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WILLOWDALE

Freda May Smith was just seventeen when she met Fred Thomsett in war-torn England in 1940. She was a pretty, petite music student, an only child from a loving British family. Her father made his living working at the local waterworks in Surrey. By night he was a music-hall entertainer, a song-and-dance man who performed popular songs of the day like “Knees Up Mother Brown” and “I’ve Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts.” He was a gentle, caring man who ran a hand-puppet show for the kids in local hospitals and doted on his daughter, Freda. His wife was a typical British mum, a housewife and mother who kept their little cottage in Walton-on-Thames tidy and had a traditional British rockery—a garden of coloured stones, seashells and flowers—in their tiny backyard.

Freda was studying the piano when the war broke out and, following the family tradition of community service, she began playing for the troops in a London hospital. There she met a genuine Canadian war hero. His name was Fred Thomsett and he was one the most highly decorated soldiers of World War II. He had taken a shrapnel wound in North Africa and had been sent to England for medical care. She instantly fell in love with the handsome young Canadian, and when Fred was released from the hospital for rehabilitation they began dating. In the urgency of the war years their relationship progressed rapidly. Before Fred

shipped out to return to the front they were married, and in this chaotic time I was conceived.

Freda continued to live with her parents in Walton-on-Thames, in Surrey, carrying her baby while the battle of Britain raged around them. Bombs rained down on the English countryside. When her due date arrived Freda was taken down to the underground hospital. Three times that night, traumatized by the constant shelling and unable to give birth, she was returned to the house. The last time she was carried up from the bomb shelter the house was gone, as was most of the block. It had taken a direct hit by a V-2 rocket. Freda was taken back to the shelter and thirty-six hours later, in the midst of earth-shaking bomb blasts, I arrived. David Henry Thomsett was born.

Fred, a motorcycle dispatch rider with the Royal Canadian Signal Corps, was again in the thick of the fighting with Montgomery in North Africa. It was a dangerous job with a high mortality rate—three out of five dispatch riders were killed. Riding through enemy lines on a motorcycle with a dispatch pouch and a Sten gun, dispatch riders often found themselves in hand-to-hand combat. He was wounded again, this time taking a machine-gun bullet in his hip, and was returned to England, where his young son had just been born. He spent a few short months with his new family and again returned to the front. This time he was slogging through the mud of Italy, participating in some of the most brutal battles of the war—Sicily, Monte Cassino. When I was three years old my mother and I left England and immigrated to Canada to live with Fred's family in Willowdale, Ontario, and waited for the war to end.

Willowdale in the 1950s was a small rural town north of Toronto, consisting of a few service stations, small family-owned

businesses and farms, with a scattering of postwar subdivisions. Divided right down the middle by the northern stretches of Yonge Street, it was mostly blue-collar. Italian and British to the east and predominately Jewish to the west—a mixture of homegrown Canucks and immigrants who came to Canada following World War II. It was still mostly farm country in the fifties, with rolling cornfields and dairy farms. There were large wooded areas for a youngster to play in and creeks and ponds for swimming. Facing north from the city limits of Toronto in those days you looked out over miles of rolling farmland, the skyline of Willowdale dominated by the two-storey Dempsey's hardware store.

My mother and her parents raised me until I was three, when we sailed for Canada, after which we lived with Fred's sister for nearly a year. Then my father came home. A big, rough man, six feet tall, 200 pounds, with a vicious temper hardened by the horrors of war, he was the complete opposite of my gentle grandfather with his funny songs and his puppet shows, and he terrified me. This enraged Fred. After all, he had given everything for his country, endured unspeakable hardships, and now he couldn't understand why his young son recoiled from him. The problem was that the boy's mother and maternal grandfather had been too soft on him. The army had taught Fred that discipline was the answer to everything. He'd toughen the youngster up. And the beatings began. In later years I realized how traumatized and psychologically damaged my father was by the war. The horrors he saw changed him forever and he never truly recovered. He became as brutal as the war that he relived for the rest of his life.

The war was not the only contributing factor to Fred's violent nature. He was a brutal and controlling tyrant from a long line of

tyrants. His father had raised his family by the old-world code that “children are to be seen, not heard,” and his children lived in absolute terror of him. A word spoken out of turn by a child at Grandpa’s dinner table sent that child, spitting blood and teeth, flying across the room from a deadly accurate backhand. Tyrannical patriarchs like the Thomsetts were a throwback to another age.

My mother was helpless in the face of Fred’s temper. A gentle, artistic girl barely out of her teens and a long way from home, she had her own way of dealing with my father’s rages. She would never confront him directly. His temper would flare and then soon burn out. He’d become contrite and then she would get her way. She loved Fred unconditionally and always believed he would mellow as time passed.

In 1947 Freda gave birth to their second child, my brother, John. Now there were two boys who were the targets of their father’s uncontrollable temper. My earliest memories were of the beatings. They came in many forms, from a razor strop across the buttocks in the basement to sudden vicious attacks with boots and fists for the slightest infraction of Fred Thomsett’s rules. The two boys reacted differently to the beatings. My brother, John, would curl up in a ball on the floor and cry, “I love you, Dad, I’ll never do it again, I’m sorry, I’m sorry . . .” My brother wasn’t a bad guy—he was a victim too. He learned early on how to con his way out of the beatings, and that was his way of dealing with things his whole life. John became a hustler, always just a few days away from his next big score. He was constantly in and out of jail. He was never a big-time criminal—he just always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people. He died a hopeless alcoholic, a broken man. But the damage had been done years before. He was broken as a child by our father,

and he went to his grave early, still desperately seeking the old man's approval. I never really got to know John. When I left home at fifteen he was still a kid, and over the years I had almost no contact with him. He was either in jail or kissing up to the old man, and I wanted no part of either of them. John and I were very different. He was slim and blond-haired, a good-looking boy who could charm his way out of anything. I was stocky and dark-haired with a bad attitude. I'd defy Fred at every opportunity. Even as a youngster I wouldn't take the beatings lying down. I refused to drop my pants and bend over obediently for a whipping. Fred would have to drag me to the basement for punishment, biting, kicking and screaming.

My father was a big man and tough as nails, a rugged outdoorsman with years of military training. A ten-year-old didn't stand a chance against him. I took the worst of the beatings. I was six years older than John. Unlike John I wouldn't submit passively and plead, "I love you, Dad, don't hit me." That got John off easy. He'd take a few licks and it was over. Besides, he was still just a kid and I was getting old enough to challenge the old man. The ultimate sin in Fred's world was to challenge his authority. "So you think you're a man, eh! You think you're big enough to take me?" BAM!

He'd knock me clear across the room for some breach of his rules, and I would come up off the floor and charge at him, flailing away with my little fists and taking bloody beatings. My mother would plead with me, "Don't fight him, you'll only make it worse." I hated this man with a passion and would often cry myself to sleep at night wishing he were dead. I took my suppressed rage out at school. I was a big strong kid and met the

slightest perceived insult with flying fists. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was becoming just like the father I hated.

Fred worked as a constable on the Willowdale police force for a while, but that didn't last long. Rumour had it that he couldn't control his temper and was let go for beating prisoners. He bounced from job to job until he settled on a lifetime career with North York Hydro as a lineman. He hated the job. Standing on his spurs on a hydro pole in a sub-zero blizzard repairing downed power lines was not what he expected from life. He stayed there for forty years, just for the retirement benefits. He was a bitter, angry man who felt the world had betrayed him. After coming back from seven years of war, twice wounded and a highly decorated veteran, he thought he would return home a national hero, but when wars are over heroes are forgotten, and he was relegated to blue-collar jobs commensurate with his grade-school education. He worked long, hard hours for his money and he let us know it at every opportunity. We weren't poor—he made decent money at Hydro and my mother worked full-time as a secretary at the township offices—but Fred was born of the Great Depression, and it had left him almost pathologically frugal. He sent his boys to school in bargain-basement clothes and hand-me-downs ... not exactly the way to build self-esteem in the peer-oriented world of young people.

Fred would count candies, fruit, cookies and the contents of the fridge before he went to work in the morning. When he came home, if anything was missing, it was down to the basement, where John and I would be alternately whipped until one of us confessed to the unspeakable crime of stealing a slice of pie. Fred and Freda both worked until 5:00 p.m., so John and I would be home alone for a few hours after school every day. Leaving two

boys alone in the house with cookies and candies was just too much temptation for a kid. So we would take turns confessing—“I took the whipping yesterday, it’s your turn today.” We were never allowed to feel that it was our home and that it was okay to have a piece of pie after school. It was Fred Thomsett’s house—everything in it belonged to him and nothing happened without his permission. Fred ruled his world like a master sergeant, barking orders enforced by slaps and insults—never a word of approval, never a hint of affection. Fred Thomsett’s word was law and God help anyone who didn’t snap to and obey him instantly. That may have worked in the army but it’s not what a kid needs from his father. I hated every minute I was forced to spend with him.

Fred was a hunter and kept a large kennel of dogs in the backyard—blueticks, redbones, black and tans, a big, rugged hunting pack. Fred’s dogs were his pride and joy. I inherited from him a lifelong love of dogs but I didn’t share his love of hunting. Lying in wait in the bush, shivering in the cold morning air under the always critical eye of my father, waiting for the dogs to drive a beautiful animal up the ravine so you could kill it was not my idea of a good time.

My best friend in those days was Bill Pugliese. He lived a few doors away on McKee Avenue, and from grade six on we had a special friendship. Bill’s dad ran a two-chair barbershop in Willowdale and was well liked by everyone. Sam Pugliese was a kindly Italian immigrant with a thick accent. He and his wife were always good to me. Bill and I walked to school together every day and we hit it off right away. When something funny happened in class and no one else seemed to notice, I knew if I caught Bill’s eye there would be a twinkle that said “I get it.” We shared the same sense of humour and we loved the same kind of

music. In our early teens we would sit up in his room late at night listening to the R&B stations from Buffalo on his portable radio. Little Richard, Fats Domino and Bo Diddley—the best R&B was played on a late-night Buffalo station by a DJ called the Hound: “Round sounds from the Hound, awooooo ... The Hound’s around.” Country music was king in Canada but Bill and I only listened to “black music.”

The Pugliese home became a refuge for me. When the beatings and abuse became too much at my house I could always escape to the warmth and kindness of Bill’s place. My habit of running to Bill’s house when I had problems would last for the rest of my life. In later years, when he had become a very wealthy man, there was always a room at Bill’s place that the family laughingly referred to as “David’s room.” Whenever I needed help—for marital problems, business concerns—or when I just needed to get away for a few days, I could call Bill and, without question, my room was made ready.

Marlon Brando was our hero from the first time we saw *The Wild One*. We wanted to be rebel bikers just like Brando and had to have motorcycles to impress the local girls. As soon as we were old enough Bill and I had Harleys, cast-off cop bikes with a three-speed shifter on the tank and a suicide clutch, which we bought cheap at police auctions and stripped down for the street. We wore black leather jackets with chrome studs, greasy blue jeans and motorcycle boots, our hair slicked back with Brylcreem. We’d roar around Willowdale on our straight-piped Harleys and cruise the local drive-in for chicks.

I began running away from home at an early age. I remember once when I was no more than twelve I hitchhiked to Niagara Falls and tried to cross the border into the States. The border

guards took one look at this kid with no luggage, no identification, and detained me until I told them where I lived. My father drove down to the border and took me home, bitching and complaining all the way that he had to lose time from work to come down and pick up his useless no-good son. It never occurred to him to wonder why a twelve-year-old was so terrified of going home that he was trying to jump the border to get away. This was all just an embarrassing inconvenience to him and I knew when he got me home I was really going to get it.

Over the next three years things got worse at home. I found out in later years that Fred had developed a serious drinking problem around that time. His temper was out of control and his rebellious son wasn't helping matters. Of course the fact that he was drinking didn't really register with a young teenager. All I knew was that home was not a pleasant place to be and I tried to run away several more times. Each time, the cops picked me up and brought me back for yet another beating. Now I was getting big enough to be a physical challenge to my father. Our battles got more violent. When we clashed it was serious. Furniture got broken. My mother was afraid one of us was going to kill the other. Finally, there was an incident that brought the hostilities to an explosion.

When I was about fifteen I had an adolescent crush on a girl named Diane. She came from a nice middle-class neighbourhood. Her dad was an accountant. They were a kind and loving family and made me feel welcome in their home. Diane, for some reason, really liked this scruffy working-class kid and one evening she invited me to have dinner with her family. I was painfully aware of my shabby clothes and tattered, smelly old sneakers so I took a chance. I decided to "borrow" a pair of my father's shoes,

hoping I could bring them back before he discovered they were missing. They were three sizes too big, but at least I would have neat, clean shoes for my dinner with Diane's family. Halfway through dinner there was a commotion at the front door. It was my father in a rage because his shoes were missing. He stormed into the house and dragged me by the scruff of the neck into their backyard, where he beat the hell out of me. Fists and boots, karate chops—the works. Fred was a trained killer and he knew how to fight. He ripped the shoes off and tore the clothes from my back, leaving me bloody and naked on the lawn except for my underpants. Diane's parents were powerless to stop this big raging brute of a man and called the police. Most of the Willowdale cops had worked with my dad in his police days and were drinking buddies of his. Basically, they told Diane's father that I was a bad kid and probably deserved everything I was getting. At this point in my life I really believed I was "a bad kid." I must be. My father told me constantly how "useless" I was and I had come to accept this as a fact.

I crept away in shame, unable to face Diane and her family. Barefoot and half-naked, I walked several miles to the Puglieses' house, where they took me in, cleaned me up and fed me. By this time they were used to seeing me appear at their home battered and bloody. No one wanted to face my father's rage and calling the police did no good—they would just take me back to my father for another beating. I was so ashamed that I couldn't even face the Puglieses so the next morning I borrowed some clothes from Bill and left. I would never go back home again.