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## An Army of Maples

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## An Army of Maples

The sun made long shadows on the cool grass, and the wind made them dance. I lifted my hot face and glared at Tommy Greston. "I'm in charge of this here parade, Tommy, and I'm goin' to lead it past his house." Irritated, I stretched a brown arm down my leg, past the scar from my bike wipe-out, and scratched a mosquito bite. "I guess you can help carry the banner though."

Tommy Greston took part of the banner I held out to him and slithered like a garden snake toward Sally Peters. Twitching my shoulders underneath the faded blanket tied under my chin, I called out, "Company, march forward!" Slowly, our group clamored down Reed Hill Drive, on our way to Lewis' place. I turned around half way so I could see what our parade looked like. Tommy Greston, his toothless grin splitting his freckled cheeks, bounced next to Sally who marched like a real veteran. Between them, the banner waved like a butterfly, "WELCOME BACK PRIVATE MARSHALL LEWIS" spelled out in crayons. Mom had written out the letters, but Carrie, my baby sister, and I had filled them in. Right now, Carrie was just about disgracing this entire parade as she zig-zagged the road, arms flapping like a bird's wings. Just behind her was Jay Alterson, banging tunelessly on a pan while his fat cheeks puffed in a silent whistle. Last of all came Davy Bush, wearing a newspaper hat and carrying a wooden gun over his left shoulder.

We marched right up Reed Hill, stopping only once under a giant elm so Carrie could shake out the dirt from her tennis shoes. And then, right around the curve, we could see the Lewis's house surrounded by an army of maples. The house, anchored between hills, had a river of green grass floating around it. "Everyone," I commanded, "Look sharp. We are comin' close to Mr. Private Marshall Lewis's house."

Just as we approached their place, the Lewis's Ford, spitting out grey pebbles, coughed past us and crawled up the gravel driveway. We watched the dusty Ford slide to a stop, and my heart started beating as loud as a bass drum. Sally lowered her half of the banner, and Tommy puckered his lips where a low-pitched whistle escaped. Jay Alterson's pudgy jaw dropped open, leaving his wide lips to form a perfect "O." Silently, Carrie

sidled up to me, slipping her sweaty hand in mine, but I hardly noticed because Mr. Private Marshall Lewis himself had climbed out of the wheezing Ford. I nearly swallowed my tongue I was so excited at being near a real soldier. "Mr. Private Lewis," I called out, in my grandest commander's voice, "Welcome back." Taking a deep breath, I tried to step forward and salute Private Lewis, but my knees were wobbling more than they do before my turn in our school's recital.

Marshall Lewis halted, his back facing us. Somewhere in the sky, a sparrow cried, and somewhere in the waving grass, a cricket silenced him. Streams of shivers tickled my back as Marshall Lewis slowly turned to face us. His sunken eyes shifted slowly across us as though he were trying to remember, and then they settled on a point just over our heads. Instead of a pea jacket speckled with shiny metals, a tweed coat hung as loose on him as on a hanger. Slowly, he shuffled his dusty brown shoes that were like the ones Mom bought me at Crellon's Shoe Store in town. I kept waiting for him to say something, but he just stood like a stone statue with his shoulders hunched and his back arched like a frightened tomcat.

Carrie slipped her sweaty hand out of mine and, tugging on my sleeve, whispered in a voice that all of Michigan heard, "Mr. Private Lewis Marshall doesn't look like anybody special. Let's go home and play hide-in-seek." I could have killed her right then I was so embarrassed. I don't think any jury would even have sent me to jail. Instead, I told her to hush up, but she just stuck out her cherry-red tongue and shouted, "I'm goin' home to play hide-in-seek. Last one there's it." Tommy Greston at least paused for half a second before following her, and then I watched as Sally did cartwheels down the street. His cheeks puffing, Jay Alterson left, pumping his fat legs like pistons, and Davy Bush, giving his newspaper hat to the wind, sped down Reed Hill faster than a plane, leaving me feeling like a soldier whose own company had deserted him in the middle of a parade ground. Slowly, I turned to face Mr. Lewis, but he had already retreated into his army of maples.

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