



The Little Red Shovel

By Lloyd Thorsheim

I'm sitting here in your room, son, with your letter in my hand. It came this morning, along with the rest of the mail. Your father and I usually take your letters into your room and read them. You're much closer to us that way it seems. Sometimes it's almost as if you are here among the things you left behind. And your letters always tell us you are all right, that we aren't to worry, but it's hard not to, when we read the papers and listen to the newscasts . . .

You said you had been doing some shoveling. We almost laughed when you said you could have used your little red shovel - - we almost laughed. You know it's strange that you should say that because I'm holding that little red shovel in my other hand. I picked it up as I came in here. I often do. It seems such a little shovel now with the paint scratched and worn away. The blade is bent. But we keep it here in your room, the way you always did.

Do you remember the day we got it for you? I can still see you when you picked it up that day in the store and refused to part with it. You ran down the aisles with your father close behind, laughing and reaching out for you. But you were hard to catch; you were so little and so quick. Finally your father said, "Let's get it for him. It isn't everyone who takes to a shovel like that!"

You didn't even come inside when we got home. You had to try the shovel right away! How the snow flew! You didn't really shovel the walk, but you made a path for little feet. Sometimes you scooped the snow high into the air and it came down all over you. Then you laughed and squealed and shook yourself but you looked more like a snowman with each shovelful! It was cold and you shoveled for quite awhile. I was afraid you might catch a cold or get sick; you know how mother worry about things like that. At last I called to you and told you to come inside.

You wore a funny little fur cap and a brown wooly coat. You looked like a little brown bear standing there, the red shovel in your hand. Only, little brown bears don't have red button noses and pink frosty cheeks, do they?

You didn't want to come inside. Oh, you didn't cry or anything like that. You just said, "No!"

I don't think Napoleon himself could have put it any better! You stood there defiant, immovable, a little giant. With your red shovel in your hand you defied the whole world, and especially your mother. Even though I was irritated that you should disobey, I could not insist against such innocent courage, my son. I closed the door, but I had hardly turned away before I heard the sound of little feet and the clanking of the shovel as you came inside. You looked at me as if you expected some harsh words for your defiance, but there were none. How could I scold a happy, tired snowman? And you were all snow, it seemed. It was in your overshoes and down your neck, and you had a runny nose . . .

That evening you played with your little toy soldiers. You took the small scatter rugs and swirled them into mountains and rippled them into cliffs and valleys. Then the battle began and the fighting was furious! There were great losses on both sides but the battle seemed to be an endless one and even some of the dead soldiers rose to fight again. But soon your eyelids drooped and our little shoveller dropped off to sleep – right in the middle of a battle, and right on the battlefield!

Your father picked you up and carried you into your bedroom. We smiled when you roused enough to ask for your little red shovel and I placed it in your hand so you would go back to sleep. You sighed contentedly and smiled dreamily, I remember.

I will never forget the day your father brought a little white rabbit home to you. Together, you built a little pen and many times a day I saw you take your little pet to green patches of tender clover where he could eat his fill. You were so excited at first! And you grew to love your little friend so much! I cried the day you were gone and he got away. It wasn't anybody's fault. He just - - got away. I helped you hunt for him, and when we finally found him, dead, it broke my heart to see the look in your eyes. You didn't say a word. You just turned and walked away into the house and into your room. It was a long time before you returned, with the little red shovel in your hand. I left you alone, but the next day I went back to the scene and I saw the little mound of new-turned earth with the wilted violets and the cross of sticks.

It seems almost too soon that the little boy stretched up and became a big boy. But you never wanted to part with things you had acquired when you were little. There were boxes filled with things in your closet and there were stacks of comic books beside your bed. The top of your chest of drawers was always cluttered, and the little red shovel was always somewhere in your room. Sometimes, as you grew older, I would pick it up, smile, and put it down again. I smiled then, too, because I remembered.

One day, I was going to clean your room, to pack some of the things away, but you only said, "Why don't you leave it here, the way it is, Mother? Some day I will be gone and then you can pack it away." But we never did.

There are so many things in this room, so many things you liked to have around and they are all a part of you, my son. That is why we come here so often, your father and I.

He is sleeping now. The doctor was here and - - he is sleeping. He isn't well you know. I don't think he ever will be well again. He was so happy when you were home, we both were! Hardly a day goes by but what he reminds me of the walks you took together in our woods. He told me how you missed us both and how you wished you could be home again. And we understand things have to change; they don't always remain the same. But this house is a strange and empty place without you, son. The days are so long, and we miss you so much! I wish I could turn around and find you here beside me or lying on your bed or sitting in the chair - - - maybe just looking out the window, the way it used to be!

It's lovely outside today. The sun is shining through the leaves of the big oak tree beside your window. The birds are singing. I can see a squirrel scampering along a branch. He is so quick, so filled with life.

But I better put your little red shovel away. I have so many things to do this morning. You see, there was some other mail and now there are things to attend to, so many things . . .

We want to make everything just right. It's all for you, my son; every detail! And there are so many details - - to a military funeral.