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No Longer Home

Douglas L. Thomas

Steven laid there, eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. It was a familiar ceiling, one that he had seen every morning growing up. Back then, he used to look up and daydream about all of the places and adventures that he would go on, when he was old enough and free to make his own path in life. Now, he just stared at that same ceiling thinking about how far away and lonely it seemed. He believed his childhood ceiling no longer belonged to him. It was just a depressing reminder that he was no longer home, not the home he wanted to be in. The world was so cruel sometimes.

He had spent a few years in the army. It was the only way he could think to get out of his dreary hometown and see the world, the only way that would allow him to go on all of the adventures he had dreamed about. So, when the opportunity to join presented itself, he jumped at the chance. Thinking back on it, he remembered how young and excited he was to finally be going on an adventure.

Initially, the path was a hard one. He had trouble getting used to the constant physical training that he had to endure every morning and the pain it caused him. But one day it became natural to him, like it was something he had always done. That day, he woke up and found that his entire life and outlook had changed. It finally became clear that he was a soldier and his life as a civilian was over. He had become a warrior for his country and he discovered that everything he did seemed easier. He could run easier, the pushups he had done every morning didn't hurt as much, and when he did his sit-ups it was like part of him was a spring board. It wasn't a stretch to say that when he woke up that morning he had changed into a totally different

person. All of his childhood dreams of travel and adventure had been replaced by a purpose to serve his country.

Now that purpose was missing, and his life had become an empty shell of what it once was. When he woke up now, in the room he'd grown up in, he had no reason to jump out of bed and get ready to train. Instead, he just laid there, looking at the ceiling and feeling lost, floating in a world that he no longer belonged to. It was a feeling that led to a deep depression he felt he couldn't escape from, no matter how hard he tried. He had lost the old life he had found in the military. It was something he could never regain. They said he had post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, PTS, or whatever they were calling it now. The name changed almost as often as the description that the doctors gave it. All he knew for sure was that it stole his old life from him and he could never go back. He was truly lost between two worlds; one he didn't belong in and another he could never return to. He felt as though he was stuck in idle with the engine revving, nowhere to go and no desire to leave.

This morning was just like all the rest since returning from service. He woke up, looked at that ceiling, and laid there motionless and silent. The cadences of morning runs that used to beckon him out in the morning were nowhere to be found here and Steven had no desire to search for them, so he continued to lay in bed. He would stay that way until midmorning or perhaps even noon. No one ever bothered to get him up any earlier, and he began to think, as he did most mornings, he wasn't worth their time or effort. His family might have been different, but they were more like the rest of the civilian world than they knew. They were like the kids that had watched the action movies and thought they knew what it was like to fight in a war. The ones that would walk up and blurt out a stupid question that made him see red. It was only by sheer luck and some lingering bit of discipline that none of those idiots were laying in a hospital

bed after crossing his path. Despite that lingering discipline however, he always felt like he was standing on a razor's edge, just waiting for the blade to shift. That's why he would just lay there, staring at that white ceiling that was no longer his. Better to be alone in misery than surrounded by idiots.

This morning felt different though. It was as though some unseen force was trying to push him to start moving. At first, he tried to ignore it, but he soon found he was powerless against its pull. A noise was all it took to push him. It reached his ears and burrowed deep within him as he laid in that depressing bed in that depressing room looking up at that depressing ceiling. It came from underneath him in the kitchen. It was his father. He looked at the time and realized that it was still too early in the morning for his father to be back for lunch. His father was the town's sheriff and his position usually kept him at his office until lunch. The only times Steven could remember his father coming home before lunch was when there was some sort of town emergency. In a town as small as his, that didn't happen very often. He knew something big must have happened to bring him back this early and to get him to make so much noise grabbing his go-bag and supplies, but none of that got Steven going. No, he didn't get up until he heard his mother pleading with his father to ask Steven for help.

Steven was curious about what could have happened to cause her to ask that. He laid there in his numbed state, turning that thought over in his mind again and again. Why would she think he could help? He wasn't really a part of the town anymore. They weren't his people. They were all strangers to him now—even his parents to some extent. He was thankful for everything they had done for him, trying to make his transition easier, but he felt like he was beyond their reach and didn't know how to tell them.

What was it that she wanted him to do? He didn't belong there anymore. He didn't belong anywhere. He wanted them to understand that new truth. He wanted to make them understand. He needed to tell them, scream it at them if he had to. So he decided to go down and tell them that whatever it was they were planning, it wouldn't work. He was beyond their help. He was fine the way he was.

He slid from the bed and reached down onto the floor, grabbing his sweatpants and lifting them to his nose. He sniffed them and decided that they were still clean enough to wear for a few more days. His heart sank a little as he put them on. In the past, he would never leave his room in such a wretched state. He sighed and thought about it for a brief moment, realizing that he no longer feared his sergeant's wrath for not having his room looking like a model home.

After he put on his sweatpants and his hoodie, he reached for the doorknob but hesitated. He didn't know if he should go through with it. He didn't know if he should let his mother and father know that he had even the slightest interest in what they were planning for him. He thought about what it would mean if he turned that doorknob, went through the door, and actually acknowledged them.

"Steven? What are you doing down here?" his mother asked him.

He was surprised by the question. He was surprised by the fact that he was in the kitchen. He didn't remember walking down the stairs. He wasn't even sure how long he had been standing there before his mother noticed. He didn't know exactly how to respond so he did what he was used to now, he was short with her.

"Why wouldn't I be down here? I live here don't I?" he said in a condescending and confrontational tone.

“You don’t talk to your mother like that! You better be thankful that we even let you stay at home since you got back with your piss-poor attitude and that ‘I’m better than you’ way you keep addressing us. We’re your parents! Show some respect!” Steven’s father, sheriff of their town and house yelled at him.

Steven could feel it happening again. The same thing that happened when those kids in town would ask him their stupid questions. He wanted to explode. He needed to exploded. He couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“Show you some respect? How about *me*? Why don’t you show me some respect? Do you even realize what I went through; what happened to me and my guys while I was over there, the friends I lost? And you, what, you want me to show you some respect when you can’t even keep from meddling in my life and forcing me to live however you think I should live?”

“I don’t have time for this today!” Steven’s father yelled, throwing his hands in the air in frustration. “I have to get back to my guys! We have a lost kid to look for and I don’t have time for your attitude or your lack of respect. You seem to forget that I served too!”

“Yeah, in the rear with the gear and no fear. You have no idea what it’s like for guys like me that had to go out and risk our lives for some stupid little dirt mounds. That’s why I don’t have to listen to your stupid nagging. If you want me out of here, then fine! I’m going to go pack my bags and leave!”

“You need to watch what you say Steven. I might not have gone to war, but I still had it rough. I was away from home. I was away from your mother. I know what it’s like to miss home.”

“You have no idea what it’s like. Mom stayed with you. She waited for you. My girl just left me without a word and took everything I had. She didn’t wait for me. You have no idea what it’s like for me!”

“Both of you shut up!” Steven’s mother screamed. “Frank! You don’t have time for this. You need to get back out there and get them looking for that boy. Steven! Steven, you need to help look for him.”

“Why should I? It’s not like he’s one of my people. Why should I care—”

“It’s your duty,” she replied in a stern and even tone. “Whether he’s one of your people or not, you joined the army and became a military police officer because you wanted to help people, *all* people. It doesn’t matter that you’re no longer in the Army. You have an obligation to help someone in need. I raised you better than this. Now get yourself dressed and ready. You’re not looking for that boy in that. Get on some decent clothes and be ready in five minutes. I know you can do it, so go get it done. And in case you plan on arguing with me on this, just know that if you don’t go out there and help your father today, I’ll kick you out of this house. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes ma’am.” Steven replied as he turned and headed back up to get ready, muttering under his breath the entire time.

He didn’t know why, but he didn’t argue the point any farther. It might have been that weird feeling that he’d had earlier. The thing that had been pulling at him all morning. He just felt like he had to go out there with his father whether he wanted to or not; it was something that he had to do.

“Honey,” Frank tried to say after Steven had left the kitchen. Before he could finish, his wife cut him off.

“Our son is hurting right now and feels alone. We need to do everything we can to show him that he still has a place here, that he is still a part of something and that his life still has purpose. He needs to know that he can still come home,” she was crying. Frank wrapped his arms around her and held her close.

“I know Kelly,” Frank whispered to her. “I’m not sure he’ll ever make it all the way back home, but I’ll do my best to show him the way. I’m just not sure he’ll follow me.”

“Then, you’ll have to make him follow you. Drag him if you have to,” she said through her sobs.

“I’ll do my best.”