
TEARS
of the
HEART

H o m e

A R T D E S M A R A I S

CHAPTER ONE

Army Hospital 1969

I awoke to a quivering sensation. It wasn't new. I had felt it before. *Why does this happen to me? I can't think with my body shaking like this. The fear...it never leaves. I'm afraid of everything. Maybe life itself scares me. I'm not a functioning person, just a carcass to be cast aside like road kill on the side of the road. I can't even say I merely exist because on most levels, I don't.*

The war haunts me; my life seems to have no meaning. It was so honorable at first. My father fought in World War II. I liked to think that it was my duty to go, now I am not so sure. I have nothing inside. Any joys life held had been sucked out of me, no one can make me laugh or smile. I thought I could take it. Who knew fear could drain your very soul. Fear. Fear can't describe the bear trap that grips your guts and makes your blood curdle. I felt like that during my whole tour. Equal portions of mind numbing boredom and stark terror. I guess I was one of the lucky ones, though I sure don't feel lucky. All alone is what I feel. Alone and scared.

"John. John, come back."

"Sorry, Doctor Sarah."

"How are you feeling, John?"

"I guess I'm okay, though I still wake up with the shakes."

"You're going to be just fine. Breathe in and out. Tell me about this trip you want to take."

"Oh, yeah, the bike trip."

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“Yes, the bike trip. What are you planning on doing?”

“Travel around.”

“Go on.”

“Well, just travel around.”

“That’s right, John. You can’t hide in here forever. You have to get out in the world again. Make friends, learn to laugh, live again.”

“I know. I want to try....”

“That’s the spirit, John. Life does not happen in here, it’s out there. Is it going to be easy? No, I don’t think it will be, but you can do it. Start again. Just breathe. Now tell me again where you are headed.”

“Well, I am going to go to New Hampshire first and buy a bike, check out the old stomping grounds, maybe find some old friends. Then I’m going to head down South and then out West. I love the Southwest.”

“See, that wasn’t hard, was it?”

“No, I guess not. But I’ll be alone.”

An orderly passed by my room and Dr. Sarah got up to close the door. The people working at the hospital thought that our relationship was different from most doctor/patient relationships, but Dr. Sarah was more like a mother figure to me. She would always talk straight to me and other times she would comfort me. Everything she did was with kindness and she seemed to always know what I needed. She sat back down and said, “You can call me anytime.”

Here is my private number and a prescription to get your meds at the VA Hospital.”

“Thank you. Are you sure I’ll be okay?”

“John, you need to have faith in yourself. Look at all the things you have done. Smile, well at least try. You’re not leaving for a couple more days. There’s a church group coming by today, why don’t you go with them and spend the day outside. They’re very nice people.”

“Thanks anyway, I’d rather not.”

“Doctor’s orders. They’re having a picnic lunch by the lake.”

“It sounds nice, but I know they will want me to go to church.”

“That’s true, but it won’t kill you. In the afternoon they will be going to a Hobo Festival with live music and dancing. I promise it will be good for you.”

It was hard to say no to Dr. Sarah and I didn’t want to but it was so..... so damn hard to mingle with people. She said, “Look me in the eyes. Yes, good. Now go out and be with people, look them in the eyes too.”

I still hesitated. “Okay, I’ll go, but I don’t like it.”

“Good. Meet me downstairs by the door in an hour. I am going with you.”

I went up to my room and lay down to take a nap, but I couldn’t sleep. The hour went by fast and I hoped the rest of the day would too. I gathered my things and went down to meet Dr. Sarah. The school bus had already arrived and a knot of raggedy-looking people had formed on the sidewalk.

She rolled her eyes at my attire. “Come on, John, did you have to wear that beat-up field jacket? I know this is a hobo affair, but how about some originality.”

I had forgotten about the hobo theme and concluded that I looked pretty much like a hobo as is.

“Hey,” I said, lightening up, “it’s all I have and I kind of like it.”

We got on the bus with the others and found a seat. Somebody’s boom box was playing Roger Miller’s *King of the Road* and everyone started singing, “*Trailers for sale or rent. Rooms for rent for fifty cents.*” I felt silly but sang along. There were a lot of people going on this field trip. *Well, if anything, I might be able to find some cigarettes and they might even have some beer. This might be a good thing after all.*

The bus took us into a small tidewater town. I could hear the music in the distance. The place reminded me of New England. Was it the slight odor of shellfish in the air? An old mill town with weathered brick buildings, a park with a bandstand in the middle, the houses on the main street had porches with roofs. I think they call them farmer’s porches. They were really old looking. The bus pulled up to the park and we got off.

There was a band playing on the grandstands. Our hobos joined the town hobos and soon there was no telling one from

the other. Of course, I didn't know how to feel so I had no idea what to expect. Groping mentally for the right attitude, I shot Dr. Sarah a tepid grin. She grinned back. I think the crowd's joyful mood was contagious. I felt a twinge of hope and seemed to fit in just fine. A lady handed me a sandwich and a soda. I thanked her and she smiled, her eyes lingering on me longer than most. She said, "I am so sorry." I smiled back then sat down to eat and listen to the music. There were small children huddled in front of the grandstand and they began dancing. A tear came down my face as I watched them laugh and smile. I tried not to remember anything, the doc had told me to live in the moment, but it was hard. I hoped I wasn't folding already. Needing something to do, I got up to walk down to the pond to sit by the water when a young lady grabbed my hand and asked, "Would you like to dance?" When I turned around I saw her cringe. "Sorry," she said, "I just wasn't expecting that."

"That's okay. I'm still not used to it myself." I thought *the people here were used to us veterans not being quite right. Hadn't these church groups had been coming to the hospital for years trying to save us? Just like the one that went to the Army base I was on every Sunday. I used to go just for the meal. It was always good.*

She came right back at me saying "I'd still like to dance with you."

"Thank you, but I think I am going to sit down by the pond."

"Want some company?" she asked in a pleasant voice.

"If you like."

She followed me down the hill and we picked out a place to sit. It was a quiet little pond with lily pads floating on the flat black surface as big as plates with those yellow flowers that seem to defy gravity. The frogs seemed to sing to the music of the band. The sun was warm for an April day.

She tucked her skirt around her knees, hugged them and was quit for a while. I couldn't think of anything to say. We listened to the frogs croaking. "You seem distant," she murmured.

"Sorry. It's hard to believe sometimes that I am really here with people laughing and the little ones dancing to the band."

"How long have you been home?" Her voice was gentle.

"This is my first trip outside. I have been here in the States for about four months."

"How did this happen?" she asked as she pointed to my face.

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to pry. My brother is over there right now. I pray for him to come home safe and sound."

"Sorry to hear that. I hope he does, too."

"Are you with the doctor from the hospital?"

"Yeah. She thought I needed to get out in the world. It looks like the whole town is here."

"This is one of those towns where everyone knows everyone else."

"Are there any stores open?" I asked. "The whole town looks closed."

"It's Sunday, everything is closed."

"Oh. I was hoping to get some cigarettes and a beer."

She jumped up and reached her hand out to me. "Come on, come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"I know someone who may have just what you're looking for. He's out behind the train station. What's your name, anyway?"

"John." I got up and followed her to the train station. The wooden building was just as I remembered from the movies, with a ticket window and a main entrance. A wooden porch with a slanted roof provided shelter to anyone waiting for the train. Next to the track was an old water tower that looked like it hadn't been used for years. It all looked pretty cool. I stopped her and asked why there were no more trains. "Oh that," she said. "When the mine closed the trains stopped coming. It nearly closed down the whole town."

I followed her behind the station, paper and trash littered the ground. The forest loomed nearby, dark and dense. A man with a cane was sitting down next to a cooler. The long hair and the boots were a dead giveaway.

As we approached she smiled broadly. "John, this is Andy," she said. He looked at me and nodded. She told him, "John is looking for a beer and a cigarette."

“Well, John, you came to the right place.” He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and handed them to me and then opened his cooler and handed me a beer from it.

“Thanks, Andy. Can I give you some money?”

“No need,” he said. “Have a seat.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate this.”

“John, us people need to stick together. It looks like you got it bad over there.”

“You know it. But not as bad as my friends that didn’t make it.”

“I hear ya. We all know, don’t we?”

“Yes we do. What’s wrong with your leg?”

“Nothing. It’s just fake,” he said as he tapped it with his cane.

“Sorry, man.”

“I’m okay. But I can see that you have a long road ahead of you.”

I gazed at him and said, “You know, sometimes you just need a beer and a friend.” We both put on our best smiles.

All three of us sat quietly for a while. I had expected some kind of gab fest but we all seemed content to puff and sip. The girl was too. “Hey,” I said, “thanks for the beer. I better get back to the doc before she misses me.”

Andy gave me a hug. “Take care of yourself, John.”

“You too, Andy.”

I turned to the girl. “I never did get your name.”

“Sue. Take care of yourself, John. Be safe.”

I tried to give my most nonchalant wave and headed back with the sense that maybe I really could make it, but I still wasn’t sure.

I sat with the doctor during the church service. I had never seen people get dunked in the water in church before, but no one pressured me to take part so I sat back to watch and listen to the reverend or priest, I wasn’t sure what to call him. It was a little different from a Catholic service, but the food after the service was good and the people were very nice to me. The service ended and Doctor Sarah and I walked outside to get on the bus.

“See John, it wasn’t that bad, was it? I see you found some friends out behind the train station.”

“Ah, yeah. You saw me?”

“Yes, I did. In fact I was hoping you would make your way around to talk to people and as far as I can tell, you did just fine.”

“I’m still scared, you know.”

“I know. So your plane leaves in two days. Do you have everything ready?”

“Yeah, I think so. Everything isn’t much. I’m heading to Boston and then taking a bus to Manchester to pick up a bike and head out. I was thinking of staying at the Carpenter Hotel while I look for a bike, but then again, I don’t know for sure. I don’t even know if it’s still there.” The bus was moving toward the hospital, the only home I had known for the last four months. “Doctor Sarah, I do want to thank you for saving my life. I know you believe in me, I just wish I could believe in myself.”

“John, I know you will drink too much out there where you are going. Be careful or you could end up like Andy back there.” She motioned towards the woods. “He lives there, you know. The church people take care of him. He has made his home in the woods. Don’t do that to yourself. Find something or someone to care about. You see, Andy cares about nothing. He just exists in a world that he created for himself. Learn to smile and laugh.”

“I’ll try.”

She lapsed serious again. “You know, going to New Hampshire is not the best idea.”

“I know, but there may be something there for me.”

“Yes. Bad memories.”

“Doc, I just want to be close to her.”

“Okay, I do understand that. Call me when you get there and do it before your train wrecks. That place is no good for you.”

“My trip has to start with her.”

“I can see that I can’t change your mind. Be careful.”

“I will. Thanks again, Doc.”

The next two days passed quickly. What little gear I had was all packed and ready to go. I went downstairs not expecting to see anyone, but Doctor Sarah was waiting. She gave me a big hug and I saw a tear in her eye. She told me to be safe one last time and breathe. I realized that she was not afraid of my failure but

that she would really miss me. And I realized that I was going to miss her. I walked out to the taxi out front and headed to the airport where I sat and waited.

I boarded the plane with a deep breath. . It was a short trip, but I managed to drink a couple of beers and smoke a few cigarettes. I knew there would be no one waiting for me. Somehow that made it easier. No expectations. Nobody to wince when they saw my face. Less pressure.

My plane landed with a thump, a squeal of rubber and the roar of reverse thrusting jet engines. As the plane touched down, I got lonely real fast. If I died, no one would come. *Breathe John, just breathe.* I went down to get my duffle bag and found a place to have a drink. “Whisky please, and make it a double,” I told the bartender.

He handed me my drink. “Here you go. You just getting home?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

“My brother’s hands shake like yours.”

“I guess that happens sometimes. Hey, can you tell me where the shuttle to Manchester is?”

“Yes, downstairs. Far end. You’ll see the sign.” He wiped a spot on the bar trying not to be the nosy sort, but he couldn’t help it. “How many shots till your hands stop shaking?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Why?”

“It takes two doubles for him.”

I ignored the remark and asked, “Can I have one more please?” A well dressed woman started to sit down beside me but quickly moved away. I guess I should expect that, but it still hurts inside. I tried to keep my face on but sometimes it just puts a tear in my eye. I finished up my drink and headed to the shuttle. The ride was smooth, the new highway was done. Spring was in the air, a rebirth of life. *I hope that means me too.*

The shuttle stopped in front of the Carpenter Hotel. I grabbed my bag, tipped the driver, and went inside. I got a room and went and threw my bag on the floor and headed down to the bar for a drink.

CHAPTER TWO

Just lost, I guess. This was home once. The minor league local teams the Blackhawks played at the Coliseum and the Yankees played at Gil Stadium. Remember standing on Valley Street waiting for foul balls to land in the street? A young girl was walking past the stadium, her dark hair shining in the sun. I know it’s not her. I can’t go to the cemetery, I just can’t. The streets look the same. I thought I could find something here. The war. Why me? Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night in a panic, can’t breathe. Where are all my friends? No one seems to be here. I guess it’s just me. Breathe, John. It’s still cold here in May, I didn’t remember that. Why did you come here? Let’s go to Ohio. I will, in time. Let’s go to the park. No, not Derryfield Park, only sadness there, the other one, Howe, I think, yeah, Howe Park, down by where Mike lived. Swing, cry if you want. What have they done to me? There can’t be a god. Parade? Yeah right, they threw things at me. Why? I only did what they wanted. There’s nothing left here, just a gravesite. Will I ever get over this? I don’t know. I’m not even sure what it is that I need to get over. Why does everyone hate me so? You better get to the VA hospital to get your meds. Just a little longer on the swing, I’m so tired. I was jolted out of my reverie by an angry voice. “Hey you, we don’t like bums around here. Get moving or I’ll call the police.”

“I’m going, just leave me alone.”

“Then get out of here, you drunk.”

I started walking down Lincoln Street, I needed to find a bike and get out of this town. I had only gone a short way when I saw the cruiser coming down the road. He was driving real slow. He

wanted me. I knew he did. It stopped in front of me and the cop got out.

“Put your hands on the hood.”

“Why? I didn’t do anything.”

“Drunk and disorderly. Do you have any ID? What happened to your face?” I handed him my identification and said nothing. “I’ll tell you what, John Miller” he said as his voice softened, “Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“Where is home?”

“It was here once. Now I am not so sure where my home is.”

He gazed at me a moment, the tight line of his mouth softened. “I don’t want to have to bring you in.”

“If you know where there’s a bike shop and a bank, I would sure appreciate it. I want to buy a motorcycle and get out of this town. I don’t know why I came back here. Maybe you could give me a lift to the VA?” The string of sentences came out so fast he had to think about which one to answer first.

“Why don’t I take you over to the hospital,” he said. He put me in the back and we headed to the hospital. On the way he told me that there was a bike shop on South Willow Street and the bank was a few blocks north of it. As he pulled up to the hospital he had one last bit of advice, “Do yourself a favor, buddy, and get out of town. You don’t make a good first impression. No telling what folks will think you are.”

Don’t worry about that, I thought. I thanked him for the ride and got out.

As I walked into the building I saw the line of GIs. Some of them were drunk, others were strung out. I felt a strange familiarity, like somehow I was home and among friends. But I had no friends, I reminded myself. For the most part we were all just kids. Maybe that was it, we were the same generation. I wasn’t in a hurry any longer. I felt a little better, like I could do whatever I had to do. Not omnipotent, not high, just better than what I felt at the hands of that hick cop.

It was finally my turn, I handed the woman behind the glass my military ID and the prescription Dr. Sarah had given me. She

told me to have a seat and someone would be with me in a while. As I looked around the room, I saw the same stare on everyone’s face. A dead stare. The kind you only see in a soldier who has seen too much. We all went over to serve our country and a lot of us came back drunks and drug addicts. I know what the hick cop would have said about that. *Whose fault was that? Nobody drugged you up. Nobody filled you with booze.* And he might be right. I don’t think this had happened to my father over in Europe. He never talked about it so who really knew?

I finally got my meds and asked to make a phone call to my doctor in Maryland. *She is the only one who can help me right now.*

Dr. Sarah gave me the same line, go camping, learn to smile, cry if you have to, and learn to laugh. Call anytime, she said, and breathe, John, breathe. You can do this. It didn’t seem like I had come very far. My mind was so troubled. It had been worse four months ago, though, when I first met her. Did the Dr. Sarah’s of the VA hospitals tell all the young GIs the same thing? Laugh. Smile. Breathe. *Just breathe, in and out, maybe the smile will come in time.*

I left the hospital and got a taxi to the bank and took out some money. I headed back down the street toward the bike shop. I stood for a few moments before going in. When I did I just stood there, jaw slightly agape. I must have looked like some kid who had never seen machines before. The smell of new leather and new machinery was part of the showroom. It was in the air. I got a rush. Not the rush you get from grass or booze. It’s the rush you get when you come face to face with something you truly love. I felt the wind in my face and the power under me in that place.

My first smile came when I saw the bike of my dreams, a 900 Harley. It was black and all chromed out. I didn’t need a sales job. But the salesman didn’t know that. He was still scoping me out, my clothes, my face, my demeanor. He looked doubtful. I didn’t exactly look like a paying customer. So when he started into his sales pitch he was less than enthusiastic. Before he said two words I shut him down and said, “I want it. But I need a radio and tape deck for it. And saddlebags, too, to carry my gear.”

He didn't say anything or reach for any paperwork yet. Until he saw the wad of cash in my hand. Playing it cool he said that he thought he could do it and that it would be ready tomorrow night. I handed him the money and said I would be back at closing tomorrow.

I headed back out to the street. *A hot shower would feel good, and maybe something to eat. A bottle of whiskey and a few beers would feel even better.* I opted for a burger and picked up a six pack on the way back to the hotel. *This drinking and smoking is killing me. Maybe I died over there and don't know it.* Just thinking about the bike was making me feel a little better. It would be freedom. *What kind of freedom are you looking for, John?*

I don't know.

Is it going to be any different than it is here?

I don't know. I think I am going to take that bike trip to nowhere. Smile. I'm trying to. You can do this, Doc Sarah says you can. Smile, breathe.

I walked around town for that day and most of the next waiting anxiously for my bike to be ready. I walked over to the mill area and looked at the black band of bricks that went around some of the old buildings. They were mourning bands that were put there during construction, when Lincoln was assassinated. *Did I go over there so this nation might be free? It doesn't seem so now.* I sat on Elm Street watching the people go by. They all looked at me with varying emotions. Emotions that ranged from pity to contempt. Mostly with contempt and disgust. *Maybe I am disgusting.* Somewhere inside I knew I could stand up again. Well it sounded good, anyway, to hear myself say that. *If there's a higher power, I could use some help right about now.*

CHAPTER THREE

The day, like all days, inevitably went by and I was ready to go. Okay John, where to? South, but I don't want to go through New York. At least the bike is loaded. I've got money and well, no one to ride with. Yeah, you can't have everything. Remember when we talked about this trip? Humph, under the ponchos. Did it ever stop raining? I don't think so. Bill, Peter and I were going to...that's right! Peter, I almost forgot about him, he was from Ohio. Wow, I hope he is still alive. Well we were going to run the country drinking as much beer and whiskey as we could, maybe even chasing a woman or two. We thought it would make us feel better. I am still trying to get used to my face and the burns. They said I died a couple of times and they brought me back. Then the deep, dark abyss, the numbness, the dreams. Always the dreams. Couldn't they knock me out so I wouldn't dream? The pain was there but the nerve endings being burned away was a blessing, a natural anesthesia. Then the grafts and more than a year in the hospital and then well, the crazy house. At least I'm out now. I guess I feel okay. Hey, watch the road. If we meet people, try to keep your bad attitude to yourself. Maybe smiling wouldn't kill you. Wow, I thought that crow was going to hit me. What is up with these birds? The Indians put so much stock in them. Treated them like they had intelligence or something. Or powers. That was it. They felt they had powers. Just a dumb crow to me.

I took Route 84 past Hartford, Connecticut and bypassed New York, moving straight down into the mountains of Pennsylvania. When I stopped for a cigarette and a soda somewhere in the Poconos the sun was bright and the leaves were taking shape.