

Wingsy
by Tom Sheehan

Long and lanky and always of a dark eye, ever adept at study of any kind, Wingsy held a broad maple leaf aloft, with fine fingers at the end of one long thin arm, against an angle of penetrating August sunlight. To a young friend he pointed out the webbing of shadowed filaments. As he pointed out the leafy veins, he spoke in an instructive manner, yet indirectly, as if for the moment he had but half interest, which was somewhat unlike him. *Interest* was something he had a facility of generating, no matter the subject.

From my vantage, perched on the fence rail above the dry culvert across from the State Theater the Lone Ranger was coming to for the fifteenth and final time that summer of 1938, New England quiet, America quiet, practically all of Europe finally beginning to scratch itself awake, I felt a small surge of uneasiness pass through a span of intelligence within me. It almost assumed matter in its surge, like dough cranked up with yeast. I'd recall it a number of times over the years, looking at it differently at times, as if something had been partially decoded. Almost handed to me in its bare essence, but not quite. Wingsy was never easy to handle, and he talked a lot but only to a few close friends.

: If you really want to know, I suppose I'll have to explain it all to you, but you have to pay attention all the time. Don't dare relax! Don't turn your head away for the least second! You get nothing free if you don't want to know about it. Nobody else will care what you find inside a leaf or on a mountaintop for all that matter. And they'll poke fun at you if you stick at it, but they'll never know what you know, not in a thousand years, because they are not open to it. When I tell you about a leaf and all its parts, when I tell you about magic and photosynthesis and a hundred other things you just haven't got the hang of yet, you'll begin to realize there's a whole other world around us that you haven't seen yet, not a whisker of it, and they'll never trespass upon. And don't ever pretend that it's NOT important to you. Don't ever quit on it, no matter what they do to try to upset you and not learn what they can't learn.

I watched him giving his version of a miracle to a much shorter friend with thick glasses, a thick bush of red hair and a sweater too heavy for the day, but certainly heavy enough to speak of a mother's overdressing hand.

Nature's miracles, no matter the size or the impact, had no better advocate than Hugh (Wingsy) Menzies. He was the promise that staid and trite biology teachers, caught between mediocrity and the languid, waited for, the new chance they dreamed of, a protégé to thrust between their chlorophyll and Bunsen burners, posted as armor against every passerby or commentator on the scene.

Wingsy, taller than average, average weight, but with an eye twisted on interest, was a stick-out in any crowd, in any classroom, in any gang of kids hanging on a corner or sitting under a park pavilion with the rain lolling around as company. His name came from the size and span of his ears we had exclaimed about ("membranous" and not too kindly if you must know the truth) from the first day in school, enormous ears that also showed a webbing of veins under the scrutiny of sunlight that plied its dark ways beneath his pale skin, ears that conjured up images of wind and sail, or, more likely, a hawk on an upper and mysterious trail of passing air. We'd have called him *Teddy Thermal* if we could have thought of it.

Thin, dark-haired, forehead jutting up as a scarp into that dark hair, a long nose the target of every winter season, eyes at once cool and penetrating in their grayness, Wingsy came off all in one shot as studious, quiet, lots of reserve in his backpack, and especially clumsy (all right, we called him oafish, if you must know). He didn't join us in any of our hell raisin' games that had ball, bat or basket, as if all that time gasping for air was hardly worth the energy put into it, that there were graces one didn't have to attain because they didn't amount to much in the end anyhow. If you must know, we didn't treat Wingsy the same way we treated ourselves; he was target and scapegoat of much that we did and didn't do. He was an outlet.

We found ourselves awed both by his interests and his aloofness, a sort of distance he managed any time it was required, as if he were detaching himself from us and our stand in the world, putting us in our places. Stare right on through you he could like an engineer aiming his train down the merging tracks coming to the far juncture, the distant merger of lines, and there simply was no other target out there. It was armor and protection we had no clue about.

: You can kid me all you want, poke fun for all that matter, even call me names whose roots you couldn't even begin to trace, or throw me to the best of the wolves in and around you, but it would never hold me back, not from what I'm reaching for. You couldn't begin to believe what triggers me, what lingers in me, what crooks its small finger at me every living hour, every breath in me! You run across this field of grass in your timeless games and you never have even the slightest idea that this grass span gives off enough oxygen to keep ten people alive for a whole day! Ten people, mind you, who might otherwise be left airless. Ten people! Five sets of your parents, doting all day on each of you, or all the Flaverty's in one fell swoop on their knees begging for air that might begin on Stackpole Field, or Shirley Majors and nine of her handmaid classmates. Now wouldn't THAT make a difference in your lives!

Once, at the edge of Lily Pond long before they tore the dam down to get fill for the airport runway extension in Boston, I saw Wingsy poring over the structure of a cat-o-nine tail standing in his hand as brown as a cigar or a rocket left over from the Fourth, its face and tail burned with that harsh expression. He must have pushed himself through the edge of the swampy area to get it---his pants were covered with slime and muck---and held the blunt creature like it was a prize relic retrieved from a medieval site. Dark and missile-looking, the cat-o-nine did not look out of place in his hands, rather came off as a laboratory piece at common perusal, and as he showed it to a friend of the same age, Kendall Tucker, he spoke so that I could not hear, a mumbo-jumbo I was convinced was poking some kind of fun at me.

: He won't bother us, not when he's alone, not when the others aren't here to join his cause. He'll just sit there on that log, not knowing it houses a snake's family, because he's leery of THIS. He held the cat-o-nine aloft again, higher, against the sun.

: He thinks I'm telling you all about this, what it's for, how it came, that I know all about it, but it's next on the list to find out about. It's right now just armor against him, against his ignorance, against his know-it-all attitude. He really thinks I know EVERYTHING, and I'm going to keep him thinking that way, keeping things in place. In class once I was telling the teacher, Miss Voss, about an internal combustion engine, the kind his own father works on, and I could see in his eyes he wished he knew what I knew and could talk to his father about it. You could see he would have busted a gut to be able to talk about pistons and cams and magnetos, but I think those other guys would beat the hell out of him if he got too much like me, like us. We know

better, don't we, how we can fill the mind up and there's still room for the whole universe in there, all the names of stars old and new and planets yet to come, and satellites we haven't heard about yet. For a lot of our time we'll be on the edge in one way, but on the other side we'll be deep in knowing.

I should have challenged him the way he looked back at me a couple of times, but it would not be a fair fight. He stood in the sunlight like a spare limb torn prematurely from one of the alders lining the shore of the pond, looking bland and sort of neuter, as if nothing important was ever going to happen around him. A bare breeze trickled in his hair. Appeared colorless he did even in the sunlight. But I should have known better. Odds and chances always work against supposition.

As I turned away and walked through the brush, bristles catching hold of me as if something was trying to keep me in place, but something not speakable, I carried the stark picture of him in my mind. Not ten feet into that mat of underbrush, I heard Kendall Tucker cry for help, half-hearted yaps at first as at games, and then a full-throated terrified scream.

I tore back through the brush expecting to see Wingsy beating on little Kendall, the long thin arms raised over him and coming down on him with tempered blows. But Wingsy was erect and still at the edge of the swampy part of the pond and Kendall Tucker was standing up to his waist in water and muck, struggling to get back to shore. Wingsy stood frozen in place, staring at his friend, or through him, or rapt at some other enterprise I couldn't reach.

"It's quicksand, Wingsy!" he screamed. "Help me! Help me!" The more he struggled, the less he seemed to move, as if his feet indeed were locked in the terrifying grip of quicksand. "Wingsy! Wingsy!" he pleaded, not knowing there was no quicksand any place around us.

I raced toward them, however, the struggling and terrified Kendall Tucker and Hugh Menzies standing as if he had been frozen in place. A long thick branch, long since dead, had hung itself almost upright in a thicket of brush, and I grabbed at it as I ran by. At once a thorn of the bush and a long knife-like sliver of the limb ran themselves as a pair into the wrist of my right arm, announcing sharply on nerve ends. Out over the six or seven feet of water and muck I dropped the branch in front of Kendall, and yelled to him to grab it. I pulled him to shore, not without some struggle on my own part, the pain shooting in my arm from the coarse incisions, and Hugh Menzies did not move a muscle. Not one finger did he lift to help me. And when Kendall was safe ashore, drenched, sobbing, staring at Wingsy as if he hated him forever, the apt and studious companion remained trance-like in his place. His eyes were dull, glassed over; his mouth stuck open, his hands, the long hands and the long fingers, remaining stationary at his side. He hadn't even flinched.

I screamed at him. "What the hell's wrong with you, Wingsy?" Kendall had fallen in a clump at my feet and was bawling his eyes out, shaking like a dog just out of water. That's when I first saw something else in Wingsy that maybe nobody else had seen. What it was I couldn't put a name on, but it beat about him with a scent I could almost smell or a magnetic field flowing off an awed core and was working its way all around him.

I grabbed his arm and was surprised how hard that thin arm was, vise-gripped, heavy of tendons, locked as tight as a clock spring at the first tick. "What's wrong, Wingsy? Why didn't you help him? He could have drowned!" Words spit a torrent from my mouth.

His arm remained stiff, long and angular and stiff; his mouth open, the glassy stare of his eyes still in place, searching for something, or having found it, found it as detestable as it must have been. For the first time I noticed the skin on his face. It clung like veneer to the skeletal structure, stretching itself onto every inch of bone, taking on a near-satin finish in the frantic clutch. It showed a small knob on one side of his jaw like a pea alone in a shell, pulling tautly at the corners of his eyes after the fashion of mannequins. The earliest hint of hair, a down on his upper lip, caught itself on sunlight, showed its golden curl, curled over on itself. Almost angelic, but not! Then, in that brace of time in which we measure things, coming at us or moving away, carrying messages, tipping our lives out of the very ordinary, I was suddenly aware that dark and light were at concert. I felt that Wingsy stood for a moment in a dark shadow against the sunlight, or the sunlight itself fell about his long thin frame as though it had been peeled and spared for this very dark and omnipresent image. It was a terrific shot I received, blue-belted, ion-charged, all that old pap and cream of wheat gone its neutral way, all the soft crap of mediocrity. Then I smelled the sweat, or whatever exuded from him, a rough odor I had not encountered before, a new identity, a new recognition, a new state of affairs. High it came, almost crystal on the air but not quite up to that clarity; more than image in being, it was a message demanding to be decoded, to be read, if the capability was within me to do so. What did leap out at me was that he appeared dark, cool, enigmatic, all that at once, and yet the sun continued about him wildly in its heat waves. The shimmering taking place made the puzzle that much darker in spite of itself. He was an awed boy in an awed atmosphere, a peer but not a peer, or seemed not to be so.

I don't know how many times later on I thought about that day, following me, as it did like a bad dream not letting go, through the rest of the year. A sudden flurry of any kind of dark activity, any image, would bring it back full force. It slipped into mornings and evenings with equal force, not particular in its approach, bouncing from a leaf falling across the sky or a cat-o-nine ready to take off like a July rocket. Or its shadow leaned in a copse and almost said his name, and with it whatever insights I thought I had about Wingsy. It was a lot of times I thought about it but never a clear revelation in the bunch.

Oh, the year moved on. I saw Wingsy a lot, close at times but mostly from a distance, the stick of him, the lean shadow, the slim sword against an evening sunset, hair black and wind-tossed, eyes sunken with Atlantic gray, his nose grasping for what caricature loomed doubly within it. Sometimes he was radiant with the sun around him and a leaf in his hand aloft to its grasp, always in a gray nondescript jacket with big pockets whose contents one would die to learn about. I'd be in the line for a theater ticket (a huge dime in those days), sucking away on a sherbet cup, fingering two cents worth of candy and lint in my pocket. And there'd be Wingsy down the Linden Branch railroad tracks putting slugs on the silver rails before the Lynn-Boston slicker came pounding through, or he'd be off on the edge of the cemetery beside the stream and the parallel tracks where cat-o-nines stood ten feet tall. Him and them both throwing the longest shadows, spears to the last of them, nature's armory standing at attention. I'd see him and think about that day at the pond and shivers would run right on through me, two fingers right in the open socket. And I never knew what it was, except that it was eerie, like something boded, formulated, and waiting to happen. Jarred, ready to be freed.

It was slightly less than a year later when a fire broke out in the Odd Fellows Hall

in the square, great columns of black smoke rising as if from two fires, and I could smell the asphalt shingles burning way down past the park. When I rushed into the square, the fire was clawing its way through that grand old building, taking huge chunks at a time, the red bricks of that four-storied hall in the oven for the last time. Fire engines were everywhere in the square and were from at least half dozen towns. Clumsily, like tethered beetles, firemen ran about in their great boots and black and yellow slickers and warrior hats, yelling to each other and pointing out places in the fire, their arms and hands full of exclamation. A great rushing noise seemed to dwarf all of us, like a rushing up out of a maelstrom, a gushing, and a last breath from a fallen giant. And there, at the edge of the crowd, as if he were not only not at a fire, but also not in a crowd either, was Wingsy. Straight and stiff as a cat-o-nine tail he stood, casting no shadow at high noon, but his eyes containing that same dulled look, that trance look I had seen almost a year earlier. It was nowhere the mien of an arsonist, I knew, for there was no excitement in those Atlantic gray orbs, no bubbles at trouble. It was just as if he were outside of himself for the time being, that old detachment. If it hadn't been for the thick tar-burning smell driven across the air, a huge tongue of it hanging over our heads like licorice, I bet I could have smelled the same old pond smell on him, that same old odor perhaps only Kendall had known besides me. Only we two people in the whole world getting some kind of sign and never knowing just what it was.

A policeman urged us back from the fire, pushing roughly when he had to, yelling that the walls were probably going to come down, his voice thick with age and anxiety, winded, his eyes more of the arsonist than anyone's, his mustache falling sadly at both ends. Most of us moved back sort of quickly, touching each other gently, unionized and getting self-support and awareness, all the time eyeing the flames at their enormous task. It was only Wingsy who didn't move, unresponsive, becoming the stiff puzzle again. Not even when he was shoved and threatened by the policeman.

"Move on, lad! Back it up there! Move it or I'll pop you one on the side of the head!"

Inside me that telltale surge suddenly shot its wad, true voltage, known voltage, a mad thrust from inertia's bed. Wingsy was stunned or in a stupor and stood alone in the face of the policeman. And nothing the policeman said moved Wingsy, who finally had to be lifted forcibly off the ground and carried plank-like back to the barrier line, his hair falling wick-like over the gray jacket with the big pockets, an unlit candle waiting on more darkness. He never said a word, never uttered a cry. When he was stood on his feet at the barrier he continued to stand stock still as if he had not been moved at all. In that seeming haziness I felt that only I had seen another darkness. Again, I thought, I was privy to darkness.

One day the seventh grade geography teacher, Miss Kellock, was talking just outside the teacher's room, the trail of cigarette smoke a thin sheet coming under the door, and my ears were pinned to her words: He's not apathetic! Not in any way. Knows more than any child I've ever had, or absorbs more. It's just *that way* he has, covering up or hiding something. I don't mean it's sinful or anything like that, but it *is different* and definitely *at odds* with everything else around him. Sometimes I just swear he knows a lot more than he's letting us know.

I could tell that she wished she was back behind that door and puffing on her cigarette again, her hands sort of washing themselves without any water, no books or papers to grasp, her long nails and thin white fingers finally crossing each other in

punctuation: There's just him, no brothers or sisters, and the parents quite a bit older than the rest, almost elderly. He's a conductor on the B&M, but looks as if he could be retired, gray and slow, a thin face like the boy's, no ready aptitude for anything special that I know of. She's only slightly younger looking, stares away a lot in conversation, but not nervous at all in her manner. She's as limp as a laundry bag. Brought him in once when he was truant. No big deal, as it was, but making her own statement. He could miss a week of school, a whole term for that matter, and still be ahead of everybody else and I think she knows it full well.

"So?" asked her almost-confidante, both of them oblivious of me, not the best student by a long shot, not the best listener, at least not to their minds.

"Well, all secrets are dangerous or valuable. If you could, you'd take your pick of how they're going to hit you. And that's just what this all seems---that he knows something else we're not privy to, and will never be, and he's keeping it from us at all costs, dangerous or valuable or whatever label's put on it. You might think I'm ludicrous or too far-fetched, but if you could see him locked away from me in class I think you'd come round to my way of thinking. He's just so special as a student most of the time, while this other *thing* just seems so pronounced! So disrupting! Oh, only a few times I'll admit, but striking at that."

We never knew how to take Miss Kellock, not really. She wore the same blue dress most of the year, anyway, and that would sure get you wondering, and standing there against the corridor wall as if I didn't exist at all, hearing what she had to say about no one else but Wingsy puzzling me all the more. I was caught between the two tides. Wingsy on the one side and them on the other. Secrets and puzzles; the darkness about him and the stretching, pleasant, warm, slightly electric, secretive languor I'd noticed infiltrating me whenever I thought of teachers behind that barricade. The smoke still curled under the partly shut door and I had a thousand and one images of the teachers in their slippers and thigh-grasping panties and how they'd lounge carefree on a couch or a big soft chair, smoking long cigarettes, their legs hanging lasciviously over the arm of the sofa, their eyes full of soft hell. Daytime soft.

Her legs were exquisitely long and shapely and she stood on one stiff leg with the calf making a grand pronouncement because of her high heel and propped the other leg tightly at an angle against the skirt of her dress so that I could see the line of her underpants against the other thigh, like the edge of a drapery in a dim room. For a moment she was vivid. Her skin was exceptionally white and her cheeks were high and animated and rouged as if they had just been squeezed. And she talked about a pupil, a peer! It wasn't very often you'd get a teacher talking like Miss Kellock did. They didn't do that, honor wouldn't let them it said, yet she had voiced some of what had come at me, had ear-marked a bit of the mystery of a pupil, made public what was mine. Quickly I put her behind that door and sat her all legs and lack of mystery in place, all but to serve her right, to put her in a more proper attitude.

It was finally more than Wingsy Menzies who made the air electric.

All those episodes about him merged at some point in time, so that he became a very stark character in my life's story, but eventually a shadow at the periphery. At some point I stopped poking fun at him, stopped finding odd ways of looking at him in untrue measurement, even a few times called him Hugh or Hughie on the way past his front steps, but never in a crowd. On the edge of crowds he whispered, loomed on dim horizons as a slim shadow against the slicing sunset, passed through the same periods I went through. Breathing earth air was our only common ground.

Into and out of high school we passed and never once bumped fully into each other, different strokes making different folks as they say. Finally he went over that horizon, on a day I can't remember, on into his own destiny. I know that he finished high school a year after me. I went off to the war in Korea in 1950, came back in 1952 and started college.

One cold day in January of 1966, going to pick up a car pooler on the way to work, I saw a garland of flowers tied onto a metal pole at the intersection of four streets in the far end of town. The flowers appeared fresh and colorful and looked no way out of context on the pole, the reds and whites and faint purples of them as much at home as you could imagine. On top of the pole was a gray, heavy cast metal sign to which were struck the words in thick black letters, PFC HUGH MENZIES SQUARE.

The electricity stung me again! I had passed that sign a hundred or more times and had never once seen that bold legend, had never known he had died, had never known he was in Korea. And I wondered who had hung the flowers. Who had reached high on tiptoes and knotted a small piece of twine about a cold metal pole on the cold side of the road? Who had hung a heart out?

I went looking.

At Riverside Cemetery, in the Veterans Section, at the meeting of four internal roads and under the most stately of elm trees, I found a bronze plate marker in the very first row; PFC HUGH MENZIES PH 179th INFANTRY KOREA JUNE 1929 MAR 1952. The gravesite was separated by another grave from that of Eddie McCarthy who had died in Korea in April of 1951. Eddie had been a tough little fighter, a boxer of some renown. I did not know that he too had fallen in Korea. I had seen him fight a number of times. His long-time girlfriend was a neighbor of mine. I gasped at the earth air again.

For many months I found myself visiting there, standing in the shade of the elms, little limbs of shadows coming across my face, my eyes, wind and sweet airs trying to get up enough gumption to have voices of their own. Much of the time was spent in searching the back of my mind for pieces of Hugh that I had forgotten. But I could not get away from calling him Wingsy, nor forget my laughing so many times at something I found odd about him. Neither could I get away from the presence of something dark and boding that had existed as much as he had.

His parents were gone. No other known relatives. No brother or sister or old aunt off in the hinterlands. Kendall Tucker and others of his friends had departed town or dropped completely from sight. Nothing. Except someone who had hung a bouquet of flowers on a cold metal pole on a cold gray day of January.

Nobody I questioned knew the least detail of his death. He had simply passed through my life. I had laughed at him in my own ludicrous way and he died where Eddie McCarthy died, where I could have died. The haunt was in place, full-fledged, leaping all over me at any time of the day, whole episodes about him coming back to me; the day at the pond, the day at the fire, other days which I had never thought about a second time. I was, I thought, sharing some kind of hell that really had come about over fifty years ago, a darkness that I might have put aside but never got rid of.

One day at the dentist's office a veteran's magazine fell open as I thumbed through a pile of magazines, and a column requesting information caught my eye. Readers were asking for back-up proof of disabilities, histories on certain military units, seeking mementos and souvenirs of the oddest kind, and requesting last known addresses of comrades from the dim past. Beside me I envisioned Hugh Menzies

standing dark and vague but as tall as ever, the thin evidence of shadow falling across my whole life, never having departed.

My letter, addressed to the column said: *WANTED, FOR A MEMORIAL ARTICLE, INFORMATION ON THE FINAL SACRIFICE OF PFC HUGH MENZIES, 179th INFANTRY, WHO FELL IN KOREA ON 25 MARCH 1952.*

More than two years after the request was printed, after I had given up hope of ever receiving any information from that quarter, but not going without Hugh's constant company, never without visiting in decent or tolerable weather both his and Eddie's final resting places, the elms still in place, their shadows of leaf sometimes but always of limb passing down over my visits, almost temperance of a sort, I found a plain manila envelope in my mail.

:I knew Hugh. I was with him the day he died. This letter, for the longest time, was not going to be written. I saw the magazine the day it came out and I guess there hasn't been a day since he died that I haven't thought about him. We were in Basic together, both of us with a little more reserve than all the others, and drawn together. He had a serious presence to him and I was still scarred by a lot of my young life. We were the odd buddies, if you want to know, but we liked each other's company. Perhaps, as I've said, we were driven together, I am not sure. A couple of times, on weekend leaves from camp in Colorado, we visited my parents' small ranch in Utah. They liked Hugh, even though my father thought he had a too serious side to him, but he knew so much about everything that he just captivated them in spite of my father's reservations. I mean ranching and cactus and desert life and land erosion and river histories and coyote habits and wild horse stories filled with great stallions, stories that could take over a kitchen in bare minutes. And, of course, we spent a lot of time together traveling back and forth. You catch things that really aren't thrown at you in such situations, near secrets and hopes and the dreams that come out of the void of all of us, but you learn to temper your own likes and dislikes when something different comes along. Hugh was different. But the biggest thing of all was that from the very beginning he knew, to the very day, almost to the hour, when he was going to die. He told me on the way back to camp from one of our visits to see my folks. He was positive of it. Spoke of it a number of times. He said it was going to be in March of the next year, late in the month, late in the day, on a hillside strewn with hell. He said he had known it for most of his life, that it was one of the things he found on the way to wherever he was going and was neither hurt nor discouraged by it. Once, in a very grave conversation on the way over to Korea by ship, he even said, "It might be up to me to make it happen. But I will be a hero when it happens." He never added to that, or took any of it back, but you just knew he was counting down the days the way he had of looking at leaves or insects or a piece of shale from a riverbed, as if committing all their parts to memory for the hereafter. And that darkness hung over me too. I have to admit there were times when I did not want to be caught standing near him, or filling up the same foxhole with him when the shells were coming in. Those things kind of passed off in their way, like UFO's I suppose, there but not there. I never wanted for anything when he was around; his money, his goods, even at times his ammunition. Once, by an evening fire in a reserve area, he hugged me and it was the warmest feeling I ever had in my whole life, and it drove that old darkness away for a while. The pressure from his arm was never far from my shoulders, the sweet wrap of it. And one day, in the valley of Saepori, when things were as hot as they ever got, Hugh came down out of his hole and pulled me back up the hill, blood spilling wildly out of my

thigh from a hot piece of shrapnel. He put me down inside the hole and said he had to go get Buckner. He smiled at me as he slid over the edge, and said, "This is the time, Sherman." The sun was low on the rugged horizon, ready to pass away behind the mountains. I knew it was getting cooler. Minutes later, hell still being raised all around us, he dropped Buckner into the hole and fell down himself at my feet, all according to scripture. I must have passed out. I woke up in the hospital. Hugh was dead. Buckner was dead. Now the shadow passes from me. I feel it leaving. I've carried it so long, I must pass it on. Excuse my quick departure.

His comrade, Sherman Gilbreth

I got ya, Hugh! Right here!