

Tender Mercies

by Michael McManus

After he was wounded in Iraq, Wilson Jenkins came home to Monroe. He had suffered two wounds. The first was a waxy-looking scar on his left leg. A twisting crevice of flesh, it started inches above the ankle and ended on his outer hip. In the field hospital the surgical team had operated on Wilson for four hours. But even after that there was still shrapnel left in him and many days it hurt him when he walked.

The second wound was not visible. Wilson would not talk about it. The day following the surgery a pulmonary embolism nearly killed him. He went out of his body and stayed there until he decided it was better to go back. While he was out there was no luminous tunnel of light to enter. There was no team of doctors to look down on as they tried to resuscitate him. But he knew he had died as surely as he had lived. He carried the memory of this thing, for he did not know what to call it, with him at all times. Many nights this thing would not let him sleep. On other nights he would wake up before his racing heart, feeling like it would break free from his chest. Unlike many other nineteen-year-old young men, Wilson no longer believed in his own immortality.

Monroe, Louisiana, the place where he was born and raised was a small city of old money and narrow minds. It was still rooted in the old southern aesthetics. Many of the people who lived there found it difficult to move forward from the past. Wilson used to be one of them. But his time in the Marine Corps had showed him how naïve he was to what was in the rest of the world. It was a dynamic place and truly being part of it had changed his attitudes towards other ethnic groups. He had learned to never underestimate anybody, including himself.

While Wilson recovered in the hospital he often recalled what life was like before the war. Sometimes the memories helped him forget what had happened to him and sometimes they made him feel melancholy. Before the war in the summer he would take his father's

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bass boat and drive to Farmerville and go bass fishing on Lake D'Arbonne. There was an old cypress tree near the Bernice Highway Bridge and this was his favorite place to cast his topwater lure. In his mind it was always easy to be successful. He could see the silver flash the bass made when it shot out of the water, shaking like it had been shocked so it could work the lure free. He could see a solitary blue heron standing on its spindly legs in the shallow, lily-covered water near shore. There were snowy white egrets and as they passed overhead they made shadows on the dark water. It was always very hot and after he started the boat back and took off across the lake the wind felt good on his face.

In Iraq it seemed like he was a million miles away from everything. Wilson missed his friends and he often wondered what they were doing. In high school he was a gregarious, popular student, although his acerbic wit sometimes offended people. If this happened, which was not often, Wilson always felt sorry for what was said. His apologies were buoyed by a wide smile and this exorcised any ill feelings someone might hold against him.

Now in late July the daytime temperatures stayed near one-hundred degrees. Wilson was not home one week before he fell back in with his old friends. The war made him think he might have trouble fitting back in. But there was no trouble. Everything was easy and soon Wilson and his buddies were back to their pleasant ways. They would wait until sunset and drive through the woods north of Monroe until they came to a sandy beach along the Ouachita River. In this place the river was wide and ran quiet. There were always plenty of mosquitoes. Wilson and his buddies would make start a fire from piled driftwood so the smoke would keep the mosquitoes away. They would sit as close to the fire as they could on sun-bleached logs.

Now that he was around his friends, Wilson began to feel young again. In Iraq he had not felt young anymore. He knew that he was not the only one who felt this way. It had happened to almost everyone. There were other young men who had aged much more than Wilson. They looked like they were sick. The aging first began

in their eyes. In combat after a man saw the dead for the first time he would change. His eyes lost their radiance as if he had been killed too. Like the dead they were darker and seemed unable to reflect the sunlight.

But during those nights along the river, Wilson's eyes turned bright. He would laugh loud and hard. He drank beer and became part of the common remembering that passes between friends. They told old stories in new ways. In this the stories were like wood smoke because they never held the same shape. There were also times when they would feel some sudden nostalgia for what had passed. Weighed down by its unexpected arrival, they would stop talking and stare into the fire. The fire wood would crack and hiss as a million cicadas thrummed from the trees. Out in the river a fish would jump and come back down into the ripples which spread out in widening circles.

Sometimes Wilson's friends would ask him about the war. He told them about the huge desert and its heat. He talked about the mechanization and the firepower and the food and the medical care. He talked about the logistics of war and in this he told them nothing at all. There were many things he would not talk about unless it was with other men who had experienced combat.

* * *

Monroe was well known for its garden district. In it there were wonderfully renovated grand mansions. Some sat along the Ouachita River. The landscaped yards were surrounded by magnolia and towering oak trees. The grass was very green and the cars that sat in the driveways always appeared as if they had been detailed that day. Wilson had no desire to live there but ten days after he had been home he was invited to a party in one of the larger river front homes. The party was given by a first-year law student at LSU named Peter Breard. His parents were both attorneys and before them their fathers, respectively, now both retired, had been attorneys. Because the Breards were wealthy they believed that their alliances should be with persons of similar affluence. Peter Breard agreed with his parents about this. He believed in an

unspoken caste system based on assets, income, and inheritance. Wilson had received his invitation through a friend of a friend of Peters and because he considered it almost hearsay he was hesitant to go. But he did and during the first hour he had a wonderful time. The pretty girls, many who attended college, were interested in learning about Wilson's scars and he was equally interested in learning about the girls. The learning didn't last long because after one hour Peter Breard had drunk four beers and two shots of Crown Royal and his face was very flushed when in front of the living room fireplace he demanded to know how many people Wilson had killed.

"Five hundred," Wilson said, "with a single bullet." Then he walked away.

Breard launched into a sarcastic tirade. "Don't turn your back on me you brain washed bullet stopper. The only things you've killed in your life were the fire ants in your backyard."

The Corps had taught Wilson that it was acceptable to experience the company of idiots until such persons exceeded their idiocy. This teaching was not always foolproof, because sometimes the lines of demarcation were not clear, but that night they were very clear. There was something to be said for clarity. When Peter Breard would not stop his belligerency, Wilson shook his head to show that there was nothing left between them.

"Fuck you very much for the party," Wilson said as walked out the front door.

Before he drove home, Wilson walked across Riverside Drive. The levee was twenty feet high and from the top he stood looking down on the river. The full moon's reflection shimmered on the water. The more he stared into that white eye the more it was like a sage who could resurrect certain moments in one's life until they were razor sharp and quick to cut.

Wilson knelt down on one knee as the razor cut into him. In Baghdad there had been a full moon, too. Three Hummers were on night patrol. From time to time sporadic small arm's fire echoed across Baghdad. Wilson rode in the second Hummer in the passenger's seat. The convoy had reached a long stretch of road

where most of the buildings were blown up and uninhabitable. The convoy slowed to pass around the burned out shell of a car. The IED was inside a dog carcass, which detonated between the first and second Hummers.

In those first seconds after the explosion Wilson felt weightless from the effects of the deafening concussion. He believed he might have died. His body was numb except for the ringing in his ears. He wasn't sure where he was. The shouting that came through was an ambiguous mix of rage and fear. Sand and dirt settled on the Hummer.

As he struggled to push open the twisted door, Wilson saw the blood and torn legging. The pain wasn't felt much yet because the adrenaline covered it. He staggered out the door and limped towards the lead Hummer. But he could not get close to it because the shooting flames were fanned by the desert wind. The air smelled of burning diesel. Wilson felt sick inside. Three days earlier Wilson had gotten drunk with Sanchez and Lawrence. Now he cried out to them as he suffered with the hopeless despair only war can bring. The suffocating heat was like a blast furnace. It kept forcing Wilson back, singeing his hair and eyebrows. M-16 rounds started going off inside the wreckage. The Marines stood there feeling helpless, unable to do anything but radio for a medevac.

That night at the end of his surgery Wilson got eighty-nine stitches in his leg. The next morning the blood clot formed in a deep vein behind his right knee. Wilson believed the terrible pain came from the stitches and surgery and so he didn't tell anyone about it. Later that day when the blood clot reached his lung he couldn't breathe. Everything in his body suffered if he moved or talked. Later he was told by his doctors that he almost died.

After the night on the levee it seemed only moments before Wilson's friends had gone off to college. Wilson had planned on going to college, too, but he was not ready yet, so he slept in until nine o'clock and started staying up late, reading novels, and thinking about his future. He thought also about the past and Iraq and his mother who had died from brain cancer when Wilson was

ten. It was terrible to watch how she suffered and died and the affect it had on Wilson's father, who never remarried. In the last few years, Wilson began to understand why his father had not remarried and why he no longer said anything about Wilson sleeping in late. Before Wilson went to Iraq, he was not allowed to sleep in much longer than sunrise. He would have to mow the grass and take out the trash and he would still do those things. But Wilson had learned that certain things in life change the ways a man lives his life and looks back at it.

Wilson's father worked at the GM plant where had made eighty thousand dollars a year assembling headlights. He liked to joke about his 'bright future.' During the first week in September he came home from work a few hours later than he usually did. He came into the den with two beers and gave one to Wilson.

"Wilson, after work I went over to Sal's Saloon. Jimmy Muldoon was there."

"The funeral home guy?"

"Yes. That guy. Muldoon's Funeral Home. I like Jimmy because he doesn't let his money make him believe than everyone else even though he's mad a killing." Eric Jenkins laughed.

"That's lame," Wilson said.

"Yeah, I know. But it works. Anyway, I told him that you were going to wait a while before you started college. Before I said anything else, he told me he has a job for you if you want it."

"Doing what?"

"I'm not sure. But if you feel like it, go see him in the morning."

"Sure. Why not? I could use the money."

Muldoon's Funeral Home was a sprawling, green and white single wood and brick building that was built in 1910. Its Victorian design gave the place a somber appearance. It was two blocks from the river and one block from the Ouachita Parish Courthouse. The dead and the convicted were never far apart.

A girl who appeared to be about Wilson's age looked up from her desk when he walked in the front door. She smiled and brushed back her long red hair. Her penetrating blue eyes seemed confident

and kind. She was dressed in blue jeans and a white short-sleeved blouse, which was accented by a black choker around her neck. She stood up and smiled. Her teeth were perfect. When she was sitting down, Wilson imagined that she was taller, but when she walked out from behind her desk she wasn't five feet tall if she was an inch.

"Good morning, can I help you?"

"Hi. My name is Wilson Jenkins. I'm here to see Mr. Muldoon." Wilson wanted to know if she was dating anybody. She was beautiful. He felt less lonely the moment he saw her.

"Oh, you mean Jimmy. He's my dad. He told me that you might come by this morning. My name's Molly. I graduated high school the same year that you did. But I went to Ouachita Christian. Weren't you a wide receiver on the football team?"

Wilson shook her hand. It was tiny and warm. His hand was large enough to palm a basketball. It made hers disappear. He could smell her perfume. It was his just compensation for getting up. He had been unsure whether or not he would visit Mr. Muldoon. Now he was thankful he had. He blushed when he realized that he had held onto her hand as she tried to take it away. Her cheeks dimpled when she smiled.

"You've got a good memory. Yeah, that was me. I could catch anything thrown my way but I couldn't run worth dying for." Wilson laughed and looked around. "Maybe I shouldn't have said that?"

"Oh," she said, playfully thumping his shoulder. "Don't be so hard on yourself. I've heard every dead joke that's been said and I know I'll hear them all again. Come on. Dad's back in his office."

Jimmy Muldoon stood up from behind his large mahogany desk when Molly led Wilson into the office. As she turned to leave he didn't want her to go. Wilson had forgotten how good a girl could smell. He wondered what she looked like in shorts.

"Hello, Wilson. I'm Jimmy Muldoon." They shook hands. "Please sit down."

Jimmy wore a dark suit and a white shirt centered by a red tie checkered with tiny black spots. He was tall with a thin nose, serious dark eyes that, when he spoke, looked upon Wilson as if he

were a customer. His long fingers seemed suited for a pianist. On his desk sat a vase filled with fresh flowers.

"Thank you, sir."

"No, Jimmy. Thank you. I can't say that enough. Thank you for everything you've done for your country."

Wilson had heard that kind of talk a lot. Many times it seemed too rhetorical, like the things a politician might say during a reelection campaign. But not now. Wilson did not believe he was on the receiving end of any kind of hyperbole or patronizing dogma. He believed that Jimmy was sincere.

"You're very kind, sir."

"Ah, don't call me that. Call me Jimmy. Just like you dad calls me. Okay?"

"Jimmy it is."

"My father did two tours of Nam. He was at Khe San. Came home with a Purple Heart and a lot of silence about what happened over there."

Wilson straightened up. "Really? Is he here?"

"No. Damn drunk driver killed him on I-20 near Ruston. Lat year."

"Man, I'm sorry. That sucks."

"I could tell he would have liked you. Well, let's get to the job. Good help is hard to find these days. Especially in the funeral home business. They think the dead are going to come back to life, when actually people are just dying to get in here!" Jimmy laughed at his joke while Wilson wondered how many times he had told it.

"Yeah, I guess." Wilson glanced at the crucifix on the wall.

"Wilson, I need a runner, someone who will pick up bodies at the hospitals, nursing homes, or maybe someone's house. I think you get my point. Sometimes you'll get an accident. But most of the time, if it's too bad, the paramedics will scoop them up and slide them in the body bags. And when you get back, we'll take care of the rest. Here at Muldoon's Funeral Home we pride ourselves in tender mercies. That's important in this type of business."

"Why do you think I'd be good for this type of work?"

“Wilson, my dad believed that men who had gone to war and saw combat were perfect for this kind of work. They could handle the reality of death much better than other people. You've been to war. I'm assuming you've seen the dead. I'm assuming you can deal with it better than most people. Am I right? I hope so. The pay is twelve dollars an hour.”

The work was not as bad as Wilson expected. Most of the times the dead were covered in sheets or already in body bags at the hospitals or nursing homes. They smelled of disinfectants and there was always someone to help Wilson put the body on the stretcher and into the hearse. Sometimes he saw the dead in the embalming room but only the feet were exposed. A white tag the size of a dollar bill was always tied to the big toe.

He got used to it all. He enjoyed the slow times when he got to talk to Molly. He learned that she would sometimes help with an embalming. It was just like going to the grocery store. Unlike many other girls who were Molly's age, she was much more mature. Maybe, he thought, it was because she had been around the dead her entire life and this made her appreciate life more than most people.

On the first day of November when Wilson came to work he found Molly standing behind her desk. She was talking on the phone. Her conversation had her laughing to the point where she was nearly in tears. As Wilson approached her she looked up and waved and mouthed a sincere but silent hello. Then she went back to laughing. Wilson expected it to turn into a shriek. He smiled at her. *Today I'm going to ask her out*, he thought. *Nothing can change that. I'll ask her out and maybe I will tell her about the war. She knows the dead. She will understand.*

He walked down the hall to the embalming room door where a clipboard was kept on top of a small wooden stand. There were no names on the pickup log. If a body was being embalmed, Molly always told Wilson so he would know to take the long way around to get to the employee break room. In there he would watch television while he waited for a pickup.

Wilson walked into the embalming room. He checked his cell phone volume to make sure it was not muted in case Jimmy called. After the door had shut behind him, Wilson looked up. He saw it all and could not move.

“Good morning,” the doctor said, greeting him through her surgical mask. “Who are you?”

On the stainless steel table lay a young white man with dark decaying skin. On his right shoulder he had large open wounds from tumbling on the road after he had been thrown from his rolling truck. His skull cap had been cut away, exposing the brain with its pink segmented sections. The body shook back and forth. The doctor's hands were up inside the rib cage where the chest had been cut down the middle, pulled back, and held in place with stainless steel instruments. The body shook and Wilson heard the doctor grunt as she pulled on something.

“Do you work for Jimmy? Are you here to help?” The body continued to shake. One arm fell off the table and a few seconds it swung like a grotesque pendulum.

Molly met him in the hall. She ran her hands through her hair as if she was getting ready to tie it into a pony tail. “Wilson, I'm so sorry. I was on the phone. I forget to tell you about the autopsy. Sometimes St. Francis Hospital does autopsies here. I'm sorry, Wilson. I'm so, so sorry.”

Outside it was uncommonly hot for October. The heat index had reached one hundred and ten. Already Wilson's shirt was sweat-stained. It was so hot he felt like he would pass out. He was having trouble catching his breath. In the street a car slowed and a featureless face stared out from the passenger side. Wilson stumbled around the corner of the building. Up ahead he saw the river. The sight of it was almost comforting.

Wilson closed his eyes as he thought about Sanchez and Lawrence. He fell into their memories and tried walking faster but it was difficult because the heat from the sun poured down on him like molten lead. His throat was dry like he was back in the desert. His breath came in quick gasps. Suddenly there was a Hummer in the

street on fire and the smell of burning diesel. He looked back and saw Molly. She stood looking with her hands covering her mouth. Wilson turned back to find the river and staggered forward a few steps before he started to run. He was terrified now because he believed if he did not reach the water he would suffocate from the heat.

