

New Fiction from Lucas Randolph: “Boys Play Dress Up”



When visiting

a friend's grandpa, the Boy learned that the grandpa liked watching football games on the weekends instead of the black and white western movies. His favorite football team was the Kansas City Chiefs. Their team colors were—red, white, and yellow. Some of the fans had feathers on their head and they chanted and made a chopping motion with one of their hands when the game started. Sometimes a man who was dressed up in a pretend costume would beat on a giant drum. The grandpa said it was tradition and traditions were good. The Boy asked the friend's grandpa if he ever watched western movies, but he said those were all fake and weren't worth the copper they were printed on. That's why he liked watching football. Real men. Real blood. Real consequences.

None of that fake cowboy horseshit.

Sometimes, though, if it was late at night, the friend's grandpa said he liked to watch military documentaries, but only if everyone was already asleep. The Boy didn't ask why. The grandpa had an American flag that hung from the front porch of his house—red, white, and blue. The Boy's own grandpa didn't have one. Neither did the Boy's father.

Were you in the War too?

No, my parents wanted me to go to college. The same college my daddy went too. In fact, we even played ball for the same team. That's my old jersey there.

The friend's grandpa pointed to the wall. Two framed black and white photos with wooden frames that bent and curved all fancy like hung next to each other. The Boy knew one photo was older because it had a football team where they all had leather helmets on, and the image was faded. There was also a framed football jersey on the wall with the same last name that his friend had with stitched together letters on the back of it. The team colors were—green, gold, and black.

I almost volunteered for the military. I wanted too—hell, they almost got me in the draft! Maybe I wish they would have. Just wasn't in the playbook, I guess. Your grandfather was in the service? World War II?

Yes sir. Well—no, he fought in Korea. My dad too. Air force. He didn't fight in any War, though.

That's okay son, you should be damn proud. We all have our role to play. That's what my old man used to say.

I'm going to join too—when I'm old enough, anyway.

The grandpa smiled and put a hand on the Boy's shoulder.

That's a good boy.

The grandpa reached over and grabbed an old football that sat on a wooden mantle with some sports memorabilia underneath the old photos and the jersey. He held it in front of the Boy's face close enough for him to smell the aged pigskin leather, letting his eyes wander over the scars from the field of battle. When the Boy's hands moved to touch the football, the grandpa reached back in an old-school football pose like the quarterback does and threw the ball across the room to his grandson who caught it above his head with both hands.

Nice one! Just like your old man!

He lost

his favorite coffee mug. The Old Man poured dark roast into a short glass mason jar mixing it with the golden liquid already left waiting at the bottom. It wasn't meant for hot liquids and the Old Man reached for a red trimmed potholder with a green and yellow wildflower pattern to hold it with. He sat down into his favorite corduroy rocking chair, one hand against his lower back for support. He smiled with the jar between his legs letting the glass cool, the steam from the roasted beans rising to his nose. Smells of earth and sweet honey warmed the room. The sting of diesel was nearly absent.

Please, just one-story Grandpa. I promise I won't ask for more. Please—

Well shit, you're old enough by now. I promised your dad I wouldn't, but hell in my day you could drive a tractor at ten, and you're nearly that. It can be our little secret. What do you want to know?

About the War, about—Korea. Like, what kind of gun did you use?

A few, but mostly the ole Browning M1919. I bet you don't even know what that is, do you?

The Boy shook his head no.

It's a light machine gun. L.M.G. It took two of us to shoot and two more to carry everything. It was a real son-of-a-bitch to get around.

Did you have to shoot it a lot?

I never shot it once, to tell you the truth, not at anyone anyway. See, I just fed the ammo to keep it firing. Do you know what that means, to feed the ammo?

The Old Man didn't wait for the Boy to answer.

I was what they called an assistant gunner. Corporal did all of the shooting and stuff for us. He liked that kind of thing.

The Old Man grabbed the hot mason jar from between his legs and took a long drag of his coffee. The rounded glass edge burned against the crease of his lips, but he drank it anyway. He remembered the Corporal well. They grew matching mustaches; they all did. The lieutenant dubbed them his "Mustache Maniacs," which later got shortened to just "M&M's." It was a real hoot with the men. The Old Man shaved it shortly before returning home. He felt stupid with it by himself. It didn't feel right without Corporal Lopez and the rest. He wouldn't tell that story today, though.

They didn't deserve it, the people. Not too different from us you know—some of the best God-damned people I've ever met, actually. They fought side by side with us. Those Koreans, real God-damn patriots. We suffered together; I remember how hungry they were. How hungry we were—and cold, for shit's sake was it cold. Colder than a well digger's ass, if you ask me. You have to understand, it's a different kind of cold they have there in Korea. It's all any of us thought about most of the time. We weren't ready for any of it. It was a terrible War.

Why were you fighting then Grandpa? If they weren't bad?

It wasn't them we were fighting; it was those god-damned Reds! You see, retreat was never part of the plan, hell, War was never part of the plan—we just killed that other bastard five years earlier! You have to imagine, when they first came over them mountain tops, millions of 'em, I swear to God, the God-damned ground disappeared. I don't know if they shot back, or hell, if they even had guns. Corporal [REDACTED] just kept firing. There was so much smoke you couldn't see more than a few feet in front of you. I loaded until my hands charred like wood. We

could hear them breathing they was so close. A wave of glowing lead to the left. A wave of glowing lead to the right.

The Old Man's arms followed waves of bullets from one side of his body to the other in a repeating pattern. The aged wood from underneath his corduroy rocking chair snapped with the weight of his story. Liquid from the mason jar in one of his hands splashed over the rim.

The Boy breathed hard, too afraid to look away.

We screamed for the runners to bring more ammo; I don't remember when they stopped coming. The Reds didn't. They never stopped. When they were right God-damned on top of us, Corporal [REDACTED] handed me his pistol, a Colt 1911. Just a small little thing. He picked up that son-of-a-bitch Browning with his bare hands and we fired until we both had nothing left. And then, we ran. We all ran. Everyone did. And we kept running. When the order finally came to stand fast; we already made it to the God-damned ocean.

The Old Man drank from his mason jar again, the amber glow of liquid not able to hide behind his lost porcelain coffee mug. He nearly spit it out when he started laughing from somewhere deep down in his belly. He had to use his free hand to cover the top of the jar to keep the liquid from spilling everywhere.

You know, when we finally did stop, there were these two supply crates, just sitting there waiting for us. One had ammo, one had food. We hadn't had a single round of ammunition to fire in over a week and no one had eaten in at least double that amount of time, probably longer. But wouldn't you God-damn believe it, I was the only shit-stick dumb enough to go for the ammo first. I was more scared of those god-damned Reds than I was of starving to death. Go for the ammo first, that's what Corporal [REDACTED] would have done, so that's what I did. He always knew what to do.

Invitation to a Gunfighter, starring Yul Brynner and George Segal, played at a low volume in the background on a black and white television screen. The film ends after the hero takes a shotgun blast to the chest and one bullet through the stomach. The hero manages to jump from his horse in a dramatic roll before single-handedly disarming the bad guys in one swift motion. An entire town watches from the side. The hero then spends the next two minutes and thirty-four seconds forcing the bad guys to apologize in front of all the town's folk for their crimes against their own neighbors. Eventually, the hero succumbs to the injuries and the people carry him away on their shoulders. The Old Man and the Boy sat in silence until the credits finished and the screen turned to black.

The Boy wasn't sure what was meant to be funny about the ending to his grandpa's story. He waited for the rest of the story to finish, but it never came.

The Sheriff

first met the Boy when he was still just a boy. The Sheriff took the Old Man away but said he could come back home once he was feeling better. The Old Man said it was the bitch's fault. The Sheriff also gave the Boy a pack of Colorado Rocky baseball trading cards and a golden sheriff's sticker that he could put on the outside of his shirt. The Boy wore it to school the next Monday and everybody wanted to know where he got it from but he told them it was a secret.