

## Some Mothers' Sons

The two vans pulled up to the entrance of the orthopedic wing of the Veteran's Hospital on the north shore of Long Island at almost the same time. The side doors of both opened and the elevated platforms lowered two men seated on wheel chairs. The chairs rolled off and the men smiled and nodded to each other. One man was missing his right leg and the other, his left leg, both below the knee.

"Maybe we can work a deal buying a pair of shoes together."

"Do you like black or brown?"

Both laughed out loud.

"How're you doing, buddy? My name is Matt."

"Kevin. Where did you leave yours?"

"Some tiny village in Iraq near Bagdad. You?"

"A village near Kabul in Afghanistan."

"Hey, at least we made it back to the States. Are you here to be fitted?"

"Yep. You too?"

"There goes our shoe partnership."

They both rolled into the hospital without the help of their attendants. With their paperwork in hand, the woman at the front desk told them which way to go. It was in the waiting area adjoining the gym used for physical therapy that they met Al, who

was missing both legs below the knee and waiting patiently in a wheelchair.

“You guys here to get fitted? I’m here to get updated with some modern stuff. They swear I’ll be able to walk with them. Maybe even run. I’d settle for walk. My name is Al. I dropped these two in Nam on some damn hill we really didn’t need.”

“I’m Kevin. My foot is still in Afghanistan. That’s Matt over there. His leg is somewhere in Iraq.”

As they waited to be attended to and fitted, they spoke about their wars and the futility of what they went through. In their own way, they tried to trade jokes about their current situation. Al made the first attempt at being funny.

“Once we get the new legs we could start a physically challenged chorus line. We’d just have to hope that the legs stayed on when we did high kicks.”

“Tap dancing is definitely out of the question,” Kevin put in.

“So is ballet,” Matt said, laughing.

One by one they went into the examining room and were attended to. Fittings and physical therapy were scheduled for the three of them and they were happy about the prospect of meeting again at the hospital. When they were finished for the day, Matt said, “Our vans won’t be back until four o’clock. Why don’t we roll

down to the coffee shop and shoot the breeze until then? It ain't a bar but it's better than nothing."

"Sounds good to me."

"Me, too," Al quickly said.

Over coffee and donuts, they told each other about themselves, how their injuries changed their lives and what thoughts they had, if any, about the future. The conversation became more serious and the joking was replaced with some soul searching revelations. Somehow, the three were able to become intimate very quickly. They spoke of feelings they had not shared with anyone before. The cafeteria became the setting for a very meaningful group therapy session conducted by them.

They discovered that they all lived along the north shore of the island. Al, the oldest, lived in Port Jefferson, in a small waterfront cottage left to him by his grandfather. He and his wife separated soon after he returned from Viet Nam. His depression, use of drugs and alienation from her pushed her away and gave her no choice but to move out. She still called him regularly to see how he was doing, and was still hopeful about getting back together again. Al was able to find a job as a dispatcher for a local trucking company and drove his hand-controlled station wagon to work. He had won a hard-fought battle with drugs and both he and his wife

were proud that he was now clean. He told Kevin and Matt that maybe with the “new pins to walk on, things might go better.”

Kevin lived in Smithtown with his parents. They had a small delicatessen and Kevin worked the cash register and made homemade salads, both while perched on a high stool. He wanted to get back to college and study to be a counselor for war vets or kids, but felt that he “had to get his own head straight first.” He had high hopes for the new prosthesis.

Matt lived with his girlfriend in Wading River in a small rented cottage. She was an artist and with her watercolors, he was working on a children’s book about war and how it changed people’s lives.

It pleased the men to learn that they were “practically neighbors.” They looked forward to getting together after each of the physical therapy sessions and sharing thoughts. Sooner than they expected, the three were able to walk across the gym on their new legs. They shared their happiness and new found pride.

Over coffee, Matt took their relationship a bit further when he said, “I wasn’t really decided about doing it, but now, maybe it’s something we could do together. My local high school, where I played football, by the way, asked me to come in around Veteran’s Day to speak in the auditorium about war. Why don’t the three of us go? How about it?”

Kevin and Al looked at each other and nodded. "It's not like going fishing, but it sounds good to me," Al said.

"I never spoke in front of a large group, but it's got to be easier than being in a battle. O.K.," Kevin smiled.

"Give me directions and I'll pick you guys up. I have an old station wagon and I'll even wash it for the accession."

Kevin and Matt looked at each other, hesitantly.

"Hey, it's got hand controls."

"O.K.," they all laughed together.

On the day of the event, they all wore their army uniforms, neatly pressed and inspection ready.

Al said, "You guys really clean up nice."

"You, too."

The auditorium was full and silent as they walked on stage. They sat carefully on the three chairs prepared for them, as the audience applauded them. As they had planned during the car ride, all three raised their pants legs to partially reveal their prosthesis.

Al spoke first to a shocked audience. "Sometimes in war, you leave something behind."

"But, we're glad we came back. War is very ugly, but it makes you see you how beautiful peace can be," Matt continued.

“And we’re here to tell you a bit of what it was like,” Kevin said as he cleared his throat.

Their talk went very well. They spoke of their fears, their feelings of sadness and depression and the joy of coming home. Many girls, as well as boys, had tears in their eyes when it was over. The three men were proud and moved by their own presentation. They walked off the stage to a standing ovation. When they stopped for lunch at a small seafood restaurant along the shore, they share the thought that their high school talk was the most meaningful thing each had done since coming home from war.

As they shared clams on the half-shell and a pitcher of beer, Al broke the serious atmosphere. “Now that we’ve done something important together, let’s plan to go fishing. I have a buddy who runs a boat out of Montauk. We could catch some nice stripers. I’ll drive. How about it?”

“Does he carry heavy-duty life preservers?” Kevin asked.

“Can we fish sitting?” Matt asked, half jokingly.

“Yes, and yes. What about next Saturday? I’ll call him.”

The men even enjoyed the ride along the ocean on Route 27, as they munched egg sandwiches and drank coffee that they bought along the way. Al’s buddy Rick welcomed them warmly and the day turned out to be a huge success. As they all cleaned their

cooler full of striped bass and bluefish on the dock, Al asked Rick about an old party fishing boat moored on the other side of the pier.

“It’s been here a while. The owner passed away about a year ago. It used to be a real fine boat. Needs a lot of tender loving care now. His wife hasn’t had an offer in a while. She probably would let it go cheap. What are you thinking of, Al?”

“I’m thinking that the three of us, or maybe even the four of us, Rick, could go into business. It’s not such a crazy idea. What do you think?”

Kevin and Matt just looked at each other. Rick said, “I’d be in competition with myself.”

“Not the way I’m thinking. We could adapt that boat to physically challenged Vets like us. A specialized fishing boat.”

“With little seats and heavy duty life preservers,” Matt said, warming up to the idea.

“It beats my job in the deli,” Kevin blurted out.

The four of them circled and put their hands together in the middle.

“We might even have fun while we make some money!” Al cheered loudly. The future for the three vets began to look brighter.

Hank Heitmann