

The Long And Winding Road

by Kingfisher



Acknowledgements:

Characters aren't mine. Most are SELMURs except for Laine – that's Mary Wright's/ Eagle Lady's. I just borrowed her again because it was easier than thinking up someone on a short schedule.

LtCOL D. Grossman - his book On Killing and CD Bulletproof Mind.

The Long and Winding Road, Lyrics by Paul McCartney and John Lennon

Twilight at Caumsett landscape by David Peikon

Photos aren't mine either.

*The long and winding road That leads to your door
Will never disappear I've seen that road before
It always leads me here Lead me to your door*

The river was a rock in his life. Even after a flood, it never seemed to change. The Rock River. So many times its moving water seemed to calm him and set him level. It cleared his head to think. And once he could think things through, he could act with confidence. He needed confidence now. He was scared to death. Over three years fighting overseas and he stood here afraid to walk the last 1000 feet home.

He just didn't think he would be as scared as Kirby was. That was in Chicago. And Cleveland seemed a lifetime away still. He was focused on getting the men – his men – home safely.

He still wasn't quite sure how they had swung it - all of them getting home as a group. Maybe it was his petitioning of Jampel. Well the man certainly owed him. And it was just the five of them. The lieutenant had been gone for weeks. The first foray into Germany had left Hanley with a hole in his side and one functioning lung. Last they had heard he was still in England getting well enough to travel home. Billy had succumbed not long after. It wasn't a life-threatening wound at first. But after the infection took hold because they were stuck out in the snow and mud for a week, the poor kid almost lost his leg. Billy was in an east coast Army hospital learning to walk with what was left of his leg.

They dropped Kirby off first. Kirby insisted that he show them the sights of downtown Chicago. Saunders should have suspected after the fourth bar that Kirby didn't want to go home.

"Kirby, it's time to move on." Saunders stated it. No emotion. No gesturing as if a pep talk. Just a stated fact. It was time. "What's the problem?"

The others looked to their feet. They too were aware that something wasn't right, but they couldn't put their finger on it. Kirby looked down at the bar floor and shuffled his feet like a young boy caught in the act.



"What if she hates me?"

"What if who hates you?"

"Ruthie."

Saunders breathed deep. He didn't like where this was going. He couldn't even imagine where this was going.

"Kirby, why in the world would Ruthie hate you?"

"I came back," he said, almost as if speaking to no one in particular, "and he didn't."

Sarge started to say "Who?", then stopped. He knew who. Eddie. Eddie Kopacheck. "Eddie's death wasn't your fault. Why would she blame you?"

"She's not gonna to blame me, Sarge – just hate me for being the one to come back. She loved Eddie!"

"Kirby, you're not makin' sense. She's your sister. She's gonna hate you for coming home alive? You tellin' me your sister doesn't like you?" The hand gestures were starting. But he didn't have a good answer formulating in his brain. The pep talk just wasn't spilling out of him. What if Kirby was right? What if their families weren't happy to see them? What if people blamed them for the loss of others who weren't returning?

His men were much different from the boys and young men that had left home months, and for some of them, years before. He could see that in each of them. They were meaner, untrusting - except of each of other. They were nice enough to people they met on the street – yet he saw the difference as they made their way back to the US. The men stayed close to each other, watching each other's backs. Maybe it wasn't a question of their families accepting them. Maybe they had to accept their families? Maybe they had to accept themselves? Saunders felt as if he was at the edge of a cliff. A cliff that was crumbling under his feet and he couldn't move back from the edge. All this way and he was going to fall off a cliff into the crazy house!

This was stupid!

He was going home. He was goin' home where he didn't have to watch his back or anyone else's. He was gonna be free of this burden. Kirby wasn't gonna screw this up for him!

"You are goin' home." It was a statement. Then came the order. "Now you get your rear in gear. Off and on! NOW!" Well, he knew he had a pep talk in there somewhere. He growled at Kirby - and they all responded. Every one of them stood tall, picked up their duffles and formed up. He gave out a deep sigh.

"Now you all listen up. And you listen good. I'm gonna say it one more time. We're gonna make it." His words were firm and slow. "We made it through Germany. We made it through our furlough." They smirked. "Well, some better than others." Soft chuckles. OK, he thought, they were relaxing. "We can do this. Hell, we're home!" Well, that word perked up their ears. "We're all gonna make it because we're still watchin' each other's back. You know the deal."

"Yeah, Sarge," Littlejohn broke in, "we know the deal. We're gonna contact you when we get home and write each other a month later." Littlejohn smiled.

"Yeah, we got it, Sarge," echoed Doc and Caje.

"Good. Let's move out." He swung his duffle over his shoulder. "Which way, Kirby?" and then added for emphasis, "to your home."

Kirby's sister did not hate him. She fell on him when she saw him, clung to him, sobbing, saying his name over and over. Kirby's mother enveloped her son with a hug and then went into a feeding frenzy. She fed them all until they were sleepy from being so full. Saunders begged to be gone so they could make their connections west. Time was running out to catch their train. He gathered what was left of his squad, had them collect their duffles and headed toward the door.

Ruthie let go of Kirby and rushed up to Saunders. She looked him in the eye with an intensity that made Saunders squirm, took both of his hands and said "Thank you for bringing home Bill." It was such a soft voice, yet he heard her heartbreak over Eddie. He heard her joy

over Kirby's return. And he heard her standing on the edge of that crumbling cliff. Maybe the soldiers weren't the only ones that wouldn't make it back from the war?

With very few minutes to spare, they climbed aboard the train toward Moline. Saunders had already talked to the conductor, and he agreed to let him off at Barstow. The train would be slowing down for its trip into the city by then, anyways. Between the run to make the train and the intensity of Kirby's sister's reaction to them, Saunders began to be impatient with the process of getting home. He needed some time alone before he faced his family, and the burden of shepherding his squad was beginning to weigh upon him. Littlejohn, after him again, wanted to walk him the last few miles to his house.

"Nah, Littlejohn, I can make it alone from here."

"Sarge, how far is your house from here?" Littlejohn was arguing they take Sarge all the way home – just like they did for Kirby. Saunders was the next stop of their journey. From here they would separate.

"A couple miles, Littlejohn. Just a short patrol."

"It's awful late to be walking through the country, Sarge. Ya don' have a rifle," the large man deadpanned.

Saunders looked at him sideways. "Littlejohn, it's northern Illinois. Unless there's been an Indian uprising, it's been fairly peaceful here the last 100 years. It's not Chicago."

Silently, they all sighed inwardly. And it's not over there...

"Well, we should get you home. You always got us back. We should get you back."

"I think I can do this one myself. You guys stay on the train so you don't miss your connections."

He stood and looked back. This was the end of their last patrol. They'd be fine. Cajé and Doc would switch in Moline and go south. Doc would head across Old Man River at Memphis. Doc would be home in another day. Cajé was about the same. Cajé would travel south until the track stopped at the coast in New Orleans. Littlejohn had decided to take the train to Omaha. He hadn't decided on whether to take a bus the last part or call his folks to come get him. He was going to watch the weather, as he got closer he'd make a decision. No reason to take them off the farm if the weather was good. It might be two more days before he made it home. Saunders wondered internally whether Littlejohn was standing on the crumbly cliff edge or whether he was falling back into the mindset of a farmer. Only time would tell.

"OK, you know the deal. I'll hear from you all soon." He stood up and swung his duffle over his shoulder. Barstow was just a few minutes away.



Littlejohn stood up and held out his hand, "Thanks, Sarge..." He stopped. "Sarge, you gotta real name? I mean, you're not our sergeant anymore. You know, we could... we should be more like friends, you know?"

Saunders looked uncomfortable for a second. Littlejohn was right. But he didn't know these people as anything but his soldiers. They knew each other as friends. Didn't they? No, he sighed, they knew each other as brothers. Something closer than brothers. Someone you could cry with. Someone who shared and held your deepest, darkest fears.

"Chip. The locals here call me Chip." Saunders held out his hand to Littlejohn.

"Good bye, Chip" Littlejohn smiled. "Sarge, thanks for getting me home."

Saunders jumped onto the platform. The train really didn't stop. It was late at night and there wasn't anyone at Barstow this late. He laughed to himself. Was there ever a time when there were a lot of people at the Barstow stop? Well, maybe folks who took the train in to work at the plant south of here. But they'd probably take the other line south that was closer to the plant.

He crossed the bridge at Barstow over the Rock River. He stood on the bridge looking down. It would be so easy just to float down stream and away. Just take the easy way out once. Just once. Was that so bad? He picked up the duffle and kept walking. It was another five miles if he kept to the road. He could be there by breakfast. He'd probably be able to thumb a ride. Or he could slip down by the bridge pilings and walk along the river all the way home. Well, he'd have to clean his boots when he got done. These dress boots weren't made for long walks in the woods.

The river called to him. The moon was not quite half full, but the sky was fairly clear. It was enough light for him to see. He was quite comfortable walking through the woods in the dark. He was damn good at it by now. The banks of the river were generally low. Occasionally they became small cliffs of sand, mud and rock. As he walked, he could see his dad taking him fishing. They had that old wooden rowboat. His dad had left it tied to a tree by the river because it was so heavy to drag from behind the shed. Later, his dad had brought Joey along as well. What a pain!

Joey was always trying to do what he did. Tie his own knots, only to make a mess that had to be cut off again. Put on his own worms... how many had they lost that way! Poor worms. Casting! What a disaster! How many times did Chip sit there wanting to talk to his dad 'bout how fast to reel in or where to cast next - instead his dad was sitting in the bow picking at the bait cast reel to get the birds nest out of it that Joey installed by not holding his finger down on the drum. He chuckled. He missed his dad. He missed Joey.

He stopped. This is about where they had lost Joey. He sighed deeply. A fish jumped way out in the middle of the river. You could hear the water slipping by. It gurgled and sushed quietly. The river smelled like mud, dying kelp, summer run off, dead fish. He sucked it in. This was home.

Then he stood on the cliff again. The edge was falling out slowly under his feet. He couldn't step back. There were other rivers. Rivers with dead bodies in them. Rivers that smelled like blood and cordite and sulfur. Rivers that were stagnant, or ditches or canals... with his buddies, dead and dying in them. The ground under him tumbled away and he found himself stretched flat out on the face of the cliff, clinging to it for all his life. He dare not move. He needed help! Where was everybody?

On their way home, idiot! His breaths were deep and heavy. He fought back the panic. He was standing at what was left of his dad's boat. Still tied to the tree where he had left it four years ago. He looked up. There it was, his house. His home. Home. Just a short walk of a 1000 feet or so and he'd be there. But his feet wouldn't move. He looked out again to the river. He was alone again. Just like when he went into war.

Somewhere from the depths, the help came. "You gotta depend on yourself. Ain't nobody else gonna help you over the rough spots."

"Yes, Sergeant," he responded automatically. He always had the greatest respect for Avery. He was a mean SOB. Mean with a purpose. So, just like he had told Kirby – it was time to move on.

The porch looked the same. The house could use some paint. Well, he'd get to that. Couldn't really expect Chris to do that with school and all. Chris. Chris was still out there and he was here safe. Somehow that wasn't right. His little brother should be home and he should be out there protecting him.

He could hear people moving in the house. He could smell his mom making breakfast. Was that his sister's voice? Front door or back door? If he used the back door he wouldn't track so much river mud through the house. But he hadn't called to tell them when he'd be home. Hadn't written, either. Maybe the front door. He could take off his boots and give them time to adjust to him. He made a mental stop. You're treating them like they were in a war zone. These weren't peasants in France out in the country not knowing who was banging on the door – GIs or Germans. This was his family. He breathed in deeply and exhaled slowly, trying to calm his nerves. He'd use the front door.

Opening the screen, he rapped hard on the door and then walked in.

"Mom? Mom! I'm home!"

He dropped his duffle by the side of the door and began to unlace his boots. They weren't that bad. The walk through the field had cleaned up most of the mud. His uniform was a different story. The pant legs were spattered with mud.

The door to the kitchen opened. A woman with golden hair highlighted with white came out. She stopped and looked at him. There were no words. She seemed confused and full of hope all at once.

He struggled to get the last boot off. "Mom, it's me. Chip."

"I thought I heard your dad's voice." It was a statement, almost an apology. And then she seemed to be about to collapse. He walked up to her, grabbed her in his arms and swung her around.

"Well, it's not Dad, it's me." He held her tight and breathed her in. He could smell hotcakes and butter and jam and syrup. She smelled like mom. She smelled like home. His eyes stung. "Mom, I missed you so much!"

Mae Saunders found it difficult to breathe. Her breaths came as sobs as this child hugged her tightly in his arms. Clinging to him, she mumbled a prayer of thanksgiving. They stood there for several moments, both with wet eyes, both just holding on to each other.

When Mae had lost her husband, her eldest son John had become her rock. Even as a young man, he was her confidant. So physically like his father in features and mannerisms, his father and uncles had begun calling him Chip at an early age. When toddler and father had stood next to each other it was almost comical with the blond hair sticking out every direction and deep blue eyes, either in anger or in mirth, boring right through you. How she missed them both!

Mae and Chip shared their trials and joys after her husband's passing like two harbor lights. Both of them steady, guiding lights for the younger three children, while silently and confidently providing comfort and presence to the other. They were more friends, than mother and son. With her eldest back in her home she felt reconnected. Whole. But her returning son



was different; not just his physical presence. He must have put on at least 30 pounds, most of it in the shoulders. His face was crinkled with lines. Perhaps living outdoors for so many years had toughened his features? Maybe his face reflected worry for her and his siblings?

Mae set the thoughts aside. She'd find out later. They'd talk, deep, long talks just like before. But later, not now. Now her John was home. Her baby boy. Chip, her rock to cling to when things just couldn't get any worse. Mae smiled up into that face, drinking in the smiling eyes that she had longed to see. No. No deep conversations now. Now he needed to eat.

"You're just in time for breakfast," she said, stepping back but holding onto his hands. "Louise! Louise, come here! Your brother's home!"

Louise had heard a male voice downstairs. She thought it was Barney from Prairie Dairy. Mom had been laying in milk expecting Chip home any day. She wanted to be ready when he walked in. "You know he always writes about how he misses real food. Real milk. Real beef. My cooking. I want to make sure that's what he gets. I want him to feel at home." Louise understood her mom's concerns, but not what having fresh milk was going to do to keep Chip from becoming like Greg.

Greg Bittner down the street had been home two months. He had been wounded, but not terribly. It was so close to what was seen as the end of the war in Europe that they sent him home to recover. Greg was two years older than her brother Chip. He had only been overseas about a year, yet he looked like an old man. He sulked all day on the Bittner front porch and while he talked to anyone who stopped by, he wouldn't leave the house. He didn't feel comfortable, he said. He wasn't sure he was really home. How could you sit in your own front yard and not know if you were really home?

She plummeted down the steps into the living room. There were dirty boots and a large green duffel sitting by the front door. The green bag had black stenciling on it. "SGT J.C. Saunders 361st K Co. USA" Goon was back! She heard her mom talking to someone on the kitchen. That man's voice didn't sound like Goon. The hairs on the back of her neck crawled. She straightened her back. She was afraid. And of what, she thought? Chip? She had him right where she wanted him, wrapped around her little finger. At least she did when he had left. That was the youngest daughter's right. And she played the role so well. Well she'd give herself a day. A day to get him right back to where he was before. Then maybe he would take her out driving. She really needed to learn how. After all, she was almost 17!

The kitchen door was open. She walked up to it. Should she jump on his back? She looked in. Who was her mother talking to? That wasn't Chip. She looked in farther. There was no one else there.

"Louise! He's home!"

"Hello, Brat." The man stood up and walked towards her. He stopped and dropped his arms when he saw her take a step back. She could see the deep hurt appear on his face. The man began to back away from her, as if to give her space. "I guess I don't look the same." His hand ran through his hair and made it stick out at all angles, as if it ever did anything but that. That smile he had was familiar. "You look a little different too. Actually, Louise, you look a lot different. You look like a woman not a brat."

Her face went red. Who was this man? This was not the Chip she remembered. The voice was much deeper. This guy almost had a beard. OK, he had a beard, but it didn't show much. His face was full of wrinkles. But his eyes... they were the same. Deep, bright and warm... hopeful.

"I don't know you."

Her mother sucked in air audibly. "Louise! What a thing to say to your brother!"

"It's OK, mom. She's right. She doesn't know me. I'm not the same person who left here." He sat back down and turned his eyes into his coffee cup. The coffee swirled like the thoughts in his head.

"Louise! We want Chip to feel at home!"

"Mom," he said softly, "She was just a little girl when I left. Don't make her feel bad. Let her be. She's got to have time." He smiled at them. "How 'bout that glass of milk you promised me!" He looked at his mom with a big smile. "You're torturing me, Mom! I'm dying for a glass of real milk!"

She poured him a large glass while giving Louise that 'we're going to sit down and have a long talk young lady' look.

Louise stood at the edge of the kitchen door watching her mom converse with this man as if they were the best of friends. Well, thought Louise, if it's Chip, then they were the best of friends. Eventually she came and sat at the table. He ignored her unless her mom brought her into the conversation. But she knew he was watching her every move. Yet he never made a move towards her. He just chatted with his mom. Sometimes when he smiled, she could see her brother's face. She struggled in her mind, Chip, are you really in there?

*The wild and windy night That the rain washed away
Has left a pool of tears Crying for the day
Why leave me standing here Let me know the way*

The first day home had passed slowly. His mom insisted he do nothing but sit on the front porch and eat her cooking and drink the fresh milk she had stockpiled. He had walked down to the Bittner's after lunch and sat with Greg for an hour just talking about what they had left behind. Greg really hadn't come home. He was still in France somewhere, seeing things his mind couldn't reconcile. Every time he tried to put it behind him, he saw something else that reminded him of the French farm country he had helped destroy. Greg's parents looked to Chip as if he somehow held the magic cure to bring their son back to the way he was when they had sent him out into the world. Chip Saunders held no answers. He had no cures.

He finished his last smoke of the day in the yard, sucking in the smells and sounds of the neighborhood. The cluster of houses was at the end of the road that led into a small town. It was really more like a group of small farms than a real town. His dad had bought the house out here when they moved out west so that his kids could grow up in the country, not on a city sidewalk like he had done. With the river across the field and nothing but woods and farms for miles, his dad had gotten his wish. Or at least most of it. His dad hadn't really been around to watch his children grow up.

Chip tried to walk up the steps to his room as quietly as possible. He expected his mother had to be exhausted after cooking three hot meals that day. Three hot meals each with enough food to feed his entire squad! He was so stuffed he didn't think he was going to be able to eat for a couple of days. Chip smiled to himself. A year ago today he would have done just about anything to be in his mom's kitchen rather than fighting his way through the French countryside. And to have food. Real food! Not slop served out of the back of a truck and eaten with as much dirt as anything else. Real food with taste and texture and that you had some idea

if it was animal or vegetable! He didn't care how uncomfortable he was right now, he was going to enjoy living through a few more days of "fattening up".

It had been a great day except for Louise. He scared her and he didn't know why. Was he that different? Maybe she saw right through him. Maybe she saw what he really was. What he had really become. Maybe she knew he was nothing better than a killer. A damn efficient killer. An efficient killer and scared. Scared of what? Of being home?

Louise stood in the hall watching him. Her brother stood at his dresser mumbling in annoyance and digging through the drawers for something.

"Nuthin'. Darn."

Finally he sat on his bed and began to systematically take things out of his duffle. She heard a metallic clunk. Her curiosity couldn't stand it anymore; she had to go see what he was doing. She laughed at herself. Well, at least that about him hadn't changed – she still wanted to know everything he was doing.

His back was towards her as he dug deeper into the long bag. His back was huge. Like most boys back here his arms were tanned and his back was lily white. But his back was different. There were lines across his back. Little white and pink lines. Lines like Mike Gutterman had from getting hung up in the lines they used to lift hay up to the barn loft. She had seen them when they all went to the public swimming pool in East Moline for a church picnic last summer. Mike's scars were pink and puffy because they were so new. But these lines on her brothers back were a variety of colors. Pink through white.

"Louise..."

Darn it, how did he hear her? Time to be bold before he went into big brother mode. "What are you looking for? You're making a mess of this room and I'm the one that had to get it clean for you, you know."

"Yeah, right." He turned towards her with a big smile. But his smile was not rewarded. She gasped, staring at him. Why did he frighten her so much? She and Chris were two of a kind – nothing scared them. What, did he look like an ogre? He was older but... He remembered the scars. Damn. Oh well just keep going, finish what you started. "I'm looking for something to wear to bed. Seems like I don't quite fit in what's in that dresser. And somethin' seems to have happened with all my cotton shirts out of my closet. I guess you wouldn't know about that?"

He got a smile out of her. A small victory, but a victory none the less.

"Chip..." He had two victories! She was talking to him. "What are those things on you?" Louise seemed to be thinking as she talked to him. She was puzzling something out in her head. Damn, he hated the fact she was so smart. He felt the face of the cliff begin to come up against him. He felt the fear grip his insides that he would be found out. Her face showed she had come up with a conclusion.

"Chip, those are scars aren't they?"

He clung to the side of the cliff. "Yeah."

"Wait, I'll be right back!"

Eternity ticked slowly by. Was she going to get him something for his boo-boos? Good lord, that was all he needed was for her to be playing nurse like when she was ten. He'd be stuck shoulder to navel with tape and cotton! No she was too old for that. Wasn't she? Maybe

she was going to retrieve some of the shirts she had stolen? Why did girls have to wear their fathers' and brothers' shirts? Didn't they have enough clothing as it was?

She came back with a shirt and a box and plopped on his bed next to him. "Here, this was actually one of Dad's. If you don't fit in what's in your dresser you're not going to fit in the shirts I borrowed from you. I mean, it's not like you were using them!" Chip looked down and smiled at his sister as he shook his head. Kirby had nothing on her logic or her wily ways of getting trouble shuck off her back. This girl could teach Kirby a few lessons.

Chip worked into the shirt and began to button it up. Louise opened the cigar box she held with great care, as if the contents were gold or some other treasure valuable beyond measure.

"You never wrote," she stated.

"What are ya talking about? I wrote." He was a little indignant, but with a smile.

"Right. You never wrote about anything." She clarified. "Nothing. Nothing about what you were really doing"

"There were censors," he offered quietly, still trying to keep the smile pasted to his face without seeming false or upset.

"Right." She looked right at him and held a letter in her hand. But it wasn't one of his letters. It was a letter from the Army. "So... the way we knew what was going on was from the Army."

The room began to tilt a little. He felt suddenly very warm even though the window was letting in a cool breeze, heavy with the dampness from the river.

"Like this one." Louise began to read, "We regret to inform you that your son is missing in action... That was from last summer. Where were you lost? How were you lost? I've never known you to get lost in the woods, let alone in some farmer's fields. Our geography class studied Europe. You were at Normandy. That's a lot like back here. How'd you get back from 'being lost'? Did you meet anyone nice on your trip?" Her voice dripped with acid.



The warmth he felt became anger and panic all rolled into one. Damn this girl could still push his buttons. The rock on the face of the cliff began to shift. He felt himself grasp the rock face looking for purchase... anything to hold on to. The fear gripped his insides so tight he thought he was going to get sick.

"We got your letter that said you had been lost but you were found by some French Resistance members and were back with your unit. The countryside was pretty and the weather was hot. Anything you'd like to add?" Louise offered the letter to him. But she didn't wait for a response. "Here's another one. Something about a Purple Heart medal. I believe that they give those to soldiers that are wounded. A couple of those in here. That might explain the lines on your back?" He had the distinct impression that she was angry. Maybe more than angry.

Louise was hurt. Hurt that he didn't care enough to write about his day. He had forgotten those times before he had left. He would tuck Louise in, just like Dad had done.

Sitting on the edge of her bed, they chatted about the news of the day from a little girl's perspective. Bugs caught; dolls that had been bad; friends she wanted to see Sunday at church. She dug into the box again, "Or maybe those are from the letters about your 'stars'? You got a couple of different colors, silver, bronze..." She paused for a moment and then continued with a softer tone. "The point is, how am I supposed to know you when I don't know anything about you?"

The blond sergeant looked down at the floor. His mind threw up its defenses, the same ones he had used once he had gotten to the point of too much pain. And you're not gonna know what I did, he thought. Not now, not ever. In his most commanding, yet quiet voice, he said "Time for you to get to bed, Louise. 'Night." And he began putting things back into his duffle. The conversation was over. He might have had a few victories in some minor skirmishes, but she had won this battle.

The week wore on and he struggled with sleeping. His mom didn't say anything. His struggles to regain normalcy only made Louise more distant. When she looked at him it was as if he was a stranger. Could he blame her? Who wanted a stranger and a killer under their roof? A killer and an animal that you didn't know. That you didn't understand.

He couldn't get comfortable in the bed. He could sleep, no problem. Sleep had never been a problem. Anywhere, any way. He was the envy of his squad. Hell, he was the envy of the entire Company. No matter the noise, if it was time to sleep, Saunders slept. Yet not in this bed. He would wake up at the slightest sound bathed in sweat. He decided to save the sheets and sleep on the floor. The hard cold floor was comfortable. He was used to it. He had been trained to live like an animal: minimal hygiene, no clean clothes, eating off the ground... what did they expect? Chip began to worry, maybe he and Greg Bittner were more alike than Chip wanted to admit. Maybe Chip wasn't comfortable at home either? Maybe he didn't want them to know whom he had become?

His mother acted as if his forgoing the bed for the floor of his room was a perfectly normal idea. She provided another blanket folded to the end of his bed so he wouldn't have to take the comforter off every night. "It'll come, son. Just take your time. You'll be fine. I'm here if you need me."

The first week wore on. Everybody else in the squad seemed to be doing fine. Cajé called first. The trip home was uneventful, except for the girl he met. Cajé and women. Couldn't the man just settle in first? "Cajé, get yourself settled in, then find a woman." "Sarge – what better way to settle in back home than have a pretty mademoiselle to talk to?" Maybe the scout had a point. They talked at length on plans for the future, possibilities, hopes. They didn't say good bye when they hung up. Rather they ended the conversation as if they were going on separate patrols. "See you later."

Littlejohn called next. His folks met him at the train station in Omaha. They abandoned the farm to meet him. The harvest season was upon them and Littlejohn was right back to where he left off. "Sarge, it's like I never left. Other than what, well, what I mean is... I know I'm different, but I can still do everything I used to do. So I guess it's OK. Right?"

Littlejohn was making plans to go meet Billy at the hospital for his discharge and travel across country to help Billy get home. "I know he needs to go home and help his mom, but I just think he needs have someone help him. You know what I mean, Sarge? I mean, I just think he should come here first until he's feeling better and can get along on his own. What do you think?"

Saunders thoughts tumbled inside his head. What do I think? I think some day I should be able to expect you to think for yourselves and not need me to do it for you. "Well, Littlejohn, it sounds like a plan. But don't you think his mom misses him, too?"

They talked for a while longer. "You know, Sarge, if you call here, you need to ask for Bob. That's what the locals around here call me. There's just too many Littlejohns." "Got it, Lit.... Bob. We'll see you later."

After another two days of waiting, the Sarge was getting a little worried about Doc. He decided to call him instead of waiting. The number Doc gave him was a party line.

"Hello, I'm trying to connect with Doc.." Saunders paused. What the hell was Doc's name?

"This line doesn't connect to Doc Brown."

"No, not Doc Brown. I'm sorry, I meant..." Oh hell, think! "Uh, ... John Roberts."

"One moment, let me ring there."

"Hello?"

"Hello, is this the number for John Roberts?"

"This is John Roberts"

No, thought Saunders, even at this distance, this wasn't Doc. This was some older man. "I'm sorry, I'm looking for the John Roberts that is a... was a medic. He was in my squad and I was calling to see if he got home all right."

"Oh, you must mean mah nephew, John Henry. He jus' got home a few days ago. Phones have been out here fer a few days 'cause a big storm come through. I'll have one ah th' boys go down and fetch him and have him call yuh back. Maybe tommarra?"

"That would be great. My name is Saunders. Let me leave you the number in case he doesn't have it."

Doc called later that same day. Yeah, he had been home two days. Uneventful trip, other than watching Cajé work this girl. "He'll never cease to amaze me, Sarge. That boy can get more women by looking sad than any man I know!"

They talked for a long while, exchanging information on everyone. The conversation turned to the future. What was next? Doc was looking at school. Maybe medical school, maybe just becoming a teacher at a local school. "I thought you wanted to be a short order cook?" Saunders teased. Doc laughed. "Yeah. That was before I knew what Well, what I could do, I guess. You know, Sarge, I saw a lot of rotten things during my tour. But I saw a lot of good things, too. Lots of good people out there who did a lot of great things with just a little bit. I'm thinking I can do better than a cook or grocery clerk. I'm thinking, Sarge, that I can really contribute to this world. I mean... well, I mean I didn't really do much in the battles... but ..."

"Doc!" Saunders growled. "What are you talking about! How many times did you run out where you shouldn't have, against MY better judgment and save some kid's life! Hell", he bellowed, "how many times did you run out and save my life!" Saunders winced. His mother and sister were around the corner in the kitchen. He knew they were trying not to listen into his conversations with his buddies. His voice was sure to carry. He didn't want them to know he had been hurt. His thoughts went to Louise and her treasure box. How could you explain what you had seen? What you had lived through when so many others hadn't? Would it make sense

to anyone who hadn't been there how bad it felt to be alive when your buddy had been killed right next to you? Shit, this was a mess.



"Sarge, that's not what I meant." Doc breathed deep and tried to refocus the conversation. "You guys did a lot of ... a lot of ... Sarge, you guys killed a lot of people. I didn't have to go through that. That's a burden I don't have to bear. I know sometimes I wished I could have carried a gun... But I know I had a job to do and I know I did OK."

"Doc, you did more than OK. You ..." Saunders voiced cracked with emotion. "Doc, you're the one that got us home. Alive."

"I had a hand in that, yeah. What I'm trying to say is that I think I learned that you don't have to have all the same tools as everyone else to contribute to this world's success. When I left for war, Sarge, I had nothin'. I've come back blessed beyond belief. I just want to share some of that blessing. That's all."



When Saunders finally hung up the phone with Doc, he knew he needed a walk. A walk would keep him away from his family and allow him to avoid the conversation with Louise that was sure to come up. He didn't want to tell her, couldn't she understand that? He didn't want them to know...to know that he was scared beyond any nightmare he could describe. He had a job to do and he did it the best way he knew how. Louise needed to accept him for what he was now – not what he had done in that damn box. But was there a difference?

Late summer had faded into fall and fall was transforming into winter. There were big hopes at the Saunders house that Chris would be home for Christmas. The war in the Pacific had been over for a few months and life was beginning to return to normal. Chip had taken a spot back at the factory where he had worked before the war. He had moved up to foreman on the line. While he still slept on the floor of his room, some normalcy began to creep back into his life.

He hung out with some old friends on Friday nights after work. He even took out a few old flames on dates. The women of his past life were all looking to settle down and get on with their futures. Chip wasn't ready. He didn't know why. He didn't think he was going to find a woman to sleep on the floor with him. But as irrational as it sounded, he just couldn't get into that bed. That bed was comfort and home. And he wasn't comfortable. Not with his bed. Not with being home and mostly, not with himself. He was stuck between being the Sarge and being who he was... or thought that he was. Hell, he thought, if he really was still the Sarge he coulda'... woulda' solved this by now!

Sleeping on the floor. That just had to stop. He had to get over this hump. It had been months since he had come home. Well, he was going to sleep in his bed tonight. Damn it – he was going to sleep in his bed if it killed him. And it just might. Just looking at the bed made his insides twist.

That night he woke up suddenly to the soft sushing of the wind through his window curtains and the sound of someone singing softly. It was the lullaby his mother sang when putting them down for the night. He could hear her voice in his head as clear as if she was standing next to him. Truth be told, it was how he fell asleep all across Africa, Italy and Europe.

He would listen to her in his head, stroking his wayward hair back from his eyes, and within minutes, he was fast asleep.

Grady! He had been dreaming of Grady. Grady was laughing at him. They were talking about taking a hill. Some nameless French hill. Just a knoll really. And then Grady was dead. Saunders felt the tears on his face.

“Oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh, sing horey dinkum” the voice sang the refrain and began the song again. “Soon as we are cooked, sweet potatoes...” It was his mom’s voice. Oh crap! Had he woken her up? He opened his eyes wide in terror. There was his mom, sitting on the side of his bed, holding his hand, stroking his hair, singing that soft lullaby. Only it wasn’t his mom. “Sshh!” she said, “You’ll wake up mom. It’s OK. I’m here.” And she kept singing. She kept stroking his hair, his cheek. It was Louise.



“Don’t worry” Louise whispered to him, “Grady’s not here.”

“He’s dead.” came the raspy voice. “I killed him. Killed him and left him on some nameless French hill. Killed Delaney too.” Louise tried to comprehend what her brother was muttering about. “Didn’t want to get Kirby killed by taking over for Grady, so I killed Delaney. William K. Delaney. Gave him the damned rifle. A cook’s helper. My fault. My fault.” He sobbed.

Louise started at him in shock. “You seemed angry at him. Grady, I mean. You were yelling at him.”

Chip sucked in a deep gulp of air. “I didn’t want him to leave me. He was my friend. Shouldn’t have had any friends. Just got so lonely. Couldn’t say no to Grady. Damn him!” The tears welled up again. Her brother let out a mournful sigh. It was as if he had lost all hope. “Time for you to go back to bed, Louise”

Louise didn’t move. “Uh-uh. Not leaving this time. You could shut me out when you weren’t here. You can’t shut me out now.” She began to sing the lullaby again.

“Louise!” He growled, “Please, just go.” Then softer, as if apologizing “You can’t help me honey.” No one can help me, he thought. He was on the cliff face and the rock was getting looser all the time. He’d never be able to climb out of this pit. Where were they when he needed some help? Didn’t they know he was scared?

“When I was a little girl, I sometimes had these bad dreams. I don’t remember much about them at all now. But you know what I do remember?” Her voice was calm and sweet – just like a 16-year-old girl’s voice should be. She put her hand on his cheek and firmly turned his face towards her. “I remember my big brother, sitting on my bed. He would hold me real tight in his arms.” She opened her arms around him and tried to envelope his chest in her small embrace. “And he’d rock me back and forth. He’d say, ‘ssh... we don’t want to wake mom!’ All the while he’d sing this little song to me. He never asked me what I dreamt about. He never told me it was silly or that it would be OK. He just held me and sang.” She held him tighter. She wasn’t going to tell him it was going to be OK either. She didn’t know if it was going to be OK. Maybe it would someday. But right now, his life was hell. And he hid it well.

Spring came to Illinois full of promise. Chris had just headed back to Korea. He decided to stay in the Army. Chip and Chris talked long nights away during his furlough. Chris wasn’t

ready to come back. It wasn't just what he did or had witnessed over there. He liked the discipline, the adventure. He was seriously thinking about making the military a career. Chris thought he might even look at going to college and getting a commission. With the war over the chances of him getting killed were close to nil. It was a safe job and he just couldn't think of coming back to some small town in the middle of nowhere. That was Chris the adventurous. Chris the brave.

Not at all like his older brother, Chip the homebody. Chip the ever dependable, just get it done and push on. Was he always like this?

His men had checked in a few times since they came home, though less frequently as time went on. They all seemed to be settling in to a normal life.

Caje had returned to work in his father's import business. He had already made a trip back to France to work out some new business deals. Saunders was awed. Who could have guessed that Caje was a college boy. Then again who knew anything about Caje other than the few details he shared about his sister and a dozen "dear john" letters? But with a degree in business from a local university, Caje was transitioning back into civilian life as a successful businessman.

"Sarge, sometimes it's hard. Sometimes I just want to go back out into the woods, like I did when I was a kid with my uncle. Sometimes the city life doesn't seem like it's a part of me anymore. But when I get back into the woods, like at my uncle's camp, I get to feeling like I need to constantly be on the look out for something... or someone," Caje sighed. "I don't think I'm ever gonna enjoy the outdoors again. Not if I keep thinking I need to look for krauts in every bush." Caje was quiet for a moment. "Sarge, if I can't go back to the woods and I don't like livin' in the city, where does that leave?"

Littlejohn had gone east and brought Billy Nelsen back home. Littlejohn had stayed at Billy's Iowa home for a few months over the winter helping Billy and his mom sell his dad's business. The Nelsons then moved out to Nebraska where they settled in Omaha, just an hour away from the Littlejohn's farm. The two mothers became quick friends in much the same way as their sons had bonded. Billy was attending the state university with an eye to being a teacher. He didn't think he could farm. And with his leg still weak from his wound, he didn't think he could take running a business on his own. Teaching seemed like a good idea, and with so many men coming home and sweeping up the available women, teachers were in short supply.



Even Kirby, the biggest screw up in the entire ETO was going to business school part time and learning the ropes of his uncle's bowling alley. He had big plans to branch out and build more bowling alleys. After all, guys needed a place to let off steam after work. Well at least, William G. did. And bowling alleys, with well-stocked bars seemed like a great fit – both for the clientele as well as for Kirby himself.

Spring left quickly and summer was flying by. Louise had graduated from high school and was heading off to nursing school in Rockford, over a hundred miles away. St Anthony's Nursing School was pretty well known in Illinois, but why she couldn't go somewhere closer was beyond Chip's understanding. His mother chastised him as he needed Louise to look for a college closer to home.

"Let her be, Chip. Everyone needs to move on at some point."

Yeah – even his mom had pretty much moved on. With the influx of men returning home from overseas, the female population of the state was becoming less available to traditional female jobs. His mom had been working part time at a doctor's office in Colonna as a receptionist during the war years. Now they convinced her to come on full time as they had lost most of their help to marriages. Everyone seemed to be moving on but him. He stayed glued to his little cliff afraid that any wrong move would send him crashing further down its steep slope, maybe to the same veteran's hospital that Greg Bittner ended up in.

*But still they lead me back To the long winding road
You left me standing here A long long time ago
Dont leave me waiting here Lead me to your door*

"Louise!" his mom said, with exasperation, "Please – he's going to get you to school! Now stop your worrying. He said he'd take you and Alice - and he will. Your brother has never let you down!"

Right, thought Louise as she sulked. Like not writing me for four years. That didn't let me down.

"Mom, you know he doesn't want me to go!"

"Yes, dear. I know. But if your brother tells you he's going to do something, you know he will."

Mae Saunders looked at Louise. She understood her daughter's concerns. Her son just wasn't settling in well. To the outsider, he seemed fine. But underneath she could sense a fear lingering in him. A fear and a dread of moving on. She just didn't know what to do about it.

"Now get the table set. He'll be down in a moment, and I'm ready to get dinner on the table."

The phone rang.

"I'll get it!" yelled Louise, fairly skipping out of the kitchen, without taking down any dishes for dinner. Mae looked at her and sighed. It had to be Louise's friend Alice, no one else would call at the dinner hour. She shook her head. Having the two of them at a school a hundred miles away was a bit unnerving. But they were almost women. They needed to be given the chance to spread their wings. Mae smiled. She expected the sisters at the nursing school would keep a pretty firm hand on Alice and Louise. There was really nothing she nor Chip needed to worry about.

"Chip!" Louise yelled. "It's for you! Chip!"

Chip came down the steps quickly and quietly. She wondered how he did that. She could never fly down those steps without sounding like a horse on stampede. She handed him the phone and then just stood there.

He glared at her and then smiled.

"Hello?"

"Sergeant Saunders?" It was a female voice, that seemed familiar, but he couldn't place it.

"Yeah."

"Still as talkative as ever," the female voice said dryly. Chip was suddenly excited – but he couldn't figure out why.

"Yeah."

"Oh my God! Will you ever make it at any parties!" The voice was laughing.

"Do I know you?" His tone was harsh with the annoyance he felt at the game the caller was playing with him.

"Well, yeah. But I guess you don't remember me." The voice paused for second. "It's just so good to hear your voice, what little there is and.... to know that you're alive and safe." The voice began to crack with emotion, like it was about to cry. Then the voice continued, "I saw Kirby at a show last week and he gave me your number. I owe you an evening – at least a dinner. It's OK I called, isn't it? He said you weren't married..." The voice trailed off in a question.

"No I'm not married." He growled. "Who is this?"

"Well that is the voice of yours that I'm most familiar with." The voice was upbeat again. "Sarge, it's Laine Morris. I thought I had left a bigger impression on you. Most men don't forget me that easily."

His knees got weak and he sat down with a thud in the chair next to the phone table. Louise looked at him with concern – was he sick? Maybe something had happened to one of his buddies?

"Laine Morris." He said to himself, but out loud.

"Yes"

He pulled himself together. My God when had they met? He had tried to forget so many things. He never thought this woman – a woman who could have any man, any day she wanted, would remember him, much less her offer of getting together.

"I forgot..." He paused. Right, Saunders, that's the first thing you should tell a woman! Obviously observing Hanley hadn't helped much.

"You forgot me?! Saunders, you really don't have any conversational skills. Have you even been out on a date since you came back?"

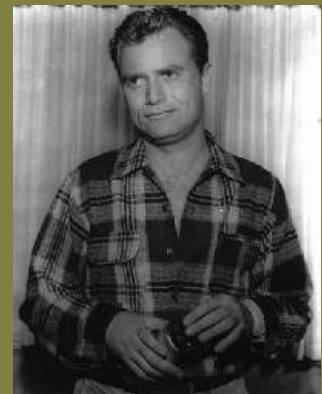
He laughed out loud. Everything came back. The anger over finding her out there alone. The frustration with a mission gone from bad to worse. The fear that he was going to lose his men ... and her. The great relief finding himself back safely, with his men, and her, in his arms. Why did he try to forget this?

"Sarge?"

"Yeah, Miss Morris?"

"No, we are not going to start the Miss Morris thing. Um, Saunders, if you don't want to go out to dinner with me, it's OK."

"No. No. Dinner would be great. You just caught me by surprise. I..."



"Great" She said – not wanting to get into a conversation that was best left to be spoken one on one. "I'm in Davenport for a show in two weeks. Given me your address and I'll send a car to pick you up. I know you're somewhere near Moline – but that's all Kirby could tell me."

His heart sank. "Can't"

"Can't?"

"Can't", he said again as he let out a breath he didn't realize he had been holding. "I'm taking my sister up to school in Rockford then. Can I get a rain check?"

"Where in Rockford?"

"A nursing school. St Anthony's"

Well, she thought, at least he's not lying to me about the reason. There is a nursing school in Rockford by that name. This might work out better than she thought.

"You really never listened to me on our little stroll through France, did you?"

Sunders felt as if he was getting set up. What this line of questioning had to do with setting up a date for dinner, he couldn't imagine.

"I was a little busy trying to keep us from getting killed." He winced – Louise was still next to him looking at him with a mix of confusion and girlish mirth. He'd take care of her later.

"Well, if you had been listening, instead of scowling every time you looked my way, you would have heard me tell you that I was from Illinois as well. Rockford, to be specific."

Chip smiled. This *actually* might work out.

"How long will you be in Rockford?" she continued.

"Just a day or two to get Louise and her friend Alice settled in. Then my plan was to take a few days off and go fishing along the upper parts of the Rock. But I can shift that if you'll be up in Rockford then." His insides felt tight. He hadn't had this much trouble talking to a girl since he was in high school. But then, this wasn't just any girl, now, was she?

"That'll work, Sarge! Let me give you my dad's number. I'll be staying with my family. Call me when you're available and we'll hook up."

They talked a few more minutes and then said their good byes.

"Sarge?"

"Yeah, Miss Morr... Laine."

"Well, I'm not quite sure how to say it...Thanks for getting me home." She took a deep breath. "Well, I guess I'll see you in a few weeks!"

He got up from the chair feeling a surge of energy, which abruptly smashed into Louise with her arms folded.

"Laine Morris? You are on a first name basis with Laine Morris!" these words were very punctuated. "THE Laine Morris, the singer?" She glared at him as he nodded, and he was suddenly feeling a bit sheepish. Where did she get that ability to project that anger? "A year you have been home and you never told me you met Laine Morris in person!!! Do you know what that knowledge would have done for my social standing?" She took a breath before continuing, trying to calm her voice. "Okay. You don't want to talk about the war. Don't want to talk about what you did. OK. I got that. But Laine Morris!!! What could she possibly have to do

with anything so terrible?" Louise was nearly shouting at the end of her tirade. Breathless, she started at him with daggers in her eyes.

He sighed. He could feel the cliff face again, slippery and loose. Yet when he looked at Louise, he knew it was time to stop the slide. Yeah, he was still on that rock face, and he still felt vulnerable. He suddenly had the energy and the confidence to try making an ascent.

Chip put his hand on her shoulder. "Come on. Let's get some dinner and I'll tell you." With that he walked into the kitchen and sat down. Louise followed after him. Was he serious?

He kept his word and told them the entire story. Finding Laine with the dead officer. He told them about being behind enemy lines with no food, ammunition or water. He was honest about not being entirely happy with the thought of having Laine along. At this, Louise snorted.

"You're telling me you found a beautiful woman, in the middle of nowhere, alone, and you guys didn't want to be with her? Mom – make him tell the truth!"

Mae looked from Louise to Chip and back again. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear this story. Chip was too serious. She just had a bad feeling about it.

"Louise, you need to understand my first job was to get my men back safe. That was my priority every day. I would do anything and everything to complete my mission and to save their lives." His hand was gesturing at her. "Miss Morris was a liability," he said flatly. Chip realized he was getting into his sergeant mode, so he dropped his arm and leaned back into the chair. After chewing on a chunk of ham, he added, "She turned out to be a darn good soldier!" Louise looked as if she didn't believe the whole story.

Chip went on to explain how Laine dirtied her dress to blend in with the woods and wore Caje's cap to cover her hair. He described how she helped a wounded Kirby walk for miles and in the end how she carried the BAR so that Caje could help him. He glossed around his capture by the Germans and their roughing him up. After all, was that really germane to the story?

"So that's where you got one of those Purple Hearts." Louise said in a low, almost reverent voice.

"Yeah. But it wasn't much of a wound really. It's just that we had to push on so I lost a little blood. Makes you tired, ya know? You've given blood in high school haven't you?" She nodded. "A couple days in the field hospital and I was back out on patrol." Well maybe more than a few days, a few weeks, but that was pretty close to the truth.



The next two weeks were a blur of activity. Packing up Alice and Louise and getting their boxes to the minimum that would fit in his car was tough. After all, he needed a little bit of room for his fly-fishing gear and his own small bag of clothes. When his mother got the gist that he was to go out to dinner with Laine Morris, she insisted he also bring a suit.

"Certainly you're not going to bring her someplace where you wouldn't wear a suit?"

"Mom, I'm not bringing her anywhere." He replied, "She owes me dinner."

His mother's jaw dropped. What was wrong with this generation? A woman asking a man out for dinner? What next? Women asking men to marry them? She supposed a woman in Laine's profession had to be bold, but certainly there were limits even for performers.

Chip saw the disapproval on his mother's face. Why was it so important that his mom liked Laine Morris? He would likely as not see her again after their night out. He wasn't going out to get married? Just to see ... see what? Well, like an army buddy. His mom just didn't understand. Laine had been there. She was one of the brothers. She had faced the terror with them and had made it out alive. She understood the fear.

It took hours to unload the car and set up Louise and Alice's room at the school. The unloading was quick. But they fussed and fussed with their room. For the second day now, Chip waited outside the dormitory reading a book on a bench on the school grounds as the girls unpacked, arranged class schedules, re-arranged their room, and met new friends. He liked this school. This looked more like an upper grades boarding school than a university. He looked at his watch. Those girls were going to want dinner before long and this was his last night here. Tomorrow he would head out to camp along the river and go fishing. Louise and Alice had begged the entire trip up to Rockford that he introduce them to Laine while he was here. He walked back inside the dormitory and found the payphone booth. He found himself beginning to get the jitters as he dialed the number Laine had given him.

A male voice answered the phone.

"Hello, this is..." he hesitated, "Chip Saunders. May I speak to Laine Morris please?"

"Hold one."

It took but a moment. "Sarge?"

"Yeah."

"OK, now I know it's you because of the wordy responses."

After taking another minute of her mild ribbing he asked her to join them for dinner. He had been in the car with the girls for almost four hours the day before and it had been worse than any patrol in enemy territory. He didn't think he could survive dinner without something taking their mind off him. Laine agreed. She'd be ready when he got to her house.

As he pulled into a long driveway that led up to a large brick house he was reminded of England. The front lawn was a forest of old trees with a high canopy that gave the yard an English country home look. He had seen several homes like that in England when he had been recuperating there before Normandy. An older, dark haired man was fussing with what seemed to be a dying rose bush.

"Can I help you, young man?" The gentleman walked over, still engrossed in a branch from the rose bush. "I can't seem to get anything to grow in this yard." It was a flat statement.

"I'm here to pick up Miss Morris." Chip said.

"Which one?"

At Chip's obvious confusion the gentleman smiled. "We have several Miss Morris's. They're all quite charming. Come on in and pick one," he said with a wink.

Inside the house was a large foyer with a wide staircase leading to the upper floor of the house. Chip could hear the screams and high-pitched giggles of several girls coming from upstairs. He cringed. It was like being in the car with Alice and Louise all over again.

"Yes, well you get used to the noise eventually." The gentleman remarked. "So they tell me. I'm not sure, it's only been 20 some years..."

A teen-age girl came sliding down the stair banister shrieking and laughing at the top of her lungs.

"Sarah Beth, "the gentleman said, without changing his calm, almost monotone voice, "would you kindly fly back up the stairs and get Elaine Marie. I believe this gentleman is waiting on her."

"Sure, Pops!" and the young woman ran back up the stairs yelling at the top of her lungs, "Lame Brain... someone's here!"

"Did I guess correctly that you're here for Elaine?"

"Yes, sir." Chip turned and extended his hand. "Chip Saunders. I knew your ... daughter?"

"Oh yes, they're all mine" The older man said with a smile and a sigh. "Keeps you young, you know. Having lots of children. Especially of the female variety."

Chip laughed. "Yeah, my mom says the same thing. About kids, I mean."

"I apologize I didn't introduce myself earlier. I always get so involved with those silly rose bushes. And for what? They never thrive. Oh, they grow an inch or two before they turn brown." The man paused again and looked at Chip. "Jack Morris. You must be 'the Sergeant'."

"I was a sergeant, yes sir."

" But are you '*the* Sergeant'?"

"I guess I don't understand, sir."

"Are you one of the young men that Laine claims rescued her from the Germans?"

Chip ran his hand thru his hair, and even though he kept it short now that he could get to a barber, it still stuck out in a multiple of directions at the slightest touch. "Yes sir" What did she tell them? "My squad, well part of my squad, we found her and escorted her back to our lines."

"A walk in the park, eh?" The old man turned as the teenager returned sliding down the banister again, this time with Laine following quickly behind – both girls laughing and squealing.

"Sarge!"

Chip looked at her and couldn't decide if he should laugh or run. Here came a grown woman sliding down the banister screaming with laughter. What did he get himself into? She threw her arms around him and held him tight for a moment. Chip, arms held out straight from his sides, looked over to her father with a wide-eyed and apologetic look on his face. He hadn't *touched* his daughter... But the gentleman was smiling and walking away. "She's all yours, young man." With that, the elder Morris went outside and began conversing with the ungrateful rose bushes.

Chip spent the next several hours a slight shade of red and looking for cover. Somehow the wisdom of inviting Laine to meet his two other female charges didn't seem like such a smart idea now that he thought it through. He was taking incoming from all sides. He had finished his dinner and dessert and was working on his fourth cup of coffee before the girls had decided that they were done with their food. Their plates didn't look like they were half eaten. After dropping off the girls at the dormitory and saying his last good byes, he brought Laine home.

"Care to come in for a cup of coffee?" she asked.

He had already had three too many cups of coffee that night. And the last time he was in this house, it was a mad house. First the drive up here, then dinner... Could he take another hour of abuse? "Ok, if it's not too much trouble."

"Trust me, I wouldn't have offered if it was."

He suddenly felt intimidated. He rolled his shoulders and followed behind her. Did she want him here or not? Laine led him around to the yard behind the house. Again the entire scene reminded him of England and the gardens the Brits attempted to keep even through air raids and falling debris.

"Pops is out back." Laine explained. "He reads a book back there every night. It's very peaceful. We have a little screen porch that's just like a comfy parlor. It'll only take me a few minutes to make the coffee. Pops will keep you company."

She left him sitting with her father, chatting the usual polite dialogue. But that dialogue began to change as she walked back into the house.

"How are you settling in?" The elder Morris asked.

"Settling in, sir?"

"Yes. You know, getting used to being a civilian again." Jack looked at him with a sadness he hadn't noticed before. "Laine said you had been overseas for several years."

"Well, including Africa and Italy, yeah, almost four years."

"Much longer than I spent." The older man paused. "Don't talk about it much here, you know - they don't quite understand it. I was there about a year – in the Great War." Jack paused. Then, as if he was just adding another sentence to the same topic, he said, "I remember the fear mostly. And the first time I messed my drawers. Can't forget that."

Saunders stopped breathing. The rock face was shifting. Streams of rock tumbled down onto him. His stomach knotted in fear.

"I guess you never had that experience. Laine says..."

Saunders never heard the rest. His mind raced back to Algiers and Tunisia. The sound was intense. He remembered at some point he just couldn't hear it anymore. And then he had lost it. "Happens all the time," said his sergeant. "Get over it and aim at that sand hill over there."

He heard his voice before he knew it was himself talking. "In Tunisia. Never had seen anythin' like it. So intense." His voice was odd – like a scared kid's. He wrung his hands. "No one ever told me..." There wasn't anybody alive that knew this about the invincible Sergeant Saunders, so why was he telling this man?

Laine came around the corner with a tray of coffee and cookies. It would be good to sit with the Sarge – with Chip. She smiled. How long had she waited for this? She hoped she didn't screw it up. She pulled up suddenly at the entry to the porch. Laine heard their voices. Something wasn't right. The two men were talking in hushed tones. She felt like she was eavesdropping. As she peeked around the corner she could see the two men, with their heads together, talking intensely with each other. One nodding as the other talked.

Fear crept down her spine. It was as if she had walked in on someone's confession. But whose? She went back into the kitchen and sat down. "What the hell is going on?" she said to herself. She couldn't shake the chill from what she had witnessed. But then, really, what had she just seen? Two men talking? About what? She shook herself head to toe. They were probably just sharing secrets about bookies. What else would men talk about?

As she came back with fresh coffee she could hear her father's laugh. They were talking like they were two old buddies that met every day for a cup of joe. Was this her father?

"Great name for the club!" her father's voice had real mirth in it – not the reserved, make the best of it tone she usually heard. "Do you think any one else would fess up?"

"Unlikely," replied Saunders with a snort. His voice reflected a sense of calm she hadn't noticed before. Maybe it wasn't there before either?

"You two ready for coffee?" Her voice did not betray what she had witnessed earlier.

She sat down with them and shared a cup of coffee and her sister's peanut butter cookies. It seemed like the two men had found some common ground and formed a bond that she couldn't understand. They were more relaxed with each other – like...like old war buddies. It reminded her of when she had visited Saunders in the field hospital after they had returned to the American lines. He was so relaxed with his own men.

Saunders stood up to leave, "Well, I best be going if I'm going to be back here in the morning to get you early."

"Get whom early?" said Laine, a bit surprised.

"Me."

"Pops?"

"Jack an... I mean your father and I are gonna go fishin' up the Rock River. Just for the day. I'll have him back by night."

She looked from Saunders to her father, "Pops, you don't fish..." Did he?

"A long time ago, before your mother pas... Well a long time ago. And Chip has been gracious enough to allow me to tag along." Her father seemed genuinely excited. "I'll have to get up in the attic and get my rods. Been so long you know." He paused and looked at Laine. "And Laine – I won't be around when Tammy gets here in the morning. Have her set up the guesthouse for Chip. He's going to stay a few days here with us while we take in a couple of streams that might be of interest." Her mouth was open. What had happened in the twenty minutes it took her to make coffee? "Laine, would you mind walking Chip out? I really do need to search the attic!"

For the next few days, Chip Saunders and her father disappeared into the back woods of upper Illinois. They left early in the morning when it was dark and returned home only after it was dark again. Laine spent those same days on the phone with agents and studios from out west lining up a contract deal for the spring. She would have to leave for California soon after the holidays this winter.

Somewhere between the fishing trips she wiggled out a few hours to take Chip out for the evening as she had planned. He escorted her to a local charity benefit where she sang and entertained. Afterwards, a few men came up to her who had seen her perform in Europe and thanked her for being there. It was a touch of home when they needed it most. Then she and Chip walked down to the local fancy restaurant and had a quiet dinner. She pulled out of him everything she could about his home, what he did as a child, what his parents were like. Slowly she began to understand the depth of his personality. His squad had been an extension of the responsibility he had for his family. And she, in that one day, had been a part of that squad.

When they got back to the house she suggested they go to the guesthouse for coffee where they could have a little more time to themselves before he left in the morning. As he walked her into the house, she held his arm, and then as natural as anything, turned to him and put her arms around him as he closed the door.

"Must you go so soon?"

"I've been here a week. I've got to go back to work eventually."

She put her head on his chest. Her hands felt his sides, then his back. She pulled herself closer, pressing herself up against him. He took her face in his rough hands and kissed her passionately. She felt him breathe deeply and then pushed her back a ways.

"We're not doing this."

"But you're leaving and I may never see you again." She snuggled back up to him. "I need you."

She could see he was wavering - reconsidering his stance. But Chip the man took a step back and the Sarge came out in front. "No."

"Laine" the hand came up and began to gesture, then he turned away and began to pace as he talked. "When I... If I... God, it's not like after a long battle where you just need to be with someone!" He took a deep breath. "Laine, I want it to be permanent. If I go to... to bed with you, it's gonna be because I'm .. I'm gonna be the only one you're gonna ... Well, I'm gonna be the one you stay with... forever." He smiled at her "And I want a lot of kids. So you had better think about that." One hand combed through his hair, while the other searched his pockets for a pack of smokes that wasn't there. "Laine, I had a real good time up here. And you are a beautiful woman. I don't mean just how you look. It's how you act with your sisters... and mine... and the way you treat your dad with respect and" He looked up at her from across the room. "Laine, I'm not right..."



He stood silent, looking out into nowhere. After a moment, she prompted, "You're not right about what?"

"I'm not... home yet, I guess. Talking to your dad really helped. I wish I could have met him a year ago. He ... he ... well, we saw some of the same things.... It's kind of the same you see?"

She didn't see. She was confused and this man was not making sense. It seemed like he felt the same way about her as she felt about him. What was all this not being home stuff? He didn't want to live in Rockford?

"You don't want to be with me?"

"No." She could see he was trying to get it formulated in his own mind. "No, that's not it. Well, yeah, it's kinda ..." She heard him swear under his breath. He had that look of frustration she had seen when she first met him. "I need to work things out. Then I can.... Then I can be ... maybe something for some... woman." She heard him suck in a long breath of air. "Laine, I'm just so scared... and confused..."

Her insides went cold. What was he trying to tell her? This man didn't get scared. This man was invincible. This man had been the rock that got everyone home. She looked at him intently. He was standing with his back to her, hands in his pockets, looking at the floor. She came around to him, took his hands in hers and made him face her. There was deep pain evident in the lines on his face. His eyes were glassy. Had he carried so much to get his men home, to get her home, that he had lost himself? She had waited almost two years to see him again. Had this been a waste of time?

The more she looked into those blue eyes, the more she knew what was right. He needed her now more than ever. But not the way she thought. Not the way she had wanted.

"So, do I wait?"

He looked at the floor and nodded. He croaked out, "I'll write you?"

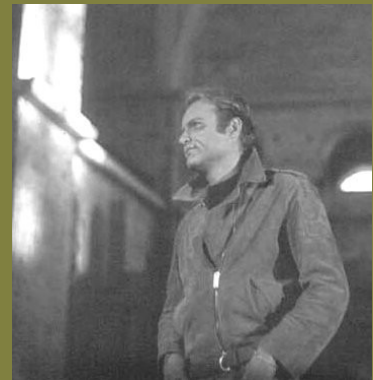
Her snort broke the tension in the room. "Your reputation precedes you. And I will be performing in about a dozen towns in the next three months. How about I call you? Maybe on Saturday mornings?"

He nodded. How did he to explain to his mom why a woman was calling him every week?

*But still they lead me back To the long winding road
You left me standing here A long long time ago
Dont leave me waiting here Lead me to your door*

He loved to sit and watch the waves. This cliff was just like back at home. He could sit here for hours and just get lost in sounds of the waves, the smell of the ocean breathing and the wind cooling him off. And this cliff was solid. Solid like a rock, just like the ones back home. He looked up for her. She was standing there with the children, her blond hair not so blond, but still as beautiful as the day he met her. She'd be beautiful any day and in anything. Whether it was dripping with mud in the middle of France, on stage in sequins and satin, after birthing their most difficult child or after the mastectomy. She was beautiful.

His thoughts returned to their wedding. It had been simple, with no time for a honeymoon. They spent a few days with their families and then traversed the country to California. She went to work in film; he went to school. And then the kids started coming. Their own platoon, as one of the middle ones liked to call it. His career had been strange. He started out as a high school history teacher and baseball coach. Then his students started returning from Korea. That's when he realized that he needed to expand the club he and Grandpop Jack had formed among themselves. No one had told these kids what combat was really like. No one told them how they would feel. What their bodies would do to them; what tricks their minds would pull on them.



But Grandpop Jack and he knew. They had learned the hard way.

So Coach Saunders sat down with the kids that came to see him before they left for overseas and had a little talk with them about the *messy pants club*. It was real and it was OK. The coach talked to them about the loss of hearing and the dire need to be with a woman after a long battle. They laughed at him, and then wrote him a few months later on how right he was. No one's father ever came back from the war and told them how scared they were. No one ever told them how much your body would desert you in the worst of times. No one had told them how guilty you could feel for surviving! The ones he didn't get to before they left, he sought out when they came home.

The coach felt he needed to do more for these kids – his kids, his team. Never one to leave a mission uncompleted, Saunders went back to school. He made understanding the act

of combat his passion. And so Chip Saunders the coach and history teacher became that strange professor down the hall that had the uniformed people showing up at his office all the time. As part of his transition from coach to doctoral candidate, Saunders dropped the name his uncles and father had given him as a young child, and took on the name his mother gave him at birth. But John had such a formal sound. His thoughts turned to Grandpop Jack, the man that stopped his slide into oblivion with that simple knowledge that Saunders wasn't a nut case. He could feel Grandpop smiling at him from heaven.

So Dr. Jack became a regular at VFW halls and VA Hospitals, police banquets and community debriefs. Wherever people needed to come to terms with a violent act or sudden disaster, Dr. Saunders made himself available. Saunders laughed at himself. In his transition from Saunders the sergeant to Chip the coach and then Jack the professor of psychology, had he really learned anything? For all he knew about the subject of combat stress, for all the people that sought him out for help, how much of it had he allowed to penetrate himself?

It took almost 50 years before he had the guts to try and deal with the ghosts he had left behind in Africa, Italy and Europe. And so here they were. The most beautiful woman in the world had insisted they go. That *he* go. And there just wasn't anything he wouldn't do for her.

The couple toured Algeria and Tunisia. And while none of the bars he had hung out at were still there, the battlefields didn't look much different, except that the bodies and body parts no longer littered the sand and palm groves. As he walked, he talked to ghosts and acknowledged his guilt for living, but he didn't wait for a response from the dead.

Italy was much worse. They started in Rome, visited San Pietro and then drove to Anzio. So many villages had portions of the town you could tell had been hard hit during the war years. Many had modern structures that he knew had been built because the Americans and the Germans had demolished what had been there. Both forces had obliterated the towns right off the map.

On the beach at Anzio, he took Laine's hand and walked down to the waters edge.

"This is just about where I became a two time member of the messy pants club." He laughed. But it was not his deep jovial laugh. It was sad. "Luckily I was still wet from the landing, so no one really noticed. We were too busy trying not to get shelled on." He walked a way a bit and mumbled, shaking his head "What a mess." How many times had he been one of the few survivors? He was lucky he hadn't been put in the crazy divisions.

Laine's response was to walk up to him and hold his hand tighter.

From Rome they flew into Frankfurt. Then they drove down south of Stuttgart, almost to Switzerland. Though he had never gone to Zurich as part of the campaign, they decided you couldn't be this close and not visit. His eyes told her that he needed a breather. Just a short R&R he told her. The next part of their journey would be the roughest. He knew whom he needed to visit in order to move on. The more he dwelled on the visit, the looser the rock on that crumbling cliff got.

They began the drive through the German, Belgian and French towns, farms and forests that he had helped destroy. Everything he had tried to forget for 50 years came flooding back to him. Every battlefield he stood on pelted his mind with snippets of memories – like a storm of rock streaming off a disintegrating cliff. Fear gripped him, as he realized he couldn't stop the memories once they started rolling back to him.

Saunders could hear the incoming shells – but he never really heard his own gun go off. He could hear Caje's peashooter and the roar of Kirby's BAR – but the actual explosions from 88 and 105 shells were dim to his mind. One thing he couldn't forget was the bite of the

shrapnel. He knew in his head that this was the effect of extreme stress on the body. He had done multiple dissertations on it. But it didn't make it any easier to remember or come to terms with.

A week later, they were near St Lo. The closer they got, the less he ate, the more he drank, the more his stomach tied into knots. A couple of his sons had joined them. Each one claiming they needed to be there. Each one worried about their father making this trip back through his own history – not really knowing where their father was going or why.

Saunders had made sure they would never have to take a trip like this themselves. Each son and daughter had been indoctrinated into the messy pants club. They may not have all been true blue members, but they knew what it took to gain entry. In his mind he replayed their introduction to the club.

Joey had been the experiment. Aren't all first children? Paul sat and listened while Grandpop Jack and he talked to Joey about the "entrance requirements". When it would happen; what to do. As if on a schedule, Joey's letter came home from Southeast Asia about two months after he had left. "Joined the club today, dad. Man, I never saw nuthin'..."

Paul was indoctrinated next and his two younger brothers listened as he was given the charge. And when son number three's time came, it was easier. "Yeah, yeah, Pops. Just tell me so I can catch my train. If I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna do it big!" Why did his wife have to name this child, ANY child, after the biggest screw-up in the entire ETO? What kind of good impression could Kirby leave on any woman he had been left alone with for more than an hour? That was a secret that he was sure to go to the grave never understanding.

By the time it came to number six child, it was just a family tradition. And when number six child came back with his story, his mother laughed so hard she re-joined the club. But then it had been Grady. This one his wife had named correctly. Gregarious, adventurous, and no fear. He didn't join the military like the first four. No, he was a bum. A white water river guide in the spring and summer; a ski instructor the rest of the year. "Man, I knew I was going to be dead, and I was waiting for that loss of sphincter control, you know dad?" He looked at his father with a smile. "But it all happened at once. I don't know if was me getting the paddle loose or me being so scared that I lost that load in my trunks. But I did get that hydraulic to let me loose." Young Chip's response was deadpanned. "Floaters or sinkers?" He wondered if his wife had joined the club because of laughing at Grady or shocked at her baby?

They finally had come to the little French town that held so much pain for him. Young Chip and Grady both were there. They watched their dad climb the little hill to the abandoned cemetery. True to graves registrations word, they had gotten a marker out there. When his sons saw him fall to the ground, they ran up the hill, only to find him sobbing and ranting at the grave marker. He hadn't told him why he was coming here. The boys had thought it was just another one of the thousand of skirmishes he had fought.

"I didn't mean to live, Grady." Saunders sobbed. "I know you'd look at me crossways now, but ... you got to understand... I didn't mean to forget you. I just couldn't go on. Then I killed Delaney. Should have stood him up out there without a rifle and pulled the trigger myself. Didn't want to lose Kirby after losing you. When Delaney got it, I just shut you out. I wasn't goin' ta remember...I didn't want to feel any more." The old man just mumbled and let the tears flow – ignoring the sons behind him.

Grady L. Saunders turned a little pale as he read the grave marker. His dad had never told anything but fun stories about Grady Long. While Grady knew that his namesake was dead, he had never understood just what Grady Long had meant to his father, or what the

former Grady had cost his dad. Grady turned to his younger brother. "You best stay, I'll go help mom up."

Jack thought he should have been embarrassed carrying on in front of his sons as he had; but he wasn't. When he stood up after a half an hour in tears, his beautiful bride took him in her arms and kissed him. He looked at her and shook his head "Why couldn't I have done it sooner?"

*But still they lead me back To the long winding road
You left me standing here A long long time ago
Don't leave me waiting here Lead me to your door*

"Grandpop!" the voice was insistent and high pitched. "Grandpop, you gotta wake up because Gramma says so!"

He opened his eyes and looked at the child. "I guess my opinion don't count, right?"

"Right." The little blond-haired child said, with a 1000-watt smile. She held out her hand to help the older man up.

"Jack!"

Uh-oh he thought, here comes the battle-axe!

"Jack – it's getting late. And you need a jacket! You're going to catch a cold and not be able to be at the re-enactment."

Truth be told, he was not planning on going to the re-enactment. He just hadn't told anyone that yet. Why extend the pain of the retribution? He had crawled that damned trail once before, he wasn't doing it again. He wasn't watching it again. He had swum that ocean and it was damn cold in June - who in their right mind would want to do this? He didn't want to remember Theo bleeding to death or Cajé falling to pieces, Hanley confused on the beach or any other of the guys that he left behind bleeding, drowning or both. He had made his peace with his memories. He may not be able to give up all the guilt, but he had done OK over his life. He had a feeling that not even Delaney held him at fault.

She stood over him, hands on her hips. God, she was beautiful!

"Are you getting up or not?" she said with a voice that showed her displeasure at him being out in the evening air without what she considered enough clothing.

"Yeah," his eyes twinkled. "I'm gettin' up." He pulled himself out of his beach chair and folded it up. "Here." He handed it to the little one that had Grandpa wake up duty. "Bring this up to the house."

"Are you being fresh with me?" The hands were on her hips in mom mode.

When the little one was gone, he looked back at her. "I could be... I mean, we are married."

She smiled her own 1000-watt smile at him. "Well, you do look like you could use a nap before dinner..." She took his hand with a squeeze that said 'yes'.

They walked back toward the house they had rented for their visit. It was filled with children, grandchildren and spouses. Ten children. Ten. She named the boys; he named the girls. He had gotten off easy. There were only 2 girls. He chose the only names he could think of – his wife and sister. She had started out fine in the naming process, he thought, when she named their first boy after Joey, the brother he had lost at such a young age. But then she just got crazy. She tried to name the second boy Kirby and he wouldn't go for it. Why ruin the child's life with a name like that?



She did eventually talk to him again – they did have more children. And he learned how to say “yes dear.” Yet another time Grandpop Jack had saved his butt. Why did he ever confide in her about his nightmares? He often wondered if the children took on the personality of their namesake based on his conversations of past battles and good times? Each one was so like their namesake and yet, they were so unique. They all had blond hair and blue or green eyes. Except for the one that looked like Grandpop Jack. He had dark brown hair but his mother's eyes and thin build.

It was after that one's birth, and his wife's insistence on the name, that Jack began his quest to find the Lieutenant. It took a few years, for he had never really talked to Hanley about where he lived, his family or life before the war. They talked about dames and smokes and field manuals. How smart was that? If Saunders was having problems and didn't have anyone to talk to, what the hell was Hanley doing? Chip had realized in his doctoral thesis that the guys that talked a lot after battles did the best when they came home. Somehow they could work it out right after the event and remain sane. Who would have ever thought that Kirby's constant chattering was healthy for someone's mental welfare? He couldn't recall it ever being healthy for his mental state. Just the opposite - like fingernails on glass. Doc, Littlejohn and Billy – they always were talking about what went on, right or wrong – who did what. Caje, not so much. But Caje had the benefit of their conversations. He didn't. He was the NCO – he had to hang back a bit. And so many times there was no down time for him. He was caught between Hanley's orders and trying to take the burden off his men. If he was almost crazy, what had it been like for Hanley? Did he talk to Jampel? Likely not.

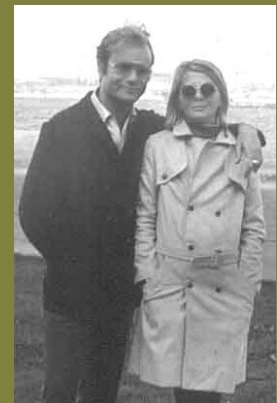
After meeting with Hanley the healing process had gone a little farther down the road for both of them. All this because his wife had insisted on the name of Gilbert for her son. Who the heck named anyone Gilbert anymore? Not a dog, much less a poor child. But the name fit him. And young Gil was apprenticing at his “uncle's” architecture firm in Connecticut. He stole a glance at his wife with a mix of awe and suspicion. How did that woman know these things?

Half way to the house, he pulled her to him. His arms wrapped around her and he gave her a long, passionate kiss... and he held her tight. God he loved this woman – even if she named these kids so that he could never get away from his memories. Maybe she had done that on purpose?

“Honestly, Jack” she giggled “you can't wait another ten minutes?”

He swallowed his emotion, smiled and took her hand as they began to walk again.

“Laine?”



“Hmm,” she said, thinking about their upcoming nap. She smiled at him with her own twinkle in her eyes and put her arm around his waist, snuggling up to him as they walked.

“Thanks for getting me home.”

The End