

“My Responsibility to America”

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The last light of dusk pencils through the attic window. My grandfather winces under the weight and utters some words not intended for my twelve-year-old ears. This time, his shoulder has gotten the best of him.

He doesn't know that I'm here. I keep an eye on him from the top of the ladder. He's

nothing less than a hero. On a solo mission, he has willed the last of the boxes uphill.

Mission accomplished.

He fidgets with the latch of a brown box. I know what's in it—I've done some recon in the attic over the years. He opens it to reveal yellowed letters, worn photographs, and the medal with the purple ribbon.

A January chill ruffles though the clapboards, and I feel like I can channel his spirit—the beat of helicopters, the rush of hot air against his cheeks, the taste of sweat dripping from his brow. But mostly, I feel the beating in his chest—an overwhelming feeling of pride—

the feeling he had when he took the responsibility to serve his country—

the feeling that powers these fifty-pound boxes of holiday decorations up two flights of stairs and a shaky ladder—with a shoulder even more shaky.

I slip away before he sees me.



The living room is eerily dark. He maneuvers his way down with the small box, prepared to share it. My seven cousins and a few of their friends are bathed in the glow of their iPhones.

“What’s in the box?” I ask, playing dumb—hoping to direct the spotlight away from the latest Apple product-line.

But the room remains stubbornly lethargic.

Not a budge.

Not a glance.

No running, no Nerf-balls, no counter-strikes against enemy lampshades. To him this scene must look haunting: twenty eyes locked onto animated gadgets like watchmen to radar-screens.

“Just a few old cigars,” he fibs.

“Don’t worry, Papa,” I tell him. I take his hand and we reconnoiter in the kitchen for a moment I’ll never forget.

I won’t let him feel out of place.

I won’t let him put the box aside.

I won’t let his larger-than-life story be overshadowed by blips on four-inch screens.

It’s occurred to me that my Christmas memory of my grandfather is a hazy reflection of America at-large. Like my cousins distracted by technology and entertainment, we’ve grown too comfortable with the dangers in the dark—with terrorists in explosive vests, with paranoid dictators and their toy-box missiles, with parched superpowers thirsting for prominence.

It’s also occurred to me that nothing can save us from these threats but the spirit of heroes like my grandfather—heroes who walk unrecognized in our midst, their heart-wrenching stories silenced by the daily buzz. From the day I discovered my grandfather’s box in the attic, I knew that he carried with him a sense of responsibility few others embrace. Like him, I can’t turn a blind eye to the forces that threaten us. We live in an increasingly lethargic, consumer-obsessed age. A generation that witnessed the American spirit wrestle with evil in WWII beholds a new generation

that applauds athletes who kneel for The Star-Spangled Banner,

that swallows the propaganda the media feeds it,

that scoffs at the notion of military service.

When my grandfather and I discussed boots-on-the-ground in Iraq that night, these were his last words: “These boys are...at war,” he cried. “The rest of the country’s...at the mall.” It was then that he gave me the box with his Purple Heart—

—and my—heart—swelled.

I’m still too young to strap on boots in the war against terror, but I can fight the war against indifference.

My responsibility to America is to fight that war—

to rally the American spirit,

to counter the complaisance of a generation in the dark.

Eventually, I’ll wage this war by teaching. To honor my grandfather’s memory, my responsibility will be to nurture an appreciative generation.

Mine will be a classroom that feeds minds without starving souls.

My students will recognize the war-games on their X-Boxes, but they’ll also recognize the real wars at their doorsteps.

Oh, they’ll know the 3-R’s, but they’ll also know God gave them two legs for The Pledge.

Some of them may not know where Benghazi is, but all of them will look up from the glow of their pixelated playthings and be overwhelmed with gratitude for those who’ve shed their blood for us.

They’ll know America is a force of good in the world—and that our soldiers’ memories must never die—in a box in the attic.