

THE JOURNEY

RON ROMAN



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BY RON ROMAN

A man wakes up from dreaming in a cornfield. Or has he? He's uncertain.

He doesn't know where he is or how he got there, nor what date it is. He notices he has no watch or jewelry. He examines his clothes, shoves his hand in his pants pocket, and grabs a wallet. He yanks it out. There's nothing inside it except for several bills. Then he freezes. The cash doesn't look familiar. "What the f---!" He's still unsure of the date. Then he notices a strange scar on his arm; he has no idea where it came from.

He finds himself next to a lush, green field near a thick, wooded area. It's sunny out. The weather is ideal. Birds are chirping. Skies are slightly cloudy; otherwise, it's nice. The temperature is nice. *Everything* is nice—but he's *lost*. And he doesn't know which direction to walk in, where to go on the dirt road in front of him.

There are no people nor evidence of any; he only hears birds

chirping and dogs barking in the distance. The sound of a distant dog barking suddenly reminds him of what he thinks was his own dog from a long time ago, yet he can't recall its name. "He was a good pooch. Best friend a boy could ever have."

He starts to breathe heavier, almost panicking. And he starts to yell out, "Hey! Is anybody there? Where in living hell am I?" The shout echoes throughout the valley, coming back empty, leaving him empty. A nearby tree stump works as a makeshift chair. He sits down to try to collect his thoughts, make sense of his predicament. "Where the hell am I?" He looks up and into the sky, staring at the clouds. "Am I in a dream?" His hands start to shake.

He lies down on the ground, looks up again into the sky, and tries to collect his wits by testing his five senses. His eyes take in everything overhead while his ears listen to any and all sounds near and far. He hears no bird or animal now, not even the leaves that had been gently sashaying amidst the treetops. He touches his neck and face. "At least *that's* still there," he snorts. Yet he can't smell a thing, let alone taste anything over his lips or inside his mouth. It's too dry, even though he's not thirsty. "But what if I can't find water?" Premonitions of panic begin to seep into his consciousness.

The man stands up halfway. "I gotta get a hold of myself. Maybe I'm just dreamin'. But this feels too damned real. Okay, now just—" He realizes he can't remember his name. "Ah, what am I supposed to do? Maybe I had a little too much to drink before going to sleep. But where? When? I'll just follow this dirt road for a while. See where it goes. Nothing to worry about or panic.... Oh, shit."

The man starts down the dirt road. “Easy walk,” he babbles to himself. “Just keep on trekking, buddy. Least I got money, though I don’t know what kind or how much.” He chuckles. “Must be some town or something up ahead. Hell, at least it’s a damned-near perfect day for a little hiking.” He tries to console himself and ekes out an anemic smile. The road under his boots feels soft and smooth. “That’s good,” he mutters, “though there’s no tire tracks and no road signs anywhere. Weird.”

He slogs onward. The sun peeks through the clouds and beats down on him. He breaks into a sweat. “Oh, this is weird, too. Old rusty train tracks. Looks like they haven’t been used in over a hundred years. Might as well follow them, see where they lead.” He picks up his pace. He thinks he catches a glimpse of something overhead, far off in the distance, something metallic-like, though not quite sure what. It reminds him of the scar on his arm. He has no idea why.

“Too damned stinkin’ hot now. There’s a little stream here. Water looks plenty clean. Have to drink some.” He drinks, takes off his boots, massages and soaks his feet. This rejuvenates him, incentivizing a will to prevail and to slog on, stopping only occasionally to urinate by the tracks. *Looks like a helluva long road up ahead, but nightfall will be coming. No flashlight, no street-lights. Better start cracking,* he reminds himself.

The homespun pep talk re-energizes him. He’s up and hurtling down the tracks, stubbing his toe and tripping. He gets up and picks up his pace. Relentlessly, he pushes onward. Shrubs and trees lining the tracks pass by quicker now. He exudes a renewed sense of urgency, as if walking over the tracks belies a need to keep up with an imaginary train schedule. He continues barreling down the tracks, noticing the

absence and signs of anything human-made: no telephone poles, bridges, walls, electric power towers, buildings, or signs. Nothing. He keeps on slogging away at a steady pace, as if by slowing down, his boots may freeze to the tracks. A sporadic breeze keeps his sweat in check. The skies grow cloudier.

The day wears on. It's late. Undaunted now, he continues to move at a crisp pace, occasionally looking back to gauge the distance he's covered. He has put behind him many miles, yet he remains unfatigued. Though the clouds are thickening now, up ahead he notices something. Something strange. Very strange.

"What the---" There's a huge white cloud, a thick foggy mist, enveloping the valley ahead, blanketing everything from the top of the sky to the ground. He stops and scans the horizon for a higher elevation spot for a better view, yet finds none. "There's no turning back. I have to confront this, this whatever it is, head-on." Like a soldier marching headlong into battle, he surges forward.

Into the thick mist he runs, barely able to see anything in front of him. He starts to tire. "I better slow down. Could be a ditch, a ravine, or something." He pauses to catch his breath, looks behind for any signs of something, anything he may have missed running blindly. There's only dense fog. He moves forward again, this time at a measured pace. The fog starts to break. A clearing appears up ahead. He inches forward. Slowly. Steadily. Like a phantom he emerges from the fog. He looks down at his feet. "Huh? The railroad tracks are brand-new."

The man follows the tracks leading downtown into a village square lined with trees. The village looks semi-deserted, something like a hick town designed like a miniature train set under a Christmas tree. There's something about the place that looks

familiar, but not everything. “Where the devil is this? There’s a drugstore across the street, but the sign says ‘Apothecary’. Thought that was British. Am I in England?” He enters the store.

The store is empty except for a tall, skinny, pimply-faced fellow standing behind a countertop vigorously mopping up leftovers from scattered dishes and utensils. “Whaddya need, buddy?”

He continues to stare at the menu.

“I said, ‘What can I do for ya?’”

“Huh? Oh, sorry. I just, just was wondering what to drink.” He scans the room. The place looks vaguely familiar in a way he can’t put his finger on. “Ugh, I’ll have a soda then. Big soda. With ice. Haven’t had anything to drink since... Really thirsty.”

“What kind?”

“Any.” The man slides atop a stool.

“Okay. Here you go. Try this.”

“What’s the name of this town?”

“Leeville.”

“‘Leeville,’ huh?” The soda goes down smooth.

“Yeah, ‘Leeville.’” The counterman shoots him a quizzical look, eyeing the scar on his arm. “You mean you don’t know where you are? Howdya get here?”

“Hmph. Long walk. Long story.”

“‘Long story,’ eh? Well, anything you need help with, let me know, okay?”

“Okay. I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks.” *Least I’m not in England*, the man thinks to himself. He finishes the drink, swipes over his lips with his sleeve, and gets off the stool for the exit, then remembers the unpaid bill. He gestures to pay while taking out the unfamiliar bills.

“Sheesh, where’d you get these bills? Haven’t seen this since before the war. Sonnafab-b-b-donkey!” pimple-face splutters as he takes one, stares at him, and cracks a sheepish grin. “That’s all right. They’re still legal tender. Is that the word? Here’s your change, Mister. Pleasure meeting you. Put ‘er right there,” he says, extending his hand. “Joey’s the name. And you?”

“Huh? Ugh, me? Er, you can call me, er, call me ‘Joseph.’ Just a little more formal.”

Pimple-face grins. “‘Joseph,’ eh? ‘a little more formal’? See ya around, Joe!”

“Yeah, ‘See ya around.’” The man stuffs the change in his pants, almost knocking over a rack of potato chips in his urgency to make a beeline for the door. “Joseph,” he says to himself and snickers over the sound of his self-given nickname. “And ‘the war’?”

Stepping outside into the sunshine, he looks back where the fog had enveloped the valley behind him. He doesn’t see any. He’s tempted to go back for a better look but senses something inside him beckoning him to continue into town.

The town appears more vibrant now. People are milling on both sides of the street; the village is thrumming with activity. The man steps down the apothecary’s stairs and onto the edge of the square. On the opposite side of the street, he sees a cat lying lazily under a park bench. It looks familiar. *Can’t be*, he thinks. He goes to pet it. “Here kitty. Nice—”

“—watch where the hell you’re going, Buster!” a motorist screams. “Trying to get yourself killed?”

The man hops back toward the stairs, almost slipping on the steps. “Whew! Yeah.” The cat slithers away. He walks past kids in a playground as he notices what looks like a political rally on the far end of the square opposite the Town Hall. He moves

toward the stage. Sounds of the campaign grow louder. There're at least a couple hundred attendees sitting on lawn chairs in front of a large stage draped with political banners and signs. The smell of frying hot dogs and hamburgers lingers in the air among cries of "Get your dogs and burgers here!"

The man grabs an empty chair and makes himself comfortable beside a middle-aged couple off to his right. They nod and smile beneficently toward him. In turn he doesn't know what to do; he manages a goofy grin.

"Bob Johnson here. This here's my wife, Joanna. Pleased to meet ya," he says, offering his hand. "And you?"

"Who, me?"

"Don't see anybody else I'm talking to." The couple laughs.

"Yes, yes, of course. I'm Joseph. But just call me, er, Joey. Yes, Joey."

"Pleased to meet you, Joey."

"Same here."

"What do you think of the speaker? Do you think this party is going to save the county and our town from going to hell in a handbasket with what's going on and---" The Johnsons lower and shake their heads, intimating they'd heard this message of this rally before.

"Let's get it on!" someone screams.

"Yeah! Let's get down to it! Didn't come here to sit on our asses all day!" shouts another.

The crowd murmurs its agreement. A speaker, elderly and porky, strides toward the podium. People lean forward in their chairs. A buzz of anticipation hovers in the air. Overhead clouds darken in the direction of the apothecary, giving a sense of immediacy. Thunder rolls in the distance. The crowd grows antsy. The stage speaker steps up behind the podium. He taps

the microphone for attention. He sees that he has it and clears his throat.

“All right, ladies and gentlemen. Glad you could make it here this afternoon. Thanks for coming. And don’t forget tonight’s fireworks. Lots of things to go over today, especially with the way things are going in the county these days and with things the way they are in our town now, eh?”

“Just get to the point, Benny,” someone in the back of the assembly shouts. “Whaddya propose to do about what the governor, that shithead, is proposing to do to us in terms of skyrocketing taxes and new county restrictions regarding farm produce sales? You know what I’m talking about. Everybody does.”

The crowd, electrified, jumps to their feet with shouts of “Yeah! What? We can’t take it no more! Whaddya gonna do about it? Stop your yodeling. What--?”

“—Okay, okay, I hear you, hear you loud and clear. That’s what I’m—we—are here today to dig into. I feel your pain as much as you do.”

The Johnsons lower and shake their heads in near-unison again; Joanna rolls her eyeballs. Behind the stage, firecrackers explode. It starts to drizzle. “I, I mean the party, are introducing legislation next week to impeach the governor—” shouts of “Yeah! Stuff it to that bastard!” and the like, ring out and echo throughout the square, the throng morphing into a mob, baying for blood. And so, on it went....

Bob Johnson suddenly swivels in his seat and looks foursquare at ‘Joey’. “You know, you look familiar. You remind me of somebody I saw, maybe even knew, years ago. There’s a photo in town somewhere of somebody resembling you,

though much younger and with a full head of hair, an image that I can't place."

Joanna leans forward to listen better amidst the commotion.

'Joey's' palms start to sweat; his mouth gets dry. He bites down on his lip. Hard. "Who? Me? Nawh."

"No, no really, Joey. 'cept your name doesn't match, doesn't ring true. Can't quite figure it out."

Joanna leans in more. "Maybe you're confused, Bobby, maybe---"

"—Shut up! I ain't confused." Bob stops, reflects on his outburst, and gently cradles her hand. "Sorry, Joanna. My apologies. Don't mean to lose my temper, yet... yet there's something now knockin' up inside my ol' brain." The drizzle got heavier.

Joey leans back and eyes Bob. "That's okay. I look like a lot of guys," is all he can spit out. Together they stare at each other as if in a contest, then Joey, embarrassed, breaks focus first, lowers his head, and mumbles something inaudible. Joanna stares at both of them.

"Getting hungry. Let's get a bite to eat, Bobby," she says. Bob gets off his chair, turns and says, "Nice meeting you, Joey—or whatever your name is."

"Yeah, same here," he says barely above a whisper. The Johnsons head for the snack stand. Joey, relieved, stands, stretches his legs, and notices the crowd starting to dwindle, the commotion dying down. The skies are clearing. He ambles toward the stage; flags tacked to the sides catch his eye. The design of the flags intrigues him; it looks oddly familiar. He doesn't understand why or how. He tries to toss the thought aside, muttering "Time to concentrate on getting a better idea as to where in hell

this place is. Looks like a signboard showing a town map up ahead. That might help.”

Approaching the board, he grows excited. *The Town of Leeville* it reads. This might be of real help after all. It beats having to ask the Johnsons embarrassing questions as to the location of Leeville, he reasons.

“That speaker, Benny, is a yodeler, a bum, just another donuthin’ politician,” a woman exclaims, standing behind him. “Blah. blah. blah. Don’t ja think, buddy?”

“Well, I’m not from here. I’ll pass on judgment,” he says, irritated.

“Where ya from then?”

“Uh, sorry. I’m pressed for time.” He turns his back on her. She snorts, shakes her head, and struts away. He’s relieved now that he can finally focus attention on doing something productive. The map details main landmarks in town, yet little else outside the community. The Town Hall and Library should be sites of helpful information, he figures, but the town’s high school is right next door and may reveal something useful as well. He starts walking toward it.

People are still lingering in the town square, enthusiastically talking about the night’s fireworks now rather than politics. He feels the urgent need to relieve himself and rushes down the steps into a nearby public restroom at the edge of the village square. The smell of stale urine permeates his nostrils. Upon finishing up, while washing his hands, he catches a glance of himself in the washroom mirror on the graffiti-splashed walls. He then realizes this is the first time he has seen himself. He freezes.

He doesn’t recognize the face staring back at him. It shows several scars, small but noticeable, and beady eyes, mournful

beady eyes. He's taken aback. He grips the wash basin with both hands. For the longest time, he remains transfixed. Many thoughts race through his mind as he stands there. He finally comes to and gets hold of himself.

"You all right, buddy?" a voice is heard from behind.

"Ugh, yeah, sure."

"You sure don't look it."

"No, I'm okay. Thanks."

"Okay. Just askin'."

"Yeah. Sure." The man in the mirror straightens up. "Get a hold of yourself," he says to the image. He wipes his hands on his pants. He heads for the exit. His legs are wobbly. This epiphany could take time for him to come to grips with. He struggles back up the stairs, almost bumping his head on the way out of the exit.

Out in the open and fresh air again, the man reorients himself in the direction of the high school. He surveys the landscape and sees it in the distance. He feels slightly invigorated now and pushes forward with a renewed zip in his step. A *Summer Vacation is Here. See You in the Fall* sign overhead welcomes visitors. He approaches the running track surrounding the football field inside the outdoor stadium. Except for a couple of roaming dogs, the place is deserted. Multiple oversized outdoor photo displays are plastered over the stadium walls, testifying to the bygone prowess and glory days of the school's old sports teams and star athletes. A couple in particular catch his eye. He edges closer.

The black-and-white photos depict the school's football team's post-championship game, front row players kneeling, the two co-captains front and center. The man stares, mesmerized by the close-up image of one of the co-captains. *Can't be.*

He wonders if the image in the restroom is not the same as in the stadium photos, except for facial scars. *Can't be*. He also ponders the possibility that it could be merely coincidental and thinks it best to visit the Town Library in the morning to research the matter. "I need to get to the bottom of this, but first I need to eat and sleep," he says to himself upon seeing the sun set. He starts back toward the town square.

He heads for the food vendor stands, now drawing in people in anticipation of the fireworks display. "What can I getchya, Champ?" shouts out one of the vendors over the din of the crowd. The man pauses at the sound of the word "Champ." Not knowing why, the word resonates in his head.

"A couple of dogs and a burger, please."

"Here you go, Champ."

"Thanks."

"Here's your change. Don't see many of these bills anymore."

"Yeah, I know." While squeezing mustard on his hot dogs, the man notices a boy, prepubescent yet almost menacing for his age, standing next to him, entranced by his arm scar. "What are you gawking at?"

Boldly the boy blurts out, "What the hell happened to your arm, Mister?"

"Mind your own goddamned freaking business, kid. Ya hear me?" The boy leers back at him. "Now go play in your sandbox." The boy scampers away.

"You don't take guff from anybody, I see," snickers the food vendor. "It's written all over you. You remind me of my Uncle Demetri: big and rough around the edges like him. He was a star football player in town." The vendor smirks. "The kids these days..."

The man nods. "Why did you call me 'Champ'?"

"My cousin used to call guys that, at least guys he liked. Here's another dog. On the house."

The man nodded again.

The skies darken; stars emerge. The first of the fireworks explodes overhead. Then another. Soon the sky explodes in a kaleidoscope of colors, a transitory rainbow emblazoned over the horizon. A chorus of "Ooh's" and "Ahh's" shoot up from the crowd. Firecrackers pop off nearby; smoke from fireworks wafts toward the crowd huddling on the village green. The man sits down on the village lawn, looks up and into the sky, observant at one moment of the colorful spectacle overhead, then drifts off to the echo of "Champ" pulsating inside his head. *Can't be.* The echo fades and dissolves into silence. The fireworks finale slaps him back into the moment.

The crowd starts to dwindle. From the safety of a good distance, the boy from the hot dog stand flashes an obscene hand gesture and grins.

"That punk." The man struggles to his feet, balancing himself against a park bench. He's zapped out from the day's ordeal and ready for a solid sleep. But where? "It's warm. I'll conk out here under that secluded gazebo." The last of the townsfolk leave the square; the place is dark and quiet. "I'm exhausted. Going to sleep like a dead man." Too tired to trudge to the public restroom, he urinates on a bush, then crawls into a hidden space in the gazebo, hunkering down under the starlight. The man drifts off into a festering dream....

"Hey, guys! Gotta win this one for ol' Head Coach Haley. Sonnafabitch is laying in the hospital, could be on his last legs from cancer. Don't know how much time he's got left in 'im. Nor how much he's got left with us. He always pulled through for us; now it's our

turn to pull through for him. Whaddya say, Champ? You're co-captain. Have a pep talk for the boys?"

"Nawh, you said enough, Demetri. If the rest of our team showed half the grit and determination on the field as you, we'd win the division championship hands down for Haley. No doubt about it."

"Thanks, bro. Every player knows we can always count on you. You weren't chosen co-captain for nuthin'. What are you going to do now that Maria's talking about filing sex assault charges against you, Champ? Did the principal say your scholarship's going to be on hold? Hey, you didn't actually do nuthin' to her, did ya? Word's already spreading around town like a spastic case of VD that you let her have it, banged her up but good. Not that that Mexican bimbo wouldn't deserve it. Ha! Ha! Or is she just makin' this whole thing up because she's jealous you didn't ask her to the prom? Is there going to be a police report? C'mon! Guys on the team want to know. You're co-captain; they deserve an answer, don't ya think?"

"Learn to mind your goddamned freaking business, fat boy, or I'll shove those miniature balls of yours up your big, fat mouth, bigger than your belly."

"LOOK, I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON WITH HER, COACH. SO, WE fooled around a little together--I said together--but I didn't force myself on her, rape her; that's for sure. She's making this stuff up to get back at me for not asking her out. Do us guys have any presumption of innocence these days for Chrissakes? Or are we all automatically presumed guilty because we've got a usable penis between our legs and they don't?"

"I don't know. It just doesn't look good for you. I need you on the team. Your word against hers, but school staff and townsfolk already

are lining up on her side, even though everyone knows she's got a reputation as a hot Mexican tamale, for sure. Your scholarship's in jeopardy. I've tried to diffuse the situation with the cops, and the School Board is meeting to take it up. Yet now my hands are tied."

"YOU CAN SAY IT'S BEEN A HUNG JURY VERDICT FOR ME, MAN. MY representatives cut a deal, if you could call it that, with the authorities and her folks that I'd join the Army right after graduation for her not pursuing further charges, so that's what I'm doing. Besides, I gotta get out of Dodge; my name's mud here now."

"Sheesh. No kiddin'. I'll be seeing you when you're on military leave then. Gonna miss ya. Gimme a hug, Champ."

"Now don't get all teary-eyed and goofy on me, man. Don't expect us to take any hot showers together anytime soon. Never thought I'd see you like this. I must be dreaming."

"HOW'S THE ARMY TREATING YOU?"

"Like shit. But I shouldn't complain. Three hots and a cot like they say."

"You missed Coach Haley's funeral, Champ. He got a great send-off. Practically the whole town turned out for him."

"So I heard. Couldn't get leave to attend, though. Military says it has to be a family member or guardian. Sent in my condolences."

"You and your Old Flame, Jenny, still getting married now?"

"Far as I know. Meeting her tomorrow. She hasn't seen what happened to me yet."

"Yeah, I heard it was a military live-fire training accident."

"No, just a chopper's blade grazing a nearby metal sign. Fragments hit my face and arm. I'm okay, though. Lucky."

"Your unit deploying to the Middle East?"

"Probably, things are heating up there. Fast."

"Saying a prayer for you."

"Yeah, thanks, brother. Need it."

"I LOVE YOU, RANDY. ALWAYS WILL, SCARRED-FACE OR MOVIE-STAR handsome. Big wedding or none at all. And I don't care what folks had said about you and Maria. She's a bitch."

"Thank you, Jenny. You're the light of my life. After this overseas deployment, we're going to have the honeymoon of our lives, a honeymoon to end all honeymoons!"

"Looks like we're going to war. I'm so scared, scared something worse than an arm injury is going to happen to you. And stop biting into your lip. That always means something bad is going to happen."

"Don't worry, Jenny. I'll be fine. Let me wipe away that tear."

"Our doggie Joey and me will be waiting for you. Always. Now give me a last kiss before you leave."

"JENNY, I SWEAR MARIA AND I—"

"You can't be sleeping here, pal. This is town property."

The man looked out from under the gazebo, shading his hands from the morning sun. "Sorry, officer. Must've had a little bit too much to drink last night. Fireworks got me worked up and tired out, too."

"Fireworks got you too worked up, huh? Whaddya, five

years old? Okay, now that you're up, whaddya doin' here? You're not from town, are ya? Let's see some ID."

"Er, ID? Look, I just got up and need to take a wicked leak in the park restroom, officer. Bad. Can I go over there? Now? Been diagnosed with an overactive bladder."

"Okay, forget the ID. Don't want you peeing in your pants. Just don't sleep out here again. Leeville don't need no vagrants. And you don't look like one. My job is to see it stays that way, got it? Only reason you're not getting a citation is because it was a town celebration and half the town was soused out last night, too."

"Thanks."

"Okay, now clear out and take your *wicked* piss. G'wan."

"Yes, sir. On my way."

"Hey, fireworks was pretty good, eh?"

The man made a run for the restroom. "Really great!" he shouted out over his shoulder as he started slowing down. "Whew! What a total jackass. And that dream last night. Gotta get to the town library now to research stuff from it. Weird, but feels so damned real. Urinal first."

The sun was rising overhead, getting stronger. The man made his way to the opposite side of the village square and stopped. He stood in front of the portico of the library entrance. Emblazed on the top in bas-relief, it simply read *Leeville Public Library*. He thought the portico oversized and ornate for such a small town and felt uneasy as to what he'd find, if anything, but hurried inside anyway.

"These are old copies of *The Leeville Gazette*; these are only weekly issues, yet they should help you cover the date range you asked for in looking for your "ol buddy," came the squeaky voice of the porky reference librarian squeezed into her small

chair barely big enough to fit her behind. "Need anything else, just holler," she said while arranging the papers over the clamor coming from kids fighting on the other side of the room.

"Much appreciated," said the man. "This should do," he said to himself. He poured voraciously through the paper, fingers dancing over the pages as fast as humanly possible, while retrieving mental references to names and dates taken from the stadium. The kids continued their fighting and squawking; the librarian did not intervene. "Thought libraries were supposed to be quiet for Chrissakes!" he muttered in her direction.

Sunshine poured through the windows. It was hot and muggy. The sole air conditioner sputtered *Th-thuck. Th-thuck. Th-thuck*. The morning wore on. The man's patience thinned; the kids were getting on his nerves. He hoped he'd dig up pay dirt. Nothing would stop him from resurrecting the truth—or what he imagined to be the truth—of his dream. Or nightmare.

"Let's see, this story again, what there is of it, just mentions the head coach's remarks after the team's final score, yet really nothing about the players. Jesus. What kind of reporters have they got, anyway?"

"How's it coming?" asked the librarian from her desk, noticing his frustration.

"Coming, it's not. Seemed to have hit a dead end. These stories don't get into details, least not about the players, their names, etc. That's what I'm looking for. The sports reporter should get shitcanned."

The man saw the librarian's face tense at the vulgarity. "Must be some fanatic Christian," he grumbled. The kids' raucousness died down. The librarian sauntered over, peevisish.

"Have you tried the school's yearbooks?"

"Jesus Christ Almighty. Why in hell didn't I think of that?"

"You really should watch your mouth, Mister. You're not from around here. This is a Christian community. Least it used to be."

"Sorry, Ma'am. You're right. Guess I should."

"No need to guess."

"Yes, you're right. Sorry again." Then he thought of the generic profanity dished out during the political rally the night before and squelched a chuckle.

"Something funny 'bout all this?" She eyed him coolly.

"Ugh, n, n, no," he stammered. "Er, I'll need yearbooks for these dates." He scribbled on a sheet of paper.

Soon she returned with several and plopped them on his desk. "This ought to cover it," she said and quickly pivoted to return to her desk, relief etched across her face. The kids had now left; the place was deserted and deathly quiet.

"Good. Thanks." He started with the oldest edition, thumbing through coverage devoted to football. This is tedious, he thought. Either the photos weren't graphic enough, or the captions not detailed. His fingers trudged through every page. On to the next yearbook. Then the next. He grew more frustrated by the minute. He squirmed in his seat, biting into his lip. Then

The hair on the back of his neck stood up straight. "Am I hallucinating? Holy shhh--! Can't believe it. Can't be." Was he looking at a photo of himself? The caption read: "Randy 'Champ' Peterson, Co-Captain." This photo was graphic; there was no mistaking him in it, but with a full head of hair and minus noticeable facial scars and his beard. For the longest time, he sat stuck in his chair, stunned and speechless.

"Any luck?" the librarian asked. The man remained immobilized as if frozen into his chair by a stun gun levied by the

Angels of Fate from above. "I said, are you having any luck? Hmm." She paused, then slowly rose and gingerly walked over behind him while eyeballing the news article.

"Whoa! This is *weird shit*! You don't even remember when you attended school here. Hot damn. Guess your 'ol buddy' you were looking for is *you*." The outburst slapped the man back into reality. "Except for the hair and the facial, uhm—"

"---the facial scars?" the man asked.

"---er, the facial scars, it sure resembles *you*."

"Look, I, I, I don't know what to say. I don't know what's going on. A brain lapse, an injury or something. I may need help. I'd appreciate it if you'd keep this to yourself for now."

"Yeah, sure. Anything I can do for you, Mister? Mister---?"

"Joey, er, Peterson. No, nothing you can do for me, not yet. I'll let you know. Just need a little more time to study things here and clear my head."

"Sure. I understand." The woman walked back to her desk, turned around, and nodded. "You just let me know, okay?"

Still shaken by the epiphany, the man dove into news stories about "Randy 'Champ' Peterson." He learned he was a star football player, a quarterback, with scholarship offers and had been charged with aggravated sexual assault by a Mexican-American girl from their high school in their senior year, inflaming racial tensions in town, only to see charges dropped in a plea deal, something to do with joining the military. After graduation he joined the Army's First Cavalry Division as a medic, later promoted to buck sergeant, and sustained injuries to his head and arm in a training exercise before being deployed overseas for combat in the Middle East. While on leave, he married his hometown sweetheart, the former Ms. Jenny Jones.

The *Th-thuck*, *Th-thuck*, *Th-thuck* of the air conditioner

reverberated in his head. His hands shook while cradling the newspaper. He read on.... "Sgt. Peterson's remains were never found. He is presumed to have died as a captive POW (Prisoner of War) or KIA (Killed in Action). He was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action. For more information, contact Leeville's local VFW post. They host a special display in honor of his memory and meritorious service."

The man struggled to steady his hands. "Then where have I been? Where have I come from?" The voice resounding in his head rendered him numb. "Joey," "Peterson," "the man"--this disembodied being remained stuck in his seat. Then he slowly rose to his feet and managed to make it over to the librarian's desk. "Do you have a map showing the town's VFW?"

"No need to. VFW, hmm? It's right around the corner. A five- or six-minute walk, maybe seven. Here, let me sketch it." She unfurled a writing pad and scribbled. "Here you go."

"Thanks." He took the paper. "You've been more than kind. Appreciate that." He started for the exit, pivoted, and blurted out: "And sorry for my foul mouth."

"Perfectly understandable. I let slip a word stinker or two myself." She giggled.

Outside, the sun was slipping into the horizon. "Better beeline it to the post. May close down soon," he muttered. He glanced at the note. "It's that direction." Soon he was standing in front of a dinghy three-story building that looked like it had just been plopped out of a cosmic map; the VFW was located on the second floor. He jumped up the stairs.

Other than a Filipina bartender, inside there were no women, only several older guys, mostly grizzled, bearded, and tattooed, slurping on beer or an occasional whiskey from their bar stools, animatedly swapping sports and war stories. An

oversized American flag hung from the ceiling almost getting entangled in an overhead swirling fan. "This we'll Defend" read a banner adjacent to it. Next to it was a POW flag. Cowboy song lyrics yodeled from a nearby jukebox. A lone pool table lay squat in the center of the room. Though the room's windows were opened wide, the place reeked of a distinctive musty smell. Photos of past post commanders, solemn-faced with tasseled headgear, graced the dimly lit walls. Except for the bar, jukebox, and pool table, the man thought, the place could pass for a funeral parlor.

"Hey, Buddy, want a Bud, Budweiser, that is?" asked one of the vets upon noticing the man entering the room, as the outsider took in the surroundings. The stranger nodded. "Hey, Nina," the vet shouted to the bartender, "one Budweiser for our guest here. Name's Alfonso; and you?"

"Ugh, Randolph."

"Randolph, eh? Well, here you go, Randolph," he said as he banged their beer bottles together. "See you're not from around here. You did military time?"

"Yeah, Army."

"Yeah? Well, I wasn't a rough, tough soldier like you, ya know, just another Navy girly-boy." He smirked. And the man grinned. "Where you from?"

The man went to deflect the inquiry. "Can you tell me anything about Randy Champ Peterson? That's what I came here for." He could smell whiskey on Alfonso's breath.

"Why you so interested in Randy Peterson? Been missing, presumed dead for years."

"He was a fellow soldier. It's an Army thing," the man said.

"I see. But did I know Randy? Nawh. Before my time. But my uncle did. Played with him on their winning championship

football team in their senior year—and in earlier years. Everybody in town knew, or knew of him, even if they didn't follow football, especially after being accused of raping a Mexican gal at the school. Talk of the town. Then he joined the military, Army, got injured, came back on leave to marry his high school sweetheart, returned to duty, and got sent into combat in the Middle East war overseas. Got the Silver Star and got himself taken prisoner or killed in action. Don't know which. His memorial display is over there," Alfonso said, pointing to it in the corner. The jukebox changed tunes and started belting out an old Roy Orbison song from the 60s.

Another vet butt in. "Yep, Randy Champ Peterson, one real, tough sonnafabitch. Fought the school bully, ten times his size, to a draw; some say he got the better of him. Beat the dog piss out of him. Dunno. Before my time, too. Only know what my aunt, who witnessed it, said. She had a crush on ol' Randy, star quarterback that he was. Besides, she was too fat and homely to be his girlfriend, or anybody's. Everyone always wondered why my uncle married her. Must've been good in the sack because she sure couldn't cook. Ha! Ha!" Upon overhearing the conversation, several others joined in on the joke and exploded in laughter.

Another vet piped in: "Did he rape that Mexican gal? Forgot her name; it was all folks would, or could, talk about for years. She moved away years ago. A real looker, they say. A hot number, tell you that much. Married some hotshot industrialist, it's been said. But was it rape?"

"Bet it was!" chimed in another.

"Ah, what do you know!" someone blurted out.

"I know he had the temperament."

"You don't know jack-squat, Caleb. You wuz only a washed-

up cook stuck in the infantry.” The others snickered in agreement. “One thing everybody always said about ‘ol Randy, you either liked him or you didn’t. Nobody ever knew him to not keep his word, never let anyone down, especially his teammates. Wasn’t called ‘Champ’ for nuthin’, the SOB.”

“Yeah, won the Silver Star, too!”

“You’re not a ‘winner’ of medals of valor, you idiot! You’re a ‘recipient.’”

“Ugh, thanks for reminding me, Pete. I forgot. Like recipients of the M-O-H, huh?”

“Well, you wuz just a grunt ground-pounder in the infantry, too. What can we expect?”

The others roared in laughter, one guy spilling his beer over his pants. “Don’t be so tough on ground-pounding grunts, Pete. We couldn’t all be commissioned officers like you, ya know,” someone shouted out from behind the pool table. They nodded in unison.

“Yeah, okay,” said Pete. “I apologize for still wearing my rank out of uniform. How about a round of drinks on me fellows, huh?”

“Yeah! Now you’re talkin’,” yelled out a pot-bellied veteran, the only tattoo-free drinker at the bar.

“Nina, a round for everybody.” With the new round of drinks, things settled down. Then the man walked over to what resembled a makeshift shrine in honor of “Sgt. Randolph Peterson,” black cloth draping Peterson’s active-duty photo on the wall. He stood motionless and in a daze in front of it as if frozen at attention before his company commander.

He wondered if he were dreaming. The mirror image reflected in the photo was that of a military-uniformed young man, handsome, scar-free. His knees weakened. *Don’t under-*

stand it. How could it be me? The epitaph below the photo read as if it had been lifted from the news stories in the library. There were other photos, one of the man in football attire wedged in between smiling teammates. A tear came to his eye. He looked around the room. Age differences aside, he wondered how these men could be related to him through service, honor, duty, country.

He couldn't think of anything. A feeling of emptiness welled up inside him. His thoughts turned to Jenny.

"Alfonso, could you tell me anything about Peterson's girlfriend?"

"Jenny? Jenny Jones? Why are you interested in her? That was years ago."

"Ah, the story at the display was really interesting."

"Well, all I know is that she came back to town. Lives on 70 Walnut, the Burghers' old homestead, three blocks over down the street. The place has turned into a sorry neighborhood in recent years. Can't tell you much more than that. Nobody here can. Don't see her often. Keeps a real low profile."

"Thanks." The man turned around. Some of the vets were now eyeing him suspiciously and talking about "Sergeant Peterson" in hushed tones. The man overheard several snippets: "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Sure looks like him." "Are you *crazy*? He's been dead for years." "Did you see the way he was acting at the display? Like he was knocked out while still on his feet and staggering on Dream Street but just didn't know it." "Yeah, but that don't necessarily mean nuthin'." "Nothing my ass! I'm telling you, the resemblance is there, just an older version." "I don't know, just don't know..." came the hushed whispers. The man thought it best to leave. Now. He slithered out the door.

It was getting dark and muggy. He thought of going to

Walnut Street, then paused. "Too late. Tomorrow. First thing. Exhausted. Better get some sleep. But where? Can't go to a motel. I've no ID. Better conk out somewhere like last night." He grew apprehensive at the thought of bumping into "Officer Jackass" again. "Still, might as well head out to the park again."

He hastened his stride. The glow from a full moon shimmered overhead, casting shadows over the trees and bushes and the park's carousel, now mothballed and collecting leaves from inactivity. The park remained silent and still. He felt a strange reminiscence come over him at the sight of this carousel. He just couldn't fathom why. "Under the floorboards is a good place to hide." He looked up into the sky and gazed at the stars. *Why am I back here? What will happen tomorrow?*

THE SUN SHONE HIGH ABOVE THE MOUNTAIN CREST TO THE EAST. "I slept like a dead man. Or am I already dead? Or does it matter?" The afternoon before, he had gorged himself on free food at the VFW. Now he felt no need to eat but only to hurry to Walnut Street in hopes of seeing his beloved Jenny. *But what if she's not there? What if it was all a mistake? A lie?* The thought kept pulsating inside his head. "Am I trapped inside a vanishing dream? No, no." He shook his head. "This is too real."

As if electrified, his weary legs came alive. Time stood still; things blurred. It was mid-morning when he found himself standing in front of the run-down, dour-looking house on 70 Walnut Street. Mouth dry, heart pounding, testicles in his throat, he knocked on the door and waited.

No answer.

He knocked again.

No answer.

A crow cawing overhead caught his attention, breaking the suspense. Then the sound of footsteps behind the door and it slowly opened....

"May I help you?"

The man stood frozen as if paralyzed.

"I said, 'May I help you?'"

"Jenny, is that you?" He recognized her; she hadn't changed much.

"How did you know my name? Who are you?"

"It's me, Randy." He grimaced. "I've come back. I---"

"---oh, my God!" The woman staggered and went to steady herself against the wooden staircase. "How could this be happening? Am I dreaming?"

"Are both of us?"

"How did you get here? Where did you come from?"

"I don't know, Jenny. Are we in a dream within a dream?"

"Jenny, who are you talking to? Who's at the door?" came a woman's voice from inside.

"It's all right, Mom. Go back to sleep. I'll take care of it." She gazed into his eyes. "You were gone for over seven years, Randy. We thought you were dead, taken from us in the war. Remember when I told you our doggie, Joey, and I would wait for you? We did. He's buried in the backyard. Then, later, you were legally declared dead. Our marriage was invalidated. What was I supposed to do?"

"I understand. But I..." The words stuck in his throat.

"Jenny, who's that?"

"I told you it's all right, Mom. Now go back to bed. Let's go out on the front porch, Randy." She gingerly closed the door behind her. "I'm engaged to be married to your best friend,

Demetri. I'm sorry, Randy. I love you, but you can't come back." She threw her arms around him, pulling him into her, hugging him tightly.

He clenched his jaw. Bit into his lip. Hard. Drew blood. It trickled down his chin.

"There you go, biting into your lip again." She tenderly wiped it away. He sat down on the porch sofa. "Remember when we made love for the first time? It was by the merry-go-round in the park. There's only one Summer of Love for every boy and girl. You can't go home again, Randy."

"Why can't I come back, Jenny? Why? The pain from the war hurts me too much inside. The war fractured me. It haunts me. I can't, I can't live like this..." The man keeled over, holding his head in his hands, sobbing in wave after wave of heated convulsions. "The government gave me its third-highest combat medal, yet it doesn't ease the pain. I witnessed so much blood, death, and dismemberment. The only thing that gave me hope at the time was the memory of you. But all the other memories, they won't fade; they won't go away. They haunt me like an eternal ghost in every breath I take. Hurts too much. It feels like a demon's hand is ripping apart my guts."

Jenny cradled and gently rocked him in her arms more like a baby than a husband. "I can't imagine what you suffered. But as shallow as it may sound, you're not living your life, living your life in the Eternal Now. You can't bury yourself in the past. The past is gone; there's only the Now leading into the dawn of tomorrow. Don't take it for granted. You have to go back on your journey, the journey from where you came. You've been looking behind yourself, Randy. It's time to look ahead. First, you need to *confront your ghosts*."

Randy 'Champ' Peterson sat on the porch swing, frozen in

time. Then he looked up, as if emerging from the wisp of a vanishing dream, a wan smile etched across his face. "Never knew you to be a philosopher. Thank you for all you've given and been to me in my previous life. I love you, Jenny. Always did. Always will. I'll go back to where I came from to face my rendezvous with destiny. I'm on a journey all right. Just don't know to where. A dream within a dream? It won't be the end of my journey." He smiled.

"It's the beginning."

