

## A Rusted Bronze Star

By Sarah Bugg

I haul another patient's file over to the desk and grunt with the effort of wrenching open the heavy plastic binder. Let's call him Philip Harvey, DOB 5/7/27. The second page in the binder, tucked just behind the sheet that tells me about his fasting sugars in the 400s and his massive doses of Seroquel, is a brief military record. This page is included in each of the resident's files; all are veterans. As I read about this Mr. Harvey, I am impressed. In poorly aligned typeset are descriptions of the valorous acts that earned him two bronze stars and a victory ribbon. Below these are lines devoted to the listing of other awards, the names of which have already been effaced by the friction of the pages of medical problems included in his tome.

Further down the page is a listing of the bases where he was stationed and the skirmishes in which he participated. He saw the bombs fall in Hiroshima. He earned the victory ribbon in Okinawa. I pause and do some math. He had to have joined up before he was legally allowed. What zeal. This man knew what he was about.

A man parked just a few feet from the nursing station interrupts my thoughts. Over and over he calls from his wheelchair, "Why won't this thing turn on?" A nurse walks by, the same one that walked by 2 minutes ago, but no matter. "Hey, missy! Hey! How do you get this car to turn on, anyhow?"

She turns around, somehow with as much patience as she mustered 2 minutes ago—and 7 minutes ago, and 11 minutes ago. She throws up her hands in mock exasperation. "You know, that un's busted. Don't run no more. We're gonna have' ta work on it."

A look of dejection overcomes the veteran. He is trapped. This fact alone has passed through the iron curtain that now hangs across the mental space where so many facts used to pass unhindered. Yet, this fact is enough to cause an effect. Though he cannot name this place, he knows this is not a place that he has chosen.

As I watch, the furrow of sadness that has formed between his eyebrows grows smooth once again. The slight pout of his lips retracts. Slowly, the look of dejection melts from his face. Nothing steps in to replace it. His features lie settled, ready to hold the empty expression for quite some time. Until—a tech rounds the corner and he begins again, "Hey, girlie. Hey!" She has just arrived for the day. This is her first interaction with our dear friend.

"What can I do for ya, hon?" she responds.

“You see those eggs over there?” He points to the rack of patient files. “Well, my car is busted and I need to go get ‘em.” She looks at me, shrugging. I grin and shrug in return. Offering a pleasantry, she strides away. Once again, I watch as the simmering frustration in his eyes slowly extinguishes itself. His mouth, hanging open, poised for another plea, begins to close. His expression is once again as empty as the gas tank on the manual wheelchair in which he sits. In the quiet, I set about resuming my previous thought process. Mr. Harvey still needs a physical exam. I mosey down to the room number listed on the spine of the enormous binder.

The Price is Right wheel is slowly revolving on the television screen. There is no one in the room to watch it just overshoot the \$10 slot. Back at the nursing station, I ask the charge, “Have you met our newest resident, Mr. Harvey? Do you know where I could find him?”

The nurse sniggers. With a single finger, she gestures across the station. Mr. Harvey has just spotted me. “Hey! Hey girl! How do you start this thing? I think it might have a lousy spark plug!”

For this is the place where men come to rest as the forgetting and the reams of medications efface their glory. This place where bronze stars grow rusty and eventually the blasts of bombshells no longer awaken men at night. Where the forgetting brings both loss and relief.

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