

Tom Sheehan

Applesmoke, Friendship

“**O**ne day,” Ed LeBlanc said, up to his crotch in the swiftly flowing Pine River near Ossipee, New Hampshire, rod tip high, a bright Macintosh apple half eaten in his left hand, his words more oath than wisdom, “we’re going fly fishing in Curt Gowdy country.” He said little else that morning, intent on the merest sensations electric at fingertips, on early May temperature of water laying heavy tongue on our boots, on the Mac’s sweet taste, on delicious silence falling on our heads as if the world was a mushroom and we under that still cap.

His words were mutually acceptable, promise rooted in them. When it came to pass did not matter, for time did not count. We had a ton of it in front of us. Young and viable we were, with so much energy between us anything was possible. And we were staunch friends, at the outset of a lasting friendship. The world was our apple, and we were in our Kingdom of the Northeast, the pine forest a soft carpet all around us, gifted silence finding expression in water’s flow, in wind’s breath through treetops.

He stooped under a low alder branch, giving his rod clear passage, but did not have to stoop too much. At five foot, six (even on tiptoes, I had often quipped) Ed did not have to duck often. He was a blocky 185 pounds, had brown hair and blue eyes, and wore a smile lighting all outdoors. On grayest days he’d be welcomed anywhere, companion of the first order, warm, stable, his word forged deeply in his soul, a fisherman who never gave advice not asked for. In worn, roughly-abused, used-up camouflage of Army fatigues, the bright Mac remnant in his hand was a period at the end of a sentence. One look told a lot: thick fingers graceful and sensitive on the cork of the rod continually testing the waters, shoulders and forearms one would know had wielded the most awful of journeyman’s tools, neck of the formidable athlete. The elegance of true labor he spelled, a doer, a taskmaster, a man who knew the bottom of the pile.

Here we were, on one of our two yearly trips, preferably in mid-May and then again in June when most of the black flies were gone to Maine, at the Pine River winding its way through the green darkness of alders and pines hanging their shrouds over mystical waters. The dense canopy produced darkness, but it was neither darkness nor privacy under those broad limbs that we loved for themselves. Here in the softest of tunnels we were not hiding from that world out there. If we had voiced it openly, each would have said it was the endless journey down into selves that brought us here, the awareness at the back of the mind, the hand of nature caressing us, touching us with root stalk, hitting the genes at the same invasive angle.

Then it was 1962 and we had first come to the hidden Deer Lodge in 1958 when Ed had mentioned a place shown to him as a youngster by a friend’s father. The lodge was just a remnant fieldstone foundation in the deep pine forest, a fallen piece of history chucked down at the end of a long-forgotten logging road. Often we would have to rebuild the road in small chunks to get vehicles through, propping rocks in place, hauling pine boughs for small bridgework. For the next twenty-one years, though, as if in response to our labors, we saw only five or six passers-by on all

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our weekends. Over that time we had nineteen or twenty friends come along with us at different times, never hiding but extolling the wonders of a small treasure. Only Ed and I made every trip. In 1979, a milestone if there ever was, he relocated to Florida when circumstances at work forced him to make the move: five boys produce the most inordinate demands. In all the time since, I have not been back to the Pine River. I don't think I am going back very soon.

Changes, though, have come into our lives, as *Time* grinds away like the sands on all lives, abrasive and wearing. We have both retired, two years ago for him, 1991 for me, and the vow sworn in the soft darkness of the Pine River still carries its ominous weight, for he never did break his word on anything. That's one of the reasons at least five men I know, and perhaps more, call Ed LeBlanc their best friend. I am one of them. We've each had our problems. We keep kicking the can over. It's communal, and demanding.

Almost every weekend for eighteen years we talked on the phone, taking turns at making calls. Oh, we've missed a few at vacation time, or a hot weekend when some of the kids' games or activities inundated us, but not too many. We threw in a few at special occasions, such as weddings or births or, indeed, times of pain, such as a son leaving this earth before you do. The calls were not ritual, they were gestures of affection. Both of us believe that feeling love or speaking of love does not stand worthily by themselves, are not that truly expressive. It is gospel with us that you must do things for those you love. You must give or sacrifice, must extend a good piece of yourself. We have never spoken of this, Ed and I, but we know it. Like a rock in the chest we know it. We understand it. It twists between us as if a special stratum connects some elemental ground. Then we talked every night on the Internet chat room, with long-time friend and Saber pilot Ray Excel in Berwick, Maine.

Ed's been here to visit four or five times, early one morning nearly knocking down the front door with October's moon rising over his shoulder, his laughter loose in the night, his breath popping its steam in the air. I've been to Orlando three times. It could be more frequent, but we each understand the other's situation.

We first met in a carpool going to work in Andover from Saugus, a small town of 25,000 barely twelve miles north of Boston. It was a scenic ride most days around the lake in nearby Wakefield and through Reading, but those to and fro rides put us together on the road for more than an hour each day, time enough for depth perception to be made, for steadfastness to be found. Shaking his hand the first time, his grip was sure and steady, his eyes brotherly and with message. Quickly I was aware of a virtual warmth and trust. As he talked, excitement in his voice about any number of interests as dear to me as to him, he revealed much of the gravel and hardpan on which he had been raised. Our *terra firma* was blue stone and granite and if it shook itself once in a while we could ride it out. This was classroom stuff, the old argument about love and how mirrors show us our selves. Daily his values and beliefs came popping out of his sub-soil, New England granites at their finest, leaping out of him in a protective argument or debate, but rock just the same.

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Friendship, if nothing else, is testimonial, what makes up a man. Faith was integral to Ed, and was not show. It moved him, not a sleeve indicator, not worn to be accepted, but primal in its force. Never did he knock anybody, no matter the circumstance. Everyone, no matter status or position, should at one time or another get a leg up from somebody in a position to help, who himself had been helped. It is only fair. All that hardpan and blue granite under him were sure ground for character.

We met at Mass, and then at CCD, and then at Boy Scout meetings. Eleven years he was scoutmaster, possessing the knowledge and lore of true woodsmen and explorer in his kit: Downstream is the best compass point of all. He would select the perfect place for a campfire and the perfect time for lighting it so that the gleam of it and the wafting smoke and the unknown just out of reach in the darkness would linger a long time in a boy's mind. And he'd say to me in a soft whisper, "Someday, a long time in coming, when they remember this, it'll bring them to their knees." You could tell he was remembering another camp fire, another light.

Hockey and football linked us further, telling me of his days at Mt. St. Charles in Rhode Island, perennial state champs, tying his skates for a practice on any available pond, and then at St. John's Prep in Danvers, MA, another high school bastion. Even then we spoke of "the old days," single wing stuff and early Don Faurot "T" formations, and wild pond hockey away from any restraints. He spoke reverently of Brother Victor, The Mount's hockey coach who could cure a puck hogger easily: Stopping a game in the middle of the old Providence Arena, asking the perpetrator to identify a puck, and then announcing, "This one is yours, put it in your pants. The other one is for the team." I told him about Father Joe at Marianapolis in Thompson, CT and how he would sit at the head table in the refectory and read the lips of our conversations and know everything about us, lost loves, late conquests. Ed roared at that, shaking his old Buick over a series of bumps and potholes and complaining about the *tricky dribbles* GMC had built into it.

He's a story teller, is Ed LeBlanc, a legend at Pine River campfires for all those years, talking about his days as The Mount or as an Army x-ray technician in Germany, or running heavy power equipment on construction sites, like the time in East Boston when with one fell swoop of his steam shovel bucket he dug up the overseas telephone cable and the Boston City Fire Alarm. He works on car engines and televisions and air conditioners. Cabinet making and finish carpentry are other persuasions of his. By occupation for his last eighteen years of work he's been a space age engineer. By avocation he is an absolute master of tinkering and repairing. His sash of merit badges is full to the gathering.

When the energy crunch came in the early 70s, we pacted to do something about it. At work I was very involved in energy conservation: Watts Masters and placebo thermostats in general work areas and oil conversions and, in the end, total energy management systems. It was a time for getting down and dirty, as Ed often said, so we bought chain saws and air-tight cast iron stoves and set about cutting and hauling firewood out of a nearby forest, doing our bit to aid the cause. For eight years we spent many of our Saturday mornings in the forest, cutting and hauling wood, filling his truck, filling my van, on the way home fishing for trout in Pye

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Brook or the Ipswich River on the good days, lazing at times on a sun-drenched bank, dreaming, soaking up the rays. We'd have a beer or two, a cold sandwich, lots of good talk. We grew closer, the fist of us tightening, as that first handshake.

And yet, so much went unsaid; that was the marvelous and mysterious part of it, those golden days sharing a task, sweating, heaving, rushing to the rescue when one's saw hung up in a forked trunk or a tree threatened to fall the wrong way, saying so little, understanding so much. They were glory days for companions, warm even in winter with snow swirling at our feet as the wood warmed us for the first time, special when the rain pelted us as we were loading but had not the edge to split us from our task.

Our saws buzzed the quiet forest, our loading chatter riding over low hills to be lost in the brush of small dales. But not lost forever it seems: I've been there since he moved south, heard his voice booming out of one dale or another, heard his *timber* move leaves about me, felt a presence. As always, he's close enough to be counted on. It's a remarkable feeling. I've told my sons to count themselves lucky to know one Ed in their days. They've come to believe it. The evidence is insurmountable.

We built two rooms on his house. Added two rooms to friend Jim's camp. Down and dirty is just about the best way we know. From these vantages we have never argued, never given advice, respecting each other's beliefs, priorities, the way we handle things passing through this life. When he headed south that last morning I went home, stoked the fire, felt apple wood warming me for the second time. Applesmoke and all that goes with it hung in the air; friendship, loss, the imponderables beating down on my mind, the sight of his red taillight like an old caboosie fading down some forgotten track, knowing times inexorably had changed.

There was a time his chain saw was mounted above his fireplace, making for a conversation piece, and high explanation.

Of course, we haven't got to Curt Gowdy country yet, where one idyllic stream courses over blue Montana gravel and rock bed, mouth of the phantom trout eager for our flies, and the campfire still warm behind us. I always thought one of those days one of us would be at the other's door saying, "Just pack a small bag. Curt's in Montana waiting for us."

And I always thought it would probably be Ed LeBlanc, though he's made that "other trip elsewhere," he and Curt Gowdy gone off to the real fishing camp.

But Ed might find a way yet. That'd be just like him.