

VETERAN'S DAY

by

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EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Dirty fingers poke into a wall of damp earth, probing, tugging at something. They pull out an acorn-size nub of metal. Wiping it clean, the fingers reveal a MINIBALL: a Civil War rifle bullet.

HUGO CARRANZA (22), lean and buzz-cut, wearing dirty coveralls, inspects the bullet. A parallel wall of earth stands right behind him. The handle of a SHOVEL leans against his shoulder.

A BIRD SINGS nearby.

WIDER

Hugo stands in a freshly dug GRAVE, his head just below the surrounding grass. He tucks the bullet into a pocket and continues digging, refining the corners.

Nearby, MARK WELLS (35), also in coveralls, slouches in the seat of a BACKHOE, puffing a cigarette. Rows of headstones stretch out in every direction. It's a beautiful spring day.

Mark notices something approaching.

About 50 yards away, an OLD SEDAN pulls to a stop on a cemetery access road. FRANK LISINSKI (85) white-haired and stiff, eases out of the driver's seat. He stands with effort, but smiles in the sun.

Mark grabs a small TWO-WAY RADIO and hits the talk button.

MARK

Dog man.

In the grave, Hugo looks up as the RADIO clipped to his belt squawks again.

MARK (V.O.)

Dog man comin'.

As Mark watches, Frank takes a PICNIC BASKET and a FOLDING BEACH CHAIR from the sedan's back seat. He slams the door and heads into the rows of headstones.

Hugo clambers out of the grave. He and Mark watch the old man arrive at a particular headstone, about 30 yards away.

MARK
Perfect timing.

HUGO
He's always here at the same time.

MARK
That's why it's perfect.

As they watch, Frank sets up the beach chair. From the basket, he takes out a BOTTLE OF BEER, pops the cap and puts it on top of the headstone. Then he produces TWO HOTDOGS with all the trimmings and puts them next to the beer.

FRANK
(faint)
Here ya go, Mickey, extra mustard.
Hey, Mick, remember that time...

Frank drops into the beach chair. He takes out a beer and a hotdog of his own and bites off a mouthful. He talks, laughs, eats, offering a running monologue to no one. Hugo and Mark are too far away to hear anything clearly.

EXT. CEMETERY - LATER

The old man is gone. Hugo and Mark are sitting on the same headstone, eating the two hotdogs, passing the beer between them. Hugo inspects the Miniball.

HUGO
There ever a battle here?

MARK
I had to fight some undertaker for
a parking space once.

Hugo pockets the Miniball. He ponders, takes another bite.

HUGO
You think maybe we shouldn't eat
these?

MARK
Fuck, Hugo, this guy's not gonna
eat 'em.

He taps the beer bottle on the headstone.

HUGO
Maybe we should wait until sunset
or something.

MARK

And let the squirrels get 'em? Hell
no.

They finish eating. Mark stuffs the bottle into a pocket,
belches.

MARK

You wanna move those liners or open
up G-48?

HUGO

How long he been coming here?

MARK

Dog man? Since before I started.
Every Friday. Long time, I guess.
So what's it gonna be?

HUGO

I'll move the liners.

MARK

Later.

Mark ambles off toward the backhoe.

Hugo squats down, reads the headstone. His fingers trace the
lines of the crossed rifles at the top.

The name is MICHAEL PATRICK CONWAY. The date of death:
September 25, 1944. The last line reads PRO PATRIA - ARNHEM
FRANCE.

INT. HUGO'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Hugo sits at the small kitchen table, rewiring a lamp. A 12-
inch TV drones on the counter. His wife ELVIRA (22) steps
into the room.

ELVIRA

Are you coming to bed?

HUGO

Uh... a little later, I'm really
into this movie.

He glances at the TV, points, offers a chuckle, then looks
back at Elvira. She doesn't buy it.

ELVIRA

Did you call your therapist today?

HUGO
I was really busy. I'll call him
tomorrow.

ELVIRA
Hugo, you need to sleep!

HUGO
Later. Later.

He smiles at her. Frowning, Elvira walks away.

INT. HUGO'S HOUSE - LATER

Hugo lies sprawled on the living room sofa, the glow from a TV spilling over him. He's asleep, twitching, trapped in a nightmare. He mutters wet, twisted words, his chest heaving.

With a SCREAM, Hugo wakes. He rockets to his feet, pounds fists on his head, pacing the room like a caged gorilla.

He rushes to the bathroom, splashes water on his face. His breathing slows. He meets his eyes in the mirror.

HUGO
Rob, tell me what to do, man. Tell
me what to do.

He steps out of the bathroom, and eases open the bedroom door. He sees Elvira asleep in bed, an arm thrown over their THREE-MONTH-OLD DAUGHTER.

He closes the door, returns to the living room. He looks at his watch, then out the window, waiting for dawn.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Mid-summer. The trees are lush, the flowers bursting.

Hugo is loading TOOLS into the back of a PICKUP TRUCK, parked on an access road. He looks gray and haggard, circles under his eyes. His RADIO squawks to life.

MARK (V.O.)
Any sign of him?

Hugo looks down the road, then grabs his radio.

HUGO
Nope.

MARK (V.O.)

Oh, man, this isn't good. He's never missed three weeks in a row, not in ten years!

HUGO

Maybe something happened.

MARK (V.O.)

Like what? What happened? What do you mean? Hey, what do you mean?

Hugo shuts off the radio, continues loading the truck. But he glances down the road a few times, searching.

INT. CHURCH BASEMENT - NIGHT

Hugo sits in a circle of chairs with a dozen other young men. One is sobbing uncontrollably as a middle-aged THERAPIST tries to comfort him.

Everyone is uncomfortable. One man walks out. The VETERAN sitting next to Hugo leans over to him, whispers.

VETERAN

I don't get it. He was doin' great. Gettin' married an' shit. Man, this is messed up.

The sobbing man's eyes open. He looks right at Hugo.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Mark is running the backhoe, digging a new grave. He glances up, and a big smile spreads over his face.

Creeping along the access road is Frank's old sedan.

Mark grabs his radio.

MARK

Dog man!

NEAR THE CONWAY HEADSTONE

Cleaning a sprinkler, Hugo looks up and watches the sedan pull over. He's closer than Mark, and sees Frank is on the passenger side. An old woman sits behind the wheel.

MARK (V.O.)

Dog man, ha ha!

Frank speaks to the woman in the car, then gets out. He moves toward the Conway headstone, slowly and empty handed.

IN THE BACKHOE

Mark's face falls.

MARK

Dog man got no dogs.

AT THE CONWAY HEADSTONE

Hugo glances at the headstone, then back to Frank.

He switches his radio to an unused channel, locks down the talk button, and hides the radio under a clump of grass at the base of the headstone.

He grabs his tools, hops in the pickup and drives away.

Frank arrives at the headstone, his face a mask of sorrow.

IN THE PICKUP

Hugo parks behind a maintenance shed. He switches the dash-mounted radio to the new channel and hears Frank talking.

FRANK (V.O.)

...had it wrong all these years, Mickey. It was half-baked, tellin' those stories so many times. I mean, people always listened, sure. And we all figured it was our job. Me and Chadwick, Peretti, all the rest. Gotta be sure nobody ever forgets what went on over there, right? Had an obligation. Had to think of all the guys that didn't come home. Only...

Frank sobs deep in his chest.

Hugo leans closer to the radio, turns up the volume.

AT THE CONWAY HEADSTONE

FRANK

Mickey, I got cancer in my brain. Hell, dyin' don't scare me, I've had a good run, but... Mickey, stuff is startin' to get away from me. Last week, Marie, she shows me an old picture of this kid, and I say, "who's that," and...

(MORE)

FRANK (CONT'D)

it was my son! My own Goddamn son!
Docs say it's gonna get worse.
Everything's just gonna slip away.

IN THE PICKUP

Hugo looks off through the windshield. Tears are running down his face.

FRANK (V.O.)

Thing is, all those stories, Mick,
all those Goddamn stories, they're
stayin' real clear. And I'm
thinkin', at the end, that's all
I'm gonna have. My kids, and
Christmas with my folks, hot dogs
at Coney Island, the night I met
Marie, it's all gonna be gone. All
I'm gonna remember is how a bunch
of guys died, cause I got those
stories down cold. And I don't
wanna go out that way, Mickey. Not
that way.

INT. HUGO'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Hugo comes in through the front door, looking like a zombie, wiping his hands with a greasy rag. He picks up a toolbox. Elvira steps in wearing a nightgown.

ELVIRA

Hugo, it's after midnight!

HUGO

I was just changin' your oil.

ELVIRA

YOU HAVE GOT TO SLEEP! YOU LOOK
TERRIBLE!

Hugo gives her a cold stare.

HUGO

I'll be in later. Go curl up with
Jessica. See you in twenty.

He heads back outside.

INT. HUGO'S HOUSE - LATER

Hugo lies in bed, curled in a fetal position, his back to Elvira. He's shivering, muttering in his sleep.

HE WAKES WITH A SCREAM, JUMPS TO HIS FEET--

HE RUNS TO THE BATHROOM AND VOMITS--

The baby begins CRYING. Elvira runs in.

ELVIRA

Did you have--

HUGO

YES! I HAD THE DREAM! I ALWAYS HAVE
THE DREAM!

ELVIRA

Take another pill.

HUGO

They don't help.

ELVIRA

Hugo, you have to talk to somebody!

HUGO

And say what?

ELVIRA

Tell somebody what happened!

Hugo slumps, lowers his head, breathing hard.

HUGO

I... Rob and me...

Elvira kneels down next to him.

ELVIRA

What, sweetie?

HUGO

NO! This is not something I wanna
talk about, ever! I am not gonna
turn it into, into some story to
tell over beers at the VFW!

ELVIRA

This is killing you!

HUGO

Maybe that's better.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Late September, leaves beginning to fall.

Hugo sits in the pickup truck under a stand of trees. From here, he can see Frank at the Conway grave, talking. As before, Hugo is listening to Frank on the radio.

FRANK (V.O.)
 Makin' it home, Mickey, that's what mattered, right? Well, I made it home. Only now it looks like it won't make no difference.

AT THE CONWAY HEADSTONE

FRANK
 Cause I know where I'm gonna be at the end. I'll be right back in that stinkin' cellar, those Kraut eighty-eights wallopin' the shit out of us.

IN THE PICKUP

Hugo looks up at the radio, his face full of horror.

FRANK (V.O.)
 I'll be lyin' right next to you, sayin', "Today's the day, Mickey! Today's the day they'll get us out."

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Hugo sits facing a DOCTOR behind a desk. The doctor reads through Hugo's file, looking over test results. Hugo looks even worse: thin, pale, sick. The doctor leans back and starts scolding him (sound under). Hugo just stares.

FRANK (V.O.)
 Even after the roof came down, I kept it up for five more days, face in the dirt, tastin' blood and piss and diesel, waitin' for the next shell to light us up.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

October. More leaves on the ground, more gray in the sky.

Frank stands at the Conway Headstone, his hands resting on a cane, his thoughts still reaching back.

FRANK

But I never let go of your hand,
Mick. Remember? And every time you
asked me how much longer, I just
said, "Today's the day. Today's the
day."

Hugo leans against a tree 50 yards away, listening on the
radio.

FRANK (V.O.)

I couldn't see ya, Mickey. But I
could hear ya say, "Okay, Frank,
okay. I can hang on one more day."
So we kept it up. Got to be like a
prayer.

INT. HUGO'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Hugo pushes open the front door and finds Elvira, his
therapist, and five relatives in the living room. It's an
intervention. Elvira stands, speaks to him (sound under).

FRANK (V.O.)

Mickey, people keep comin' by the
house to see me, and I don't know
who the hell they are. They keep
tellin me stuff I'm supposed to
remember, but it's too hard. I just
nod my head, hope they don't stick
around too long.

Hugo begins screaming at Elvira. Some try to calm him down,
others defend Elvira (sound under).

FRANK (V.O.)

God, it's all slippin' away fast.
It's like walkin' in on the middle
of a movie. Nothin' makes sense.
But get me talking about forty-
four, and I remember plenty.

INT. HUGO'S HOUSE - NIGHT

In the basement, Hugo opens a cardboard box. A folded uniform
lies on top: the desert camouflage of the Iraq war. He sets
it aside, finds his discharge letter, a campaign ribbon, and
a handful of snapshots: comrades in arms.

FRANK (V.O.)

La Pierre from Bangor who got stuck
in the ball turret, poor bastard.

(MORE)

FRANK (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 And remember Johnny Monroe? Got his
 face blown off and crawled two
 miles the wrong way. And Chinese
 Tommy, loadin' up that Sherman.
 Phosphorus shell went off, just
 burned him into nothin'. Mickey...
 Mickey, I don't wanna see this
 stuff no more.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Hugo sits in the pickup truck, listening to Frank on the
 radio. He looks worse yet: a ghost in dirty coveralls.

FRANK (V.O.)
 ...and I kept askin' 'em over and
 over, "Where's Mickey Conway? The
 big Irish dogface lyin' next to
 me?" And nobody would tell me
 nothin'. But the Chaplain finally
 did.

Hugo leans close to the radio, eyes wide.

FRANK (V.O.)
 When they pulled us out, you was
 dead for over a week. Now how can
 that be, Mickey? How could a dead
 man be talkin to me, and squeezin'
 my hand?

Hugo looks down at his hand. He starts the engine, slams the
 truck into gear.

AT THE CONWAY HEADSTONE

Frank is sitting on the headstone, hands resting on his cane.
 Hugo pulls up in the pickup and hops out. He walks over,
 picks up the concealed radio and turns it off.

Frank looks him in the eye.

FRANK
 I know you?

HUGO
 No. But I need your help.

FRANK
 What the hell are you talkin'
 about?

Hugo sits down next to him on the headstone.

HUGO
Take my hand.

FRANK
You nuts?

HUGO
For Mickey. Please.

Frank looks hard at Hugo.

FRANK
You seen some things. Who are you?

HUGO
It doesn't matter. I need to tell
you a story. One story, one time.
And then I'm never gonna tell it
again.

FRANK
Why should I give a shit?

HUGO
It's a story you already know.

Slowly, Frank reaches over. He slides his thin, wrinkled hand
into Hugo's dirty, muscular one.

Hugo takes a deep breath.

HUGO
His name was Rob Delosanto. We were
both second battalion, first
brigade combat team, tenth mountain
division. Iraq. One day we were on
patrol, came under fire. So we took
cover in this basement. Turned out
to be a bad idea.

Frank begins to nod.

FRANK
Go on.

WIDER

Hugo tells his story, sitting next to Frank on the headstone.

EXT. CEMETERY - LATER

Frank walks up to his car, gets in the passenger side. His
wife MARIE (75) sits behind the wheel.

MARIE

Who was that man you were talking with?

FRANK

Some vet. He's seen some tough times. So many guys... Never ends, does it?

Frank turns to look at Marie.

FRANK

What's your name again?

MARIE

Marie.

A smile spreads over Frank's face.

FRANK

God, you're beautiful.

Marie beams. She leans over and kisses Frank.

They drive away.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

November. Bare trees, a steely sky, close-cut grass.

Hugo approaches a fresh grave. He's a different man: clear-eyed, color in his face.

The grave is ready for a funeral: a lowering device is in place, and flowers and folding chairs are arranged nearby. An easel holds a large photo of Frank Lisinski.

Mark is setting up more folding chairs.

Hugo opens a paper bag, produces two hot dogs and a bottle of beer. He puts them on the easel under Frank's photo.

MARK

You the new dog man?

Hugo smiles at him. Walking to the edge of the grave, he digs into a pocket, finds the Civil War Miniball. He tosses it into the grave.

HUGO

Today's the day.

Hugo goes to help Mark with the chairs. A hearse arrives on the access road, a long line of cars behind it.

INT. HUGO'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Hugo and Elvira lie in bed, facing each other, their infant daughter lying between them. All three are fast asleep, their breathing slow and deep, dreamless.

THE END