

The Walk of Honor

It was warm enough to have the window over the sink open on this mid-May Friday evening. Walter Senior appreciated the little breeze that was dissipating the cooking odor. He had gone to the bother of pan frying the franks before adding the beans. Odd that Walter Junior hadn't said anything about dinner. Normally, young Walter was as polite a thirteen-year-old as they came, but something sure seemed to be eating at him tonight. Junior was frowning as he washed the dinner dishes, oblivious to the gust ruffling his hair.

Walter Senior sipped his coffee and studied his grandson's hunched posture. He had taken in the boy four years earlier, after his son and daughter-in-law died in a winter car crash. There was no money left after the funerals, and he and Junior were living on Social Security, but they managed. Walter was a great kid. He did his schoolwork, a good bit of the housework, and never complained about living in his grandpa's tiny place. This hangdog look was new, and Senior didn't like it. The seventy-five year old finished his coffee and cleared his throat. "Word down at the park is that your school's going to hold a regular walk-the-stage eighth grade graduation."

The fry pan smacked the water in the sink. "They might be holding one, but it doesn't make a difference to me, Gramps. I'm not going to graduation."

"Oh? Now, here I was looking forward to going to it. Looked up the bus schedule and everything."

Walter set his shoulders. He kept cleaning pans with his back to his grandfather. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I am not going."

“Seems to me this is something we need to discuss.” Senior pushed his wheelchair away from the table and brought the mug over to the sink. “Why don’t you want to go?”

Walter turned on the hot water tap and rinsed the coffee mug instead of answering. When he reached for other dishes, Walter Senior said, “Junior, those are clean. You’re done here, son.” He rolled back to the table, and said calmly, “Why don’t you want to go to your own graduation? Last report I got, you were doing fine.”

“I’m just not going!” Junior slapped down the dish cloth and stormed out of the kitchen. Senior heard a door slam.

Dammit, I don’t need this teenage crap already. Senior muttered a few choice words to himself, picked up the dish cloth, and wiped out the sink. Then sighing deeply, he rolled down the hall and opened his grandson’s door.

Walter was lying on his bed with an arm over his eyes. “Hey!”

“You behaved better when you were nine. In my house, you earn your privileges, you know that. Remember the family motto, son.” Senior eased his chair over the threshold. “Now, sit up and talk to me.”

At this Walter reared up. “I don’t want to go to some stupid, meaningless ceremony. That’s all. It’s a stupid waste of time.”

“That’s it? You don’t want to do meaningless things? Ha!” snorted Senior. He wheeled himself up toe to footrest with Walter. “What do you think adult life is, son? It’s showing up, doing what you’re paid to do, and going home. Over and over, rinse, repeat for fifty years—if you’re lucky. You find your own meaning, Junior. It does not come with the job.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t find any meaning to walking across a stage and shaking my principal’s hand. What good will it do?” He glared at his grandfather. “A piece of paper that says I completed eighth grade won’t make any difference to my life.”

His grandfather glared right back at him. “Don’t be so sure of that, kid. Things happen. My dad died when I was nine, too. Mom tried, but I had to leave school to watch my brother. I finally took a factory job at fourteen. If I had stayed in school even to the end of eighth grade, I could have had a better job, made more money. I’d have given anything to have a piece of paper like the one you’re being offered.”

Walter Junior looked surprised. “I didn’t know you had to quit school and go to work, Gramps.”

“It’s life. You do what you have to for family. Remember our motto. But that’s why it is important to me that you get that certificate. And I have now run out of patience. I have asked, I have offered discussion -- now I am telling you. There is no way I am allowing you to skip this graduation ceremony. You are going if I have to tie you to a skateboard and drag you behind me! I am going to be in that auditorium, Junior. I want to see with my own eyes that you won’t have to settle for menial labor jobs all your life.”

Walter stood up and ran his hands through his hair. “There’s still a problem, Gramps. I really can’t go!”

Gramps leaned back in his chair. *Finally*. “What’s the real problem, son?” Junior turned his back again to his grandfather, unable to face him. “It’s a dress-up thing. The principal said this is a solemn occasion and boys have to wear a jacket and tie.”

Senior’s shoulders drooped as he let his hands fall into his lap. “Ah.”

Walter sank back down on his bed. “I’m sorry, Gramps. I don’t fit into the suit I wore to the funerals. I can’t get the jacket on at all. And I know there’s no money for a new one. I didn’t want to tell you. I didn’t want to make you feel bad.”

Gramps coughed, reached for Junior’s hand and squeezed it. “I appreciate that. But I might have something you could wear. Follow me.”

He rolled out of Junior’s space and led him into to his own room, to the closet. “Pull out the covered hanger in the back left,” he told Walter.

Puzzled, Junior stepped into the stuffed closet and pushed things aside, emerging a few moments later with a brown garment bag. “This, Gramps?”

“Lay it on the bed, and open it.”

Junior unzipped the bag to see the dark green of an old Army uniform, with wide lapels and chest pockets, and brass buttons down the front. A white shirt and black tie hung neatly with it. Most noticeable were the ribboned medals and an impressive triple row of bars pinned over the left pocket of the jacket. “What is this, Gramps?”

“My unit dress uniform from Vietnam. I want to be buried in it. I thought maybe you could wear the jacket and tie for your graduation.”

“Wow, Gramps, I’d love to. But I think I’ll have to get permission.” The boy reached out to touch a bronze disk hanging from a red and green ribbon. “Tell me about these medals, Gramps?”

The rest of the evening was a history lesson, the kind that brought grandfather and grandson closer to each other.

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Next Monday at school early, Walter went to the library to look up some of the medals his grandfather had shown him. Then he looked up the uniform and the weird hat that was in the bottom of the bag. The librarian let him copy the pictures. Before his first hour History class, he asked his teacher, “Mr. Shaffer? When school began, didn’t you tell us you were a vet?”

“I’m still in the Army Reserves, and I did a couple tours in the sandbox. Why?”

“Could I talk to you after school? It’s about my grandpa. He’s a vet.”

Mr. Shaffer said sure, and started class, and Walter did some serious thinking.

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Graduation was scheduled for the first Friday in June. The week before, there were class parties, end of the year project presentations, and some lucky classes watched movies. What made Walter happiest was the principal’s announcement that the High School Parent Teacher Organization was sponsoring a used suit and jacket collection, just as they did prom dresses, and that any student who had outgrown his current suit might exchange it for one that fit. The National Honor Society was running it and would act as clerks to help any eighth graders who showed up. Walter took his too-small suit and discovered a blue blazer that fit, and a cool yellow shirt. He also discovered that a lot of other kids he knew were there, too.

On the night before graduation, Walter Junior watched his grandfather polish his boots and buttons. He wasn’t allowed to help, but Gramps said he would need Walter to help him get the boots on. Then he skewered Walter with a no-nonsense look. “You’re sure this History teacher said I should wear my rig.”

“Yes, sir. We had a big talk about wearing a real uniform and that if we wear it with the medals the original guy had, we’d be, um--”

“‘Stealing his valor.’ That means trying to get the glory without doing the work. He sounds like a good teacher, Junior.”

Walter was examining the tin of shoe polish like it was very interesting. “Uh, Gramps?”

Gramps raised one bushy eyebrow and grunted, “Yeah? Out with it, kid. You’ve been twitchy about something for a couple weeks now. ‘Bout time you spilled.”

Walter twisted the cap on the little Brasso bottle, and his grandfather moved it away from him. “Time’s up, son. Whatever you need to say, say it now.”

“I asked the principal for special permission, and I got it. I want you to cross the stage with me.”

Gramps opened his mouth, shut it, then sat back. “Repeat that.”

“When I asked about me wearing your uniform, since that answer was ‘No,’ I asked if you could accompany me across the stage to get my certificate. You told me to get it for you, Gramps, so I am. And I want you right there with me. The principal didn’t have a problem except we will cross at the end instead of in alphabetical order.” His grandfather was still looking taken aback, and Walter added, “It’s all arranged, Grandpa. Please don’t be upset.”

Walter Senior put down the shoe he was holding, and the polishing cloth. “I kind of think I’m honored, Junior. Glad at least my jacket still fits.” He looked over at the young man anxiously waiting to see if there was any other reaction.

“And son—that was a nice gesture on your part. I appreciate it. I’ll try to do you honor, too.”

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Walter Junior was nervous. He had arrived early, with the rest of the eighth grade cohort. Mr. Shaffer had promised that someone from his reserves unit would pick up his grandfather in an Ambucab, and bring him to the school, and get him on the right level for the stage. Walter was still nervous, hoping that tonight's action was the right thing to do.

The graduation ceremony was the last part of the evening. Walter sat with the rest of his class in the front of the auditorium while the choir sang, and the school orchestra played. Then, as the orchestra played *America the Beautiful* as quietly as they could, the students filed into the wings. The principal and several teachers, all wearing academic gowns, stood by a table at mid stage to hand out the certificates. The President of the School Board called out the names, and one by one, smiling bashfully or wobbling on their first high heels, Walter's classmates crossed the stage to applause, the occasional whistle or a cheer. At the far side a photographer snapped pictures of each student shaking the principal's hand or holding up the certificate, before returning, still grinning, to their seats. Walter Junior found his grandfather backstage and carefully took hold of the wheelchair's handles and moved into position at the end of the line.

When Nancy Zywicki beamed for the photographer, the people in the auditorium started to rustle their programs, but stopped as the orchestra went silent; then drumrolls began the flourish that started a soft rendition of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. Mr. Shaffer now stood in his Army Reserve Officer's uniform at the podium. He told the audience that there were two more graduations to celebrate.

“Walter O'Connor, Junior, accompanied by Weapons Sergeant Walter O'Connor, Special Forces, 1964-1967.”

Walter nudged the wheelchair, and he and his grandfather moved slowly across a stage that now looked as long as a football field. Gramps sat up at attention, the flash on his Green

Beret cocked over his left eye. A ripple of applause broke out in the audience and suddenly everyone on the platform and in the auditorium was clapping. Walter turned his grandfather's wheelchair so he could see the audience. The other old guys Gramps played chess with in the park were there, and all of Walter Senior's friends from the Legion.

Mr. Shaffer held up his hand, and said, "Sergeant O'Connor's commendations from his service include a Purple Heart and a Silver Star. Tonight we are privileged to extend a lesser certificate, but one he has wanted since forced to quit school in the eighth grade to support his family: a certification of High School graduation, signed by the State Secretary of Education, in acknowledgment of his lifetime contributions of service, demonstrating the qualities of valor and honor." At those words, Senior sat up even higher, and Junior's eyes opened wide.

Then Mr. Shaffer added, "And, Walter Junior, here is your certification of graduation from the eighth grade." Junior shook Mr. Shaffer's hand and took the certificates. Gramps snapped a salute and Mr. Shaffer returned it. Everyone on stage and in the auditorium was on their feet, applauding.

The photographer was taking picture after picture, but the best one was of Walter Senior with his arms wrapped around his grandson, and both were beaming with accomplishment: Valor and Honor. It was their family motto.