Discharged to Battle

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Abstract

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IT WAS nearly midnight when I entered the small, dingy restaurant that served as a bus depot. At first I thought the plump, blonde waitress was the only person in the place, for the four marble-topped tables were empty. The waitress glanced up as I entered and then returned to her aimless wiping of the clean marble counter. It was only when I had dropped my canvas bag on the first table and slouched into one of the metal-backed chairs that I first noticed him sitting on a chair that had been hidden from my view by the door.

He was the handsomest boy I had ever seen, and I could not help staring at him as he sat stiffly in the chair in his starched Army uniform. His hair was a mass of golden ringlets. His face was finely chiseled and smooth and pale. His eyes were a deep blue and met mine with a steely firmness.

"Hi. You goin' on furlough too?"

A smile played across his perfect features as he shook his head slightly.

"No. I got my discharge today. I'm headin' home for good."

"Discharge! Why you don't look old enough to . . . How long you been in?" His features relaxed somewhat as I spoke,
his smile broadened, revealing his even white teeth, and his eyes sparkled mischievously. "I get it," I said. "A minority discharge. They found out about your age, huh?"

He chuckled then, amused by my perplexity, but as he started to answer, the waitress interrupted us.

"Here comes the bus . . . Thank God . . . Now I kin get outta this joint."

I stood up then, and through the large front window cluttered with advertisements and posters I could see the lights of a vehicle coming down the deserted main street of the small town. The boy had turned slightly in his chair and from behind the clutter of posters and bills he pulled two metal arm crutches. As he slipped the metal bands about his wrists and clutched the rubber grips, his features tensed and he had the same determined look as when I had first seen him.

He turned his body sideways in the chair, and with a violent effort which contorted his torso and made the veins along his face and neck stick out, he heaved himself upwards until he stood shakily on his feet. Then his features slackened. I saw the handbag just as he turned his head and looked down at the place where the small bag rested on the worn wooden floor. As I started for the bag he backed himself against the chair and was about to let himself down again when I picked up the bag.

"I'll get it for you."

"Thanks, but I can carry it all right."

"No bother. As long as we're goin' on the same bus, I'll get it for you."

"Thanks, buddy, but I'd just as soon carry it myself."

Beads of sweat formed on his forehead, but he stood steady and rigid then, and his eyes sparkled with a steely firmness as I held out the bag to him. He hooked it swiftly with the fingers of his right hand and clutched it tightly against the rubber grip of the crutch. I picked up my own bag then and moved toward the door as the bus driver opened it and came into the restaurant. He looked at the boy and me for a moment without speaking, then walked to the counter where the waitress had a cup of coffee waiting for him.
As I held the door open, the boy began the tortuous walk toward the bus. He pushed the crutch on his left arm out in front of him until its rubber tip gripped the wooden floor. He dragged his left foot up to it. He pushed his right arm out. He dragged his right foot forward. Slowly. Tortuously. Slowly. Left crutch forward. Left foot forward. Right crutch forward. Right foot forward.

Sweat was trickling down his face and neck. Beneath his arms his shirt was damp and darkened by it. His face alternately flushed and whitened, and his hands, where they gripped the crutches, were red and white splotches.

When he passed through the door I let it close slowly behind us and followed him to the bus. When he reached the open doorway of the bus, he stopped and rested momentarily against the side of the bus door.

"I'll give you a hand gettin' on."

"That's okay. I'll rest a minute. I can make it all right."

His breathing was irregular, and he leaned heavily against the door as he wiped the sweat from his forehead and face with the sleeve of his uniform.

"Well, I could... I could carry you up the steps without too much trouble."

"No. No. I can make it fine."

He shifted the crutch in his left hand to his right. Then he grabbed the metal horizontal bar along the steps of the bus with his left hand and supported his right side with the crutches.

"Well, here... Let me take your bag anyway."

He didn't answer as he pulled himself onto the first step and paused. He moved his grip on the metal bar forward, placed his crutches firmly, and pulled himself onto the second step of the bus. Once again he paused. Sweat was again trickling down his face and his shirt clung to his damp skin. He grasped the vertical bar of the bus then, and pulled himself to the floor level of the bus. The front seat was empty and he fell heavily into it.

"Mind some company?"

"Not at all." He smiled wanly. "That is, if you don't mind takin' the inside seat."
"Not at all. I'd rather be by the window. Hand me your bag and I'll put it on top."

He paused momentarily, then shrugged slightly and handed the bag to me. As I took it from him and placed it on the rack above, I could feel the dampness and smell the sweaty odor of the leather handle.

I had just taken my seat and lit a cigarette when the bus driver came out of the restaurant and started the engine. For the first few minutes of the ride neither the boy nor I spoke. Finally I began to mumble an apology.

"Look, uh... Geez, I don't even know your name. Mine's Joe Crowder. Stationed out here at the base."

"Glad to meet you, Joe. I'm Tim, Tim Bonny."

"Well look, Tim, I... I feel silly as hell about those stupid remarks I made back there. I didn't see your... Well, hell, I'm just sorry about it. You look so young and..."

"Forget it, Joe. I'm used to it. I've been called baby-face or pretty boy ever since I've been in the service."

"How long you been in, Tim?"

"Well, let's see... It's a little over a year now. But I don't guess I really been in the Army that long. I only had six quick weeks of basic, a three-day pass, and I was on my way to Korea."

"Man, they didn't waste any time with you, did they?"

"Nope. They shipped the whole training company out lock, stock and barrel."

"Did you see much of it, Tim?"

"No. It's a funny thing. I've got a combat infantry badge and the purple heart, but I don't know anymore about fightin' than when I got outta basic. I was only in the lines two days. We were sittin in a clump of trees gettin' orientated by the platoon sergeant when boom, this shell comes in, and the next thing I know I'm in a field hospital."

"Geez. Ya make me feel like a heel. You outta wear your ribbons so idiots like me wouldn't be shootin' off their mouth."

"I would, Joe, but I never had the chance to get 'em. First it was the Tokyo hospital, then Arizona, then this place. And now that I'm discharged I don't guess I'll need 'em."
"How'd your family take it, Tim?... You know, uh... It must have been kind of rough on 'em."

"They just... well, you know how folks are... They just don't understand these things. Well, like Mom, for instance. They came out to visit me at the hospital in Arizona. And she was cryin' all the time and callin' me her baby in front of the other guys and stuff like that. And she had me bawlin' like a baby."

"Well, you can't blame 'em, Tim. After all..."

"Oh I know. It's just that they gotta understand. I'm gonna make it on my own. The doc said it would take time. Sure. But I'm gonna walk without these things again. And he said the only way I could do it was by myself."

"You'll make it fine Tim... Do your folks know you're comin' home?"

"They didn't till a few minutes ago. I just called them before the bus came. Mom was dumbfounded. She thought I was still in Arizona."

"You mean they didn't even know you were here at the base?"

"No. To be truthful I wouldn't have even called them to meet me at the bus station if our farm wasn't so far from town. I'd rather have walked right up to the front door on my own."

"Where is your home, Tim?"

"Just a couple miles off this highway. I'll be gettin' off here in Carlton. Our farm's only a few miles south of here."

The bus was now moving through the well-lighted streets of a fairly large town. The neon signs of the bars and cafes twinkled brightly and people moved about the streets searching for the pleasures of a Saturday night in town.

"Well you're only about twenty miles from the base then Tim."

"Yeah. It's just about twenty... Here's the bus depot right up ahead."

The bus turned into a side street then turned sharply again behind the corner bus depot into the well-lighted ramp area in back. By one of the exit doors, a tall heavy-set man in summer slacks and sports shirt stood next to a slight pretty blonde woman in a cotton print dress. A metal collapsible wheel chair rested against the building by their side.
When the bus stopped at the ramp and the door was opened the waiting couple came quickly toward us. Tim's beautiful features were set firmly as he slipped the metal bands of his crutches about his slim wrists. When his mother came up the steps and saw Tim, tears were already forming in her pale blue eyes.

"Timmy! Timmy!" She rushed to his side and threw her arms about his neck, hugging and kissing him, and she was crying freely then. "Why didn't you let us know you were here? Oh, it doesn't matter now. . . You're home now. That's all that counts. . . Mother will take care of you now."

She clasped Timmy's hands and held them lovingly in her own.

"Let's go home now, son. Here let me take these things."

Before Timmy could protest she had slipped the crutches from his arms.

"Don't, Mom. I can walk okay with 'em. I don't need any. . . ."

"Nonsense, Timmy. You're home now. Dad'll take care of you now."

Timmy sat numbly beside me as she took the crutches and his father moved to his side.

"Hello, son. Glad to have you back."

"Dad, don't. Please don't. I can walk all right. Just give me the crutches."

"Later, son. Later. . . . Don't fret now. We'll take care of you."

As his father carried Timmy down the steps, Timmy glanced up at me. His head drooped and the steely firmness of his eyes was gone, clouded behind the tears that were beginning to well from them.