

Fiction by Cristine A. Gruber

Whiskey and Reds

His name was Pete. I chatted with him every second Wednesday of the month while recycling my bottles and cans. He lived in the field alongside the town's main shopping center. I looked forward to our conversations; he was a lively and fascinating individual. He'd fought in two wars, and had the honors and scars to prove it.

He showed me his medals once, a heart and a star. They were wrapped together in a little velvet pouch. The bag smelled of smoke and alcohol. But the medals themselves still glimmered bright in his weathered hands. I was honored he trusted me enough to show them to me. It was August. It was warm. The rising goosebumps on the back of my neck weren't caused by the weather. The man shared a part of himself that day that few others had seen. I wiped at my eyes as he carefully put the little blue pouch back in his duffle bag.

He showed me his scars that day as well. He rolled up his sleeve, then took my hand and placed it on the large, jagged hollow on his upper arm.

Feel that? he asked.

I nodded. I could feel his pulse in the gouged out cavern of his mutilated tricep. He'd lost a chunk of his arm to a belligerent bullet that had torn right through him. In the middle of a warzone, infection had set in, doing much more damage than the bullet itself.

Lucky I was able to keep the arm at all, he said. *Fella next to me weren't so lucky. Bullet passed through me, hit him. Took out half his neck. Died right there in my arms. Can't remember the man's name though. That bothers me some.*

Pete recounted the tale in total monotone. It was the only time he spoke of the incident. I could see in his eyes he really wished he could remember the other soldier's name.

From that day forward, I always offered Pete my recycling money when we were done with our monthly chat, but he never accepted it. So I simply started using the money to buy him some much-needed food. He graciously accepted the food items with a humble spirit and genuine gratitude.

When the weather cooled down, I brought him a coat. In the heat of summer, I provided water and sunscreen. I asked him once if there was anyplace he could go, a home of a family member perhaps, or maybe an old friend who could help him out. He simply shook his head and said there was no one. Then he smiled his crooked grin.

Got a fifth of whiskey and a carton of reds to keep me warm, he said.

He was comfortable and matter of fact. There was no pain or animosity as he spoke of his situation. Only peace and acceptance. Before I knew what was happening, I leaned over and hugged him. He looked surprised at first, but only for a moment. He hugged me back. He was the most honest friend I'd ever had.

It happened on a warm day in June. I knew the moment I got out of my car that something had changed. From across the parking lot I could see the adjacent field. For the first time in more than two years, the grocery cart that had always stood alongside the first cluster of trees was no longer there. I didn't try to justify the absence of the cart in my mind. I knew what it meant. My friend was gone.

I ventured off the pavement and crossed that field for the first time in all the years I'd been frequenting that shopping center. I called Pete's name, once, twice...nothing. No response. I stopped just short of the trees, then called his name again. Still nothing. The wind picked up and I swore I could smell him, a combination of whiskey, smokes, and unlaundered clothing. I plunged through the cluster of trees, still calling his name. I didn't get far, for his cardboard structure of a home lay in shambles just a few feet beyond the treeline. Pete was gone.

I called the police and reported him missing, but in my heart I already knew I'd seen my friend for the last time. Six months to the day from the filing of that report, I received a call from the local police chief to let me know that they were closing the case and weren't going to investigate any further. I thanked him as politely as I could for the update and hung up the phone.

It would be another six months before I received the package. Once again, it was a warm day in June. The small package was wrapped in brown butcher paper and tied with string rather than taped. My name and address were written in a thick, jagged scrawl across the front. Both name and address were horribly misspelled. And there was no return address listed in the corner. How the package managed to be delivered at all is anybody's guess.

I knew what was inside before I opened it. I could smell his hands on the wrinkled brown paper. I cried for an hour with the bundle in my lap. The paper was soaked through by the time I undid the string and removed the contents. I'll never understand how those precious medals managed to find their way to my home a full year after the fact, but I know it was meant to be. I held them for most of the afternoon, finally saying goodbye to my friend. Then I put them back in the little blue pouch and placed them in the nightstand next to my bed.

I rarely dream, but when I do, I only see one color...blue. And no matter where I am in my dreams, no matter where they may happen to take me, everything around me always smells the same. Everything smells of whiskey and reds.

Cristine A. Gruber, a Southern California native, is a registered caregiver as well as an aspiring author and poet. Her writing reflects her view of the human condition in all its pain, complexity, and beauty. Her work has been featured in numerous magazines, including: *North American Review*, *Writer's Digest*, *California Quarterly*, *Dead Snakes*, *The Endicott Review*, *The Homestead Review*, *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *The Penwood Review*, *The Poet's Haven*, *Pound of Flash*, *Pyrokinection*, *Red River Review*, *The Tule Review*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, and *The Write Place at the Write Time*. In 2014, her short

stories, "Imprisoned," and "Stash," both received Honorable Mentions in the *Writers Weekly* 24-Hour Short Story Competition. Her first full-length collection, [Lifeline](#), is available from Amazon.com. More of Cristine's work can be found and enjoyed at sierraviewjournal.blogspot.com/.