

# Stories from the War

*by* Nathaniel Tower

He didn't know how to tell his story. It wasn't an easy story to tell. There certainly was a clear beginning, but it didn't make much sense to start at the beginning. There was no way to end the story either; the ending seemed to last forever.

For the last sixty years he had been living the American Dream, a dream that existed only when awake. It was a dream that consisted of a happy marriage, a beautiful home, and wonderful kids and then grandkids. At night though, the dream always disappeared as the nightmare took over. Nightly it changed. While the dream was always the same, the nightmare varied every night. There was just too much to fit all into one.

"You had another nightmare last night," his wife told him over grapefruit juice and bran cereal.

"Did I?" he asked in that detached voice that he always associated with her observations. In reality, he wasn't detached at all; that was just how he wanted to appear, and so he barely looked up as he slurped a spoonful of bran flakes and fat free milk into his mouth.

"Yes, honey, you did. You woke up screaming. That's eight nights in a row now."

"Is it?"

"Yes, honey, it is. Do you want to talk about them?"

"I don't remember them," he lied through another slurp. The nightmares had been with him for sixty years. Of course he remembered them. He didn't need the nightmares to remember the stories. The nightmares were not vivid enough to do the stories

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justice. They simply were reminders, reminders that he didn't need, but reminders that terrified him nonetheless. No one could ever forget what he had seen. But that was the nature of war.

"Why don't you ever want to talk about them?" she pressed on. Living with these unknown nightmares for sixty years had not been easy on her either, but she had tried to be a patient and understanding wife through it all. The man had taken such great care of her and their children. For awhile, she had even been able to sleep through his kicks and sweats and cries in the night. Their life together had been satisfying enough that his years of secrets had been okay. But with the cancer getting worse each day, she wanted to know what the man had been struggling with all his life. She wanted to know before she died.

"There's nothing to talk about," he replied, rising from the table and pouring half of his milk-moistened bran flakes into the sink.

"If you ever want to talk, I'm here for you." As she said these words, she rose from her chair and gently touched the shoulder that was busy scrubbing the wet particles of bran out of the ceramic bowl.

"I know you're here. I just don't have anything I need to talk about." He slowed his scrubbing and let her gently caress his shoulder in a consistent circular pattern similar to that of waxing a car. He knew she was trying to heal him of his scars, but he also knew the scars were far too deep to ever heal. If he had thought there had been any hope for healing, he gladly would have shared his stories with her years ago.

Again he woke up sweating that night, his upper body jolting straight up past military sit-up position, a fierce scream accompanying the sudden jolt. Tonight had been flak storms and shrapnel showers. Last night had been alligator-filled swamps. The night before had been the faceless body of his best friend blown to

pieces by a land mine. Before that, he saw mutilated bodies, raped women and children, and countless other tragedies that weren't even worth mentioning. They were so far back in time that it didn't matter anymore; there was nothing that could be done to rectify any of them, yet they haunted him constantly. There never had been anything that he could have done. He had just been planted in the middle, an innocent bystander that had joined because everyone else had joined. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Looking back, it had been the right thing to do at the time. But the moment he had been dropped off in that jungle, he had ceased to have any innocence.

They had gotten married right before he had left even though she had only been seventeen and they had only known each other for six months. Again, it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. They would have a big church ceremony when he returned. After one year and nine months, she didn't think he would return, but she remained innocent, thousands and thousands of miles away from any of the tragedies. She was detached. No matter how many stories she read or heard, it would never have the same impact on her. You had to be there to know.

When he returned after two years and one month, they forgot all about the church wedding. She mentioned it once a couple months after the return, but he was too jaded for that. He didn't see much point in having a big fancy celebration after the things he had seen.

The moment his torso lurched forward in the bed, she placed her hand soothingly on his back. "Shhhh," she whispered comfortingly in an angelic voice capable of bringing withered tulips back to life. The hand repeated the waxing motions from earlier in the day. "It's okay honey. It's okay."

She didn't believe the words she said. Neither did he. He couldn't explain why these nightmares grew more and more intense as he

grew further away from the experiences. They should have vanished long ago just like all those lives had.

"Please tell me about it," she said, trying not to grit her teeth as the aches in her head pounded violently against her temples. The headaches were getting worse now. She knew she only had a few weeks, maybe a few months if she was lucky, although she wasn't entirely sure she would consider that luck at this point.

"There's nothing to tell," he panted. "Just a dream. Go back to sleep. You need your rest."

Even through his painful demons he protected and cared for her.

"Harold," she said to him the next day while they read the morning paper, he the business section, she the lifestyle.

"Yes, ma'm?" he muttered without looking up, his reading glasses secured tightly on the bridge of his nose. "Did you know that another American company was sold to the damn foreigners today? Pretty soon we'll have nothing left. Is this what I fought for?" Seldom did he make references to the days of the war, but when he did they always were politically charged.

"Harold," she said tersely. "I want to talk to you."

"We're talking, honey. We're talking just fine. We always talk fine." He turned the page, pretending to continue the story from the front.

"Harold." This time it was a no-nonsense shout. It had been many years since she had used this tone. It might have been the first time since their three girls had grown and left to have children of their own. This was the only thing left that could really faze him. He was all ears now.

"You've got my attention, dear. Now what do you want to talk about?"

"I want you to tell me what you dreamt about last night." She had put the paper down and was demanding that he make eye contact. He did.

"I don't remember." He looked away momentarily as he spoke, not willing to lie while looking in his wife's eyes.

"Yes you do. Now tell me."

"There's no need for you to be haunted, too."

"But I am haunted, Harold. Any time that something haunts you, it haunts me too. I've been haunted for sixty years just like you. Ever since you came home you've been different. I haven't loved you any less for it, but I have been haunted every moment right along with you. That's what happens when you give your heart and soul away to someone. You experience everything they experience. You share everything. The joys they feel as well as the pain and horrors. I don't always want to, but I can't make the ghosts go away either. As long as we're both alive, I'll be haunted if you are."

"Then there's no need to talk about it."

"I'd like to know what's been haunting us for the past sixty years. I want you to tell me before I die."

"You're not dying anytime soon," he lied.

Both had tears welling in their eyes behind their reading glasses, but neither was willing to be the first to let one spill. Their eyes were dams fighting against the swelling waters.

"I think I know when I'm dying. And I know I'm dying soon, whether you want to believe it or not."

Harold was the first to relinquish a tear. She leaned in a bony finger and wiped it away. He thought the finger was beautiful and gently took hold of her hand before she could pull it away. He tasted the tear. It tasted like two years of hell. It tasted like sixty years of swelling pain. It tasted like his wife was dying. He longed to taste her tears, too.

"Tell me before I die. It's the last thing I want to hear." A tear was beginning to escape her eye, but she was too strong to let it fall. With a quick blink of the eyelid, the tear remained stationary in the swelling ocean.

"Why do you want that to be the last thing you hear?"

"Because nothing could show me that you love me more than your deepest secrets and fears. And because that will make the pain of death feel like the joys of eighty-five Christmases."

"You haven't experienced eighty-five Christmases."

"I know. That's why I want to."

He creased the paper, still holding her hand with a loving firmness. "I'll tell you before you die."

"Thank you." A tear finally rolled down her cheek. He quickly scooped it up with his dried hand. Instantly he felt refreshed, as if that tear contained a thousand years of peaceful life.

For the next three weeks, the nightmares continued, growing in intensity each night. Sometimes they came more than once in a night. He still could not bring himself to disclose the information to

his wife, but she wasn't dying yet.

Then the expected happened. She was rushed to the hospital after fainting and hitting her head on the dresser. The patch of congealed blood brought back horrifying images, and for the first time in a long time he saw the nightmares during his waking hours.

"Lucy has only a few hours to live," the doctor told him. "She is conscious and can hear you, but she can't really speak much."

Again the tears swelled in his eyes, but he fought stronger than before to hold them back. He would not allow her to see these tears escape. He would not allow her to know that this was worse than every moment of those two years of hell, those two years of constant fear, those two years of torture and death and destruction and all of the unsightly images that accompanied them. He gladly would have fought for sixty more years in conditions ten times worse if he could prolong her life until the end of his. But he couldn't. The only thing left that he could fight was the tears that tried desperately to escape his eyes. He held them firmly inside, nearly swallowing them to the point of invisibility as he entered the room to see his wife of over sixty years for the last time. She wouldn't have been able to see the tears, but surely she would have known they were there.

When he entered, she spoke but two sentences. "I love you. Now tell me." That was it, her last six words, none more than a syllable. And somehow he knew that she wouldn't utter even another sound before all life vanished from her body. So he sat beside her, and with great strength, he told her what he believed she needed to hear.

"...and surrounded in the field of the most beautiful flowers, we saved the young boy's life." It didn't matter that he changed the two most important details of the story. What mattered was the beautiful smile that swept across the adorable face that he had fallen in love with back in 1941. It was the same smile. It was the same face. She

didn't need to see the horrors he experienced during those years. She just needed him to tell her a story as her life finally came to an end after a long and painful struggle.

When he went to bed that night, he didn't see anything except her beautiful smiling face.

