

## Grampy Spinelli's War Story

"Gonna stomp you, Spinelli! Gonna stomp you if you don't say 'I'm a queer-ass faggot!' Say it, Spinelli! Say it!"

Chris Siemasz and his posse of thugs stood around me as I lay on the ground in the Bog, a remote and perpetually muddy corner of the playground of Clawson Elementary School in one of Detroit's less fashionable suburbs, where I attended fifth grade along with this gaggle of miscreants. Light-years away, I could see kids on the swings, crawling across the metal jungle gym, and chasing each other with faint yells, but here in the Bog I was alone with Chris and Co.

Most of my attention was on the fact that Chris had one huge foot on my left arm and the other lifted over my abdomen, exposing the thick waffle tread of the work boots he always wore. There were clots of brown mud stuck in the rubber. I struggled to free my arm, but Chris only pressed down harder, making me yell in pain.

"Noooooo, I don't think so, faggot," he said, laughing. "You're not getting up yet. Say you're a queer faggot! You got five seconds!"

He began counting down from five. I stared at the bottom of his boot, imagining what it would feel like if he brought it down into my exposed belly. When he got to one, I yelled out.

"Okay, I'm a queer faggot! Now let me up!"

"About time you told the truth," said Chris, and stomped me anyway.

The pain was enormous, but worse than the pain was having every last ounce of air forced from my body. I struggled to breathe. My diaphragm felt paralyzed. I began to panic.

Chris and Company watched and laughed. At some point, they drifted away to find new entertainment.

Finally, blessedly, I drew a huge, gasping breath, savoring the sweet air as it tunneled down my windpipe and reinflated my chest.

I rose slowly and began to trudge toward the main office. I would have to call my mother and have her bring me new clothes. I briefly considered telling the lady behind the front desk about who had done this to me, then rejected the idea. That would just get me in more trouble with Chris, one way or another. I didn't have the guts to take that chance.

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"Charles Spinelli! Who did this to you?"

My mom looked at me from the driver's seat of her Buick. We were on our way home, winding through the outer Detroit suburbs.

"Never mind, Mom. It doesn't matter." The fact was, though, I ached to tell her who had done it. I desperately wanted to tell her everything – that Chris and his buddies had been picking on me all year, ever since he'd discovered I made an easy target because I never fought back. I wanted to tell her these things. But the words stuck in my throat.

"It most certainly does matter!" she said, glancing between me and the road ahead. "I want that principal, that Mr. Dunning, to know what's happening to my son in his school. I want whoever did this to you to...to suffer the consequences!"

I didn't say anything. I just stared out the window.

"Charlie! Are you hearing me? Why won't you tell me who did this?"

I still didn't answer. I couldn't, even though I wanted to. She just didn't get it. She didn't understand that any adult intervention would just make things worse for me.

I pressed myself into the corner of my seat and stared out the window some more. My mother's pleading faded into the background.

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"Hey, Charlie Brown!" This from the Head Lunk himself, standing with a towel around his considerable waist in front of his open locker. I was just stepping out of the shower, naked as the day I was born. "Yeah, Charlie Brown! C'mere!"

I froze.

Chris had two members of his posse with him. They sauntered over, scattering smaller kids out of the way like bowling pins.

"What do you all think?" said Chris, looking at his two Assistant Lunks. "A little rat-tail action for Charlie Brown here?"

The Assistant Lunks snickered like Beavis and Butthead. (Come to think of it, they bore a passing resemblance to those two cartoon gentlemen.)

"Gimme your towel," said Chris, pointing at Beavis. Beavis stopped snickering and shook his head. A locker door slammed nearby, echoing through the small, damp dungeon of the Clawson Elementary boy's locker room. Fluorescent lights in steel cages on the ceiling hummed and flickered.

"No way, man. I'm not gonna go naked in front of this little faggot."

Chris immediately dope-slapped Beavis in the back of the head. Beavis reeled.

"Ow! You motherfuck--"

“Shut up,” said Chris matter-of-factly, and yanked Beavis’s towel off his waist.

I will never forget the look of pure embarrassment that came over Beavis’s pimply face, or how his dick looked like it was trying to crawl up into his belly.

But that’s not what started me laughing so hard I couldn’t stop.

What got me laughing was how *hairy* his entire crotch was. Dense, dark hair covered practically everything, and extended in a trail up his lower abdomen to his navel. I realized in a flash that Beavis was a lot older than his fellow fifth graders. Beavis was repeating fifth grade for at least the fourth time. I found this extraordinarily funny.

So, I laughed. I pointed at his crotch and stared and laughed my stupid head off. Beavis spluttered with rage. He grabbed his towel back from Chris (who was also staring at Beavis’ crotch, but with a befuddled expression, like a bull staring at a flying saucer that just landed in the pasture) and wrapped it around his waist. Tears were running down my face and it felt like my ribs would split. The other boys gathered to see what the joke was, which only made Beavis’ humiliation worse.

“You want me to rip your fuckin’ balls off, Charlie Brown?” Beavis screamed. “Keep laughing!” He lunged out and shoved the nearest spectator, a skinny kid with bright orange hair and deathly pale skin that was dotted liberally with freckles. The kid flew backwards like a thrown doll and his bony ass connected with the dirty white cinderblock of one wall. He howled in pain and slumped to the floor.

I never even saw the first punch coming, because it came from Chris and not Beavis. Pain exploded from my left temple all the way through my head. A second later, Chris kicked me in the gut.

I collapsed onto my side, naked except for my rubber shower shoes. Chris and the Assistant Lunks carried me to the back of the locker room. There was an old emergency exit back there that hadn’t

been connected to an alarm for years. Kids sometimes ducked out of this door to smoke, because it gave on a little blind brick cul-de-sac behind the school, formed by the intersection of the gymnasium wing and the library.

The door opened and a wave of arctic air hit me. They tossed me out the door and slammed it closed.

Did I mention it was November when all of this was going down? The outside temperature was probably in the twenties that day.

There was no handle on the outside of the emergency door so I pounded on it and yelled. Nothing happened.

“Shit!” I yelled as a blast of wind hit me. My fingers, toes, and ears were already numb. My teeth chattered. They were banging together so hard I was afraid I’d knock some loose.

“Shit,” I said again, and left the cul-de-sac and began walking around the school to the main entrance. I was freezing, stark naked, and parading past any number of classroom windows. Faces pressed against windows. Teachers stared in horror. Finally I reached the main doors and pressed the buzzer to be let in. When the doors clicked open, I scurried across the lobby to the main office.

The school secretary, a severe woman named Mrs. Dinsmore, stood up as I walked in. She was unfazed by my nudity. With quick movements, she took a long coat from the lost and found box next to her desk and gave it to me. I wrapped it gratefully around myself, sticking my hands into my armpits to thaw them out.

“Where are your clothes, Charlie?” she asked, pointing to a chair next to her desk. I sat down. I’d only been in this office a couple of times before, when I’d been sick. It had always been a mysterious and vaguely menacing place, especially the rear area where Mr. Schieffen, the principal, had his office. Now, though, the room was a warm sanctuary.

“In the locker room,” I said.

Mrs. Dinsmore picked up the phone on her desk and dialed.

“Yes,” she said. “It’s the front office. Please go to the boys’ locker room and fetch any clothing you find there. Thank you.”

She hung up. “The janitor will have your clothes here in just a minute, Charlie.” I saw a hint of compassion on her face. “Now, what happened? Tell me everything.”

I wrapped the coat more tightly around myself and tried to pull my head down into the collar, like a turtle. It didn’t work.

The thing is, I really wanted to tell Mrs. Dinsmore about it: the shoving, the punching, the final, unceremonious toss out into the cold. But just like they had with my mother, the words stuck in my throat. As much as I wanted to spit them out, something in me had thrown up a roadblock and those words simply weren’t going to come. Partly it was the risk of everything getting back to Chris. But there was more, and I didn’t figure this out until many years later: I needed to deal with Chris on my own, without adult help. I needed to know I could stand up for myself. So I said nothing.

But there was one grownup I *could* tell, and I knew he would keep my secret safe.

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“These guys sound like triple-distilled assholes!” Grampy Spinelli barked laughter and blew stinking smoke out his nostrils. “God damn, Charlie! What’d you call them? The Blanket Gang?”

“Blockhead Gang, Grampy. Blockhead. Maybe you need a new hearing aid.”

“The hell I do,” he said congenially. “Charlie, I wanna show you something.” He reached into a drawer in a little side table next to his chair. He withdrew a small metal cross with a purple ribbon looped through a hole at one end. The cross had flared ends. He laid it in my hand. It was heavy.

“That’s an Iron Cross. Highest honor a German soldier could get in the war. Now have a seat. I’m going to tell you how I got that chunk of metal. It’s the only war story you’ll ever hear from me. I’m telling it to you now because I think it might help you with those assholes at school.”

He picked up his cigarette and took a long drag. I waited, perched on the loveseat, gripping the cross in my hand, relishing the anticipation of finally hearing about the old man’s war years. Then, at last, he began to speak.

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“It was Christmas Day, 1944. Battle of the Bulge. Coldest winter in northern Europe in decades. Men losing fingers and toes to frostbite. A royal goddam mess.

“I was part of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. We were defending Bastogne. That’s a pretty little town in Belgium. At least, it was pretty before it got bombed to shit. Anyway, the Krauts had the town under siege. We were hungry, tired, cold, and running low on ammo.

“My platoon was holed up in a bombed-out café. We’d been there two straight days. A Kraut unit, two dozen men maybe, had us pinned down. My platoon was down to ten guys. We had orders to hold our position at all costs.

“So we held our position. Goddam, but we held it. Two straight days with no food and no sleep, and getting shot at every few minutes. But by God, we held ‘em off.

“But then, around noon on the third day, we get new orders over the radio. The brass wants us to go on the offense. They want us to break cover, leave the café, and go after the Kraut bastards.

“Now, you gotta understand something, Charlie. I *wanted* to go after them. We all did. There’s nothing worse than being pinned down in combat, knowing there’s a bullet out there with your name on it. At least when you’re on the offense, you’re *doing* something. So we wanted to go after them, but we knew it’d be suicide if we all went out into the open.

“We needed a plan. The one entrance to our café opened out onto a little plaza. On the other side was a huge rubble pile that used to be the town wall before it got bombed. The Krauts were hiding in that rubble, fifty yards away.

“Our platoon sergeant, big Irish fellow named Gorman, he calls all of us together. ‘Boys,’ he says, ‘those goddam Krauts have us in their crosshairs. Only way this is gonna work is if we flank ‘em. Come at ‘em from the sides, where they ain’t expecting it.’

“Now, I’m standing there listening to Gorman, and next to me is my buddy Corporal Mike D’Angelo. Suddenly D’Angelo raises his hand. Like he’s in school or something. Polite son of a bitch, D’Angelo was. I swear I heard him say ‘Excuse me’ once when he shot someone.

“Gorman, he stops talking and stares at D’Angelo. ‘Yeah?’ he says. And D’Angelo says ‘Well, Sarge, I’m just wondering. I mean, what if those Krauts have a sniper waiting for us to show our faces?’ Gorman keeps staring at him. Finally he says ‘D’Angelo, you dago asshole, you want me to go over there and ask ‘em about it? Hey there, you Krauts! Excuse me, but would you mind telling me if you have any snipers around? Gee, I sure would appreciate it. That what you want?’ And D’Angelo doesn’t say anything back, just sits there with his face turning red. I wanted to slap the sarge for that. D’Angelo was just pointing out the obvious.

“But I think what D’Angelo was saying must have sunk into Gorman’s thick head, because he says ‘Okay, who’s the fastest runner we got?’ And everyone turns to look at D’Angelo again. We all knew he’d been a track star in high school. Gorman points at him and says ‘You’re gonna sprint out that door and zig-zag like hell until you get to the wall over there.’ We all knew what he meant-there was a section of town wall that was still standing, maybe seventy yards from the café.



It was the only cover around besides the café. ‘The rest of us will lay down suppressing fire,’ the sarge says. ‘If there are any goddam snipers they’ll shoot at you, D’Angelo. And they’re gonna fuckin’ miss, right? ‘Cause you’re the fastest motherfucker around, right?’

“And D’Angelo, he just stares off into space and says ‘Yeah, sarge. Ain’t nobody faster than me.’ But the look on his face told me he already thought he was a dead man. But what choice did he have? What choice did any of us have? We had our orders.

“So D’Angelo crouches down just inside the doorway, with the rest of us next to him. Gorman says ‘Run, you son of a bitch!’ And D’Angelo blasts out of that doorway, and the rest of us open fire on the rubble pile.

“It was like the gates of Hell had opened. Fire poured across the plaza in both directions. The sound was like one big, long explosion that wouldn’t stop. The Kraut machine guns sounded like chainsaws. Plaster exploded all around us.

“Once D’Angelo was out the door, he began zig-zagging like a madman. And our suppressing fire seemed to be working. All the return fire was coming at us and not him. I started thinking he was gonna make it.”

Grampy stopped talking and pulled out a packet of cigarette papers and a pouch of tobacco from a side table drawer. I sat as patiently as I could while his arthritic fingers slowly rolled another smoke, then lit it with a kitchen match from the same drawer. Then he took a long drag on it, and blew smoke out in a satisfied cloud.

I couldn’t stand it anymore. “Did he make it? D’Angelo? Did he make it to the wall?”

“No, Charlie, my buddy didn’t make it. Turned out there *were* snipers, at least one, because when D’Angelo was about fifteen yards from the wall I heard a single shot. Don’t ask me how I heard it over the ruckus, but I did. And D’Angelo dropped like a lead weight. He didn’t even twitch when he hit the ground.

“We charged out through the doorway in a blind rage. Even Gorman was right there with us, screaming like a demon.

“One by one, every single man in my platoon was cut down. Gorman got it first, from one of the machine guns, I think. Ripped his head clean off. By the time we’d been in the open for maybe fifteen seconds everyone but me was dead.

“Then a hammer smashed into my left leg, down below my knee. I sprawled out on the ground and started rolling. I knew if I laid still I was a dead man. So I rolled. My bad leg flopped around. Bullets smacked the cobblestone all around me. Seemed like every gun in the whole goddam German army was shooting at me.”

“I kept rolling until I banged into something, and I realized it was the piece of wall that D’Angelo’d been heading for. I got into a crouch and looked around. I could see those Krauts in their little hidey-holes. And the best part was, *they hadn’t seen me*. I’d rolled clean out of their line of sight. And the sniper, wherever he was, I guess he hadn’t seen me, either. Or he’d missed me.

“You know what enfilading is, Charlie? It’s the worst thing that can happen to an infantry unit in a defensive position. It means the enemy has gotten on your flank and is firing on you from the side. It’s like stabbing a crocodile in the soft underbelly where he isn’t protected. Well, I was in a bang-up spot for enfilading those bastards. All I had to do was lock and load my rifle, and pick them off as fast as I could.

“When I popped the first one, the rest of ‘em jumped out of their holes like the devil was after ‘em. They couldn’t find me, all hunkered down like I was. I kept firing until my clip was empty, and I nailed a Kraut with every single shot. Then I shoved in a fresh clip and got a couple more before the rest of ‘em finally decided to skedaddle.” Grampy Spinelli barked a harsh laugh. “Boy, you shoulda seen ‘em. Like jackrabbits they were. Bouncing up out of that rubble and running for the hills.”

I was gripping the Iron Cross hard enough to hurt. “But you got shot, right? In the leg?”

“Damn right I did. Kraut bullet tore clean through my left calf. Hurt like goddamed hellfire, once the adrenaline got out of my system. I ripped away my trouser leg below the knee to expose the wound. Ugly thing, all clotted up with drying blood. I used the scraps of trouser cloth to bind it up. Couldn’t do anything for the pain, though. All the platoon’s medical supplies were gone. So I gritted my teeth and took it.

“I got up and started walking back across the plaza. Hobbled, actually. My leg was in bad shape. I needed to get to HQ for proper medical attention.

“Well, I hadn’t gone but twenty steps when suddenly a Kraut pops out of a nearby building. His rifle had a scope on it. I knew right away I was looking at the sniper who’d taken out D’Angelo.

“How does a grunt with a bad leg beat a Kraut sniper who’s got the drop on him? Sheer goddam willpower. You know what I did, Charlie? I stood up straight, squared my shoulders, and I looked that damned Kraut sniper dead in the eye, just like I’m doin’ with you right now. Didn’t say a thing. My eyes did all the talking. And my eyes said, ‘This is one Dago-American you ain’t gonna fuck with, you Kraut son of a bitch. Don’t even think about using that rifle, you’ll regret it for the rest of your short, pathetic life.’

“Of course, I didn’t think for a second this bullshit would actually work! It was a desperation move. But as I stared into that Kraut’s face, I saw that it *was* working! He started kinda shifting his eyes around like he wasn’t sure what to do. His hands started shakin’, too. His rifle jittered. I started walking toward him. Slowly. As I got closer, he got more scared. He still had the rifle pointed at me, but I could tell he just didn’t know what to do anymore. He was psyched out, like you kids say.

“When I’d gotten close to him, just a few steps away, I unslung my Garand faster than you can say ‘Heil Hitler.’ I squeezed off two rounds. They went right through that Kraut’s chest. He dropped like a ton of bricks.”

My eyes were bugged out and my jaw was hanging open. I snapped it closed.

“Before I left I noticed an Iron Cross, the same one you’re holding right this second, pinned to his uniform. I grabbed it as a souvenir. Then I busted ass back to HQ.”

The Iron Cross had magically gained weight during Grampy’s story. It sat in my palm like a living piece of history.

“Charlie, here’s why I told you all of this old stuff. This here’s the most important part, so listen up.

“The next time those assholes at your school try to mess with you, you remember your Grampy Spinelli and those Krauts. You remember how willpower and guts can beat any bully, no matter how big and mean he thinks he is. The next time they come at you, you think of me, that sniper, and that Iron Cross. And you stare ‘em down like you’ll tear their goddam balls off and stuff ‘em down their throats if they touch you.” He pointed at one of his eyes. “It’s all in how you look at ‘em. That’s all you need.”

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I began carrying that Iron Cross in my backpack to school and hanging it in my locker, where I’d look at it between classes, just to remind me of what Grampy Spinelli had said. And the next time Chris and the Blockhead Gang came after me (back in the Bog, on the frozen mud, less than a week after Grampy told his story) I faced them down and stared Chris dead in the eye, just like Grampy did with the sniper. I didn’t say a thing, just stood my ground and put all of my willpower into that stare. Chris stared back, and, amazingly, I saw uncertainty flicker across his face. That was all I needed. In that split-second of hesitation I delivered a kick right into Chris’s balls with my heavy winter boot. He shrieked and collapsed. The rest of his posse looked down at him in utter disbelief. They looked at me. Then, just like Grampy’s Krauts, they hightailed it out of there like a bunch of scared jackrabbits.

They never bothered me again.

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That could have been the end of the story, but I can't wrap this up without telling you about something that happened six months later: Grampy Spinelli's death.

It happened in late May of that year, and it happened fast. Massive stroke. The doctor said he probably never knew what hit him. The doctor was also of the opinion that the stroke was more than likely brought on by his smoking habit. Those foul home-rolled cigarettes had done what a Kraut infantry squad and a sniper couldn't. They had killed the bravest man I knew.

After the funeral, when relatives were over at our house offering condolences, I found myself sitting next to my dad in the living room. He looked shocked and tired. We sat in silence for a few minutes.

"Grampy sure had some war stories, huh? I mean, all that fighting he was in? The Battle of the Bulge, Bastogne, all that stuff? Crazy."

"Battle of the Bulge?" he said, looking puzzled. "What're you talking about, Charlie?"

"He told me all about it, Dad. Last winter. He told me a kick-ass story about how he killed a bunch of Krauts. And how he stared down a sniper!"

My dad shook his head and smiled. "I don't know where he came up with those stories. He always had an imagination, didn't he? Charlie, I hate to disappoint you, but your Grampy Spinelli was never in the Battle of the Bulge. He spent his Army years stateside. See, he got hurt during basic training. Not bad enough for a discharge, but it disqualified him from front-line duty. So the Army kept him at Fort Benning, where they trained paratroopers. He helped pack chutes, schedule training runs, that sort of thing. I don't think he ever even *saw* a German."

I was offended that my father would try to lay this on me right after Grampy's funeral. I didn't know what he thought he was doing, but it made me mad. "I saw all of his war souvenirs! He even

gave me the Iron Cross he took off the sniper. Look!” I pulled it out of my pocket. “And he’s got all of those war souvenirs around his house. The Mauser and the helmet and the knife and all the other stuff.”

“Grampy bought all of that stuff at flea markets and auctions after the war was over. Most of it isn’t even authentic. I remember your Grammy getting angry at him for spending so much money on useless crap. That’s what she called it: useless crap. He bought that Iron Cross just a few years ago on eBay.”

I shook my head. “No way, dad. No way.”

Very gently, he took the Iron Cross from my hand. He turned it over, and suddenly I realized I’d never looked at the back. My heart sank. I didn’t want to see what I knew was there. And yes, there it was, stamped into the metal in tiny letters:

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So that’s it. Was I angry? You bet I was. I was furious at Grampy for, as I saw it, duping me. This feeling lasted until, one day about a year or so after his death, I wrote my first story.

It was a class assignment. I’d never thought about writing before, and probably never would have if it hadn’t been for Mrs. Bushears, my sixth-grade English teacher. The assignment was to write a two-page short story about an event in my family history that influenced me in some way. With marching orders like that, it was inevitable that I’d write about Grampy and those Germans at Bastogne, even though it had never actually happened. I figured I could squeeze two pages out of that, if I used big margins and double-spaced everything.

The story wound up being ten pages long, and that was after cutting a lot of things out. And I loved every minute I spent on it. That’s when I discovered what Mrs. Bushears referred to as “my

calling," after she'd read my story and given it an A+. I was hooked. I kept writing and never stopped, in the process achieving enough success to do it full-time and, eventually, enough to make me something of a household name. In fact, if you have tweens or teens, the chances are pretty good you have one or two of my books on your shelf.

But, while I stopped being angry at Grampy Spinelli in sixth grade, it wasn't until many years later that I really understood what he'd been doing with his war story that day. When my daughter, Emma, was four she developed a terror of that classic childhood creature, the monster in the closet. It didn't matter what my wife and I did: leaving a light on, closing the closet door - nothing worked. One night, in desperation, I sat down with her on her bed and began to tell her about a brave knight whose job it was to visit little kids' rooms and protect them from monsters. This was the knight's only job, I told her, and he was very, very good at it. So good that no kid had ever been hurt by a monster, not even a scratch. She slept soundly that night, and the next, and never mentioned monsters again.

Did I lie to her? Did Grampy Spinelli lie to me? Not in any way that matters. What really matters about those stories, about any story, I think, is not whether it's factual. What matters is whether the story is true for the person who hears it. And for a story to be true, the listener has to *need* it to be true. Emma's knight was true for her because she needed a knight. Grampy's war story was true for me because I needed courage to stand up to my bullies. And Grampy knew exactly the right way to deliver it to a credulous fifth-grade boy just learning how to stand his own ground.