

To The Red, White, and Blue We Belong

By Tom Ray

The July sun was punishing. A lot of people had gone to the beach, but for a suburban Fourth of July there were still quite a few people along the parade route. There was an open space beside the guy, which was how Paul Martin and his ten-year-old son Josh happened to stand next to him. As they'd come up beside him he'd looked at them briefly, nodding at Paul and Joshua in turn.

Paul had felt comfortable in the heat, in sandals, shorts, a faded Ocean City souvenir t-shirt, and an old Nationals baseball cap. As usual at the end of a long weekend, he was wearing three days of beard. Now he felt grubby, standing next to this man in his short-sleeved, oxford-blue, button-down shirt and khaki slacks. The shirt and slacks were pressed, and the light gray running shoes spotless. His arms were muscular, matching his broad shoulders and trim waist. He wore a straw fedora, and the hair on the sides and back of his head was neatly trimmed, with only hints of gray. He looked to be in his early forties, a little older than Paul. Aviator sunglasses on his tan, clean-shaven face gave him a mildly threatening look. He carried a wooden walking stick with a brass tip and a derby handle, the kind of handle that comes off of the shaft at right angles before forming a stylish curve. The cane seemed more of a fashion accessory than a prosthetic aid.

They were about a mile from the parade's starting point, and those local parades always started late. Father and son had been chatting for forty-five minutes before they heard the first strains of music approaching. Josh was patient for his age, but his excitement showed how anxious he'd been for the parade to start.

"Listen! Do you hear it? I can hear the band!"

"Why, I think you're right." Paul had already heard it, but he wanted to make it seem like Josh had heard it first.

The cheering of the crowd along the route grew as the band, and the American flag,

drew near. It was a high school band, reduced in size due to vacation. The man had started tapping his cane against the sidewalk, then picked it up, grasping the middle of the shaft like a drum major's baton, and moving it up and down in time with the music. Paul saw Josh glance at the man and smile. They cheered as the flag went by, and the guy whistled with his pinky and index finger in his mouth. That was the manly way to whistle, which Paul had never mastered.

After that first band came a float from the local 4H Club. It consisted of a flatbed trailer pulled by a tractor. Four teenagers sat on a few bales of hay on the trailer, the kids holding jars of canned food, sewing projects, and a rabbit and chicken, the only feasible livestock in this bedroom community. Next came a group of marchers from a children's dance studio, ranging in age from too small to perform comfortably on the hot asphalt, to too old to be impressed by a parade. The man had brought the tip of his cane back down to the sidewalk, holding the handle with both of his hands in front of him. Another high school marching band approached, and he stepped off the curb and marched along next to the curb a few steps, then turned and marched in the other direction, past his original spot, then turned again, pumping his cane like a drum major, and smiling. Paul was amused, and saw Josh smiling, as well as others in the crowd. After the band had gone by he returned to his spot next to Paul and Josh.

When another band came by he marched in front of the crowd, but now holding the cane like a marching soldier carries a rifle, the handle resting upside down in his hand like the butt end of a rifle. As the man turned the stick didn't come close to anybody in the crowd, but Paul and several others flinched. Paul glanced at Josh, who was staring at the man now. People were glaring at the guy, whose pleasant smile had turned into a stern frown as he marched. A man in the crowd said, in a low voice, "What's he trying to prove? If he wants to march, he ought to join a marching band or drill team or something."

Convertibles with VIPs waving at the crowd came by, then another float, this one from a barber shop quartet society. The base of the trailer bed and wheels were hidden by maroon crepe paper, with the name of the society spelled out in gold-colored foil glued to the crepe paper. Four men in red and white striped sport coats and straw boaters were belting out

snappy tunes, barely audible above the band music and crowd noise. That was followed by marchers from a local civic club, all male in matching blazers, sweating profusely.

The guy had resumed his observation spot next to Paul and Josh. The strains of “The Stars and Stripes Forever” could be heard coming down the street now. All of the bands had been playing Sousa, but this was the first to play “Stars and Stripes.” He stepped off the curb and stood at attention briefly facing the parade. He rested the cane on the ground like a rifle, then placed it on his shoulder, turned and marched a few steps in parallel with the band, turned and marched the other way, reversed again and stopped in front of Paul and Josh, facing them. He began maneuvering the cane the way Paul had seen the soldiers handle their rifles at ceremonies in Washington, picking it up, placing it on one shoulder, then the other, resting it on the ground, spinning it in front of him.

Paul had felt the movement of air against his face with the first spinning of the cane, and his nervousness peaked when the cane flew up into the air. He thought it had flown directly above him, and he was sure it was going to land on his head. Paul actually raised his hand to protect himself, but the guy caught the cane before Paul’s hand went above his head. Finally the man set the stick on the ground, handle down.

The stern expression gave way to a loud laugh. “Man, that song.” He said that looking Paul directly in the eye, then looked down at Josh. “Doesn’t that song make you want to go out and kill somebody, boy?” “The Stars and Stripes Forever” was just fading away.

Paul felt like he should say something. A woman’s voice, said, “Why don’t you leave them alone?”

But the guy kept staring at Josh, and said, “What’s the matter, boy?”

“Leave my son alone.” Paul heard his voice sounding shrill.

“What’s the matter, dad? You’ve got to teach your boy to be a man. That’s what this day is about, killing people. All that march music is to make you want to go out and kill for your country.”

The woman said, “That’s not what this day is about. You’re crazy. This is about love of

country.”

“You show that love by killing for your country. The point isn’t to die for your country, but to kill for your country. ‘To the red, white, and blue we belong.’ That means you owe it to your country to kill for it.”

“Don’t tell my son that. This is about love of country.” He still sounded shrill, and felt like a wimp for echoing the woman.

“What do you think, junior? Are you ready to kill for your country?”

“I don’t know.” Josh’s words came out hesitantly, and Paul could tell he was confused and scared.

“Don’t talk to my son, you son of a bitch. Get away from us. Stay away from my son.”

The same woman spoke up. “What is this, some kind of street theater? Are you a pacifist or something?”

“This man is the pacifist, not me.” He jerked his head to indicate Paul. “He doesn’t want his son to fight for his country.”

Paul’s fear of the man was overpowered by the urge to protect Josh. “That’s a lie. You said he should kill for his country.”

“Dude, how else do you fight for your country? Our troops aren’t fighting the terrorists in a boxing ring. You fight for your country by killing bad guys. If you have to, you die for your country, but the objective is to kill for your country.”

“Shut up, asshole.” It was the voice that had first complained before about the guy’s marching. “What’s your problem? Marching around like an idiot. Why can’t you stand in the crowd like everybody else and just enjoy the music, and leave us all alone?”

“How can you enjoy the music without marching? That music psyches me up, it makes me want to go out and kill, and if I can’t do that, at least I can march, and do a little manual of arms.”

Now several voices spoke up, and Paul heard people saying things like “shut up,” or “leave them alone,” or “get away before we call a cop.” A stout young police officer who had

been patrolling the parade route on foot approached.

“What’s up, Smitty?” The cop wore a relaxed smile, but it was obvious he was checking out the noise from this cluster as a potential problem.

“Hey, Kevin. These pacifists here don’t like me. They’re saying I’m a pacifist.” The man’s tone wasn’t humorous or ironic.

The cop remained relaxed and pleasant. “I can assure everybody here, Smitty is no pacifist.”

“He’s talking crazy, officer. He told that boy he should kill people.” It was the woman who’d been the first to speak up in support of Paul.

“I said he should kill for his country. That’s true, isn’t it, Kevin?” Smitty wore a slight smile now, but his eyes were narrowed in a menacing way. His question to the cop sounded like a challenge.

“Oh, come on, Smitty. You want to come over to my car? I’ve got some lemonade, ice water, and coffee.”

“I tell you, I’d rather have a beer.”

“You know I’m on duty. Besides, no alcoholic beverages are allowed along the parade route.”

“All right, some lemonade might go good now.”

Smitty followed Kevin up the street. The woman came up to Paul and said, “You have to stand up to nuts like that. What a way to talk to your son.”

“Ol’ Josh and me had it under control, didn’t we Josh? Thanks for speaking up, though.” He was feeling better after the support from the crowd, and with Smitty gone.

A man said, “Wonder what was wrong with that jerk? He’s probably one of those police characters, always having run-ins.”

“Yeah. Probably.” Paul looked at Josh, who was staring up at him, but was smiling slightly and looked calm.

Another band was approaching, playing “El Capitan,” as the cop walked back toward

Paul and the group. He was still smiling.

“Sorry about Smitty, folks. Hope he didn’t ruin the parade for you. He wouldn’t hurt anybody. He’s a veteran.”

Paul said, “PTSD?”

“No. He did tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, but he’s OK. He just has interesting ideas.”

The woman said, “He said some very disturbing things to that boy.”

“Oh? What’d he say?”

“He just said you have to be willing to kill for your country.” Paul tried to say it offhandedly, not wanting to give away how much Smitty had scared him.

“Oh, man, that Smitty.” He shook his head, still grinning. “That’s one way of looking at it, I suppose. Not a good choice of words, though, for sure. I’ll caution him about that. You all enjoy the parade.” He gave one of those casual salutes, between a military salute and a wave, and continued on down the street.

As they walked to their car after the parade Josh said, “What did he mean, I have to kill somebody?”

“He’s just a nut. You don’t have to kill anybody.”

“But he said for my country.”

“Yeah, I heard him. That’s not true.”

“What if there’s a war?”

“Yeah, if there’s a war, and if you get drafted, you might be put in a situation where you’d be in danger, and might have to kill somebody. But all of that is pretty remote.”

“But a patriotic citizen has to be willing to kill for his country.”

“No.”

“But if a citizen had to go into the Army, he would have to be ready to kill for his country, and die for his country, right?”

“You could say it that way, although I think that would be overstating it.”

“What does that mean, ‘overstating’?”

“I mean I just don’t think it very likely you’ll have to die for your country, or kill for it.”

“Killing is better, isn’t it, than dying?”

“He made it sound like America goes around killing people, which isn’t the case.”

“But we have to kill more of them to win the war, don’t we?”

“Yeah, in that sense it’s true.”

“So Smitty was right in a way.”

“In a way, but he’s kind of messed up.”

“Is that why you didn’t go into the Army, you didn’t want to kill people?”

“No. If I’d been called on to go fight for my country, I would have.”

“Why weren’t you called on?”

“Fortunately, there were enough people who wanted to go fight that I didn’t have to.”

“I hope I never have to go. Still, like Smitty said, the music makes you want to go fight.”

“It stirs up your emotions. The way I’d say it is, it makes you love your country.”

“Love it enough to kill for it.”

“If you insist.”

“It’s just what Smitty said, and he’s been to war, the cop said.”

“Yeah. OK.” He gently squeezed Josh’s shoulder as the boy climbed into the car.

The End

Tom Ray bio: Tom Ray, a native of Tennessee, entered Federal civil service following military service that included a tour in Vietnam. He retired from civil service after a thirty-five year career spent in the Washington, D.C., area. He currently resides in Knoxville, Tennessee. His fiction has been published in New Pop Lit and Penny Shorts.