for allowing it to happen.

My number in the annual draft lottery was low; a 4-F deferment as a full-time college student protected me from the draft. I turned eighteen soon after graduating high school and my best friend's father got me a job at one of the larger automotive suppliers in the area. As a union shop, the hourly wage for a production worker was comparable to what the "Big Three" paid their employees.

In the middle of summer, many employees in the shop took vacations. As the lowest-ranking employee, I found myself forced to work 65 - 70 hours a week on the afternoon shift to cover the absences. I was a probationary employee and did not want to give the company an excuse to fire me for refusing to work the overtime.

In August, I enrolled in my local community college for the fall semester, signing up for twelve credit hours, the minimum to earn a 4-F draft rating for a full-time student.

When September rolled around, the same work schedule continued. Business was good and the company hired more employees, but until new workers were professionally trained, the rest of us had to work mandatory overtime until two thirty a.m. The money was great, and since I was living at home, most, if not all my paycheck went into the bank. Soon, I had earned enough to buy a brand-new car, a 1970 Chevrolet Camaro. Life was grand.

As most of my classes began at eight a.m., I found it difficult to function with so little sleep. Nobody cut me any slack, so my only option was to keep going.

By mid-October, I was dragging ass and my grades slipped; I was barely holding on to a C average. Still a probationary employee, missing work was a surefire way to

termination, but cutting class put me at risk of losing my student deferment. Something had to give. I had to make a choice: school or money? What was best for me? After debating the voices in my head, the job and money won out.

I missed classes and finally dropped out before Thanksgiving. I sadly forfeited my semester tuition, but it was not a big deal. I was making top dollar, enjoying a new car, and getting a full night's sleep, all while remaining confident about the opportunity to choose easier classes and work a more flexible schedule after Christmas.

Wrong!

It happened so quickly! Registration at the college went well and I managed to secure a decent schedule of classes that would not conflict with my long hours at work. Unfortunately, the college had already notified the Selective Service that I was no longer a full-time student. Uncle Sam did not waste any time, and several days before Christmas, I received a postcard informing me of the change to my draft status from 4-F to 1-A. Without missing a beat, two days later, another postcard arrived from the Selective Service, instructing me to report for a physical examination. Merry Christmas! What a shocker! Surely this

was a mistake! Hell, I was starting school again in a couple of weeks.

I decided to take my schedule and tuition receipt to the Selective Service building downtown and appeal the decision. Well, guess what? Neither document meant squat! Every person I spoke with informed me that nothing would change. It was my choice to quit school during the fall semester, and therefore, I should have known the consequences of doing so. I saw more people shrug their shoulders and show me the palms of their hands than I had ever experienced in my 18 years of life.

When I arrived for my physical examination, I informed the doctor that I had a bum knee from a football injury I had sustained the prior year, a severely sprained ankle from basketball, serious food allergies, and terrible sinuses due to a family curse. The doctor, an old, bald guy with a potbelly hanging over his belt, examined my knee and ankle, then asked me to walk across the room and hop a few times. As for the allergies, he said the condition was inherent to those living in Michigan. In another room, I read letters incorrectly on the wall chart, and when checked for a hernia, I giggled. They all saw through my bullshit. The staff's only interest was to get me processed through

the long lines along with everyone else. At the final station, they told me they would be in touch.

The dreaded postcard arrived at the beginning of February, informing me that I had passed my physical examination with excellence, and that I was to report to Fort Wayne on the west side of Detroit, for induction in three weeks - February 27, 1970.

Friends and co-workers sympathized; some suggested I flee to Canada, while others who served in WWII and Korea, told me it was my patriotic duty and wished me well.

I was able to get a full refund for my school tuition and signed a leave of absence request at my job. By law, the company had to rehire me to my former position after I had fulfilled my military obligation. Those three weeks passed quickly. One day I was sitting on the side of my bed, and the next day, it was time to go.