

Homecoming

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2005 It was a hot, gritty night. The kind you experience only on the high desert. The long, flat highway rolled-out ahead as would a path through a mountain meadow. Except that here the peaks were rising towers of mist, the valley, sand, wind-blown off the desert floor across which the blue/gray Navy hearse was forced to crawl at snail-speed. A cloud enshrouded full moon did little to help either, unless you're one of those strange souls for whom the spooky factor gets high marks. Under normal conditions it was just over an hour from the port of Long Beach to Point Mugu NAS but tonight, tonight they'd be lucky to get back much before midnight. Well the driver, a navy corpsman, would get back, Lt. Erickson was scheduled to accompany the body of the Marine in back all the way to Canton, Ohio. From the scuttlebutt the corpsman passed along there wasn't much left of the dead guy but a Marine was a Marine, no matter he'd fallen in battle over 40 years ago. And a Marine officer, even a recently commissioned mustang, is clear in his duty; pick up the decedent's remains at the port of debarkation and accompany them to the home of record for release to the next of kin. On his lap Lt. Erickson held a brown envelope containing the personal effects of the decedent. It was almost flat; a few Vietnamese coins, a set of dog tags on a badly rusted chain, and a second less tarnished chain that held the only really personal property, an old fashioned high school graduation ring. Despite protocol the lieutenant had peeked into the envelope before they left Long Beach. As a result he found himself wondering for perhaps the hundredth time how a Marine lance corporal had come by such a trinket and why he'd kept it on a gold chain around his neck in a war zone, through the rigors of combat. It was pretty obvious the damn old thing wasn't of any particular intrinsic value. The plating had worn-off every raised surface leaving the numerals 1-9-6-4 and the word S-E-N-I-O-R highlighted in reverse relief against a dirty, gilt background. "Must have meant something to Cpl. Snyder," the Lt. muttered under his breath. But not quite softly enough. "Sir?" the driver asked eagerly, though his traveling companion was unsure if the corpsman was curious or simply wanted to strike up a conversation. It'd been quiet for most of the trip, Lt. Erickson preferred it that way and ignored the query, just shaking his head idly. ~~~~~ The landing lights of the regional airport in Canton, Ohio were a welcome sight to Lt. Erickson when the Navy C-130 dropped below the cloud cover. Chicago, O'Hare it wasn't but Sam Erickson badly needed to make a piss call and some hot chow would be nice, too. Perhaps even a change of skivvies and some fresh class A's. Sometimes this officer shit got old he thought longing for the days of duty in BDU's and the unpretentiousness of the base EM club. So as soon as the casket was deplaned and placed safely inside the unimpressive air

terminal he went in search of the head, someplace to grab some breakfast, and a place to change. He hadn't eaten an actual meal since yesterday noon, before he left Pendleton, and though Canton didn't offer too much in the way of amenities this early, he was sure he'd find someplace. When he did it definitely wasn't much. One of those shiny metal places that look like a 50's travel trailer, designed inside with chrome and Naugahyde the shabby diner resembled an old fashioned railroad car. But at this time of day it was the only place open and the unshaven Marine didn't particularly want ambiance. And he didn't get it, what he did get was dingy counters and fly specked fluorescent lights, a salmon and turquoise color scheme straight out of 1956. Sam Erickson didn't care, they had coffee, he could smell it wafting above the rank odor of stale fryer grease and a general air of neglect and disuse. Then there was the requisite small town waitress, this one, no longer young, was the epitome of the victim-hood wrought by hard living. And although sitting on a counter stool until Sam's entry into her sanctum, the woman seemed stooped and bent even beyond life's not insignificant ability to prematurely bring the ravages of age to a woman. Her nerve endings seemed to have been cauterized by time, sadness was hard-wired into gray/green eyes that were notable only because they held-out no hope, only pain. No matter. She was Sam's sole link to the contents of the coffee urn and despite his initial aversion Sam's interest was piqued. The filthy, yellowed menu with 1970's prices should have been Sam's first clue. His eggs were limp, half cooked pools of salty slime, his toast seemed to have endured the ravages of a great flood, and not of butter. But the coffee was hot and strong, which was a blessing as the home fried potatoes tasted like and had the consistency of saw dust. Still, perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the awful meal was the enforced company of the crone that served Sam with his fare. It took the lieutenant awhile but finally he came to the realization that contrary to his first impression the woman's troubled eyes weren't simply reflections of anguish as much as they were the opaque mirrors of disappointment and it's handmaiden, discouragement. The waitress had a kind voice, though, and her abject apologies for the food's shortcomings seemed to have no end. Where at first he couldn't wait to get out of the place, away from his tormentor and the crap she brought him to eat, he soon found himself the author of a strange dichotomy where he actually craved her attention on some perverse level. So, as strangers convergent in time and place will do, they began to talk. Sam told the dowdy, small town waitress about his mission with regard to the remains of a fallen Marine he was accompanying home for burial. About the long night flight from California to Canton, Ohio just to return the badly decomposed body of man who'd lain in the open, dead since the early days of the Vietnam conflict. And about the enigma of the class ring he discovered among the deceased man's possessions. But when he told the until-then dispirited waitress that he assumed the ring had apparently held a special significance to Cpl. Snyder things changed. "Snyder?" the waitress asked, suddenly alert. "Did you say Snyder? Not Tommy Snyder by any chance?" "Uh, yeah," the Lieutenant answered, consulting the information printed on the property envelope. "Snyder, Thomas P. Why?" For a long moment the woman was unable to reply. Her face had grown pale through the layered makeup and tears sprang to her sad gray eyes. Eyes that seemed, if it was possible, to have instantly grown more tragic, more troubled. Gone was the hardness Sam had first seen. In it's place was a coltish vulnerability that's usually

reserved for an adolescent girl upon whom love has only recently placed its first blush. "He was my boyfriend," the waitress in the ill-fitting, badly disheveled white uniform finally managed to say in a husky voice. "He was, um, Tommy was my first love." "Ah shit..." Sam Erickson began. "Can I see the ring you told me about, sir? Is it on a gold chain? A school ring from 1964?" When Sam shook the old trinket from the envelope and it landed in his palm her tears began in earnest. 1964 ~~~~~

Tommy and Sarah had been seeing one another for a bit over a year when he decided to enlist in the Marine Corps. Graduation was just a few weeks away and things in South East Asia were spinning out of control. The generals needed every hand they could get over there. President Kennedy was dead at the hands of an assassin and the mood of the country was of dejection and despair. A despair that permeated small town Ohio and the hearts of her citizens, eighteen year old Tommy Snyder's as much as anyone else's, though perhaps for a different reason. So when the pair made plans to see a movie together on a sultry summer night nobody thought it unusual or in any way noteworthy. Both kids were adults now and their parents approved whole heartedly of their offspring's choice of partners, a late summer wedding appeared to be in their futures. Besides the old theater had recently installed air conditioning. In the dark balcony of the old Rialto Theater, Tommy told Sarah of his recent enlistment, and of the subsequent call up. He'd miss his own graduation, he told his girl, joking, trying to make light of a grave situation. Of course Sarah could think of nothing except their plans for the future. Plans thwarted by an unwanted separation. It was one of those moments people tend to remember and in retrospect it would become even more so. The lovers kissed tenderly as if aware of time standing still, waiting. There was little to say and for awhile the pair simply clung to one another as if that simple action would prevent tomorrow coming. Tommy traced the line of Sarah's quivering jaw with a single finger as their mouths met in a lingering kiss and their tongues entwined in a way that spoke volumes. She ran her youthful fingers across his muscular back, under his shirt. There was a scar there she knew very well, not how it got there or what had made the jagged cut, but how it felt and how Tommy thrilled when she caressed it. Tommy's eyes seemed to be pleading with Sarah, and her mind was a buzzing cacophony of mixed emotions as she drew her man close to herself, pressing him to her breasts. And all thought of chastity had flown away on the wings of an unbridled passion when the girl whimpered her assent in words unspoken yet fully comprehensible. Sarah raised her skirt and slid onto Tommy's lap, facing him. For his part Tommy pulled aside his girl friend's panties and gently slid his unskilled fingers along the hirsute entrance to her virginal love tunnel. When she found Tommy's zipper in the darkened balcony his cock was already fully erect and the girl simply guided his manhood into herself, falling toward him. And if Tommy even noticed the girl's grimace of discomfort as his erection passed her intact hymen he didn't stop. Not then, and not until he'd expended himself fully into the tightness of Sarah's no-longer-virginal pussy and they'd fallen breathless and limp into each other's arms, the smoldering of their young eyes vowing eternal love. It was Sarah who finally broke the spell cast in the afterglow of sex, saying in a breathy whisper, "Take this, Tommy," and removed the chain upon which was suspended her class ring from her own neck. As she carefully pulled the chain over her lover's ears she added, "But come back to me..." "I promise," the boy panted into the soft fragrance of Sarah's ear. "I will, if it

takes forever.”