

The Tourist

Tired ... he was so tired. The walk from his limousine, parked some distance down the darkened boulevard behind the monument, had been the longest he'd taken without assistance in years. Only the little used leg braces strapped to his limbs and the support of an aluminum cane had enabled him to manage the long path by himself. With a glance up the length of the dimly lit walk stretching away in both directions into the night, he was beginning to wonder about his wisdom in ordering his driver to remain with the vehicle.

Feeling a bit foolish, the tattered old green jacket on a whim he'd thrown over his suit coat providing little insulation from the lonely chill of the late Autumn air, he slowly hobbled deeper into the earth near the center of the monument. Slowly, at first, and then with increasing clarity, he began to recall the first time he'd descended into this oddly shadowed landscaped slash in the earth.

Once, long ago, here on this spot, he'd stood and listened seemingly forever to the endless speech making of a procession of pontificating politicians, until the searing pain in his legs had finally overcome him. In exhausted confusion, he'd collapsed to the base of the monument. Regaining consciousness he found himself staring up into a jumble of intertwined tree branches. Somewhat disoriented, he'd become aware of a noise like a distant fire-fight. His buddies staring down at him had seemed strangely detached, in their apparent concern for him ignoring the incessant chattering of what seemed to be nearby machine gun fire. With a start he'd pulled at them, imploring them to leave him behind, to seek cover, to ... and then, in the time of a blink, his vision had cleared. The lines etched deeply in the faces of his friends, the amplified hum of a microphone, colored bunting and flower arrangements ... what was that noise? Yes ... that was it ... the clicking shutters of a multitude of motor driven cameras, lenses all pointed at him. So many photographers in a picture taking frenzy, collectively focusing their full efforts at recording his anguished repose against the obscene black wall. To one of them, he recalled the auto-graphed copy he'd later received in the mail, would go that year's Pulitzer Prize, a cover shot destined to be printed and reprinted around the world in both postcard and poster format.

Now, in the late night mist, all was quiet. The once pristine grass was in spots beaten to dirt by the passing of thousands of casual strollers. The black marble was marred with greasy hand prints left by curious passerbys, and there were but a few tired looking bouquets of flowers where once had been an orchard of offerings to the names engraved into the marble wall.

He stood motionless for a long time, reading the names and wondering why being in this place brought him no unusual emotion. It was after awhile that it came to him that all he really knew was he was beginning to shiver, the cold wet air having easily penetrated both the old coat and the expensive blazer he was wearing. As he turned to head up the walkway a burst of light from the pathway at his front dazzled him.

"Oh, sorry. I hope I didn't blind you or anything!"

As his vision slowly returned he could see the outline of a boy in front of him, the young teenager holding a small plastic camera with a built-in flash. Rubbing his eyes, "I'm okay. What are you doing?"

"I saw you standing in front of the wall, and, well, like I thought it would make a really neat picture."

"What are you doing here so late?"

"I'm here with my class ... Jefferson Middle School. Our history teacher, Mr. Richardson, brought us down for a field trip."

"Must be an awfully small school, except for me looks like you're are the only one here."

"They all went up to that Lincoln Memorial place over there." The young boy pointed through the dark trees to indicate the gleaming white marble structure in the distance.

"So, why did you stay down here?"

"Well, like I thought this place was really cool. All these names on the wall ... there are over 55,000 of them. Did you know that?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I did."

"My uncle was in the army. He gave me this camera just before we left home and asked me to take some pictures here. When I saw you standing there, well, with your old jacket on I kinda thought it looked just like one of the postcards I saw in the souvenir booth up the walkway."

"Oh."

The boy gave him a long, quizzical look, "Say, like, were you in the war?"

"Yes, I was."

The boys eyes widened as his hands dropped to his sides, "Wow! Is that how you ... is that what happened to your legs?"

Watching the bright blue eyes in front of him, he'd forgotten the cold metal support in his hands, and the tightness of the straps holding the braces to his legs suddenly returned. "Yes," as he spoke he briefly recalled the soft click he'd heard just before the explosion, and for a brief second the smell of mud and sweat and fright seemed to fill his nostrils, "I stepped on a mine."

Very, very quietly, after a moment's hesitation, "It must have hurt a lot. You're really lucky it didn't kill you."

"My friends next to me didn't have my luck," even as he responded he regretted what he was saying, but the words were past his lips before the thought could stop them.

The boys eyes watered, and his breathing became very slow. In a hushed, almost reverent voice, "Did you have to kill anyone?"

"I don't know, I probably ..." he looked at the figure in front of him, and, for the first time since he'd come home so many years ago, "... yes. Yes, I killed people."

"Does that, you know, like bother you now?"

"No," he spoke truthfully, "It's never really affected me that much. It was a war, remember. It's what you do in a war."

"My teacher, he said that we could have won the war if we'd really wanted to. He told us a lot of lives were wasted."

"Your teacher's Mr. Richardson, right?"

"Yeah. He said it was the first war America lost."

Very carefully, with deliberate slowness, "I think your teacher's just little bit mistaken, we didn't lose the war. And no lives were wasted."

A slight tightening of the youthful face, blue eyes just a bit sharp, "What do you mean? Are you saying we won the war?"

"No, we didn't win."

"But, if we didn't win and didn't lose ... well, what happened?"

"As all wars do, it simply ended. For awhile, one side always calls itself the winner, and, sometimes, the other side even admits to being the loser. Truth is, there aren't any winners or losers in a war ... it's not a game."

"Oh ..."

"And the only wasted life is one not lived. The length of a life, or the circumstances of its ending, or even the fact that it is eventually forgotten, has little to do with its worth."

With a quick glance at the lines of colored squares over the pocket of the green tunic, "Were you a hero?"

The tears slowly filled his eyes as he began to feel in the thickening mist the presence of so many comrades around him, "Yes, I was a hero. And now I'm an old man. Would you mind helping me back to my car?"

"Sure," and the boy reached up to support him as he turned and headed up the path.

When they reached the service road at the edge of the mall, and he could see his driver walking towards them, he turned to the boy and said, "I'd like to give you something for helping me."

"Oh, I couldn't let you do that. My mom says it's good to help old people. And, besides, I think I got a really neat picture of you!"

"Just the same, I'd like you to have this," as he reached down the boy's hand automatically rose to meet his. Curling the young fingers over his own, he said, "Take this, keep it. Pin it to the picture you took, okay?"

"Sure, okay."

And then his driver was hustling him to the limousine and tucking him into the back seat, all the while muttering about cold air and the flu and the foolishness of someone who was supposed to be smart enough to know better. His last glimpse of the boy was as the vehicle rounded the corner and headed down the road that ran alongside the Lincoln Memorial. Through the deep tinted windows he caught a glimpse of the lad walking quickly across the grass towards a group of kids lining up near the steps to the gleaming monument.

As the boy entered the pool of light at the base of the huge marble building he looked across the lawn just in time to see the gray limousine speed away into the night. Opening his hand, he looked down to see what the old man had given him. Against the pink of his palm, appearing only a tiny bit age tattered and faded by time, the deep blue of the cloth rectangle provided an almost infinite depth in which the miniature gold stars weightlessly floated.

"Wow. Cool! Like, really cool." And he hurried to join his teacher and friends as they prepared to board their bus to return home.