

A Little Red Wagon:

A Long-Remembered Face

By Tom Sheehan

One Christmas many years ago there was for me one present from my parents, a little, done-over red wagon with a long hauling handle and slatted sides. The sides were for extra cargo! For overload! The name, the logo, of the wagon has not stuck with me, but its ownership has. That the wounded wagon, from some wars of its own, had been touched-up, repainted, a bit of rust covered over, two wheels replaced, had no interest for me. Early and mid-Thirties had all ready made their impressionable slash in the mind of a seven-year old. *This one, now, was mine!*

I think it was a *Radio Flyer*, though the name, after three quarters of a century, seems insignificant.

The hauler, my first red wagon, was destined to accompany my scrounging adventures along the tracks of the Saugus-Linden Branch. I was the family hunter for chunks of coal fallen from Boston & Maine Railroad tenders, one of my Saturday-Sunday chores. It was so on any other day of the week when the coal box beside the kitchen stove of our third floor apartment was empty, or near empty, the relevant chill easy to find in

the air, in any corner of our flat. Winter chill, I learned readily, is not partisan in any measure; you had to fight it any way you could, but most of it frontally, head on.

That little red hauler, as it turned out, brought me in contact with a man I had never seen before, would never see again, and to this day, as in nearly every day of my life, I have not forgotten. In near-darkness that one time, down the Saugus-Linden Branch, he floated away from me, unknown, nameless, riding off to wherever nameless people go. Life, it would prove in the long run, is rampant with such departures, and, as a paradox, some of those departures never leave you, etched, indelible, surviving time's erosion.

This man's face, though, I see to this day; with a wide grin of a smile, the absolute flare of white teeth, like lights inside barn doors ajar; eyes bright as two new aggies, the aggregate mystery and muscle of a man at hard labor.

Little red wagons, it has proven, evoke charms of their own and a stable of memories. Off to one side of the Christmas tree that celebrated morning, the wagon was a lone figure, an outcast, as it stood apart from the small clutter of presents for my five sisters. There was a doll for each, a communal set of play dishes to make the rounds, sundry dresses and sweaters and outer clothes due for girls, and a lone chuck under my chin from my father who said, in honest approbation, "You understand," as I did, being the lone boy about, and being in the dungaree mode long before the current fad began.

I was on the male side of things. The kitchen stove, though my mother's domain, was an extension of my precinct; where its attentions were mine... the morning match, the kindling wood to start the burn in the stove, the coal to keep it going on the tough winter days. We lived in a cold-water flat, looking out over Clifftondale Square, out over

the roof of Hanson's Garage, and our life, with nothing more positive in winter, centered about the kitchen stove. We cooked on it, made toast directly on its round cast-iron lids so that the aromas hang in yet, smelled deep tubs of overnight beans simmering on the top and great breads baking in its oven. When necessary for warmth in the sock of winter, we huddled around it, sharing blankets, old overcoats, a half dozen wee eggs at the incubator.

And the rear disposal areas of the First National Store and the Economy Market with its deep green paint and Braid's Market and Walkey's Market, all there in the Square, were for my scavenging only. I'd fight in a minute for the castoffs and throwaways from these stores; wood from apple boxes belonged to me, as well as bottoms of peach baskets, wired and stapled thin slats of orange crates, a bother to begin with, and whatever minor dunnage might be thrown out from delivery packaging. All these were mine, all fuel for the kitchen stove, all part of my scrounging precinct, my due!

And fallen chunks of coal, tumbling from B&M tenders, there for the grabbing along the tracks of the railroad tracks, from School Street to Laurel Street... they were mine too! That was Saturday and Sunday work. Other days, the school days, days whose doors closed early in darkness, were for delivering newspapers or circulars from the same stores I scrounged behind or for games after school with Charlie Flynn and Johnny O'Neil and Buddy Tottingham and Ralphie Sullo and Billy Callahan. Or they were for a late skate on the frozen surface of Anna Parker Playground, all lit up at night, girls whizzing by on their white figure skates, smiling their smiles, dazzling in their own way.

One winter Saturday, the coal remnants having thinned out and leaving but black dust on the bottom of the coal box, my red wagon alongside the railroad tracks was half full in my search for lost coal, for useable clinkers. I stood looking down the tracks, toward Linden first, then toward Saugus Center, trying to determine where the balance of a wagon load might best be found. A half-loaded wagon was not fit game to haul home. Then, ground trembling, air becoming urgent, an engine of a freighter came puffing and noisy around the far bend, a tornado of black smoke swirling from its stack. The engine slowed, crossing Essex Street, coming my way from the Center. Again it slowed, finally stopping beside me, dwarfing me, a pulsing giant of iron and steamy breath, an unforgettable smell broadcast on the air. Like an iron pour at a slag mill it was. Ferric almost. Near white in heat. Loud as gunfire.

I looked up to see the fireman on the coal tender staring down at me, checking out my my little red wagon parked on the wayside, and eyeing the half load, the incomplete errand. I realized that The Depression sat around me, enveloping me, like a mist or a fog off a boggy mire. His shoulders were broad as I-beams. His eyes were soft in comparison and hard in reality. I swore a kind of history moved across his face; an identification, a knowledge of root structure. It was full of realizations and measurements. I shivered as he drained into my eyes and then took something away from me. I could feel it going out of me, leaving my soul, taking a weight off my arms, and felt immediately felt something else coming back. I knew he was sharing, shifting a load so common for the times.

Oh, that I can remember every line of that face, every hair of his head, every shift of his eyes. Like the gandy dancers I watched doing their itinerant work on sections of the rail bed, he was novel, he was compelling. Coal dusted his face like the floor of an

empty coal bin, or our empty coal box. His shirt was dirty, and ragged from labors. His neck was sweaty and grimy. Forearms he exhibited were as black and as thick as upturned roots. Yet his eyes were as blue as a new pair of aggies sitting on my bedroom windowsill at home. With a slight shrug of those huge shoulders, he smiled. And a mouthful of white teeth gleamed at me. For a given moment he studied the boss engineer at the pilot throttle gazing down the tracks, smiled again a message of a smile, and, like some god at a fountainhead, suddenly began to lay out shovel after shovel of coal chunks on the track bed. Big chunks came down in the cascade. Half of West Virginia's or Pennsylvania's mines! Black anthracite crying for ignition. Oh, half of B&M's coal that trusty and merciful man must have thrown down at my feet. It littered the tracks, the great chunks of it! Combustion! Great anthracite! The Black Gold of the Depression!

Scurrying about, joyous frenzy popping through my veins, *the little man* about to bring the bacon home, I filled my red wagon. It brimmed and brimmed again. I found an old apple box and parlayed it on top and filled that. Oh, the Compton Mines rediscovered! The mother lode! My breath came heavy. The smile kept coming down at me, at once angelic and mischievous, the flash of white teeth, the whites of his eyes, perhaps something I didn't know then about *old-country gratuity*. The shovel flashed in the air. I had not seen that man before. Have not seen him since. Except in dreams. In reveries. In a hole stretched against the sky on just about every cold winter day that gets a knife edge under memory. He lives immemorially.

After five full loads hauled home, put to coal box, I told my mother about him. "For sure, it was cousin Myrtle's husband Danny," she said. "He works for the B&M. For sure. Or Mrs. O'Meara's boy, William. For sure. For sure."

Her eyes sought out the deep past, the voyages, Ireland astern of everybody she knew.

She believed in connections.

My father, when I told him about my extraordinary good luck, smiled, rubbed his hand over the top of my head as if words were being deposited, nodded, winked at me with a chuck under the chin one more time.

He believed in generosity.

He believed in early manhood.

Tom Sheehan's books are Epic Cures (an Ippy Award winner) and Brief Cases, Short Spans, Press 53; A Collection of Friends and From the Quickening, Pocol Press. His work is in Home of the Brave, Stories in Uniform: and Milspeak; Warriors, Veterans, Family and Friends Writing the Military Experience, both issued by Press 53. He has published 4 collections of poetry, has 15 Pushcart nominations, a Georges Simenon Award for Fiction, a story in the Dzanc Best of the Web Anthology for 2009, and nominations for Best of the Web 2010 and 2011. He has 231 stories on Rope and Wire Magazine, has been in Rosebud Magazine four times and Ocean Magazine seven times. His newest book is Korean Echoes, September 2011, from Milspeak Publishers. He served with the 31st Infantry Regiment in Korea, 1951.