

All Soul's Day

THE MID-MORNING TRAFFIC ON Georgia Avenue is congested with voters driving back to work from the election polls. A black SUV pulls up to the security gate at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Right now, the main hospital and campus is the premiere stateside care facility for trauma casualties flown in from Iraq and Afghanistan. Located in the far north-eastern corner of the District on a 113-acre parcel of land, the hospital and its auxiliary facilities are currently running at maximum capacity. Security is tight.

Dennis Michaels rolls down his window. A security officer checks his drivers' license and verifies that he is on today's list of registered guests. "Pull over to the side, sir, while we inspect your vehicle." A security detail walks around the SUV to inspect the back seat and trunk area, and confirms the license plate number with the documents provided. "He's good."

The security officer gives him a guest badge. "Here you go, sir. The Mologne House is behind the main hospital. Just follow the semi-circle around to Visitor Parking."

Dennis nods and follows the directions. He parks and heads up the stairs. Walking past the marble water fountain, he stops in front of the main hospital to briefly look at the beautiful exterior of the historic landmark. Dennis reads the inscription on the building: *We Provide Warrior*

Care. It is very fitting. The main hospital, a ten-story red brick building housing nearly three hundred beds and fourteen operating rooms, has cared for the country's wounded since the World War I, including a number of presidents.

But the sudden sight of men in wheelchairs out on the patio mars Dennis' appreciation. Some are missing arms. Some are missing legs. Some are missing both. Actually, it's the sight of teenagers in wheelchairs, with many of their faces so boyish, that is the most jarring. *Did we look that young?* Dennis wonders, shaking his head. It's hard to see these young faces and bodies disfigured. The paradox of the current conflict is that there are far fewer combatants killed in action than Korea or Vietnam, but more survivors of polytraumatic casualties—amputations, head injuries, and burns. In each successive war, there have been fewer KIA's than the previous one because of improvements in technology. Today, the military is able to quickly transport casualties to Germany and on to Walter Reed and Bethesda Naval hospitals for critical care, where surgeons and state-of-the-art equipment are ready to operate within hours of the conflict. So the likelihood of bleeding out on the battlefield is much less today than it was forty years ago. Their lives have been saved, but the lifeless look in the eyes of these veterans on the porch says it all.

Dennis averts his gaze; he doesn't want to seem as if he's staring. He walks around to the back and toward the Mologne House, a convalescence facility that houses rehabilitation patients. Don Leary, founder and president of the "Make a Difference" organization, is standing in front of the manicured lawn waiting to greet him.

"Dennis, thank you for coming." The two men shake hands warmly. "I'm glad you could make it. Follow me." Don leads him inside the Victorian-style mansion. "I told Andy all about you"

"Oh? What did you tell him?"

"Just that you are were a marine in Vietnam with three purple hearts and a story to tell."

Dennis cringes. "I hope you didn't make me out to be some kind of goddamned hero, Don. I didn't do anything that anybody else didn't do over there. That's not what this is about."

“No, no, don’t worry,” Don assures him. “I told him you were a mentor with our program.”

Dennis isn’t exactly sure what a mentor really is, much less how good a one he is going to be, but he likes Don, likes his passion. Although Don himself never fought in a war, he nonetheless became inspired to create Make a Difference, a non-profit organization whose mission is to improve the quality of life for disabled veterans. So far, the group has provided financial assistance to help offset the costs of special equipment and living expenses for over a dozen veterans. Just recently, Don began recruiting older veterans to help those coming home from the current conflict to readjust to life and, if need be, aid in their recovery. After meeting at a business function, Don asked Dennis to join the mentor team; after all, he seemed the perfect candidate.

“The goal,” Don had first explained in corporate terms, “is to help these guys achieve their post-recovery goals and keep them looking positively at the future.”

“Look, Don, I admire what you’re doing, but what do these veteran mentors really *do*?” Dennis questioned.

“They talk, they listen . . . They do anything they think will help the guys. Don’t let them get in a funk, get them living again, let them know they’re appreciated and can still contribute.”

It sounded good at the time, but now, seeing Don, Dennis has reservations. “Wait here,” Don points to the couch in the reception room, “I’ll go tell Andy you’re here.”

Dennis sits down and looks around at the decor. They do a nice job making families feel at home here, he concludes. He picks up a bulletin letter. It lists the activities going on at the campus today, including a list of different religious services. He skims over it briefly. The fact is, he’s not a man to be found in a church on most Sundays; but whenever asked, he tells people, “There are no atheists on the battlefield.” A Catholic mass is scheduled for today at ten o’clock. It has an asterisk next to it: *All Souls Day.

He remembers back to a conversation he had nearly forty years ago while in the hospital at Camp Pendleton recovering from an automobile accident. He was sharing a room with a marine named Rocco, who was

a devout Catholic. Rocco had been in-country and Dennis respected his tenure, often passing the time picking his brain about Vietnam. One day in early November, Rocco told him about All Souls Day, or Day of the Dead, which dated back to the 7th century. Rocco explained that it was centered on the belief that souls of the dead are not perfectly cleansed and are barred from entering heaven until they have been purged from sin.

“So where do they go?” Dennis remembers asking him.

“Purgatory,” Rocco said gravely.

“What’s that?”

“Purgatory,” Rocco said in almost a hushed voice, as if sharing a conspiracy. “Is a place between heaven and hell, good and bad, a place where sins can be purged and passage granted.

Rocco then told him that All Souls Day was created so that the living could pray for the dead. “Pretty much everyone goes to Purgatory, because everyone has sinned. So it helps if people here on earth pray for those who’ve died—you know, help them atone for their sins and move on to heaven.” At the time, it reminded Dennis of something he had read in the *Odyssey*, how the souls of Agamemnon and the dead warriors of the Trojan War were cast away to the underworld Hades, which could only be accessed by crossing the River Styx. Then Rocco said something that Dennis would never forget. “War is the hell, Dennis. When you’re out there in the jungle, guys will talk about home like it’s heaven, like they can’t wait to go home. But home is the purgatory. The only heaven you’ll ever know is when you die.”

Now, sitting in the waiting room at the Mologne House, it dawns on Dennis what Rocco was talking about all those years ago. Maybe purgatory is a very real place, found here on earth, a personal daily confinement that some veterans live in every single day of their waking lives.

Don returns and motions for Dennis to follow him down the hallway. They stop in front of a room. Don knocks lightly on the door and opens it. “Andy, Dennis is here to see you.”

No response.

Don looks at Dennis apprehensively. “Well, I’ll leave you two alone,” he motions to Dennis to have a seat and shuts the door behind him.

Dennis pulls up a chair next to the bed and sits down. Up close, he can easily see the outline of Andy's shortened body. The blanket lies perfectly flat against the bed below his torso. His face is turned away.

"Hey there, is it Andy . . . or do you prefer Andrew?"

Again, no response.

"Well, I don't know what they told you about me. And I don't know what you're feeling right now. So I thought we'd start off by just talking. How old are you, Andy?"

Silence.

Dennis already knows Andy is twenty-two. He memorized the biography that Don sent. Born: 1982, San Diego, California. Grew up in Ohio. Joined the marines in 2001. Deployed to Iraq. Second tour. Injured outside Fallujah. Sunni Triangle. Improvised Explosive Device. Both legs amputated. Here at Walter Reed since April.

What Dennis doesn't know is that Andy was in surgery just hours ago while doctors drained an ugly puss-filled cyst that was oozing out of the sutures on his right stump. Shrapnel is still working its way out of Andy's vexed skin and will further delay the fitting for his prosthesis, as his stumps cannot yet be molded to fit socket castings until the inflammation subsides; yet another setback in the name of progress. Tired and disgusted, with his mood clouded in foulness, Andy views Dennis' visit with contempt. *This guy still has his own legs, what the hell does he know?*

Dennis senses Andy's skepticism and desperately wants to break the silence, but he doesn't know what to say. Looking at the stump of Andy's body, he can't help but wonder how he can possibly help this young man. *Look at this boy's body. This is all so very wrong.* He starts to feel pity, but immediately fights the temptation. *No, don't pity him. That won't do him a damn bit of good.* Dennis takes a deep breath and refocuses, forcing himself to look at Andy in a different light. *He's one of us . . . Semper Fi.*

"Look, son. War is war. It doesn't matter where it's fought, or even when. I don't know exactly what you went through, but I know it was something real bad."

Dennis looks down at the floor. *Just keep talking. Maybe he'll come around.*

“I also know how it feels to come home when you’re not ready. The day I left Vietnam? Well, I look at that day as the day that I was born. Because the person I am sitting here today didn’t exist before then. Some people may think that sounds strange. But truth of the matter is, I was conceived in war. You were too.”

Andy’s body stiffens.

Dennis sits back in his chair as if his mind is reaching out to grasp a key that opens a long-forgotten door.

“1967.” Dennis starts pensively. “I was nineteen years old,” his voice grows bolder. “And I was in Vietnam for nine months—the same amount of time it takes a woman to give birth to a child. And that’s exactly what it felt like. The only difference was, inside the war’s womb, I was consciously aware of the changes taking place in me the entire time.” Dennis pauses. “And when I came out, I wasn’t born with my innocence. I was born without it.”

Andy’s body rustles under the covers. He turns his face away from the window and stares up at the ceiling straight ahead. He is listening.

“I can still pinpoint the days when I felt something inside of me change. Those days when I saw too much . . . did too much . . . lost too much. For me, those days happened over the course of five operations that changed my entire life. Starting with Deckhouse Five”

But just as Andy is checking in, Dennis is checking out, and his mind returns to a different place and time.