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The Hero

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The Hero

I can tell the minute I get in the door and drop my bag, I'm not staying. The familiar smell of home accosts my nose and makes my eyes water. Maybe if I shut my eyes I can try and believe that nothing has changed, that there has been no war, and that I had never left. Instead, I see a strange face that looks back at me from the hallway mirror; it is a face that doesn't belong. Suddenly I am forty-six with grey hair, a man older than I had ever imagined I could be.

The stale silence is suddenly broken by a large intrusive crowd of welcoming family members. They had been loyal with constant letters, but now, nonetheless, they are unfamiliar to me and, at the moment, an unavoidable nuisance. There are hands everywhere that are reaching out for me. They are patting my back, rubbing my arms, pumping my hands, hugging me tightly, and lips which are constantly kissing my cheeks. Foolishly, they believe that their tender words and affections can dim the memories of the cold and the fear of those lonely nights in the foxhole.

My shock is ignored. Somehow my bags are taken away and I am ushered inside. The furniture, the arrangement of pictures, it is all very familiar. They are so close to me, finally just an arm's length away. Terror seizes my heart, I am afraid that if I try to touch any of them they will all disappear. I will simply wake to find myself in another dream in a place far from home. Unlike the other dreams about my homecoming, this one is not happy and perfect; rather, it is unsettling and distressing.

I am welcomed with a hero's welcome, what a laugh. What do they know? What would they think if they knew that I had often sat in dark corners, alone, hungry and crying for my salvation? Me, their fearless husband, father, or whoever I am. The fact is sometimes I would have killed anyone for food and freedom; it could have been anyone, even them. They knew nothing about fear and hardship as they live their comfortable lives in the wonderful penthouse on Park Avenue that I had worked so hard to give them. My stomach begins to reel, and I feel like I am going to be sick. The smile that is glued on my lips disguises the distaste that I am feeling. My family has become a bunch of naive strangers. Oddly enough that is all they are now, strangers who used to belong to another man from another lifetime.

He was a Republican, a dutiful son, a loving husband, a cherished father, and a respected stockbroker on Wall Street who once had the world in the palm of his hands. I return now to that same man's house to find his spirit crushed, his children grown, his father dead, and his wife only a shadow of the woman she used to be.

I can't take it; I quickly escape to the bathroom. I am sick. I splash some cold water on my face and catch my breath. I can hear their endless chatter through the walls, and I find myself longing for the quiet of the jungle. I finally reappear and head directly for the bar. I am able to down several scotches on the rocks before I am rediscovered by my predators. They hover, crowd, and constrict me until I am saved by the dinner bell.

The meal is beautiful and Millie, the cook, gives me a quiet "Welcome home, Sir" that is accompanied by a gentle squeeze on my arm. I pick at my food, unaccustomed to such rich choices, finding myself unable to eat. She has prepared all my favorite foods that I used to yearn for: home-made mashed potatoes, asparagus with Hollandaise sauce, Filet Mignon with Bernaise sauce, and undoubtedly creme caramel for dessert. I take a gulp of the sweet red wine and almost choke. I can no longer handle such refinement. Slipping into the kitchen, I grab a Rolling Rock out of the fridge—even this is better quality beer than I'm used to. I never thought I would miss the cheap rice beer in those dark alley pubs in Vietnam. After a few minutes, I bravely return to the table. The dinner conversation is ridiculous. They are attempting to sum up all the gossip that I have missed while I was away, like I could give a damn. I plaster a smile on my face and drift from the conversation. I wonder where my lost platoon buddies are? How are they adjusting? My eyes grow misty at the thought of the men who were my family for so long. The tears in my eyes are misinterpreted by my wife. She grabs my hand tightly and refuses to let go, I suppose she thinks this is a comforting gesture.

Dinner passes and I am finally left to myself to remember and wander the house alone. I am deeply grateful for this time! Bed time rolls around, but I don't change. I look at my wife who is standing outside on the balcony looking up intently at the stars. She is motionless. I watch her closely from my secret hiding place. The wind gently blows her hair giving her a gold halo, the lights from the street give her skin a special glow, and above all the din and chaos of the city she waits. I lovingly go over every curve of her body and every wrinkle on her face. She is wearing a cream Victoria Secret's negligee similar to the one she wore on our honeymoon in Aruba. It is similar, but not the same. I realize that we are both lost. In her heart, she feels the same weight and confusion that I do.

I cross. I used to love this woman very much, somewhere inside me I probably still do, but that feeling is now buried beneath general feelings of betrayal, anger, hatred and the frustration of not being able to regain what once was. I slowly brush the hair off her face and feel the warmth of her soft skin. Deeply, I gaze into her eyes. There, I see the pain that she has been hiding. The years of not knowing and estrangement have taken their toll on her too. A single tear slips down her cheek before she nuzzles her head into my shoulder. She holds me tightly. All I can think about is the million times she begged me not to go. She had called me pig-headed, and she was right. I stroke her hair. It smells familiar. I wonder if she still uses the same shampoo.

I am no longer the man she remembers, and I will never, can never, be him again. I don't know where I'm going to go. There is no where for me to run, but I can't sit here and pretend that the world isn't falling apart. I have seen things no human being should ever see. Eyes, cold with death, stared up at me, begged me for help and all I could do was run. The brave American I thought I was, puffed up with my own sense of diplomatic duty...putting those commibastards back from where they came. I was wrong. We were wrong. In that horrible place, I discovered that I was weak— no weaker than any other

man, simply mortal. There was no room for this realization in my old life. I have to go somewhere so I could start fresh. As far as I am concerned, Arthur Wellington West III died over there in the line of duty. The man standing here now is Art West— a simple, average, middle-class Joe who does not belong in this penthouse or this life.

I release her frail body with care and give her a kiss on the forehead. Stepping backward, I look at her for the last time. I do a clipped pivot, just like I had done endlessly in the army, and walk away. I feel her eyes boring into my back. She knows there is no other way. It is better to leave with the pleasant memories we have than ruin everything we shared by trying fruitlessly to reconstruct the past. I breathe deeply and pick up my suitcase, leaving without a single word.

— Sara Sterling Ely '96