

War's Over, Come Home

Excerpt from Chapter 3

For This My Son Is Alive Again

But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. —Luke 15: 22- 24

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. . . A siren wails in the distance. I'd heard Ansley tell them not to use a siren! It's coming closer. It's headed up Manor Road. Then, there it is, a house-sized fire engine roaring up the hill towards us. Andrew keeps walking, doesn't even glance at the fire engine. He can't see me. I pull my red-checkered flannel shirt off, wave it over my head with my left hand while pointing with my right at Andrew. The siren turns off. The fire engine passes us, stops, turns into the Ives entrance, backs out and then drives past us.

Walking full speed, I keep waving the flannel shirt. Another siren is coming from behind. I look back; it's a big red EMS truck. The driver spots me, turns the siren off.

The fire engine pulls over at the bottom of the hill. Everyone gets out. Six or so. The EMS truck passes us and pulls up behind the fire engine; four hop out. A woman in uniform leads a phalanx towards us. "Which of you needs to be examined? Which of you needs help?"

Christ, I realize I look just as crazy—waving a flannel shirt, white hair flying, old faded blue polo shirt, old too-baggy, frayed khakis of Andrew's—as Andrew. They can't tell the difference between us.

"He needs help!" I call out. "He has PTSD. He's homeless. We have him home and want him to stay. He's dehydrated, not making sense, hasn't eaten or had anything to drink in twenty-four hours. . . ."

Andrew slows, bends down to their level, says a word or two. They have their hands down, fully extended, by their sides. He laces through them as if this is a perfectly normal situation while each of them asks, "Can't we help you?"

Then, he's through the phalanx. He's past the EMS truck and is up at the front of the fire engine. He's headed out. Down Manor Road for three-quarters of a mile, take a right on the Jarrettsville Pike, stay on it for five miles as it turns into Dulaney Valley Road, and in another few miles it crosses over Interstate 695 where he can catch a ride on a truck headed out to anywhere in America.

We'd had him. I had sat inches away from him the whole way back from the airport, trying to engage him. I had patted his leg a few times when I laughed and made a point. He'd been on the farm. He'd been lying down on the recliner on our pavilion with the pups. He's been in New York City, in Michigan, in California, in a jail for a month in Kansas, in Maryland for a summer with us, then in California, in Orlando, then in Montana, then in Seattle, and before that, while in the Marines, he'd been stationed at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton outside of San Diego, at Camp Le Jeune in North Carolina, and at Twenty-nine Palms Marine Base near Palm Springs, deployed twice to Iraq, took that helicopter with the Colonel and a few others up into the mountains of Syria, and now he's just a few feet away from me.

"He needs to be examined. He's hallucinating. He thinks he's Todd from Wyoming," I tell the fire engine crew and then, he's through them; he's in front of the truck and has a clear shot to head out to the Baltimore Beltway, and then, take a left, stick out his thumb and head to Interstate 95 and down the East Coast, or take a right, stick out his thumb and head for Interstate 70 and west. He is there in front of me like a running back with the ball at the fifty-yard line and there is nothing but space ahead of him. Wide open space that I know he could accelerate through, leaving me behind, leaving me to wonder where he is, where he's sleeping, what he's eating, why he's had to go to the emergency ward, leaving me to imagine him scared, cold, paranoid, walking back and forth smoking a cigarette in the drizzle on a sidewalk, looking over one shoulder, looking over the other shoulder, remembering the gang that had attacked him, leaving us perhaps forever, to never know, never find out what has happened to him.

I run forward. Andrew sprints away from me. He is picking up speed. I leap, throw my arms around his chest, tackle him, trying to take him down. With incredible speed and force, he shoots his arm up around my neck, flips me over his shoulder, throws me down on my side on

the asphalt. My head hits. It cracks against the asphalt, my right shoulder and rib cage whacks on the asphalt. I'm out. I come to. He's on top of me. We roll into the weeds and ditch, up against the far bank. Can't believe how helpless I am. I'm at a total loss of control of my body. It is like as a kid when a wave picks you up and pummels you, flips you over and over, mashes you against the gravelly bottom. I'm receiving body blows, punches, hard, precise, fast, over and over in the same spot, on the right side of my chest. I'm weak and pathetic and old and can't believe he has this strength. Drowning in the weeds, I wrestle against his fast-pumping arms. This is it. My time is up. And then he's up and dancing around in the middle of the road waving his hands and I'm up, dizzy, out of it, staggering around, searching for my glasses in the ditch and no one is helping. They are all standing back, aghast, watching, as if they've been ordered not to step forward, not to become involved, not to help find my glasses. I feel their eyes on me. Andrew yells, "You saw it! You saw it! He assaulted me!" The EMS people are standing back beside their truck. The firemen are standing by the cab of their truck. Now there are cars backed up. Cars down the hill, ten or so. Cars up the hill, four or five. And a police car. A Baltimore County police cruiser, lights flashing, siren wailing, is winding its way through the lower line of cars and pulling up in front of them. The policeman steps out. Sharp looking. Fit. Sunglasses. Has rubber gloves on—odd? Andrew and I are now in the middle of a circus. Where's Ansley? I talk to the officer. Tell him that Andrew threw me down on the pavement, punched me. Andrew yells, "He assaulted me." He turns to the EMS crew. "You saw it! He assaulted me!"

The officer seems to be listening to me. I don't push the concept of Andrew assaulting me. The EMS crew remains silent. They saw me tackle him. I tell the officer he can't let Andrew go. I explain about the homelessness. Explain about searching for him in Seattle. Inform him of Andrew's two tours in Iraq, that he has PTSD, that he is a paranoid-schizophrenic. The officer is listening. Where's Ansley?

An old dented pickup truck with a noisy diesel engine pulls out of the line of cars into the ditch, bumps along through the weeds and grass, and stops right in front of us. I feel a sense of relief. An ally. And a strong one, gentle and forgiving, but who can be tough when need be. My childhood friend, fellow one-time steeplechase jockey and running mate, J.B. Secor, who calls me by my initials, A.P., a sobriquet left over from our race riding days. J.B. knew Andrew well; he'd taken an interest in Andrew during his rebellious teenage years. J.B. had lived through some rebellious years himself.

He gets out—no jockey’s build now, he’s broad-shouldered and powerful with a vigorous paunch—approaches, has a worried, twisted expression you never see on his face.

“A.P., what’s going on?”

“I had to do it,” I said to him by his truck. “I had to tackle him J.B., can you imagine, I had to tackle my own son. I don’t want him to leave.” He surveys the situation. Calms me down.

We walk over towards Andrew and the policeman. J.B. knew Andrew well; he’d taken an interest in Andrew during the rebellious teenage years before enlisting in the Marines

“Andrew,” J.B. says. He reaches up, prepares to put his hand on Andrew’s shoulder.

“Don’t you fucking put your hand on me,” Andrew says.

J.B. backs off, walks to me. “A.P., this is terrible, just terrible.”

I give him a brief recounting of the morning.

“The poor bugger, Pat. He doesn’t mean it. He needs help. He’s got nightmares going on in his head.”

Another squad car arrives, lights blinking, siren wailing. Where’s Ansley? The officer is a higher rank. He waves me away. The two of them interview Andrew.

Ansley arrives! She rushes straight into their circle. She has a plastic box with the cell phone and its accessories Andrew has just bought. “You need this. Here, you need this,” she says, handing him the recently-opened box with wires hanging out. “Call us, Andrew,” she says. “Call us.” She tries to talk to them. She explains to the police that we are trying to help Andrew, that we have just picked him up at the airport, that we want him to stay on the farm and recuperate; we live half a mile up the road. They put their arms out, keeping her away from Andrew. Next thing I know, the first officer is pulling on a pair of plastic gloves. What the hell are they for? Then he’s patting Andrew down, gingerly, carefully. It pisses me off. I feel it as an insult. Has to put those f-ing sissified gloves on to touch my son. Andrew is facing away from me. He is cooperating. He has his hands on the trunk of the car, just like in the movies. His khakis are filthy. There’s a swath of dark sweat stain down the back. The officer with the plastic gloves pats my son carefully, over his pockets, down the outside of his legs, up and between his legs, down the inside of his legs. Ansley is asking Andrew if he needs any money. She opens her wallet, pulls out all the cash, holds it out, tells him to take it. He stares at it for a second, turns toward the car. “Andrew, don’t you need some money? Take the money!”

The officer is standing between Ansley and Andrew, not touching her, holding up both arms, keeping her away. She takes a step to the side and walks directly towards Andrew. “Mam, mam,” they’re telling her. “It’s dangerous standing out here in the road.”

“He’s my son. I want to talk to my son.” She doesn’t back down.

“We’re sorry man, you’ll have go step over here.”

They are holding her back. They are gently holding her back and they’re saying it’s too dangerous for him to be walking along the road. I step back into the fray. There are now two cops and a Marine vet against me. I argue. I tell them this makes no sense. They say he has his rights. Andrew is quiet. I push it. I step forward. The officer of higher rank reaches into his pocket and now he pulls on a pair of rubbers gloves. I reiterate that I’d just been to Seattle to find him; we’d flown him all the way from Seattle this morning. We want to help him. He needs help. He’s homeless. He’s dehydrated. He’s hallucinating. He hasn’t eaten in twenty-four hours. I don’t repeat that he is a “danger to society,” I don’t repeat that he’d thrown me on the asphalt, punched and battered me. I can’t do it. Have a spinning, whirling sensation. They are going to take Andrew away. They are going to put him in the back of the cruiser and drive him where he wants to go. This is unbelievable. The higher ranked officer steps in front of me, between me and Andrew.

Ansley is not crying; she is not hysterical. I’ve never seen her look this way. She is stunned; she is staring at the scene; she is in shock. Her face is blank, devoid of expression, without color.

Now I can’t see Andrew. I don’t know what Andrew’s doing. I don’t know what these fucking cops are doing or the fire engine crew is doing or the EMS people are doing or what I’m doing. I’m a skinny, white-haired guy standing in the middle of this three-ring circus, people out of their cars gawking at us, and everything is whirling around. They repeat that he has his rights. They load him into the back seat of the squad car—a steel mesh, extending from the top of the front seat to the ceiling, protecting the driver—a steel mesh I could break through. A steel mesh I had once broken through in younger days on the late night of Ansley’s and my rehearsal dinner after I had fought off the Rosie O’Grady bouncers with the assistance of my sister Sue Sue and several ushers, fought off one under-cover cop, but the second got me in a choke hold, threw me down on the asphalt, and I couldn’t breathe, was seeing stars, just about to pass out when Sue Sue was on him, pulling his hair, screaming, digging at his eyes and he released me, the oxygen

rushed into my system and feeling wild, energy-injected, I rushed back into the melee, only to be brought down again, strangled again until I was nearing the passing out stage when I was released, slammed against the squad car, handcuffed and stuffed into the back at which time I heard Sue Sue scream outside, and my hands cuffed behind my back, kicked through the mesh, kicked and thrashed my way out of the car, onto the sidewalk, to my sister's side but this time, forty years later, I just stand there. Cannot believe it is what I am doing. I stand there, in the surreal moment, frozen, wooden—feeling dead inside—and watch as the car proceeds down the hill, through the bottleneck of vehicles and gaping bystanders, my son in the back, taking him not to the police station, not to a psychiatric ward, not to a VA emergency room, but astonishingly, unbelievably, like an Uber driver, this policeman is taking Andrew wherever he wants to go in the county, and the thought occurs to follow them. Ansley's new blue SUV is up the hill behind the fire engine and the growing jam-up of cars—yet, it is hopeless, I am giving up; I am fizzling out. By the time I jogged up the hill, past all this confusion, they'd be long gone. They'd probably make us stop following them anyway; we'd be easy to spot in the new blue SUV. And Ansley would be against doing it. Besides, I have no energy, no zip. Yet, if I could force myself to run back to the house and hop in my old gray sedan, and if I could be left alone, and not told what to do, where to go, if I could fall into a rhythm of pushing in the clutch and going through the five forward gears, mashing the accelerator to the floor, and head around the back way to the Jarrettsville Pike, I could catch up with them, track them. No, there's not enough time; it is out of the range of possibilities now. Off the cruiser goes, Andrew's shoulders and head—still, stationary, wooden—framed in the back window, Andrew's shoulders and head becoming smaller, Andrew disappearing, Andrew compliant, cooperative and under the control of the policeman, Andrew behind the steel mesh barrier between the seats, not trying to get out, not attempting to be by my side—Will he turn and look back at me? Won't he look back?—and then the car is out of sight, and my memory of the next two hours is completely blank—a void.