

In The Silence

James Andrew Edske

Chapter ~ Four

Hunched over and gasping for air, David slowly worked himself across the landing to the edge of the cliff. After five minutes of sucking hard at the thin air, he straightened up and stared out over the mountains below, too ashamed to turn and face Paul.

Paul had not planned to kick David, but there had been no alternative. A bloody brawl would have been too dangerous. Wanting to explain, Paul approached David from behind. "Look out onto the work of the Creator's hands and in the silence you'll hear his words. Things that seem important are not. Try to focus on His love. To be scared for a moment and lose one battle means nothing. To stand face to face with the Creator and have hate in your soul is what all men should fear. The consequences of that will last for all of eternity. It is hate you must learn to conquer, not me or any man."

Looking out into the valleys below, David pondered the words. He had been to this site often, but had not really noticed the beauty and awesome view. It took a few minutes before David heard Paul go back to the truck. Then he went into the bunker. Putting his voltmeter across the battery terminals, he calculated about two more hours before there would be enough charge to start the truck.

Still embarrassed, David returned to the edge of the cliff, his ribs aching from Paul's kick. He remembered earlier that morning when Paul held his hands over him and it had felt as though a chill came over him. David started praying. *God, I know you're busy and that's why you never answer my prayers. But I wish you could make things between Paul and me like they were twenty years ago. I know you hate homosexuals, because I have heard about Sodom and Gomorrah. I don't really hate Paul. It's just what he's done makes me sick. We were once such good friends. I just pray that somehow you can make things different so we could be friends again.*

Paul was just about ready to crawl into the cab when David approached. "Hey, I sort of lost it. I just didn't think it right, you making my living with Marcea the same as your living with another guy."

"I didn't mean to come across like that," apologized Paul. "I get somewhat the same reaction from my gay friends. Most of them no longer have anything to do with me because I preach and believe in chastity. I can understand your also not wanting to have anything to do with me."

David realized how alone Paul really was. "Hey, I don't hate you. I just lost it. I would like to hear more and I promise I won't get mad. Besides, my ribs can't take it."

Laughter got the best of them. Paul hadn't laughed since he tested positive. David

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couldn't laugh without his ribs hurting, his broken guffawing made both of them laugh even harder. Tears of joy came to Paul's eyes, tears of pain to David's.

"Knock it off. I can't take it," begged David.

"Okay, let's get serious," Paul said. They walked to the back of the truck. David sat on the tailgate and Paul stood. Paul pulled off his sweater, exposing his black shirt and collar and revealing the gash in his forearm. With hands folded behind his back, he paced a couple more times as he put his thoughts in order. The solitude and power of prayer had helped him understand the purity of the truth, the underlying subject of all his sermons. Some people did not like what he had to say but he always felt the strength of the Holy Spirit when he spoke. He now asked for the power and felt a slight tingling run down the back of his neck into his back, making him stand up boldly. The words just started to flow. "It is God's love that gave us this beautiful world." Paul lifted his arms in the direction of the awesome view in front of them. "Early this morning, as I stood on the edge of this mountain, I gave thanks to God for his help. As his son once said, 'Give us this day.' I was just happy for him to give us last night. I also prayed that He would give you, David, the strength to forgive me. I asked for your forgiveness not just for myself, but for you as well."

David twisted a little on the tailgate, uncomfortable. He then interjected, "Paul let's lay off the religious stuff and just get to what happened to get you so messed up. You know, tell me what made you different."

Paul could sense the tension in the air and remembered something another priest once told him. *There is a time to quit preaching. Going further only weakens your message. Tell your story with sincerity.*

"Okay, how about if I start back in about seventh grade when we were just starting to notice girls? I didn't know what to do and was too embarrassed to ask my father about sex. I thought it was wrong to have those thoughts. I wanted to talk to someone but didn't have an older brother like you did. I can still remember how you and your brother would sneak around the school and climb up the wall to look into the girls shower. I wanted to, but thought it would corrupt me or something. I was so insecure. Then when acne took over my face, the girls would not even look at me. That's one reason I tried so hard at sports. My insecurity built up for the next three years and by the time we finished our sophomore year, I still had not had a date. But I was a good athlete. All the guys liked me and the coaches would always compliment me. I felt well liked on the football team and it became my life. Not once did a team member or a coach ask me how my personal life was going. Girls started to talk to me, but it was only because I was a star on the football team. Then in my junior year, when I was having problems with math, Judy, the girl around the corner started to tutor me. Remember her?"

David rubbed his hand on his chin. "Wasn't she the real big girl about three years older

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than us, kind of homely?"

"Yes. And she helped me with more than math. About the third time she was tutoring me she started rubbing my leg and then we started wrestling around. One thing led to another. During most of my junior year we had sex about twice a month. But, you know, I never even kissed her, not one time. I tried to quit doing it with her. And yes, she was kind of homely but mostly had poor hygiene habits. She was really a turn off and would make me do stuff to her that made me really ashamed. Every time I told her that I couldn't do it, she would blackmail me. She said she would say that I raped her. I was scared to death."

David had listened to every word and had many questions. "Why didn't you ask for my help? I always thought something was funny about your tutoring. If you couldn't stand her, why didn't you just quit going over to her house?"

"I thought about talking to you back then, but was mortified. And truthfully, I started to like the sex part. But there was something missing in this sordid relationship, and now I understand the difference between love and lust. The sex was messing me up. I missed out on the typical high school crush period of a relationship. You know, just getting to know a girl, talking to her on the phone, finding out what she liked and what she believed in. If you can remember, I never dated any girls during my junior year either. I was completely trapped by Judy and my own physical desires. I put dating out of my mind." Paul quit talking, thinking how much differently his life might have been. If only abstinence had been part of teenage jargon.

David pulled the two remaining beers from the plastic holder. "She must have been pretty good. Weren't you going over to see her during the summer?"

Referring to a woman as 'pretty good' bothered Paul, but he let it slide. "During the summer Judy called Coach Porter and told him I still had to take and pass one more math course my senior year, and that if I didn't start coming over, I probably would flunk and have to be cut from the team. Then Coach called me. She really had me in her control, but I did need her help with math. We were just about to start daily doubles and I was trying to figure out how to get out of the situation. That is when I told you I wasn't going to play football my senior year. That was my escape!"

David took a big drink of beer, swallowed, and then said, "I remember that. We worked out all summer, had played side by side for three years. We were the best tackle/end combination in the league. I could never figure out why you were going to quit. I thought maybe it had something to do with your father, because he hardly made it to any of the games. I remember how we would run onto the field and you would start searching the stands for him. I even thought it might be me, because that was when I started dating Maryann, and she was coming between you and me. But you did end up playing your senior year. What happened?"

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"Well, I had planned to quit. I went over to Judy's house to tell her that I didn't need to pass math because I was not going to play football, but she had another plan. She had told some of her friends about us, so she couldn't use the rape card. Instead, she picked up the phone and said, 'I might as well let your father in on us. I might even tell him that I think I'm pregnant.' I was stuck and she knew it."

David was completely mesmerized. "I always thought she was a mean bitch. She was really pulling a mind game on you!"

Paul continued. "Like usual, she said, 'One more time and that will be it.' But she wanted to do it in the shower. She led us upstairs and we got in the shower and the next thing I hear is her father banging on the bathroom door. I didn't know what was going to happen. I thought he might beat me up or call my parents. I got dressed as fast as I could and when I got to the front room her father was sitting there drinking straight out of a whiskey bottle. I felt like throwing up. He looked at me and yelled, 'If I ever catch you around my daughter again, I'll kill you. Now get out of here!' I never saw Judy after that and they ended up moving shortly afterwards. Was I ever relieved."

David set his beer on the tailgate. Things were starting to click. "I remember when they moved, because me and my brother were sneaking into their house when it was vacant. It was right around Halloween. I also recall my mom talking to my father about Judy's family. Something was strange over there."

Paul continued. "My senior year started off great. I was rid of Judy, my acne was clearing up and our football team had won every game. My father had even made it to three of the home games. Then came the State Championship game. Catching that finale pass and winning the state play-offs put me on cloud nine. My dad drove all the way to Grassville to watch the game. I still remember them naming me Most Valuable Player and giving me the game ball. Do you remember that night?"

"How could I forget? We had to stay overnight because it was too far to come back home that night. We partied all night. I do remember you missed the party because you had to go to the hospital to get x-rayed and then didn't feel well afterwards. You were the hit of the school and you played it so cool, like it was no big deal catching the winning pass. It was after that game that Rita asked you to take her to the Senior Prom. Boy she was great looking! Those were the days." David cracked a smile as he seemed to touch those times, so long ago as though it was yesterday.

Paul reminisced also, but there was nothing for him to smile about. "That night after the team went to the locker room and the coach gave me the game ball, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I couldn't even feel the pain in my shoulder. I wanted to give the game ball to you, David, because everyone knew that it was your block that opened it up for me. But I wanted to give it to my father even more. To this day I wish I had handed the game ball to you."

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David wiped at a tear. He never knew Paul recognized his efforts that night. "Boy, the sun is sure bright. It's hurting my eyes." He was too macho to let on about his feelings. "You never did talk much about that championship game. It always felt kind of strange to me, it was one of the best nights of my life, and you never acted like it was a big thing. I still tell people about that night in 1966 when we became the State Champions."

A breeze had just started blowing up the side of the mountain and across the site, refreshing their sun-gorged bodies. Paul clapped his hand in front of his face trying to shock himself into continuing and not falling asleep. "After I got dressed in the locker room that night and the coach took me to the hospital, they reset my collar bone and taped me up. It must have been about midnight by then and it had just started to rain. I asked the coach to stop by my father's motel so that I could give him the game ball. As we left the hospital and were driving to the motel the coach said that I had a talent that only one in ten thousand men has. He told me a scout from U.C.L.A. had approached him and wanted me to play for them. He told me I could play at any college I chose and that he was honored to have coached me. All the while he was talking I was hoping my father was as proud of me as Coach Porter was."

David knew Paul was the best athlete he had ever known and now some more of the pieces were falling into place. Anxious to know more David asked, "Paul, since you were rid of Judy, I can't understand why you turned down a college football scholarship to enlist in the Army. You could have been a professional player! Why in hell didn't you take a try at college, with a deferment and all?"

"You know David, to this day, I still wonder how far I would have gone if I had gone to college and played football. But I'll try to explain. When Coach Porter and I pulled into my dad's motel, even before the car had completely stopped, I jumped out into the rain with the game ball under arm. I knew what room Dad was in. I still remember; it was room 317. I took the stairs two at a time."

Paul's face tightened. He strained to go on. "I knocked on the door and heard his voice through the door asking, 'Who's there?' Wanting to surprise him, I disguised my voice and said, 'Room service!' Then, with my good arm I held the football out to give to him when he opened the door."

Paul voice broke. Even after all the years, he had a hard time talking about this. "The door swung open and there was Elaine, my dad's secretary, standing there in a bathrobe. I could see from the vee in the neck line she had nothing on underneath. I stood there in shock for a few seconds. Then the door was pulled open further by my father, wearing only his boxer shorts. I dropped the football in the doorway and ran. All I heard was my father yelling in his demanding voice for me to come back."

A few tears began falling from Paul's striking face. He took a deep breath and went on. "As soon as I got to the car, Coach Porter sensed something was wrong and tried to

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console me, but I didn't hear a word he offered. We got back to our hotel and from the parking lot we could hear the team partying. Coach Porter wanted me to come and join in the victory celebration with the rest of the team, but I told him my shoulder hurt too badly and I wanted to go to my room for a while. It was really my heart that was feeling all the pain." Paul paused and wiped at his eyes. "When I got back to the room that you and I were sharing, I took all the pain killers they had given me at the hospital. If they had given me more than four pills, I would have taken them all. I zoned out on the bed."

David was mesmerized. He wanted to put his arms around Paul but had never held another man. Frozen, unable to reach out, David said, "You know, I came up to the room three times that night to get you to come down to the party. I wondered why I couldn't wake you. It was those pills!"

"That's right, and thank God I didn't have more. I might have overdosed and that would have been selfish and unfair to you. I would have ruined your night like my father ruined mine."

"Boy, I can't believe this. What was the best night of my life was the worst of yours."

"It's one night that I'd rather have not had in my life," replied Paul. And somewhat uncomfortable with David moving closer.

"But Paul, there was no one that could have caught that pass except you. It was almost like you were chosen before time to be right there on that field that night. You were the best at that moment and without you on our team we would have not been champions."

David's words shone a whole different light on that moment of the past. Paul relived that catch, almost smelling the grass field and feeling the coolness in the air that fall night when his collar bone was fractured early in the fourth quarter. Four points behind with seven seconds left on the clock, eleven men were huddled, breathing hard, their spirits and hopes low. A field goal wouldn't win the game so a pass play was called. If the team could hold off the rushing defenders one more play and Paul could make the catch, victory would be theirs. Unknown to the rest of the team Paul could hardly move his right arm and was on the verge of blacking out from the pain.

With a unison clap, the team marched up to the line. Paul wanted to huddle again, but they had used all their time-outs. The defensive end snarled decimation was in his blood. He had fractured Paul's collarbone minutes before with a late hit and relished when he heard the bone pop. Three personal fouls had already been called on him for unsportsmanlike conduct. He had weakened his prey and now it was time to finish Paul off. Three helmets almost touching on the line sensed a kill. The ball was snapped and Paul gritted his teeth in anticipating from the charge of the mean defensive end.

Time seemed to change to slow motion. Out of Paul's right eye he could see David

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cross blocking, his helmet buried into the chest of the defensive end, hitting him with the force of a bull. The sound of the impact could be heard over the roar in the stadium. Paul's path had been cleared and he was already three strides from the line and feeling no pain. He looked and chose his lane to the end zone, then glanced back. His eyes met the quarterback's—they both intuitively knew it was now or never. The ball was fired into the air, too far ahead of target.

With a supernatural surge of strength, Paul took three huge strides and launched himself into the air. With his left arm extended, the ball hit his hand. The din of the crowd silenced and the clock ran out. Still in flight, Paul pulled the ball in and twisted. Landing on his back in the end zone, he felt a pop in his upper chest. Holding the ball to his stomach, he looked around the stadium for his father.

Tired, Paul yawned and then savored that game winning catch in silence. David slipped off to relieve himself of beer and then went to check on the battery and some other things. When he returned to the truck, Paul had fallen asleep on the tailgate with his head propped on the spare tire inside of the truck bed. It was an awkward position but thirty hours without sleep did not require a bed. David got a towel from the cab, rolled it up and put it under Paul's head for a pillow. He then lifted Paul's dangling legs and laid them on the tailgate. Then David quietly dug around in the cab and snapped a fresh battery into his laptop computer.

Back in the bunker with the laptop, David reached for the terminal board. The Clipper Chip had worked last night and he wanted to test it again. His pulse raced as he snapped the modular phone cable into the test port on the terminal board. He took a deep breath, loaded up the software and hit the auto-connect mode. One minute passed, two minutes, then four minutes and the cursor just continued to blink. *Damn! The Clipper Chip is not working! I can kiss off five grand. It probably got damaged when my computer went dead last night. But that shouldn't have damaged it.*

When David methodically verified the connections, everything checked out. The screen went blank and then three letters, **D-O-S**, appeared as though the computer defaulted to its DOS operating system. David gulped. *That'll teach me to buy stolen property. I bet this was a faulty IC chip to start with.* David slowly reached for the power and then saw the screen suddenly come to life. It was the same message he had read last night:

SENATOR BRIAN BUCK LEADS POLLS IN RACE FOR RE-ELECTION. POLLS SHOW 64% OF VOTERS FAVOR HIM. CHARGES ON CHILD ABUSE AND DRUG SALES TO MINORS FALSE. HIS RECORD IS CLEAN.

Tapping into a wire service was no big feat for something as high tech as the Clipper Chip, but it proved that the chip worked and David was relieved. Wire services transmit the latest news stories out to all the newsrooms and newspapers around the world and charge for the information. It was unusual for a wire service to scramble their computer

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data lines and seemed strange that it took so long for the Clipper Chip to decode the information. David was tempted to try to send a message and find out which wire service he was tapped into. Trying to communicate would be like talking into the phone. The line could be traced, negating his anonymity. Knowing how snoop reporters were, he decided it not worth the risk. Some more information appeared on the screen:

UNEMPLOYMENT NUMBERS ON THE WAY UP, EXPECTED TO REACH 7.2% BY WINTER. NEW HOUSING STARTS DOWN 14%. ECONOMY FALTERS THIRD QUARTER. END OF MESSAGE # 1567.

Reading the messages was like reading the entire paper in less than fifteen minutes, only the facts were given no slants, editorials or opinions. All the useless rhetoric was gone. David wondered why newspapers couldn't be like the wire service, absent of sensationalism or titillation. When the messages started to repeat, David shut off the computer and reached up to disconnect the cord from the terminal board.

It was much brighter in the concrete bunker then it was the previous evening. David looked around the terminal board and it looked like standard phone company terminal equipment. Another test plug had a clear cover with the letters **D-O-S** on the cover and a security seal. If someone tampered with the seal, someone could tell, just like the ones the utility companies use on their meters to keep people out of them. This security seal had **PROPERTY OF US GOVERNMENT** stamped into it.

Something just didn't seem right. This was not a government site, just a private transmission site shared with the phone company and some local television stations. These days all the banks and almost all computer centers encrypted their information, making it almost impossible to tap into any computer without the passwords. But David was a voyeur of information. He loved tapping into huge computer data centers, though he narrowly escaped trouble on more than one occasion. He always wanted to be a private eye or work high security surveillance, but with a Dishonorable Discharge he could never get the clearance to qualify. With a smirk, David thought, *Things will be different now. I have the Clipper Chip.*

David kept tracing the wires that ran out of the security cover, looking for a way to tap into it. The wires ran down the terminal board, turned and headed toward the back corner of the bunker, and then took another ninety-degree turn down into a high channel microwave transceiver. David was familiar with this equipment. It was similar to what he worked on when he was in the service. It was old by today's standards, but for communicating between two places without anybody being able to detect an output signal, it was the best. In Vietnam, they could transmit information anytime and the Viet Cong could not detect them on the air. It was strange that the phone company would use this old military type of microwave equipment. David had never paid any attention to it before because it was stuck in the back rear corner and blended in with the rest of the microwave equipment. The radio bunker was shared between three television stations

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and the phone company. The television translators were on one side and the phone company microwave equipment on the other.

Down on his hands and knees, David compared the microwave equipment. Four of the microwave transceivers had phone company identification on them and the one in the corner had the letters **D-O-S** on it. He wondered what it stood for. David had been to the site often and never saw anybody besides the phone company technicians. Still looking for more clues on the D-O-S transceiver, David had to turn his shoulder a little to get his head around the side.

"David," Paul bellowed from the door.

David jerked his head, banging it on the bottom of the shelf. Jumping to his feet, his heart racing, he turned and yelled, "You scared the hell out of me!"

"I'm sorry. I just woke up and was looking for you." Paul stayed in the doorway.

"That's okay," said David as he rubbed the newly rising knot at the back of his head. "Please don't do it again."

"What are you doing?" Paul asked, seeing the laptop hooked up again.

"After you dozed off, I decided to do some work," David replied evasively, not wanting to volunteer any information about the Clipper Chip. He sort of recalled mentioning it last night and worried he might have said too much.

Paul knew to leave things alone. He stared at the computer and remembered words on the screen the night before, something about entering a United States database. *I know David is involved in something serious. I don't think he remembers telling me about that Clipper Chip and how he could spend twenty years in prison if he got caught. I'll just play dumb.*

Like a kid with his hand in the cookie jar, David awkwardly changed the subject. "How about finishing your story? I barely knew your father. He surely ruined your victory night."

"That he did, and I have forgiven him," Paul replied.

Having succeeded in changing the subject, David walked away, leaving the computer on the shelf. "Let's go back to the truck," said David as he herded Paul away from the bunker.

David sat on the tailgate of the truck and reached into the sack. "This last beer is getting a little warm. Do you want it?" He held it out to Paul.

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"No, thank you. Two is about my limit now."

"There's no sense letting it get warm." David cracked it open and took a big gulp. "Ah." Then another big swig and another, "Ah."

Paul's throat was a little dry after his short nap and the beer did sound good. "On second thought, I could go for a drink."

David leaned forward and handed the can to Paul. Now it was Paul's turn. "Ah!" They both laughed.

When Paul handed the can back to David, an alarm went off in both their heads at the same time. Both men looked at each other, recognizing the big wedge which had been driven between them. Paul unintentionally had put David on the spot. "I'll finish that beer if you don't want anymore," said Paul taking the can back.

David's biases were softening. He wanted real answers. Believing the past held the answer to Paul's homosexuality, he asked Paul to go on. "Paul, I still remember you dated Rita, the best looking girl in high school. Things just don't make sense. Didn't you feel anything for her?"

"You're right, David. Rita was a great looking girl and I did like her. I couldn't believe she asked me to take her to the prom! Up until then my only experience with girls was with Judy, and we never dated or anything. I hadn't even really kissed a girl. Anyway, the prom went great. My acne was gone by then, the tuxedo fit great, everything was going pretty good. After the prom she suggested we drive to the beach. The entire drive there all Rita talked about was herself. She was going to modeling school, then New York, and on and on. Not once did she ask about my plans. It was like I didn't even exist. When we got to the beach and parked. I was unsure of what to do. All I remembered was how much Judy liked to have sex. I just figured Rita would too." Paul stopped, there was no reason to go into any more detail.

David rocked forward on the tailgate. The thoughts of Rita and Paul parked on some darken beach was titillating. "Don't stop now!"

As a priest, Paul knew that David wanted to hear the sexual part of his confession. Going into intimate detail was a fine line. Should he cross it? Could he leave this part out, or was it an important part of his past that needed to be told?

"I slid my hand up under her blouse and she really got tense. I started to caress her breasts and she put her mouth on mine. I learned about kissing really fast! We laid down on the seat, one thing led to another, I was on top of her, and thought she was eager, at least willing. Suddenly, Rita went crazy. She started screaming, scratched my face, called me all kinds of names and then got out of the car."

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"Did you do it to her?" asked David.

"No, thank goodness. I could have been charged with what is known as date rape today. Anyway, she got a ride home with another couple and must have told everyone at school that I tried to rape her. Was I ever confused! For the rest of the school year most of the girls wouldn't even say hi to me. They all hated me."

Sitting there, David was piecing Paul's high school years together. The more he heard the more he needed to know. "Paul, I could have helped you. I can understand how confused you were with women. Didn't your father warn you about going too far with a girl and what could happen?"

"No, he never had time. And when I caught him with his secretary it made me think all that women wanted to do was use men, just in different ways. I always equated my experience with Judy with my father and his secretary."

"What did your Dad do? I mean, did he explain his affair to you or did he ever get caught?"

"He acted like the playoff game and Elaine never happened, neither of us ever mentioned it. I don't know if he even kept the game ball. I never saw it again. I knew he and mom were having problems. By the next summer he let Elaine go and my parent's marriage seemed to get better. I never told my mom. I knew she would feel the same pain I did." Paul smiled slightly with the thought of his mother. He loved her and wondered if his father had told her about their son being gay.

"Is that why you enlisted in the Army? I could never figure out why you turned down a scholarship and deferment. Now I understand. You wanted to get away from a bunch of stuff."

"David, you are partially right about my signing up to get away from all my problems. But I could have gone off to college to get away."

"That's right," said David as he scratched his head and realized the past was not so cut and dry. "Then, why the hell did you go to Nam?"

"Mainly, because of you."

"What?" David replied and was stunned at the same time.

"David, when you enlisted, I thought you were so brave, the way you always talked about doing your part in making the world a better place. That is what really convinced me to join," Paul said.

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David never knew this. He remembered his patriotism and bravery, how he had believed in the American way. But the ugly reality of that war quickly embittered him. He had enlisted in the Navy to get more electronic training and avoid being drafted as a foot soldier.

Paul, not having the same aptitude or academic record ended up a foot soldier in the Army. They both ended up in Vietnam that following year. David was stationed in Saigon on a base doing electronic repairs and Paul a foot soldier on the front line. David never even fired his weapon—Paul fired his more times than he would like to remember.

Paul and David were silent for the longest time. David was still on the tailgate and Paul was standing. The sun beat down on them. There was some sort of purity in its brightness, how it shed a flame on this barren mountain site. There were no dark corners to crawl into, nowhere to hide. Should they go on? Could they go on? Was it important after all these years?

Like some code of silence was about to be broken, a soft refreshing breeze started to blow. There was a horrific experience that Paul had only shared one other time, to Monsignor Grant before he entered the priesthood. Not even in his group therapy for post war trauma had he been able to confront this. Pacing a bit, Paul began. "My first day in Nam, I got pushed out of a helicopter into a rice paddy. I landed in a deep hole face first and underwater. I thought I was going to die and had what some people call a near death experience." Paul remembered the tranquility and the bright light.

David listened more intently. If he were partly responsible for Paul's enlistment, he might be partly to blame for some horrendous war crime. But, Paul was a wounded war hero with an Honorable Discharge. He was the one with the Dishonorable Discharge. He pushed himself back and leaned against the spare tire.

Paul continued. "After about a month in country, five of us went out on a patrol. We hid alongside the road waiting for the enemy." Paul took a deep breath. This one incident is what led him to seek help after the war. It was Monsignor Grant's work with Vets suffering from post war trauma that helped ease his guilt and sparked his interest to ask the Lord for answers. Paul prayed silently, something that he did every day when he recalled this episode.

David could see Paul was praying. The more he heard the more he realized he only saw Paul, but he did not know him. He had heard so much about his best friend's past in the last hours. He was a bit apprehensive about facing more truths, but the fact was, he wanted to know everything.

Paul finished his prayer of silence and continued. "A . . . a . . ." Paul stuttered.

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"Paul, it's okay, if you don't want to go on." David said as he thought. *I bet those guys raped him and that probably made him gay. I just need one concrete answer and then I can forgive him.*

"No, that's okay," Paul said. He took a deep breath and went on. "Anyhow, the five of us were hiding down in this ditch along the road and here come four Viet Cong on bicycles. They had their rifles over the handlebars and before they knew what hit them, we opened fire. Three of them crashed in a bloody pile directly in front of us. One of them started to pedal like crazy and I remember we were all kind of laughing and were in some kind of frenzy. We let the one ride about fifty yards down the road and then someone started shooting at him. Then we all started firing. He must have been hit five times before he fell over. I had this feeling of power or victory come over me. I wanted to kill more." Paul paused for another long period, his hands trembling.

David just sat there, bewildered and speechless. He could hardly breathe. He hadn't expected this. His theory was wrong. He held both hands to his head. He knew he had to hear the rest to put his mind at ease. Uncontrollably, David blurted out, "Don't stop now."

Paul was startled by David's outburst and he moved his head in a circular motion to loosen up his tense neck. "After we killed these men, we had to get them off the road. The four soldiers I was with scrambled up onto the road and threw the three Viet Cong and their bikes into the ditch, and then covered them up with branches. I was the rookie and they sent me down the road to get the other Viet Cong. I remember walking down the road, rifle pointed at this man, thinking, *if he moves I'll shoot him.*"

Paul started to sweat. His voice lowered. "When I got up to him, his leg was wrapped up in the bike and I had to untangle it. Then I threw the bike to the side of the road and rolled him onto his back so that I could pull him off the road. When I put my hands under his arms, I could still feel that he was warm, and he was so small. I started to pull him by his shirt, not wanting to feel the warmth of his flesh. With the pool of blood under him, he slid fairly easily."

Paul stopped, closed his eyes then continued. "When I got him to the edge of the road, a pocket in his pants got hooked on something. I gave an extra tug and heard it rip the cloth off his pants. The sudden release sent both of us into the ditch along the side of the road. There was some dirty water at the bottom and the bank was slimy. I climbed up the side but slipped back in. I was now on top of the bullet riddled body of this tiny soldier, slipping in the slime, blood all over. When I stood on his chest and I pushed off him to get out of that ditch, I heard the air expel from his chest. Petrified, I finally managed to scramble up the bank and back to the road. I saw the pool of blood in the center of the road and the trail where I had just pulled him."

Paul stopped and opened his eyes, small blue veins bulging near his temples. His lips

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and mouth were dry and he took a small drink. "I noticed some papers that came from this man's pocket when it tore off. I knew I had to get rid of any evidence so I bent over to pick up these documents. A photo stared right at me. I picked it up and it continued to stare at me." Paul closed his eyes again. That image of that picture was burned forever into his memory.

David was extremely uncomfortable. This part of war was a taboo subject, too personal, too close. Although people called it war, the real word was killing.

Paul could describe that photo in detail, something he had done in his mind thousands of times. "The photo that I picked up was of this man's family! There were two children, one sitting on the man's lap and one sitting on his wife's lap. He had his arm wrapped around his wife, pulling her into him. The children were no more than five and looked like their mother. She was not smiling and her black smooth hair was pulled up on top of her head. He was very distinguished looking and had an air of determination. I started to get sick. I wished I could jump back into that ditch and trade places with him. Frozen, I just stared at that photo, thinking I should contact his wife and explain to her that this was an accident. Then Sergeant Gardner grabbed the photo from my fingers and threw it into the ditch. He slapped me across the face and said, 'This is war and that was the enemy.' I picked up my rifle and started walking back down the road, thinking to myself, *why, did the enemy have to have a family?*"

David saw the distress and pain on Paul's face and searched for words of comfort. "I don't know what to say and am truly sorry. But, please, I've heard enough." David's war experience was totally different and these stories only renewed unresolved conflicts he did not want to face.

Paul stood there, numbly trying to erase the vision of that photo, relieved that David had heard enough.

The sun was now high in the sky and the breeze had stopped. David looked at his watch and said, "I need to check the battery. It should almost be charged." He headed toward the radio shack and Paul took his place on the tailgate and lay back against the spare tire.

The battery voltage measured 13.8 volts. It had been about 45 minutes and hopefully it would start the truck. David noticed his laptop computer still connected to the modular terminal. He disconnected it, folded down the screen, and as he left the building, the sun momentarily blinded him. Walking back across the landing, he turned to the left and looked at the quiet beauty of the valley below. He thought of what Paul had said—he listened but could not hear.

So much had changed over the last twenty-four hours. David still wanted a concrete explanation. Maybe it was his brush with death or the things Paul was telling him, but

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various outlooks were wrestling inside him. David walked up to Paul and said, "The generator will only run for about another hour. I think the battery is almost charged enough to start the truck."

"That's good," replied Paul with a yawn, suffering from lack of sleep.

He was then startled by David's abrupt question: "Just give me one good reason why?"

"Why? Are you asking why am I going to die?"

"No, not that," David said. "I just can't understand it. I mean you had your problems with girls and your father, and many men have horror stories about the war, but . . ." David stopped. *Maybe it's not that important*, he thought.

"But what?" asked Paul.

The words just came out of David's mouth. "But what made you want to be homosexual?"

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