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Button

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I walked through the Memorial, a high glass and marble monument situated on a hill overlooking the James River. The names of over 12,000 servicemen killed in combat since World War II adorn the Shrine of Memory. Each name is etched precisely in glass or marble. It’s the best view in Richmond for the names of the dead. My wife has an uncle on that wall—Carlyn C. Thompson. His etching sits high up on the glass side, under the title of World War II. I look up at that name. I never knew him and know little about him. He ran a jeep over a mine in New Guinea; died just a few months before the war ended. I always make a point to look at the name and loudly say, “Hello Carlyn Thompson.” If no one is in the memorial, I talk to him about the events of the day. So far, there’s been no response. That’s probably a good thing.

I look around the property as a volunteer docent. The commanding expanse of Richmond and the breaking James is never tiring. I pick up litter. Trash drifts in from Jefferson Davis Highway. To honor the dead, the grounds must be spotless; a cigarette butt is an offense.

Once, while looking for visitors to greet, I rounded into the shrine and see a woman, no . . . maybe a girl, sitting on a marble bench. She stared at her phone. The dappled light of the glass panels danced at her sandaled feet. I came closer, prepared to give my standard greeting: “Welcome to the Virginia War Memorial. Can I help you? Are you from the area? Have you been here before? Are you a veteran? We have exhibits inside, bathrooms, water.”

I stopped short. It was only 40 degrees outside, and wet. The girl, maybe twenty, white, slight, was covered in tattoos. She had shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt on. The t-shirts says, “REPARATIONS NOW!” More jarring were the metal pins poking from her ears, nose, cheeks, and eyebrows. Possibly a hipster from the University. Many students live in the Oregon Hill neighborhood across the highway.
nice days, they come over to sun or cut through the War Memorial property to the river. It wasn’t a nice
day. She’d come over to stare at a phone.

My first reaction was to step back, do an about face, and head inside to the safety of the main
lobby. My inner voice said to quit being a chicken shit. You’re not very brave for a 30-year Navy veteran.
A customer is a customer, even one locked into a phone’s glow. I walked over and began my standard
speech. Looking up, her short black hair and long bangs waved. She said, “Get lost asshole.”

I stepped back, stuttering. The suddenness of the rude remark threw me off. She stuck her
tongue out. Metal posts dully reflected light from the glass wall. Small metal marbles pinched on both
sides of her cheeks. How could she talk? I counted five metal thingies in that derisive tongue. Hearing
voices behind me, I saw an honorable escape. Backing off, I threw my hands up in a surrender gesture.
She went back to the phone.

The voices came from a couple in their early sixties, from my generation. They were bundled up
sensibly in coats, scarves, and gloves. I was cold. My blue sport-coat, tie, and spiffy War Memorial shirt
were not warm enough. Looking up into the glass, the couple mouthed names. Occasionally, at the
Memorial, a relative shows up to help someone find a name. It’s a satisfying part of the volunteer work.
I approached the couple and I launched into my speech. The nodding, smiles, and glimmer of
understanding alerted me to receptive allies.

I walked the Maryland couple further into the Shrine of Memory. I pointed out the town of
Bedford and a huge list of dead under that town’s title, “The single greatest loss of any community in
World War II.” I’m not sure that was exactly right, but it choked up visitors. “Most of it happened within
a few hours on D-Day.” That added spice to the story.

We walked together through the shrine, slipping past the tattooed girl. The girl’s eyes never left
her phone; my eyes slyly never left her. A large white statue titled Memory graces the far end of the
chamber; perhaps the most photographed aspect of the Virginia War Memorial. The couple took
pictures. Everyone did. They asked me if I was a vet. I told them I was. “Spent 30 years in the submarine force.” They thanked me for my service.

At that, the girl rose and screamed, “Don’t thank him for his service. They’re all killers. His service is shit!” The slight girl walked belligerently over, ready for a fight with fists curled. She stomped a foot hard and then spit on the ground. Before turning away, she flipped us all off. Actually, I think she flipped me off, the couple only got hit with friendly fire. At the end of the Memorial she lit a cigarette, took a drag, then threw the lit remainder on the Memorial floor. I couldn’t speak. The couple couldn’t speak. The girl did a double flip off. The underside of her arms had as many tattoos as the top. Still holding the phone, she ran across Jefferson Davis Highway.

I apologized to the couple. They worried about me. Was I offended, that was so wrong; could they do anything for me? Hell yes I was offended and pissed, but it happened so fast and unexpectedly I just stammered, “Wow...wow.” Reactions slowed in my dotage. I suggested we go inside and see the educational exhibits. A feeling of sad déjà vu sat in my stomach, just like coming home from Vietnam.

Inside, I ran the movie for the couple: a 4D patriotic concoction full of strobe flashes and special effects. It even snowed. I wasn’t sure the snow would be appreciated in the cold weather, but most people loved the movie. I didn’t stay in the room; I had seen it a hundred times. I could mime the whole thing like film aficionados did for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. I shivered. It must have been from finally warming up, but that girl had me wired for sound.

At the front desk, another volunteer named John penned invites to an event. The volunteers often helped the permanent state staff with administrative tasks. I interrupted John saying, “Hey, I just had the weirdest thing happen.”

“I know. Tattoo Tilly. I saw it on the security monitor.”

“Tattoo Tilly?”
“Yeah, Tattoo Tilly. The one with the iron works coming out of her mouth,” John stopped writing. “Oh, your first time with her? Hadn’t realized that. Should have warned you. I won’t even go out if she’s there. The staff won’t either. I changed my shift from Wednesday to avoid her. Just my luck, now she’s coming on Thursdays.” John was an Air Force veteran. I always told him he wasn’t really part of a military service—just a golf club. He would tell me Navy guys were just gay people in training, who hadn’t figured it out yet. He twirled the pen, “Honestly, if the war didn’t give me PTSD, I’ve gotten it from that girl. A real piece of bitchy work.”

I relaxed. It hadn’t been something I did. I asked, “So is she homeless or crazy?”

John wound up speaking non-stop. He had strong opinions about Tilly. The girl was a student at Virginia Commonwealth University and a proponent of every left wing, freaked-up, damn Bill Clinton, Obama issue. Whales, slaves, renter’s rights, confederate monuments, and even cat neutering were on her radar. The focus of the pissing and moaning centered on things military. She haunted the War Memorial constantly giving shit to volunteers and visitors. She even once launched a bunch of crap on the governor on Veterans Day. “I mean real crap—dog and pig poop. The cops took her away.” John said, reddening.

“So, obviously, she can be arrested.”

“Not so much. She’s in bed with every free, liberal lawyer who can’t make a real living in the city. No, not in bed. No one would go to bed with her.” John slammed the desk forcefully, “No, it’s her First Amendment right to be a bitch. Like I said, I won’t go out if she’s there. No one will. Just avoid her—she’s looking for trouble. Looking for a lawsuit. Looking for a free pay day. Luckily, she usually just stares at that phone for hours on end. The only thing I do is watch on the monitor and make sure she doesn’t have a spray paint can.”

Nodding, I walked behind the desk to sit down. “Well, I saw her throw a cigarette down in the Memorial. That’s littering.”
“Call the cops. They won’t come. They want nothing to do with her.”

I didn’t see Tilly again for three weeks. When the day came, I was leading a class of high school students. They were good kids from Richmond Community. They listened intently, no phones out, and asked great questions. High school kids aren’t normally jazzed by the whole history thing. I had lead the group to the statue when Tilly came around the corner. She yelled, “Don’t listen to him. He’s a purveyor of death. This place is grounded in shit. They’re just trying to get you to enlist so you can kill innocents, take slaves, and get rich!” She screamed, but her voice slurred by the tongue hardware. The kids reared back, huddling together towards the glass for safety. Tilly waved at the glass saying, “They’re all dead. Dead because Republicans wanted it that way.” She pointed at me, “Don’t let these fucking Nazis fool you!”

That did it. The Nazi slam was not free speech. “Shut up. Get out of here!” I surged forward finger pointing. The kids now had their dander up. Suddenly obscenities came from them back at Tilly. The kids were protecting me; who would have thought? Tilly stammered, spitting words I didn’t quite get. Voices blended and rose louder. She took her phone out. Pushing it forward, Tilly began to tape the confrontation. Behind me, 20 phones came out recording Tilly. “Kids go inside. Tell the front desk what happened. Have them call the cops.”

I didn’t leave. She stared. I stared back. Tilly blinked first. She screamed, “Screw you, screw you!” The phone lowered, but I guessed the sound still on.

“Do you want to talk about this?” I really didn’t want to talk about it. My goal was to keep her here until the police came. I spoke calmly, deliberately, measuring every word. “Obviously, this memorial upsets you.” I waved my hand around. “You must be cold. Let’s go into the sun, take in the view, and relax.” She had the same sleeveless shirt on and the same shorts. Spring was on the way, but not here yet.
“I’m not going out there with you. You’ll rape me. I know your type.”

“Look at me. My raping days are long over. See no gun.” I motioned her towards the hill overlooking the James. “Let’s be cool. I know you’re smart. I heard you’re at the University. Please...please, no trouble. I’m only a volunteer.”

“A volunteer in death. You celebrate death!”

Trying to placate, I didn’t argue. I looked towards the building. No police yet. She stayed with me as I walked out of the shrine chamber to the grounds.

The view of the James River fully opened up. A Kodak type photo spot. I found it inspiring. She took it in. Parts of Oregon Hill opened to a similar view. Tilly took a deep breath and smelled the air. City air, but the river cleaned it. Still too cold for my taste. Still no police. Finally, she said, “What a waste of space. Condos could be built here.”

“You don’t seem like a condo type to me Tilly.” I couldn’t tell where one tattoo ended and another began. A jumble, maybe some Chinese writing, a cat with large fangs, and possibly sayings in Latin.

“My name is not Tilly. You’re trying to make fun of me. I’ve got my phone on. It’s listening.” That surprised me. I’d thought the name Tattoo Tilly grounded in reality. “Oh, um...sorry. Don’t know where I got that from. What is your name?”

She crossed her arms. “None of your business”

“Well my name is Joe.” I shuffled forward onto the Walkway of Honor. The Walkway holds memorial bricks. The bricks can be purchased by anyone. You spend a couple hundred dollars for a brick that cost $25. You didn’t have to be dead to have a brick and it can say what you want. Doesn’t even have to be military related. The money goes to the educational foundation. I pointed to the James, “Pretty isn’t it?”

“It would be prettier without this monstrosity,” she motioned towards the Memorial.
I kept looking for cops. I kept looking for help. They could see me on the security monitor. What the hell? “Why do you come here if it upsets you so much? Word is that you are the War Memorial’s most frequent flyer.”

“I do it to save people.” She glanced down. There were around 300 memorial bricks at the time. Veteran names graced most. A few organizations and companies had bought in. A couple mentioned cats or dogs. There was even one to Robert E. Lee. Not having to be dead opened up possibilities. She pointed at two bricks, “Wormongers. Companies that make killing machines. Part of the military-industrial complex.” I looked. In theory, she had a point. There were bricks from General Dynamics and Boeing. Of course, these bricks sat next to ones from a local donut shop and a brewery.

“Military-industrial complex. Haven’t heard that one in about 30 years. Where did you get that from?”

She let loose like a spitting cobra. I got an earful. Her writing professor at VCU had told her. He was Jewish, and they know stuff. The whole military thing was a money conspiracy. This veteran love-fest was meant to keep the dollars flowing to the nation’s killers. She pointed to some painted rocks.

“Look, you’re even brainwashing kids. The imperialist US Flag is over all of them!” The rocks, painted by school children, had a few flags but also bunny rabbits, cats, and what appeared to be the James River.

“I bet you even have classes for babies!” Mentally I conceded another partial point. The War Memorial did events for young children. Movies, coloring books, and activities like painting rocks. Though, we thought of it as fun, not orientation; but a point never-the-less. “Nazis. All you are Nazis training new Nazis!”

That set me off. The hell with the phone. I forcefully said the word, “Nigger.” It just came out.

Her eyes froze open and mouth dropped. She took a step back, stammered and cried out, “How dare you...how dare you use that word!”

“That’s what it feels like!”
“Feel what? You racist pig!” She balled her hands up.

“Calling a military man a Nazi is the same thing as calling a black a nigger. So, who’s the real racist here?” I made my right hand look like a pistol. I pointed at her head. I shot.

She seemed perplexed, maybe scared, maybe confused. Beginning to speak, she stopped. Raising a hand to point, she stopped. I continued, “Look, the purpose of this place is to honor the fallen.” She opened her mouth to speak but I put a finger up. I wanted to poke it in her eye. The camera wouldn’t hear a poke. “Look, I get your point. Technically this place is about the cost of war, but sometimes glorification sneaks in.”

With that metal filled tongue very visible, she opened her mouth for another tirade. Again, words failed. She was off her game, being agreed with unexpectedly. There was silence and then a fit. She began stomping all over the bricks yelling, “No, No, No, No!” The middle finger came up again. “I hate you, I hate all of you!” She said, motioning to the dead names on the wall. Pushing me aside, she ran full tilt towards the highway. I lost her behind the memorial, catching a glimpse of tattoos running into Oregon Hill.

Inside the Memorial admin building and education center, I asked John about the cops. He said, “Not coming, not for her, unless she shoots someone.”

“Really? She caused a major disruption with the school kids.”

“Didn’t shoot any, did she? Anyway, you two looked like you were having a moment. Thinking of sleeping with the enemy?” I went to look for my high school kids in the theatre.

Early that same afternoon, the War Memorial went quiet. It can get that way; spooky on the slow days. My wife’s uncle Carlyn Thompson still quiet. John had gone home. I sat all alone at the desk. The War Memorial staff huddled in a meeting behind locked doors. I had the place to myself. I caught up on reading a book about the days after Japan’s surrender. Some mere couple months after Carlyn was
killed. Finding peace harder than starting wars, with my head down I didn’t hear the woman come in. She surprised me. I jumped up like I was doing something wrong. I stammered for a second and began my standard welcoming speech.

The woman stopped me. “I’m looking for Button.”

I rudely and obviously gaped. The woman was morbidly obese and barely able to stand. Staring, my words squeaked out, “I don’t know of a Button. There’s a Baxter on the staff, but he’s in a meeting.”

“No, this is a girl. I’m sorry, her real name is Amy.” Her triple chin shook as she spoke. My inner monologue told me to be an adult. Ignore the weight. Just be cool. Pretend you don’t notice.

The woman continued. Her voice was a husky apology. “The police told me she would be here. She created a disturbance.”

“Oh, you mean Tilly?” Now the woman looked confused. Then I remembered, “Oh yes, she was...there was a problem. No police though. Last I saw, she went into Oregon Hill.”

The woman leaned more heavily on the front desk. A pant to her voice. Breathing troubled or, maybe, hyperventilating. “Can I sit down? I’m not well.”

I nodded, falling clumsily over the two chairs behind the desk. “Please come over here. Plenty of room.” I hated how that sounded. She came over, never letting go of the desk. She flopped down in the first chair and it scooted to the wall. Belly fat rolled over the arm of the chair, but she squeezed in. I took her place at the counter. “Do you need anything? Should I call someone? We have water.”

The woman shook her head and began apologizing. Button, real name Amy, was a handful. Always protesting something—getting arrested or near arrested. The woman apologized again for something that must have had happened, but never asked specifically what it was. Since Button’s father died, it had been awful. Button hated everything. All authority was evil. College should have given her some balance, but instead made her more radical upset and hateful. The woman’s breaths came in short despairing spurts. I turned to get water. The staff entrance was behind the water fountain. I hoped to
get someone to come out. I needed help from someone with more empathy than I. There was no one to
even wave at behind the glass door.

I brought the water. “My name is Joe. Tilly...sorry, I mean Amy, was a tad rough on a school
group. Amy upset people. She was angry and said a few things.”

A tear eased down the woman’s face, stopping in a fold below the eye. She sniffled with a slight
snort. I handed her a rough paper towel we used to clean the desk. The woman hit her chest three times
saying, “I’m so sorry. I’m always saying sorry for her. She hates all things military. Well, really she hates a
lot of things, but war stuff the worst.”

Sweeping my arm across the lobby I said, “I sensed that. She spends a lot of time here though.”

“Sitting in the white building with the statue looking at her phone?”

“Yes, the main shrine.” I pointed through the big glass windows of the atrium.

The face pockmarked. Through the fat emotion, it shouldn’t have been visible, but it came
through in earnest. An overwhelming sadness, a black shroud, an open wound of grief. I knew too many
widows and now, surely, another sat in front of me. She said, “Button is looking at a picture of her
father. When she gets down, maniac’s depression is what the doctors call it, she stares at the picture
endlessly. He died when Button was eight. A medical man with the Marine Corps, but a sailor guy in the
Navy. A corpse-man something. Hard to keep that all straight. I don’t even know where Iraq is.”

I went for a book behind the desk saying, “My god he’s on the wall. Let me look it up!”

The woman grabbed my arm before I could get the book. “He’s not on the wall. Martin died in a
truck accident, in Germany, on the way home. Button checked a long time ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” The War Memorial wall was only for those who died combat deaths. Seconds
of silence passed. A minute of silence. I let the woman re-live the pain. What a shithead I am.

She brightened up, wiping tears with the rough paper. “Button and her Dad were close, so very
close. She loved him so. They would plant flowers together; her favorite were carnations. It made me
jealous.” Another painful memory curtained down her face, taking the brightness away. “Joining the service was a mistake for Martin. He never fit in. A strange man I guess. Hated injustice, hated authority, hated a full-time job. At least had trouble keeping one. He came from a military family. Father, mother, brothers all served. We were losing our home and almost starving. He joined. Thought medicine would be peaceful. The noise, death, and wounded tore him up.” I got more water. The staff were still not visible. I gave her more of the rough paper, wishing I still carried a handkerchief.

“I’m being a burden. You don’t want to hear this. I need to find Button.” The woman made a move to rise but fell back in the chair. Surrendering to the weight she said, “Sometimes, when she gets crazy like this, I take her home for a couple days. Try to feed her. She tells me every bit of food I eat is illegal or evil. We argue. Do you know I blamed her for Martin’s death? Can’t believe I said it. Told Button that Martin went into the military just to feed her. That’s what I said. Didn’t mean it, but once you say these things, well, they don’t go away. Stuff just comes out. We’ve never reconciled—not really. She’ll come home, but we’ll argue and argue. Sometimes the fighting wears her out. She’ll calm down and sleep a little, maybe even eat. The fighting almost kills me, but I deserve it.” The woman looked up at me. “She’s starving herself to death. What am I going to do?” A soft, gurgling wail came out.

What was I supposed to say? I was terrible at emotional stuff and not a hugger. Action was my venue. I had to do something, but what? I offered a lame remark about the VA helping. Breaking eye contact, I looked over at a collection of military coins.

She waved me off, fanning herself with a ringless hand. “Don’t worry about us. We get a partial pension from Marty’s service. Do you know Button is on a scholarship from the American Legion? She doesn’t know that. Thinks it is from those border doctor guys. If she knew, she’d reject it. I couldn’t afford to send her to VCU without it.” Putting her fingers up to her lips in the silence sign she continued, “Don’t ever tell her, and God, don’t tell the American Legion. A buddy of Marty’s arranged the whole thing.” The woman now made the silence sign with both forefingers. “Mabel was Marty’s nickname in
the Marines. I don’t know why. After the battalion got back—is battalion the right word?” I didn’t know for sure but nodded. “Anyway, I heard from many of them. They thought the world of Mabel. Said he was a great doc but very weird. Marines are honest. If the Legion knew they were supporting her, they’d go crazy. She has a reputation all over the area. She’d go crazy—they’d go crazy. Please say nothing.”

I promised it would be my secret.

The woman looked around the atrium filled with quotes from famous Virginians, mostly military. A model airplane caught her attention, then the collection of military coins. “This is a nice place. You know our happiest moments were in Charleston, South Carolina. Marty was at the Naval Hospital there. We had a home in military housing. Oh, the flowers we grew—Azaleas, roses, and, of course, carnations. Button thrived. There were lots of programs for kids. Marty didn’t fit in exactly, but made a go of it. I wasn’t such a whale then.” Silence for a few seconds; a pleasant memory lost quickly. “Then he ended up with the Marines in Iraq. Wrong place for him. He hated authority but couldn’t say no to it. That was his family talking there. We were in Charleston when the news about Marty came in. People were very nice, supported us, cried with us, but it changed Button. That little girl never came back to me.”

She attempted to get up again but had trouble de-wedging from the chair. I rushed over, grabbed an arm, and pulled. She didn’t resist or protest. It was an effort for both of us, but she was soon standing by holding onto the desk. “Oh, I’m exhausted. Don’t get out much. Seems like the only time I do is to deal with Button.” I followed as she rounded the desk, worried she might fall. The heavy breathing scared me. “This was nice Joe, to talk to an adult, to talk to someone who understands—someone who listens.” No one had ever told me I was understanding or a good listener. The woman was a bad judge of character.

She wavered to the front door; legs in sweatpants rubbed together. I hurried ahead saying, “Sorry, I didn’t get your name. Rude of me. I’m not good with them.”
The woman grabbed my outstretched hand with both of hers. She held tightly, an apology in the grip. “I’m Winifred, Winifred Morgan. Live on the South Side near the old grain mill. If you’re ever there, say hello. Just ask for Fat Winnie. They all know me by that. Winifred wouldn’t mean anything to them.”

A world of nicknames I thought; Fat Winnie, Tattoo Tilly, and me: Joe the Jerk.

I helped her into an old Buick. The backseat was gone and chrome trim was peeling. The driver’s seat was fully pushed back. I waved goodbye to Winifred, glad the staff hadn’t intervened. Winifred, again, begged me for silence. As far as Button was concerned, we never met.

For three weeks I looked for Tilly, Amy, Button—the names confused in my head. I settled on Amy. That was her given name. But I never saw her. Other volunteers reported that she still haunted the Memorial, still cursed at volunteers and guests, still stared at the phone.

On Wednesday morning I filled in for another volunteer who had gotten very sick. The volunteers were mostly old men. We were always getting sick and dying. I came around into the shrine and saw Amy. Same sleeveless t-shirt on but more tattered, maybe dirtier. Same black shorts as before, but not so out of place in the warmer weather. I spied new hardware; pins stuck in the fleshy part of her hand between thumb and forefinger. Not much flesh to pin there. The pins must have penetrated easily until they hit bone.

I moved slowly, maybe giving her time to see me and leave. She looked up, immediately jumping onto two tattooed feet. “You racist pig—you racist pig!”


I walked past smiling, but uncomfortable. She stomped her right foot hard on the ground several times. I had seen deer do that during a rut. Going around the Memory statue, I grabbed a cigarette butt. The checked the eternal flame. In high winds it wasn’t always so eternal.
I turned left towards the overlook of the city. A hand forcefully grabbed me on the shoulder, “I talked to my professor. He told me calling someone a Nazi was nothing close to using that other word. You know, the N word.”

“Do I need to say it out loud?”

“No!” She yelled like the mere mention of the word might cause global warming. “The professor says you’re just trying to confuse me. Nazis do that. They confuse the truth. They…”

I put my hand up touching Amy on the forehead. The action surprised her. I looked her in the eyes. In a deep, authoritarian voice I said, “What did I say? What did I say?” I was forceful, menacing, almost dangerous. I could be dangerous, had been in the past. Being old didn’t make that go away.

Meekly, calmer, and leaning back away from my finger she said, “No Nazi...no Nazi bullshit.” I could see the mother in Amy. One a child self-mutilated, one eating herself into an early grave. Their eyes both reflected the green tint of the James River.

Unexpectedly, she followed me to the walk of honor. I sensed the seething, hissing, heavy breathing. Turning, I saw a body ready to spring. Amy was up on the balls of her feet with her forehead preparing for battle. My hands were down and folded, almost prayer-like. I said, “Let me show you something. It will be of interest I think. And no, I’m not going to rape you or expose myself.”

Standing to confront me once more, I asked her to move. We were close together, too close. Close enough for me to smack her. I wanted to. Amy stuck a metaled chin out. Amy took out her weapon of choice. The phone came up. I pointed down and said, “Take a picture of this.” Her toes almost touched the brick. In new letters were the words,

HM3 MARTIN MORGAN

FOR MY DAD

LOVE BUTTON
Amy didn’t comprehend the words at first. “What?” Her phone slipped back into a front pocket. She knelt down and touched the words, running her hands across them slowly. She stood up. I awaited my congratulations and thanks. Instead she kicked me hard in the shin, twice. “You son of a bitch. You son of a bitch. Now you’ve made him one of you. My dad is not a war criminal. My dad is not one of these animals.” She motioned around the totality of the War Memorial. She made to kick me again, but I jumped back stuttering apologies she never heard. Now she was crying, crying and spitting, crying and snorting. Obscenities I had never heard from a sailor spewed forth. Then she ran away, but not before flipping me off. Not once, but a hundred times in a windmill of middle fingers.

For months afterward, I kept expecting to see the brick demolished, shattered into red dust. Whenever I checked it was still there. I had thought I was doing a good thing. No good deed goes unpunished, as they say. I had thought it might bring closure. Thought it, well, I guess I didn’t think. Joe the Jerk. A name on a wall is not closure. It’s just a name on a wall. Same for bricks.

I Googled Amy Morgan’s name, just curious. Her name often followed by comments. “Whack, ugly, communist, whore-bitch.” Someone told me the term was “trolling.” Amy had her own webpage. The comments were worse there. It seemed like self-abuse, worse than tattoos and pins. On the webpage I found her Dad’s name and an off-hand reference to the nickname Button. It covered my use of it on the brick, but I still had broken the mother’s confidence. Why did I interfere? It wasn’t my way. Never be nice again. I consoled myself. The cost of the brick was still a tax deduction. Joe the Jerk.

I ran into Amy twice by accident. A Tuesday this time, once again filling in for someone else. I turned the Memorial corner and there she was, as usual on the bench, phone in hand, looking down. I didn’t get close. I had a prepared speech, apologies mostly, and explanations. But after seeing me she
stood up and shied away. No words, no middle fingers. Stepping backwards, Amy broke for the street and Oregon Hill. Another day, I was getting out of my car. We almost fell over each other. I couldn’t get my speech out. I wasn’t ready. Those green eyes bored into me for just a second. She ran down the hill to the river, running so fast she stumbled, slipped, went down on one knee, and then rolled. Amy held her stomach. With the wind knocked out of her, she soldiered on, never looking back. My eyes followed the running tattoos all the way to the James.

I did see Amy on television in news reports. One was about taking down Confederate monuments. Amy was for that. Another was about the disproportionate incarceration rate of minorities. Amy was against that. She’d become a talking head the stations put on for ratings. Some of what she said made sense, but the emotional anger and viciousness was distracting. I thought the stations were more interested in Amy’s unusual look than opinions. It seemed like the head-shots emphasized the metal pins in her face.

By mid-summer, my guilt had subsided. I’d learned a lesson about Interference in someone else’s life. The world was not a television sitcom. John and I sat at the desk greeting a steady stream of visitors. We closed at five, so the crowds were thinning out. John announced, “Well, there’s Tilly.” I started. I didn’t want anyone to know what I had done. They’d call me a pussy. If Tilly, I mean Amy, came in to yell at me the secret would be out. John pointed at the monitor. We had security cameras that covered the entire grounds.

Amy was on the Walk of Honor. She was bent down. I knew it. She waited until I was on volunteer duty to destroy the brick. Well fine. I wouldn’t stop her. John tapped the glass saying, “You know she’s been less of a pain in the ass lately. I still don’t like going near the freak, but no one has reported any verbal abuse.” I moved John over, so I could see better. John continued, “Spends time on the walkway. Must like the view. Seen her a couple times just sitting cross-legged on the bricks. Must be doing some Hari Krishna meditation thing.”
I resisted going outside. I watched the monitor closely. It was wishful thinking, but maybe, just maybe, she had kissed that brick. Then, just as suddenly, she sprang up. She looked around guiltily. There were no witnesses, or were there? Looking up at the security camera, she raised her middle finger. Both John and I jumped back in our seats as if we had taken a direct hit. John said, “Same old Tilly.”

After she left, I went to the walkway. “A litter check,” I told John. Wind whipped around the shrine and back down the hill. The Morgan brick was fine. Wishful thinking made it appear cleaner than the other bricks. A single white flower blew up the bricks, spinning around, looking for a home. Had Amy brought it? Just more wishful thinking. No, not a carnation. An escapee, one of many, from an old floral wreath with VFW on the banner. I got one of the painted stones; one with a U.S Flag. I picked up the flower. I thought twice about it. No, not the American Flag. I found a stone with a picture of the James. I pinned the flower on HM3 Morgan’s brick with the rock. In the wind, I heard a voice. The voice of my wife’s uncle, Carlyn C. Thompson. The breeze brought the words, “Now you understand. Come over for a talk.”