

Homecomings

Larry Day

At Eastside School in Idaho Falls, they gave us a full hour for lunch; and like most of the kids, I went home each day. Mom always had my lunch ready. I'd gulp it down and then hightail it back to play in the schoolyard until the bell called us back to class.

One noonday, just after I finished eating, I ran out the door. On the sidewalk I almost bumped into a big kid wearing a Western Union Telegraph cap.

We never got telegrams.

"Is this the Martin house?" he said, looking up at the house number.

"Yes."

He shifted his gaze downward. "Is your mama home?"

"Yes."

"Telegram," he said.

I walked back through the house to the kitchen. Mother was standing over the sink, washing the lunch dishes. "I thought you'd gone back to school," she said. "Hurry along now."

I said, "It's Western Union."

A lunch plate plopped back into the dishpan and water splashed onto the drain board.

Mother moved sideways to the kitchen counter and took two deep breaths. She put both hands flat on the counter. It seemed a long time be-

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fore she straightened up. Then she put her arm around my shoulder. We walked to the front door.

"It's a telegram from the War Department, Ma'am." The Western Union kid shifted his weight from one foot to the other and stared at the door frame about two feet above Mom's head.

"How bad is it?"

"Killed or wounded, ma'am," the kid said. "Do you want me to call anybody?"

Pause.

"No. I'll take it."

He handed Mom the yellow envelope and backed away. He turned just in time to avoid falling backward off the porch.

Mom and I stood there and watched him hop on his bike and ride away.

I was almost nine, but I didn't understand exactly what was happening. I knew the Western Union boy was talking about Rob, my older brother. He'd left for boot camp when I was seven and had come home on a furlough before they shipped him overseas. Mom wrote to him every day.

Rob used to read to me. He'd finished *Treasure Island* when he left for boot camp. We read part of *Kidnapped* when he was home on furlough. I still didn't know what happened to David Balfour.

The boy from Western Union pedaled down the street and out of sight. Mom and I moved inside and sat on the couch. Mom took her hand off my shoulder.

She opened the envelope and took out the telegram, but she didn't unfold it.

"Killed or wounded," she said. Mom stared across the room. There was an old upright piano with pictures of the family on top.

She rubbed the telegram between her thumb and forefinger. Then quickly, in one smooth movement, she unfolded the telegram and held it up. I leaned over to see the words printed on the thin strips of paper pasted on the telegram.

"We regret to inform you that your son, Robert Charles Martin, has been wounded in action . . ."

"He's . . . alive. He's alive!" Mom smiled and whispered, "He's alive," about twenty times. Then the joy and relief began to drain from her face.

"Wounded," she said. "What does that mean? Rob's wounded. Where? How bad? Why don't they say more?"

I said, "I don't know."

Mom must have forgotten I was there. She sat up, composed her face and said, "Hon! You're way late getting back to school. Run fast." I walked to the door. "Wait," she called, "I'll write a note for Mrs. Stevenson."

* * *

We learned later that Rob's unit had crossed the Remagen Bridge during the Battle of the Bulge. He'd been fired on and took three bullets in his left arm.

One night several weeks later, the phone rang, and Mom answered. Dad was out doing church work. He was the high priests' group leader for our ward.

"Hello. Yes, we'll accept the charges. Rob? Rob!"

Rob was calling from Bushnell Army Hospital in Brigham City. "I want to talk to him," I said.

"Wait!" she said.

I tried to listen in on the conversation; but as they talked, Mom's voice became very quiet. She hung up the phone and stared at the pictures on the piano. "Rob's in an amputation ward."

I went out and sat on the front steps. After a few minutes, Mom came out and sat beside me. We looked at the night sky.

Mom said, "When he's an old man, he still won't have a hand." Then she cried. After that, Mom wrote to Rob at the hospital, and Rob called home some. Once I heard Mom tell Dad that Rob was having trouble learning how to use his prosthesis. I didn't know what she meant.

* * *

Months later Rob came home from the hospital. It was cold. Mom, Dad, and I shivered outside the Greyhound depot as people got off the bus. The motor rumbled, and a white cloud billowed from the exhaust. A fat woman heaved herself from the bottom step and moved away from the door.

Rob was standing behind her on the second step.

My eyes went immediately to his left arm. His left hand was thrust into the front pocket of his Levis. A short stainless steel rod protruded

above the seam of the pocket. A thin cable, attached to the steel rod, disappeared beneath the sleeve of his denim jacket.

Mom hugged Rob hard. She kissed him, then buried her face in his chest. She just held on.

Rob's right arm was around her, but his left hand was still thrust into the top of his Levi pocket. Then his left arm was around Mom too, and I saw the hook.

I was standing right in front of Dad. I heard a kind of blowing sound like you make when you're trying to warm your hands, but Dad's hands were gripping my shoulders.

A rod, a cable, and a stainless steel hook were part of Rob now.

Mom let go of Rob, and Dad and I hugged him. People got on the bus, the engine roared, and the bus pulled away from the depot.

Mom asked, "Would you like something?"

"I could use a short beer," Rob said, and pulled a pack of cigarettes from the front pocket of his jacket. With his thumb on the opening, he popped up a cigarette and took it between his lips. He replaced the pack and fished a lighter out of his right-hand Levi pocket.

I stared. I had never seen Rob smoke before. As we walked to the car, I kept sneaking guilty peeks at Rob's right hand, holding the cigarette, and his left, stuffed into his Levi pocket. Dad drove. Rob got in the front seat, Mom and I sat in the back. Before we pulled away from the curb, I heard a "scruuutch." Rob had pulled open the ashtray on the dashboard. Nobody had ever used it.

"You've picked up some pretty bad habits, son," said Dad.

"I've been in some pretty bad places, Dad," said Rob.

There was a long pause.

"It's sure to snow by morning," said Dad.

* * *

After he came home, Rob and I slept in surplus army bunk beds out on the closed-in back porch.

When he got up, Rob would put his arm through a leather upper sleeve and insert it into the prosthesis. With a wool sock on it, the stump fit snugly. Rob would put a harness over his head. One side went across his chest and the other across his back. They met under his right armpit like a policeman's shoulder holster. He put his shirt on over the harness.

When Rob flexed his right shoulder muscles, the movement pulled

the cable that ran behind his back and down his arm. That's how he opened the hook. He could hold a matchbook with the hook, extract a match with his other hand, and light a cigarette.

I expected I'd enjoy sleeping on the back porch with Rob. I slept on the top bunk, and he took the bottom, and I hoped he'd tell me about his life.

Rob had lots of girlfriends in those days, and I guess he drank a lot of drinks and smoked a lot of cigarettes, but he didn't tell me anything about it. He went "pub crawling" almost every night, and he slept real late in the morning.

One day we had a Primary lesson on the Word of Wisdom. That night I made an effort to redeem Rob. I took *Kidnapped* to the back porch where he was dressing. He held out his right arm and I buttoned the sleeve for him.

"Stay home and read to me," I said. "Don't go drinking tonight."

Rob looked down at me holding the book. He paused. Then he smiled and mussed my hair.

"I've got to see a man about a dog," he said, and left the house.

* * *

Rob had been a good Mormon boy before he went away to college. My great-grandparents crossed the plains with the Utah pioneers. Mom and Dad had expected Rob to go on a mission. He kept putting it off. Then the war came. Dad blamed the atheist professors up at the U of Idaho for leading Rob astray.

Dad had hoped that, when he got home from the war, Rob would pray and read the scriptures and go to church like he had before he went away. But Rob was different now. He told Dad that life was like a bunch of kids walking through a graveyard at night. Religion was like the kids whistling in the dark trying to keep the ghosts away. When Rob said things like that, Dad just shook his head and turned on the radio.

* * *

Sometimes Rob would take our car when he went pub crawling. Sometimes he'd walk downtown, and occasionally some guys would come by and pick him up. One Friday night Rob took the car and didn't come

home until five in the morning. I woke up when he opened the back door and went into the house.

Rob went to the bathroom. I had to pee. Rob was in there rinsing his hand with cold water. Jagged scratches ran across the back of his hand. His knuckles had been bloodied.

Dad came from the bedroom and stood at the bathroom door. Then he stepped past me and looked closely at Rob's hand.

Dad said, "What does the other guy look like?"

"It wasn't a fight," Rob said.

"Well, it sure looks . . ."

"Dad, I wasn't in a fight. I was driving home from Ammon about 2:00 A.M., and I got a flat tire."

"You walked all the way home from Ammon?"

"No, I drove home, but it took me long time to change the flat."

Dad whispered, "Dear God." It was a prayer, not an oath.

Dad had pictured Rob kneeling on a lonely country road trying to force a jack under the axle of our 1936 Plymouth with one hand, gripping the tire iron, and trying to wrench the lug nuts loose, wrestling the spare tire out of the trunk, and trying to hoist it onto the wheel.

Dad looked away and wiped his eyes on his pajama sleeve. He touched the back of Rob's hand, and went back to the bedroom.

Rob finished washing up a few minutes later and came out to the porch. It was still dark outside.

He hung his prosthesis on a big nail on the wall and slid into his bunk.

"Rob?" I said.

"I'm tired," Rob said. "Let me get some sleep."

I hung over the edge of my bunk so I could see his face. "You used to read to me before."

Rob didn't answer.

"Will you read to me after you wake up? I want to find out what happens in *Kidnapped*."

No answer.

"Rob, will you read to me when you wake up?"

I heard the springs squeak, and Rob swung his legs over the side of his bunk and stood up. He rested his right arm on my bunk and looked at me. I looked back at him. I started to tear up and turned away. He'd think I was a sissy.

When he spoke, his voice was quiet. There was no ridicule.

"Okay. Here's the deal. If things stay nice and quiet around here and I get some sleep, I'll read to you, all right?"

"This afternoon?" I asked.

"Yes, this afternoon. We'll read *Kidnapped*."

I lay there staring at the ceiling. Dad got up and left for work. Mom was still asleep.

I drifted off, and then awoke with a start. Mom was on the back porch, opening the door to the basement. I waved frantically at her from my bunk. I put my finger to my lips. She quietly closed the basement door and went back into the kitchen. I climbed down over the back end of the bunk bed and joined her.

"Mom, we have to keep things quiet so Rob can sleep."

"I've got three loads of wash to do, hon," she said.

"Rob had a flat tire last night. He's really tired. When he wakes up he's going to read to me."

"I'll be real quiet, darling," she said.

"But Mom," I said. I began to cry. Mom knelt and hugged me. After a moment, I pulled back from Mom's embrace and drew my forearm across my nose. Mom handed me a hanky from her apron pocket, and I blew.

"I'll start the wash after Rob wakes up," she said. "If I can get the whites washed and hung today, I can finish the rest on Monday."

After breakfast I went outside and patrolled the back yard. About noon I heard the weekly garbage truck. The men were lifting trash cans and banging them on the side of their big dump truck. I ran up the middle of the narrow alley waving my arms. The truck stopped. I walked to the driver's side.

"There's an old lady dying down the block," I lied. "They asked if you could please be as quiet as possible."

One of the men had lifted a garbage can and was about to bang it on the side of the truck to shake the contents loose. Instead he raised it higher and dumped it into the truck without banging it.

"Thank you," I said and put on a pious face. "She's real old and real sick."

It was blessedly quiet. The next-door neighbors weren't making noise for once. Mrs. Chandler wasn't out in the back yard beating her carpet, and Mr. Stevens wasn't working on his old jalopy. Mom and I had lunch, and Rob snored on.

After lunch Mom said, "I'm going to Sister Wilson's house to help her with the Primary children's program. When Dad comes home, tell him I'll be back in time to fix supper."

The house was quiet. At one-thirty I raised the glass door of the tall bookcase in the living room and took out the frayed copy of *Kidnapped*. I carried the book out to the back porch. I sat on the floor with my back against the wall and listened to Rob snore. A couple of times I went back into the house to check the old pendulum clock hanging on the wall in the living room.

At two o'clock I went back out to the porch and stood beside the bunk. Rob was lying on his back. Holding *Kidnapped* in one hand, I touched Rob's shoulder with the other. He snorted, coughed, and turned on his side, away from me. I reached out and shook his shoulder.

"Rob, it's two o'clock," I said.

"Lemme alone," he mumbled.

"It's two o'clock. I kept everyone quiet. You said you'd read to me. It's two o'clock."

Rob turned over and propped himself up on his good elbow. His face was grayish and the black stubble stood out. There was dried slobber on his jaw. His eyes were bloodshot.

"God," he said.

"I kept everyone quiet," I said.

Rob pulled back the covers, swung his legs over the side of the bunk and sat up. He looked at me.

He took *Kidnapped* from my hand.

"Get me a drink of water," he said.

When I came back with the water, Rob was sitting sideways on the bottom bunk with his back against the wall. The book was open. He waved me onto the bunk beside him, and began to read. "Chapter Twenty-three. We came at last to the foot of an exceeding steep wood . . ."

* * *

As time passed, Rob gave no indication that he intended to move on. Dad said that it was time for him to make plans for the future, to go back to college. Rob had wanted to be a doctor. Before the war.

I remember their conversations. Dad kept insisting that Rob do something. Rob kept ducking and weaving—trying to avoid a nasty confrontation. Spring came, and with it, the planting season. Idaho Falls is

potato country, but they grow sugar beets in the valley too. It was beet-thinning time. Back in Preston, where we used to live, Rob was the fastest beet thinner in Oneida County.

One morning Rob got up early. Dad was sitting at the kitchen table reading the paper. It was his day off.

"I see they're calling for beet thinners," Dad said.

"How much are they paying?"

Dad told him.

Rob looked at me. "You wanna thin some beets?"

"You bet," I said.

"You've got school," Mom said.

"Let him go," said Dad.

Mom put some sandwiches in Rob's old lunch bucket, and Dad dropped us off at the curb in front of the employment office.

It was after nine o'clock, and no one was there except for a couple of seedy-looking characters lounging against the wall.

At thinning time, farmers drove into town and picked up the good thinners by 7:00 A.M. Even latecomers and the not-so-good thinners were almost always gone by eight.

These two had either arrived very late or were the dregs.

A pickup truck stopped, and the driver looked at the four of us. He leaned out of the truck window.

"You fellas know how to thin beets?" he asked.

"You bet," said the tall seedy guy.

"Yes, sir," said the short one.

Rob had his hook stuck in his front Levi pocket. He didn't say anything. The farmer's eyes followed down from Rob's left shoulder to the stainless steel rod sticking out of his pocket.

"What happened to your hand?"

"It got caught in a wringer," said Rob.

The farmer scowled and looked back at the other two.

"Get in the truck," he said.

The two seedy characters climbed into the back of the pickup.

"How about me?" Rob said. "I'm right-handed."

"You ever thinned beets, city boy?" asked the farmer.

"More than those guys," said Rob.

"What about the kid? I ain't gonna give him a hoe."

"He'll run water to the rest of the crew for free."

The farmer frowned. "Okay, climb in."

We got into the back of the pickup. The two seedy characters were sitting with their backs against the cab. That left the spot near the tailgate for Rob and me. In the middle of the truck bed were some short-handled beet hoes.

As we headed out of town, Rob picked through the hoes, hefting them, and looking at the blades. He selected a hoe and picked up a file that lay among the hoes. Rob put the hoe blade in his hook, held it against the inside of his thigh, and began to file the blade with short, even strokes.

We bounced along gravel roads. After awhile we started to pass beet fields with thinners spread up and down the long rows.

By fall the beets would be thirty inches long and weigh six or eight pounds each. But these beets were small and growing close together. The beet thinners chopped space between each beet. That gave the beets room to grow.

The farmer drove into a yard and stopped.

"Wait here," he said. He trotted to the house and came back with a bucket and a long-handled dipper. He handed the bucket and dipper to me.

"Fill it up over there," he said.

I jumped down and filled the bucket at the pump. Then I climbed over the tailgate and sat next to Rob just as the farmer drove off. We drove on two-track roads until we came to a dead end. Ahead was a big field of beets. The farmer got out and yelled to Rob and the two men.

"Come on. I'll step off your sections. You stay there," he said to me.

I looked at Rob.

"He's going to have you carry water to the other thinners," Rob said. "Just make sure you walk between the rows, and don't step on the beets."

He gripped his hoe and jumped down from the truck. The two other men were already following the farmer, who counted off fifteen rows for each of them.

"That'll keep them busy," he said.

* * *

I ran water to the men in the other fields for an hour or so. The farmer drove up as I was at the pump filling the bucket.

"Let's go see how the latecomers are doing," he said.

I jumped in, and we careened up the narrow track toward the field where Rob and the two seedy characters were working.

As the truck slowed down, I could see that the man nearest the fence was working on the third or fourth row of his section. The short guy, who had the middle section, had thinned about six rows, it looked like. Rob was in the middle of a row a long way over from where he had started. He was working at least ten rows beyond the original fifteen in his section.

The farmer jammed on the brakes, and through the open window I heard him curse a blue streak. He leaped out of the truck and began running across the field toward Rob, shouting, "Stop! Stop, you dumb sumbitch. Stop right where you are. Stop, gawdammit."

Rob straightened up and turned. The farmer came lumbering up, waving his arms and cursing.

I couldn't hear what they were saying, but the farmer would point toward the rows of beets that lay between where they were standing and where the short guy was working. Then he'd wave his arms. He was yelling right in Rob's face.

Rob raised his hoe. The farmer flinched and stepped back. But Rob just used the hoe to point down the row he was working on.

The farmer turned and started walking back down the row, bending low and examining the beets every few feet. He straightened up, and looked back at Rob. Then he started walking across the field toward Rob's original section. Every couple of rows he'd walk up twenty feet or so, inspecting the beets. Then he'd walk over some more rows and walk down, bending and looking, bending and looking. Finally he reached the beginning of Rob's original section.

The other two thinners had stopped working and were staring. The farmer yelled, "Get the hell back to work."

Rob was back on his row, bent at the waist, his hoe moving rhythmically.

The farmer walked back toward the truck where I was.

"Dammit, boy," he yelled, "Take those men some water."

Then he walked slowly across the field to where Rob was working. Rob straightened up. The farmer took off his hat, and bowed his head. Rob dropped his hoe, and they shook hands.

By the time I got the bucket and dipper out to Rob, he was nearly at the end of the row.

He smiled. "I guess that man had never seen anybody thin beets before," he said, and he took a long drink from the dipper.