

Chapter 19

Another morning. Again, the smell of breakfast in the house. My mind started up like an old rusty machine needing lubrication. I started picking up the pieces in various corners and drawers of my mind trying to assemble a coherent explanation of where I was and who I was. I scanned through everything; my parents fighting, joining the church, two days at church camp, two days of hell at church camp, running away, peaches in a barn, a clarinet, Angela. I could seem to connect all the dots.

I opened my eyes and Angela wasn't there. I was alone in the room. I slid out of bed, stretched, put my shoes on and followed that delicious aroma. The Old Man was at the kitchen table sipping on his coffee. Angela was nowhere to be found. "Sit down. Get yourself something to eat," said The Old Man.

I sat down and helped myself to biscuits, butter and honey.

"Sleep well?" He asked.

"Yes, sir" I said.

"Pretty much near nine o'clock in the morning already. You must have been tired from that drive last night. You remember everything from yesterday, don't you, son?"

"Yes, sir." I replied. I looked around and asked, "Where's Angela this morning. Is She O.k.?"

"She's fine. Had a talk with her when she woke up. I sent her down to the old rail yard behind the orchard to play for a while. I suspect she's down there playing that old clarinet. Told her to give you and me some time to talk before she came back."

"Are we picking the peaches today, sir?" I asked.

"Not today, son. Once you and I have a little talk, I have some business to tend to in town. The peaches will still be there for us tomorrow."

I was scarfing down biscuits and gulping down cold milk. The Old Man quietly watched me.

"My, my," he started. "From the minute I laid my eyes on you, I couldn't deny the similarity between you and Johnny" He walked to a wall and carefully took a frame down, walked over to me, placed it down, "And now, here you are...whoever you are, wearing his classes and clothes. Eating from the same table he used to eat from."

I looked at the photo, got up, walked to a small mirror in the hallway, saw myself in the reflection. I looked back and forth between myself in the mirror and the photo on the wall. There was a similarity. I walked back to the tablet and sat back down and gave the photo back to The Old Man.

He grunted and let out a long-labored sigh. "What do you know about that blasted Vietnam War, son?"

"Well, my mom told me that her brother was there."

"Did her brother come back home?"

"Yes sir. But mom said he's never been the same since he came home. Said he can't hold down a job, still wakes up screaming in the middle of the night. Has to go to the doctor often."

"That's exactly what that war did, boy. It took poor kids from poor families like my Johnny and your uncle and put them into Their little dirty war machine. They threw them in there and spit them out. Some boys never came back and others like your uncle wound up with injuries that can't be seen. Injuries that can never be fixed. And for what? Nothing!"

He turned his side and spat on the floor.

He continued talking. "It was different when we went over to Europe. We were the good guys. They were the bad guys. When Johnny got his draft notice, I bedded him to go on up to Canada and wait it out. But no, he'd grown up with that picture of me over there on the wall in my uniform in front of my tank and my crew. He wanted to be just like his Old Man."

He walked over to the wall, hung the picture of his young son back on the wall and took down his war photo. He handed it to me. He was tall, skinny, cleanshaven with an old helmet on his head that looked like a football helmet without a face guard. He was standing in front of a tank leaning on it and three other soldiers were sitting in front of him. I took a long look at it and gave it back to him.

"Did you see a lot of action," I asked. It was the only thing I could think to say. I had heard it asked before of other war vets in movies.

The Old Man let out another sigh. "North Africa, Italy, Normandy" He was about to put the photo back on the wall but instead he walked over to the garbage can and threw the framed photo away.

"Wish I would have done that forty years ago," he said. "If I would have, we probably wouldn't be sitting here having this conversation."

"Did you meet your wife in the war?"

He chuckled. "Yes, met her in Belgium. Married her and brought her back home. Not once did she ever complain about it other than mentioned from time to time how much better the bread and butter had been back in the old country."

He continued talking.

"We only had the one child. When Johnny was born, it ripped up part of Clarisse's body and she was never able to have more children after that."

He turned and looked at me, "You know how long it's been since I heard her say anything, son?"

"Angela told me about ten years."

"Closer to thirteen years now, I suspect. She and I were sitting there in those two chairs." He pointed at the two chairs in the living room. "We were shelling butterbeans. A man in a black suit, tie and hat came up to our door and handed the telegram to me. The telegram

read, 'We regret to inform you...' And I looked up at Clarisse. She saw the news in my eyes. I didn't need to tell her. She dropped her bowl of butterbeans and fell silent."

"When was that, sir?" I asked.

"July 5, 1968. And I still remember the last thing she ever said to me. Right before the man pulled up in his car she had said 'These beans are sure going to smell good cooking in the pot tonight...'"

His thoughts drifted.

He talked as he looked through the window. "How's that for the last words your wife ever spoke to you before she went off into the nothingness? That was it until yesterday. Which brings us to our crossroads doesn't it, boy. Do you know what I mean by a crossroads?"

I gently shook my head.

"Crossroads. A time and a place where things must be decided. Where you got to decide to go either left or right, go that way and then stick to your decision without looking back."

"What is it that we have to decide, sir?"

"Boy, we have to decide exactly who you are boy."

I repeated his question. "Who am I?"

"Yes, that's a hard question. Most adults can't even answer that for themselves."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Son..." he began, "I mean, you show up here three days ago with this runaway story..."

"But it's true, sir. I promise." I faintly argued.

"Perhaps it is, boy. But that's almost beside the point now. The first time I put my eyes on you a chill went through my bones because of your similarity to my son when he was your age. And then at the hospital yesterday, you resurrected my wife from her long sleep she'd

been in. I think maybe fate or destiny brought you here. It just can't be random. Which is just about as hard as anything for me to admit."

"why's that, sir?"

"Because to admin something as fate or destiny would require faith and I lost my faith the day we got that telegram. Losing my faith was the only way that I could keep going. Clarisse withdrew into her world of silence and I just lost faith. Boy, losing a child is like having an invisible knife thrust into your chest that you can never yank out. You just got to walk around with it there. Took me ten years to learn how to live with that knife stuck there. And then along you came out of nowhere."

"Do you believe in God, sir?" I blurted out suddenly."

"Oh, I believe there's something out there, boy- a kind of creator or universal architect. But I've long ceased to believe that we are all chess pieces on a checkered board in this world. That's the only way I can account for wars and famine and fifty-eight thousand you men and women getting killed in that god damned Vietnam jungle. What do you think, boy?"

"I understand you, sir. It's like that church camp I just ran away from. When those boys tied me in the woods to that tree, I kept thinking to myself if this was a church camp, wasn't God supposed to be here and if he controls everything why is he letting this happen to me."

"And so, you took things into your own hands and left that place," said the Old Man.

I hadn't thought about it that much. Something just came over me and I ran and ran. I didn't even stop to think about anything until Angela woke me up in your barn a few days ago."

"And what about your parents, son? I'm sure they are hurting just like I've been hurting all these years."

I shrugged my shoulders and looked down at the ground and said a very faint "Maybe."

"I'll admit to you, son. I haven't been forthcoming with helping you get back to them. And if there is such a thing as Judgement Day, that I'll have to answer for that. But I swear there's something terribly odd about this whole situation. I just feel that you are supposed to be here if only to bring my Clarisse back into this world and ease her pain. God knows, its bee rotting me from the inside out all these years. I almost feel that we deserve this...that we deserve you here, even if your own parents inherit the Hell, I've been in all these years.

The Old Man walked over again to the wall and cradled the photo of his son. He let out a deep breathe and stared at me and spoke in a firm soft voice, "You know son, it's not as if it seems like you're eager to contact your parents much save for a couple of token telephone calls." He paused and added "Isn't that so?"

I looked down and sunk my head into my shoulders. "Yes, sir. It's not too good at my house. They're always yelling and arguing with each other. Throwing things. My mother will lock herself in the room and threaten to kill herself. My dad lost his old job and his old one doesn't pay as much. I just go into my room and into the closet to hid in the dark until the quit fighting. It's lonely. I wish I had a brother or sister to be there with me, but I don't."

"My, my, "pondered the old Man, "No young boy should have to go through that."

He looked back out the window, "You've been here three days, son. I take it you like it around here?"

"Yes sir. I like talking with Angela. I liked picking the peaches and playing with the dogs. You make a rally good breakfast"

"Well now, "he began. "Here's where we stand. You're a young man. When I was your age, my Pop had already passed. I started working down at the sawmill to support my sisters. No man has the right to tell another man what to do. So, this decision is yours and yours alone, understand?"

"Not quite, sir."

"Here's your decision, son. "he said drawing in closely to me, "You're free to go at any time. I ain't keeping you here and I ain't tying you down. The door is unlocked, the phone is over there by the chair. You can walk through the orchard, get on the road and be to town on foot in twenty minutes."

"But by the same token, son, I ain't a 'pushing you away. If I see you at the breakfast table every morning, I'm assuming you are where you want to be. You'll be loved and wanted here. Ain't nobody going to scream, shout or throw things. Ain't nobody going to threaten to take their own life around here. You follow me, son?"

"I follow, sir" I nodded my head.

"You think long and hard about it, son. You understand?"

"Yes, sir" I said

"One more thing, son. The doctors at the hospital say if she stays among us for another week or two, they will let her come home. And when she comes home, I suspect that you will be Johnny to her. I'm even losing my grip on what's real and not real myself with this situation. Losing track of what's past and what's present, what is and what is not. It's likely that I might wake up one morning soon and you will have become Johnny to me too. You need to think long and hard about that son. I know that's a lot to handle, but life isn't always a walk in the park."

"I'll think about it, sir, "I said.

"Son, you don't have to call me sir no more, just call me Pops."

"I will...Pops."

"Now I got to go into town, do some banking, pay some bills and buy some groceries. You and Angela will be fine until I get back."

"Where can I find her?"

"take the bath down the middle of the orchard there. When you get back to the fence line, follow it all the way to the gate. Go through

the gate and you will see the remains of an old rail switch yard there. It was already abandoned even when I was a boy. There's an old caboose on a section of cross ties and rails. Angela will be down there with one or more of the dogs probably squawking on that clarinet. Tell her I'll be back later this afternoon. You two look after one another.

"We Will."

"and if I see you, I see you. If I don't I don't. that is, whenever I get back."

"Yes...Pops" I said again.

And with that, he put on his hat and was out the door to his truck and headed down the road.

I walked out the screen door toward the orchard path. The dog he called "Bozo" followe