

The Long Walk Home

by Thomas Pluck

The last time Cyrus rode in a train's passenger car, he came home a dead man.

Mattie stood biting her knuckles, apron tight over her round belly. The fella hid behind her. Thin little mustache. Had the look of a salesman.

"They said you were killed in action."

"Feel like I was."

"Don't tell Kathleen." Cy tossed his combat pay on the table. "Her dowry."

"She still cries about you."

Was a time, his girls' tears could get him by the throat. Before Chosin.

Her cedar hope chest held what remained of him. His old clothes fit like hand-me-downs. He'd withered to skin and bone in the VA. When he'd climbed out of the hospital bed, the nurse dropped a bed pan on the white tile floor. He wasn't supposed to walk again.

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Cy walked the blue highways, working hand to mouth. Every night he lay down, the scent of iodine and human waste caked his nostrils. He got some muscle back, on rabbit stew and canned beans. Camped one night with some bo's near the Erie line. His scars got nods, purple centipedes splitting the mermaid tattoo on his rangy forearm. Middle of the night, he hopped the freight with the boys. He liked a train better than a ship. Solid ground beneath your feet, and a sure direction.

A lot of vets rode the rails. Europe, Pacific. Some both. Cy signed up for the Seabees in Korea, but got in artillery. Lobbed shells over the horizon to pound China's ninth army, as the Frozen Chosin retreated. An endless gray stream of empty-eyed, frostbitten men trickled to the looming ships.

One fella, named Horgan, had been in the Great War.

"I said, the worst battle was at home."

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Cy nodded. Still couldn't hear worth a damn. No parades. People eyed your feet, hid the shame for the guys who lost to little yellow laundrymen, whose ancestors laid the tracks clacking below.

Horgan and Cy hung their legs out of the empty cattle car, swaddled by the earthy cow flop smell. Horgan offered a smoke. "Korea?"

Cy grunted thanks, made the cherry glow bright. Never smoked until the hospital. The doc put one between his lips, before he rattled off a Latin tongue twister of broken bones.

"You don't wanna talk, that's just fine," Horgan said, rolled his own smoke. "Only been a few years for you. Hell, I still have nightmares. The horses, screaming all night. Mustard gas."

Horgan's long gray beard and fisherman's cap distinguished his patchy uniform from the rest. He coughed into his armpit, took another drag.

"Guess you breathed some," Cy said.

"Oh I breathed something, all right."

"Don't smoking make it worse?"

"Takes my mind off it. Ever hear of the Bonus Army?"

"Can't say I have. We could've used them."

Horgan laughed a death rattle. "We wouldn't of done you much good. Great War vets. Silent Cal gave us a buck a day, two bits more for battle pay. Except we couldn't collect until '45." He squinted at Cyrus. "You were a kid. Bad times. Only wanted what we were owed. Weren't no jobs."

"Don't think you ever get what you're owed, really."

"Damn right," Horgan said. "Hope you aren't one of those MacArthur worshippers."

"Not after Chosin."

"Bastard tear-gassed us. Women and children. Charged us with horses, drove us to the river. Gas. Americans."

"They'd used you up already." Cy brought his smoke back to life. They watched skeletons of trees flicker by.

"Heard Korea was cold hell."

"I was on ship, for most of it."

"Saw the tattoo." Horgan puffed. "What's left of it."

"Stupid. Officer had to fire one shell. To say he gave it to them, before we cut a chogie out." Cy stroked the scars. "His snafu, maybe a bad load. Splattered him all over the bulkhead. Blew us to hell."

Horgan nodded. "Fool probably had a family at home."

"I thought I did," Cy said. "Turned out it was another fella's. " Cy flicked his smoke into the dark.

Horgan gripped his wrist. "That was good tobacco, son."

Their eyes dueled a moment, then he flung Cy's arm away. "Sounds like you throw away a lot of good things." He shuffled to the other side of the car.

Cy cracked his knuckles.

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He quit the rails around the same time kids stopped cutting their hair. Cops joined the bulls, and took joy, swinging their clubs. Like they were beating back change. Cy walked to town, worked a while and moved on. Got pretty good with a hammer, putting down shingles. Helped a commune of longhairs build a crazy house called a yurt. Kathleen would be their age, he thought. Nights, the kids got high, while Cy watched the fire.

The farm grew, and he stayed on with them. Called him Old Cyrus, who never talked much, but did whatever needed doing. Cy's hair went gray and sparse. Beard grew long. The farmers cut theirs short, had babies. Needed glasses now, and their own kids went off to school.

One morning, as Cy read the paper, tears rolled down his cheeks.

The woman held him. Isaac, her husband, read the article over Cy's shoulder.

Photo of an older woman in doctor's whites, captioned "Kathleen Brennan adjusts Iraq war vet's prosthetic leg."

"Does the freight train run to New York?" Cy wiped his face with a paint-stained handkerchief.

"You keep forgetting a third of the farm is yours." Isaac said. "You can buy a ticket."

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Cy sat on the PATH train, in a new Navy t-shirt and clean trousers. One more transfer. The page folded in his pocket. What can a dead man say to his daughter? Fifty-five years of shame and regret. Maybe she'd like someone to talk to those boys, before they headed home.

He could do that.

