

# Love Letters From An Old Soldier

a short story by  
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Whenever I recited my bedtime prayer, “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon this little child . . .” I thought of my father.

A gentle man, quiet and thoughtful, widely read and seldom heard, my father had two occupations: a soldier in World War I and later a prairie farmer.

My father was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on November 23, 1894. With his Scottish-born parents he moved to Kansas in 1900; then, hearing of the opportunities for commerce in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the family moved north. In the early 1900s there was no need to seek landed immigrant status when moving between the two countries and so he never changed his citizenship, even though he remained in Canada all his life.

He fought in the Great War as a soldier in Canada’s army, in the 43rd Canadian Infantry Battalion out of Winnipeg. His service portrait, tinted in sepia browns, shows a handsome young man of 22 years, standing straight and serious in a Highland kilt.

“Why didn’t you bring your kilt back from the war?” I asked once.

“Full of lice,” was his short reply. “They harboured in the pleats.”

Often, on a dull Sunday afternoon, I would amuse myself by rummaging through the dusty wooden box containing my father’s long-forgotten medals, multi-coloured ribbons, ration coupons, a small diary networked with abbreviations. I would pick up the old green metal hand grenade nested among the relics and loft it in my hand, taking no notice as my father winced and disappeared behind his newspaper. Folded also in the box was a letter of commendation from King George V, for being wounded in service to his country.

In wonderment, I would trace my fingers along the nerve-numbed scar that ran in a white snake-line up my father’s right arm.

“I wasn’t much of a hero,” he would mutter. “When I got hit, I couldn’t remember a thing we’d been told. Just ran all over.”

Private Allan Milne Smith had served with honour and had been disabled in the Great War, attested by the lithographed scroll personally signed by King George V on July 18, 1919. The framed parchment hung on my parents’ bedroom wall, testimony to how the outside world could affect our simple life on a remote Manitoba farm.

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When I was very little, fast-moving nightmares would sometimes sneak in to disrupt sleep, chasing my thoughts in fast dark circles until I cried out. My father would come into my room, sit down on the side of the bed and chase them away — not by talking about them but by talking about other things.

“Wouldn’t it be funny,” he would muse, rubbing his whiskered chin as if in deep thought, “if the sun decided one day to trade jobs with the moon?” He would laugh and I would be caught in his fantasy. “If tomorrow when we got up, there was the moon shining in the sky and at night, when we went to bed, the sun got up?” Such an absurdity! I laughed with him and the fast crazy paisley patterns of my nightmare disappeared.

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I read again his letters, tied with ribbon, that followed me through each stage of my life after we moved to Alberta when I was six. Three years later, he wrote in my autograph album:

*I’m not a poet, nor even clever  
So all I can do is wish you  
The best of luck, health and happiness  
Forever and ever. Love, dad.*

I started to write when I was in sixth grade, rhyming poems, short stories of mystery, humour, and the joys and despairs of growing up. He and my mother read each one carefully. Then, deciding that I showed some promise of talent, they bought me a typewriter. From then on, each gift occasion included a book: classic novels, biographies, histories. We played a game called “Shakespeare,” which required one to match a character’s speeches with its corresponding play.

When I became a teenager, I turned to my father’s wisdom. “What is love?” I asked in a note that I tucked into his lunch pail. Days passed with no reply. Then came his written response:

*Love is a passionate interest  
In someone else’s welfare.*

When I finished high school in Lacombe and left home to begin a career in Calgary, his advice followed me, borrowed for the occasion from Charles Kingsley’s “Farewell.”

*Be good, sweet maid, and let those who will be  
clever;  
Do noble things, not dream them, all day long.  
And so make Life, and Death, and that For Ever  
One grand sweet song.*

Later, heady with my new independent lifestyle, I found myself interested in two men at the same time, one from my hometown and the other a resident of my new city.

"I'm so confused," I wrote in a letter home. "Why can't I make a choice?"

In the return mail came his simple answer: "Love is a matter of proximity."

My anxiety vanished, my mind cleared by the understanding of my father, a man over 50 years my senior, a man living a quiet life uncrowded by my wild characters and events. My situation was normal — a mere matter of proximity.

When I had been living on my own for one year, my father decided I had passed muster:

*I must admit I was somewhat concerned over  
how you would manage on your own. You  
seemed to have above average intelligence  
but not enough common sense to go along  
with it. But I must tell you how proud we are . .*

The letter arrived in January, the day I had quit my job in a fit of temper. It took me another year to deserve his comments.

My father's advice continued to guide me — into marriage, his letters following us to northern bush camps, to southern cities, to tropical islands, to Australia, and back home to western Canada.

Our children, too, learned from his quiet wisdom: the proper way to dig potatoes, how to build a birdhouse that a bird would actually occupy. He was our rock, still and permanent and solid.

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And then, my father could no longer write. A stroke at age 85 incapacitated his hand. Another, following at 86, slowed his speech. He withdrew, then, like a grain stalk that has come to full head and now bends, a shell releasing its seed.

We celebrated my father's last birthday, his 94th, on November 23, 1987, when the trees had lost their orange plumage and were left with only skeletal brown frames. From his window in the auxiliary wing of Lacombe hospital, I viewed the pale yellow fields of stubble. The

heavy-headed grain, sowed by his former employer, the Government of Canada Research Station, had long been harvested. My father sat tied to his wheelchair, voraciously eating the birthday cake we had brought, his instincts now directed on survival.

Then I kissed him and said, "Happy Birthday," and he smiled at me, with the happy, peaceful smile that made him a favourite patient of the nursing staff. He reached for my hand and held it, with a grip still strong. And he was still my father.

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Allan Milne Smith died on January 3, 1988.