Four

The Light, the Gift, and the Letters of Love

I remember the light. In the dining room of the farmhouse was a pair of eastward-facing windows that looked out over the porch, the farm, and the marsh beyond, where the light came and went. Opposite the windowed wall and between two interior doors, one that led to Muma and Daddy's bedroom and the other that opened to the upstairs where the kids slept, was a reproduction of Heinrich Hoffman's *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane*; printed on a once-glossy sheet of paper that had, over the years, buckled and faded behind the glass from extremes of temperature and humidity; surrounded by a repurposed ivory-colored frame with a wooden backing that was held in place by an excess of randomly sized and protruding finishing nails. Jesus, surrounded by mysterious shadows and a thorn bush within an olive garden, was highlighted against the dark of night by a beam of light that seemed to fall through a gap in a swath of foreboding clouds above him.

Like all of the Walters who lived there, Henry passed by that picture every day, pretty much as he did one morning in May of 1959, then taking the steps two at a time on his way from the bathroom to the boys' bedroom

upstairs to ready himself for one of his last days at Oakfield High School. Having already completed his milking chores, gotten cleaned up, and finished breakfast, he pushed the bedroom door open with a leading cajole, "Get up and ready for school, Ricky," and, to the sound of a crisp *click*, turned on the knob of the Realistic transistor radio that sat atop the dresser beside the door.

Startled awake, I wiped the sleep from my eyes to the jingle for station WOKY— "double-you-ohh—kaaay—whyyyyyyyy; wau-key in Milwaukee!" In the small mirror that sat above the Realistic, Henry prepped his self-image, singing and mimicking the swagger of Bobby Darin in performance on the Ed Sullivan show while I stumbled through, like a comic extra on the stage of the CBS studio, white bare-assed, riffling through the bottom drawer of the dresser trying to find some underwear, he belting out the refrain,

> "I said, Jenny Diver,
> Suky Tawdry—
> Miss Lotte Lenya,
> and Lucy Brown;
> Oh, the line forms on the right, babe,
> Now that Mack, he's back in town!"

With the timing of choreographed crescendo lighting, the morning sun streamed through the small and permanently *gestuck* single-hung window that faced the east, illuminating Henry as he examined within the mirror

the hairstyle he'd crafted while I pulled on a pair of whiteys to cover my uncircumcised self. Henry strode away quickly down the steps as soon as Puts, who was set as sentry at the northward facing window in Muma and Daddy's bedroom to monitor the Fond du Lac County Road B oncoming, yelled, "BUS!" Then he was gone, but the music played on.

∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞

In some ways he was the chosen. At seventeen, Henry had enlisted in the Navy and, only a couple of weeks after graduating from high school, was to start boot camp at the Great Lakes Naval Station just north of Chicago. Nine weeks he spent there that summer, and each week he would pen a letter home, in a perfectly slanted and boldly masculine cursive, always beginning with the same welcomed greeting, "Dear Mom and Dad." And every day, with the exception of Sunday when there was no chance of a delivery, at or around ten o'clock, Muma took a walk down the grassy path between two graveled ruts in the long driveway to the galvanized steel mailbox, painted white to match the Walters' home, its roof arched with a red signal flag on a pivot and atop a weathered cedar post set between County Road B and the ditch, hoping to find a letter from Henry, and when discovered, gathering it up with a beat of anticipation as she brought the mail into the house, then situating a kitchen chair to face the window where

the light beamed aslant into the room, its brilliance broken into motes that flew off into the air. She sat in the light, focused on the letter in her hands, a wear-faded, cotton farmhouse dress hanging loosely from her shoulders. On most days that I watched her sitting there, she would hold on to the letter long after she had finished reading it, looking out of the window and over the horizon of the marsh beyond, without speaking.

At summer's peak and when Henry's term at boot camp was almost over, a curious sort of letter arrived with something different from him;

news that seemed to capture her imagination. I watched as she held the letter in the light, seeing what I could not, and heard her repeat lines of it to herself, her gaze upon the pages unbroken except for notice of a Red Admiral butterfly that appeared outside the window, then lighted on an orange daylily that grew at the edge of the porch and remained there in a fragile stillness. She looked up from the letter and out of the window again when the butterfly flew abruptly into the air. Her gaze followed the Red Admiral as it veered off and away toward the wilds of the marsh to the southwest, and as her profile shone in the sunbeam I saw, from a back curved under the weight of selflessness, the countenance of a woman who had received a blessing. She folded the sheets of paper carefully back into the envelope.

In the pocket of her apron, tied closely around her waist, she carried the letter out the kitchen door in pursuit of Daddy, the news running around inside of her. At the crest of the knoll near the barn, she found him at the cusp of a field that had been harvested of alfalfa, the smells of the stubble still rising into the air. Within the sunshine of morning, she read to him from the letter, Henry's words rising from the space between them in a rush of pride like a trail of barn swallows swirling upward in wonderous

curves. Shadowed under the brim of his brown cap, Daddy listened with a knowing smile across a whisker-stubbled and suntanned face.

Henry had received an offer; Daddy told me later, but only when I asked him what it was all about. Based on the results of some tests that he had taken at bootcamp and the recommendation of the recruit division commander, Henry had been selected for a fully funded college education at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis with training that would lead to a career as a naval officer. But as extraordinary as it was for a regular enlistee to be singled out for a seat at the Naval Academy, Muma and Daddy were not surprised. Henry probably blew the top off of the percentile rank scale for the testing and likely was a model recruit, svelte and physically fit from a decade or more of farm work; without fault, his bunk bed so well-made that it could serve as an illustration in the bootcamp training manual, his uniform neatly pressed and his low quarters shined so brightly that the division commander would be able to see the image of his face across the vamp when Henry stood at attention before him; his affable personality likable to peers and superiors; and no matter what menial task the squad leader might have asked him to do, whether it be sweeping the barracks, cleaning latrines, or polishing garbage cans, Henry could predictably be relied upon to perform each duty with an exemplary attitude---because,

after all, whatever he would have been asked to do at boot camp was a status upgrade from shoveling cow shit onto the manure spreader. Not the sort of folks to brag or be presumptuous, Muma and Daddy kept the news of Henry's offer pretty much to themselves and assumed nothing, but, in the morning light, I saw their spirits dance on higher ground, such as I'd never before witnessed in the eight years of my life.

∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞

He and Daddy must have been traveling through the night, Henry home again on 36-hour liberty after completing bootcamp and the Pass-In-Review ceremony, a Friday morning in mid-August. Hearing his voice coming from the kitchen downstairs, deep in conversation with Muma and Daddy, I thought, at first, it was only a dream–a foggy sensation where I was floating over something that had changed and couldn't understand. I heard the sound of Henry dropping his duffel near the bottom of the stairs, opening it with a whump and a crinkle, then pulling something out before ascending the steps two at a time, bringing with him the smells of the kitchen, his heavy shoes thumping on the floorboards of the upstairs landing. He walked into the boys' bedroom, looking in at my outstretched body that was locked in a twilight zone of altered consciousness, one of my hands stretched outward from the bed, palm upward, as if trying to grasp

the dream's meaning. At the footbed, Henry wiggled the big toe on a foot that I had, in the heat of the summer night, extended out from under the covers.

"Ricky," he whispered, "Time to get up."

As the earliest of the morning light broke through the window, I opened my mouth to call out his name but found no sound there. Instead, I looked at him, locked into silence; his uniform so magnifying his character that it seemed to be as much a part of him as his arms and legs, exuding a quality of being larger than life; his dark brown eyes at the foot of my bed examining me atop the widest of smiles, where he had placed a Navy uniform that was just my size.

∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞

It was one of those days when everything seemed lit. Henry had taken the Pontiac into Oakfield to see Grandpa and then met a couple of his friends at the Village Lunch, and while he was away, the kitchen and garden were swept up into a flurry of activity. Bobby and Zelda took care of the cows and Daddy laid down his head for a nap.

Muma launched headlong into making pie crusts of flour, lard, butter and salt; the first, and simplest, pie shell filled with cubed rhubarb from the freezer, smothered with an egg yolk, sugar, milk, and nutmeg mixture that

would create a rich tart-sweet custard when baked. Zelda arrived in the kitchen after retrieving a couple of apples from the Dutchess of Oldenburg tree that sat atop the knoll near the work shed. Peggy cut one of the apples open, revealing the seeds to be brown and so the apples ready, directing Zelda to go back and climb the tree again to get the biggest and stripiest ones within reach; and more crusts were made, the second pie's bottom filled with peeled, tart summer apple slices that were coated in a mixture of sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg and then dotted with bits of butter; the top crust adorned, before laying it on top, with Muma's signature two-center-facing half-moon slices, each side-lanced with quick pokes of the knife's tip.

A large beef roast from a cow that Henry had helped Daddy butcher that winter and had been taken out of the chest freezer to thaw was seasoned with salt and pepper and ceremoniously plopped into the pressure cooker along with a couple of cans of Campbell's Beef Consommé, some water, and a final blessing of bay leaves. The tender beef would be crafted into juicy sandwiches on *brochen* rolls that had been lightly crisped in the oven, also pulled from the freezer that morning, having been purchased the prior Saturday, a brown-bag, day-old baker's dozen, for thirty cents at the Deluxe Bakery in Waupun. In my full-dress Navy uniform, I received orders to go out to the milkhouse and extract, from

beneath the grape leaves and stalks of dill floating above brine in the crock, a few large fermented pickles that Peggy then quartered lengthwise to grace the sandwiches.

Fresh from the garden, cucumbers were picked, peeled, sliced, and mixed with onions, dill, and fresh cream that had been skimmed from the tops of the milk cans. Radishes, carrots, and green onions were cleaned and readied for eating raw, and tomatoes that tasted of heaven were washed, sliced thickly, and plated with seasonings of salt and pepper.

The farm-to-table supper, long a tradition of the Walters well before the concept became a marketing trend of fine dining establishments, was the last time we would see Henry for almost three years. Sitting at the sunshine yellow, Formica-topped, aluminum-clad dining table that sat by the windows where the light came and went, he seemed happy to be among us again, talking it up with everyone as we ate. I chose a chair next to his; in the uniform that I had been wearing since morning; listening to all of Henry's stories of bootcamp and what he would be doing next—and then after that, and after that—; hearing no mention of Annapolis or attending the Naval Academy and wondering why.

∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞

Shortly before he was to leave, Henry came out of the farmhouse to sit with me on the floorboards of the porch, our legs suspended among the daylilies that sprung up every summer from the earth below. The talk at supper had made me want to ask him something, but, at first, I held back. Sunlight lanced at the windowpanes behind us, reflecting the fields and the vista beyond. From within billows of majestic cumulus clouds over the southwest, the Oakfield light swathed the marsh in a golden luminousness. I saw again a Red Admiral butterfly that this time did not alight.

"But why?" I summoned the courage to ask, my eyes looking downward at my feet. "Why don't you want to go to Annapolis? You could be an admiral and go all around the world!"

"Nah," Henry gently dismissed. "That's not me. Besides, I like it *here*," he emphasized, "right around Fond du Lac." Although I didn't understand, and had dreamed of great expectations, I accepted the answer willingly as not my life to live, his decision so considered that I took it to be wisdom itself. "But maybe that could be something for you," he suggested; and with that thought we sat, side-by-side in silence a few more moments, gazing across the bounty of corn and grain to the marsh in the distance.

"—Tell you what—;" Henry broke the silence and captured my attention, causing me to look up at him, "I'll teach you how to salute." And

as we rose to stand, me facing him, the August afternoon sunlight made lucent his uniform and the big, black low quarters that held him upright and tall. From a joint deep breath that could be heard in the late summer stillness, right arms raised to brow, Henry offered, “Now look me right in the eyes and keep looking there until I cut first.” Upward, my glance fixated not only on his eyes but on the position of his hand to make perfect; then with a down sweep of his right forearm he released to me his charge. My hand, from elbow, mirrored his to swiftly cut downward the air, shadowing the image that stood, statuesque, before me.

In what seemed to be the next moment, Daddy pulled forward the Pontiac from its summer resting spot that provided relief from the heat of

the sun under the elliptical shadow and benevolent protection of the Dutchess of Oldenburg. Slowing to a full stop near the concrete steps with makeshift cow stanchion railings that led to the porch, duffel already loaded into the trunk, Daddy told Henry that it was time to be on their way back to Chicago. Muma and a whole contingent of Walters had assembled for the gesture of good-bye and wish of good-luck.

I lingered on the porch watching as the balloon tires of the Pontiac rolled over the ruts at the bottom of the driveway and headed south on County Road B. When the sedan slowed to turn right onto the Wild Goose Road, Henry stuck his head out of the window, his uniform's collar flap and tie blowing in the wind, as if wanting to capture and possess, in his mind's eye, the fall of light over the Horicon Marsh. Then he turned his face and raised his arm to wave goodbye to the farm that had shaped his life, and the Walters he left behind, taking the 1950's with him. The world recalled of heirloom apples, home-grown suppers together, and sunshine through the porch windows would be gone in a moment and the twinkling of an eye.

∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞∞

I didn't know then that a fall of light was divine, even though the depiction of it was right there before me, every day of my life, home-crafted within a repurposed frame, illuminating a pensive and accepting Jesus, the

Christ of the Walters of Oakfield. Nor could I have understood that Henry wasn't impersonating at all in those moments of singing and staging by the radio; that the budding showmanship *was* him; that the songs moved through him like a calling, trumpeting first in his ears and then expressed through his entire being, a reality show of life as he wanted it to be.

The most memorable gesture of my childhood, guised in the form of a child's Navy uniform that Henry gave to me, was the gift of imagination. When I dressed myself in that uniform, I felt somehow different; full of possibility; that I too could be part of something larger than myself; that there was a future where opportunity did not have to be limited by circumstance.

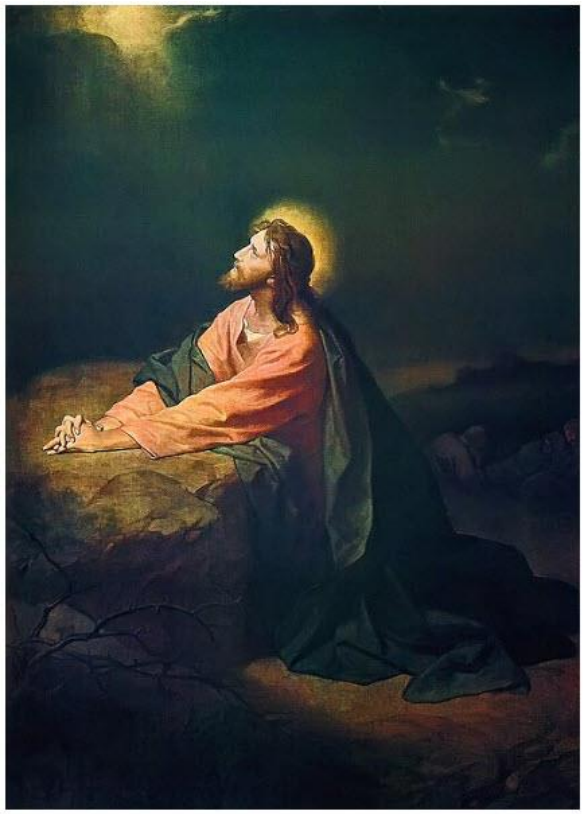
After specialized C-training at the Great Lakes Naval Station in North Chicago and a subsequent tour-of-duty on a vessel that traversed the equator with a great *Crossing the Line* ceremony from which he sent home pictures, Henry spent nearly three years of his life far afield from his Oakfield home, and the Walter family, living in little more than a strategically situated igloo with protruding antennae, on one of the Aleutian islands. He was commissioned with the rank of Petty Officer II as a cryptologic technician in charge of signals intelligence at Adak, the gateway to the Bering Sea. In the bitter cold, wet, and wind, he passed the hours,

days, months, and years teaching himself to play the guitar, by ear, and singing from memory the songs of Bobby Darin, Elvis Presley, and Buddy Holly to no one there.

From atop the world and frozen earth, Henry continued to pen weekly letters to Muma and Daddy, and, as I watched either of them read by the window's light, there always seemed to be something warm in his words that brightened their day. At one point during his service, he had emblazoned on his right arm a Rococo-ribboned heart tattoo, lanced by an arrow, and imprinted with the letters M-O-M and D-A-D. Whatever the lost circumstances or particulars that may have surrounded the day he became forever inked with body art, it's impossible for me to believe that it was not inspired by a fall of light; and the light collapsed into love.

End Notes

The Light, the Gift, and the Letters of Love



Reflecting late 19th-century German artistic style, Heinrich Hofmann's ***Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane*** (1890) is one of the most widely reproduced paintings of the Christian world, often found in homes. A dramatic fall of light focuses on Jesus's personal anguish and acceptance of fate. The original painting hangs in New York City's Riverside Church, a gift from John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

Bobby Darin was an American songwriter who became a singer in his own right during the late 1950's. He wrote and recorded several popular songs of the era, including "Splish, Splash," "Dream Lover," and "Beyond the Sea." His most memorable recording was "Mack the Knife," which he performed to a nationwide audience on the Ed Sullivan show (click here) and that won Record of the Year at the 1959 Grammy Awards.

The **Red Admiral** butterfly is a common migratory visitor to Wisconsin during the summer months, where it seeks heavily wooded areas with access to fresh water. It is sometimes confused with a Monarch butterfly but is more striking in appearance. The Red Admiral is a symbol of joy and hope and the sight of a Red Admiral is said to act as a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms.

The **United States Naval Academy** is a prestigious post-secondary educational institution located in Annapolis, Maryland. Tuition is fully funded by the Navy in exchange for an active-duty service obligation upon graduation. Admission is highly selective; in addition to a stellar high school academic record, candidates who want to attend the Academy typically must secure a letter of recommendation from one of their state's US Senators or Representative in Congress. Each academic year, however, a small number of academy seats are reserved for exemplary naval recruits who had not applied for admission but performed exceptionally well on a battery of cognitive and aptitude tests (e.g., the **Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery** and the **Officer Aptitude Rating**), and are recommended for officer candidacy by the **Great Lakes Naval Station** Recruit Division Commander.

The **Dutchess of Oldenburg** (or simply "Dutchess") is an heirloom apple prized for its taste and texture. It has a distinctive appearance, being yellow-skinned with red stripes. A deliciously crisp, tart, and juicy eating apple, it also makes a colorful, aromatic, and intensely flavorful filling for apple pie; the slices caramelize and take on a slightly orange color when baked. Commonly planted on Wisconsin dairy farms during in the 19th century, these early-season apples are ready mid-summer but keep for only a few weeks. Dutchess apples are not available in stores because they do not store well and bruise easily.