The first time Tommy walked in the diner was sixty years ago with his wife. He was wearing old jeans, a beat up band tee shirt, and some old sneakers. Tommy walked in, laughed with his wife about something she had said, sat three booths down, facing the busy New York streets. He told me the red booths, the tiled floor, and the chrome countertop reminded him of life before the war. He said he missed the purity the diner brought. That day, I came over and took the order, Tommy’s burger-no pickle and black coffee and the wife’s turkey melt and a Coke. Two weeks in, I knew that order by heart, still do.

Years passed and eventually only Tommy came around. Things changed, they always do, but Tommy still stuck around. After his wife passed, he still ate his burger and drank his coffee black, however now he would pull out a picture of her, rest it against the napkin dispenser, and just let it sit there until he paid the bill. He would pick up the picture, stuff it into his jean pocket, tip, and leave.

One rainy Saturday, Tommy walks in, sits, and orders. However, things aren’t looking bright. “You know Eddie, she died. I know that. I’ve always known that, and I was scared, but I’m not now. What I am scared of is losing the memory of her. I already lost her; I don’t want to lose her voice, the way her eyes sparkled on her wedding day, the way her grin grew when she saw the look on her baby boy’s face seconds after he was born. I went through enough. I don’t need this now!”

Up until then Tommy hadn’t shared details about his personal life. He wasn’t mean, he just didn’t talk about himself. Our relationship until then was purely business, an occasional greeting was said, maybe a ‘What is going on?’ but that was it. Now Tommy just broke down,
not that I blame him; he has been keeping it together for this long. I did my best to comfort him, refilled his cup and gave him another burger on the house. Tommy composed himself and almost instantaneously the emotion, the pain, and the hurt was gone. I’ve always wondered how he did that so fast.

Weeks went by and slowly but surely, our relationship built with each visit. Eventually, he started sharing memories about his kids. “You think that they would visit me when I gave them life,” Tommy said, pulling out a cigarette.

He shared stories about the war. The stories amazed me, the experiences this man had, the pain he had gone through yet he still smiled every day. One particular story he told fascinated me. Every night, he would keep a picture of his wife inside his helmet, so when he would lie down, his helmet would be next to him and the picture would be resting against the helmet staring back at him.

“I know it might sound strange,” he said. “But when the picture was with me, I felt a calm, that I wasn’t in this war, I wasn’t a million miles from home, and I wasn’t away from my girl. To tell the truth when that picture was with me, I fought better. I hate to say that, killing people, I mean. I hated that part; people don’t realize what killing a man can do to a man, seeing the blood. But it was either that or be killed and there was no way in hell that would happen. Trust me, I thought about it. It would’ve been so easy to just let go, drop my gun and be gone. Being away was hard and I thought about that more times than I should. Just when I thought about that, I would think of my girl being greeted by a couple of soldiers bearing her with the bad news at the front door. I fought harder, stronger, and longer because I wanted to be the one to greet her at the door. After four years, forty-eight long, hard, grueling, and tiresome months, my dream came true. Right after I stepped off the plane, I hitched home, rang the doorbell, and
waited. Slowly the door opened and there she stood, her eyes rimmed red from recently crying. When she lifted her chin up, she locked eyes with me and whispered, ‘My God, Tommy.’ It was almost slow motion. She ran toward my already outstretched arms. We spent the day crying together, kissing, hugging, and not at all talking about that bloody war.”

Tommy stopped talking and just looked out in distance. And with that he took the picture, stuffed it into his pocket, pulled out a five dollar tip, shook my hand, and left. Tommy was a good man who had faced hard times. This was a man that fell in love with his high school sweetheart at sixteen, was drafted at eighteen, came back at twenty-two, married his lover, had kids, and religiously visited the diner for nearly forty years with his wife until she died when he was sixty. Since then his kids blamed him for her death and in rebellion, refused to visit him, yet he still walked into the diner twenty years later at eighty, still struggled with the aftermath of the war in his head, and still saw the good out of every day. I rubbed my jaw and pulled out a cigarette. Tommy amazed me, he was a true hero. That next morning I clocked in, poured myself a cup of coffee, and took a deep breath.

Weeks passed and Tommy didn’t walk in. I was scared. After my shift, I grabbed a telephone, found Tommy’s address and walked to his house. The house was small, but cozy. I knocked, but no answer. I reassessed my options, walked to my apartment, changed my clothes, and picked up my car. Making my way to the nearest hospital, I stopped by a florist to grab a bouquet of flowers. My reasoning was if he was not at the house, and he was not at the diner, then he is most likely at the hospital. It is about time for something to happen with what he has been through. I felt stupid carrying a bouquet of flowers, but I had a feeling the hospital visit would be lonely. I pulled in the garage, walked up to the main lobby, and asked for his room. I walked in the room and there Tommy was, looking horrid.
“Eddie? What the hell are you doing here?”

“The real question, Tommy, is what the hell are you doing here?” I said in a feeble attempt at a laugh.

As feeble as it was, Tommy smiled nonetheless. Just as he always had.

I held out the bouquet. “I thought since no one would keep you company, well here I am.”

Tommy smiled and chuckled. I set the bouquet down on the cold, empty bedside table.

“Well can I get you anything? Water, blankets?”

“Eddie, I’m fine. Thanks.”

As Tommy said that, I could tell that Tommy was not at all ‘fine’. His eyes were tired, his face was haggard, and, I hate to say it, his smile was faded, not gone, but faded. That killed me; it ripped me apart. I forced a smile, talked to Tommy about the small things, and got a few laughs out of him. I continued to visit Tommy. I walked in the door and Tommy was there, but he was alert, like he had been waiting for me. Tommy looked at me, gave me a sad smile, and handed me something. I opened it and saw it was his will and his wishes for his funeral. I was stunned, speechless, and tears were spilling.

“Tommy, don’t do this. Everything will work out, please, man. I’m not the right person to be doing this.”

Eddie, you are the one person that I still call a friend. You’ve been there for me, you’ve memorized my order for nearly sixty years. Look, I know I am not looking good, maybe the war has caught up with me, maybe I miss my wife, but things aren’t looking too bright. I know I’m not going to make it. Please, it’s what I want.”
I left because I couldn’t stand to see Tommy that way. I slid in my car and drove home. I found his kids’ addresses, and suddenly sensed a horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach. Call it instinct, call it fate, but I dashed out the door and headed back to the hospital. In a matter of minutes, I looked at the multiple nurses and doctors trying desperately to bring Tommy back. I stumbled in. After a couple of more tries, the doctors called the time, covered him, and left the room. I uncovered him, almost angrily and by doing that his arm rolled off the table releasing the picture of his wife from his fingers. I looked up and lost it. I cried because of my own life, I cried because of my failed attempts of leaving New York, I cried because Tommy was the man, the hero that I always aspired to be.

I wiped my tears, said a final goodbye, and called Tommy’s son, Dean. The phone started ringing and I had no idea what to say.

“Hello?”

“Dean?”

“Yeah?”

“Hey Dean, I know your dad. He’s dead. I’m at Victory Memorial Hospital—”

“I’m coming.”

Tommy’s daughter, Elle was on her way too. I hunted three coffees down and soon, the kids came rushing in. I took them up and waited in the hallway.

About twenty minutes later, both of the kids came out, drying their eyes. I took them to the diner and explained myself. “When your dad came home from the war when he was twenty-two, he took his wife to a diner, Elm Street Diner. For forty years they kept visiting the diner, same seat and same meal until she died.”
After some time I noticed that Elle was crying, silent tears slipping down her cheeks. I sipped my coffee in silence when Elle spoke up.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to make it awkward for you, just I wish I could’ve taken it back, you know. I went into denial when mom died, I refused to accept reality, and in my mind I just knew she was still alive, just not here. And when I did accept the real world, I pushed everyone away. It was easier that way. I blamed him and only later did I realize that if I visited my dad, it would be a constant reminder that she’s not here, that she won’t ever be here. I couldn’t take that pain, so I pushed him so far out of my life that he couldn’t ever come back in. I am so stupid.”

Soon enough Dean broke too.

“When she died, I turned cold and mean, you know? I wasn’t expecting that call. Before, life was just one big game. I would sleep all day, get so drunk I would pass out and wake up again. I was living life so high that I came crashing down. It seemed logical that he was to blame because he was with her. I wasn’t even near her so how the hell could I be to blame!”

After a few beats of silence he added, “I just wish I could say ‘I love you’ one last time to both of them.”

Once all the tears were dried, we ordered and I pulled out the packet. In the next hour, we figured out the funeral service and what to put on the tombstone. I would say the eulogy.

That next morning, I was trying to decide what to write for the funeral. Nothing worked. I stressed myself out, grabbed my hair, and took a breath. I thought about Tommy, what kind of man he was, what he wanted to be, what he accomplished. Suddenly, the words came flowing
out and I realized later that so were tears. I never realized what Tommy did for me for, what he meant to me until he was gone.

Three days later, I was in a suit in front of a wooden podium facing a large group of weeping family and friends of Tommy. I took a deep breath and began.

I talked about Tommy, his wife, his kids, the diner, and the war. In a sense, I was not talking in a funeral to a group of crying people; I was talking to myself, trying to comfort myself. I ended the speech with, “You know earlier, I talked about the diner. He sat in the third booth even after his wife passed away. I think that he continually sat there because he was waiting for his wife to walk in and resume life as if nothing happened, right where he left it. But she didn’t come in, not ever, so his previous life did not pick up where he left it. He was forced to change his life, resulting a change in mine.”

I took a breath, looked at the congregation, and walked back to my seat. After the service, I walked out of the door, knowing that I would be all right, one day, somehow.