

Prolog-

I've known Benny Kubej since the 10th grade when we met playing football on the school team. Benny was a year older than me and always a good guy. As a rule Benny was easygoing, easy guy to get along with, and we quickly developed a casual friendship. We were never best buddies or anything, but we were friends. Benny went off to college the same year he graduated, but later I found out he dropped out after only a year. I was not to see him again until the mid 1970s, so by the time I graduated, I honestly doubt I even thought of him. The first time I went away to college, I was there only a year, then I enlisted in the Army. Benny told me when he quit school the first time the draft started breathing down his neck. So he enlisted.

I ran into Benny again about 1974 or so. He was married, and he and his wife Molly already had their first baby, a boy named Marcus. He invited me over to meet his wife and have dinner. He knew I had gone to Nam, and he told me he was glad I got home. I then remembered that either just as I was leaving college -- or maybe it was when I was in basic training -- my Mom had sent me a news clipping about Benny winning (or surviving) the Silver Star and a Purple Heart. I told him I was quite glad he got home, too.

When we met again, Benny was just finishing up his degree. I was surprised when he told me he was going to teach math. What made him want to do that? He told me a friend had convinced him that teaching was a fine goal, and I accepted that.

Molly was going for her own teaching degree when she met Ben. When the baby came along, she put that on hold. I heard later that she got the degree and then had a daughter. The last I heard Benny, was still teaching and Molly was a substitute teacher.

I was assured that the following is the absolute truth ... or if not it should be!

The Footlocker

A Christmas Story

by Don Ecker

There had been a time when Benjamin Kubej loved Christmas. His family roots were in eastern Europe, and when great-Grandfather Stefan Kubej emigrated to America he decided that the state of Pennsylvania with its coal mining industry was just the place to raise a family. Stefan had been a miner in the old country and believed that he would prosper in the new. Never rich in money, Stefan established his American roots and grew rich in family.

Ben remembered the cold, clear winter evenings with blankets of snow that seemed like heaven to a 10-year-old. Sledding with your buddies, building snow men and snow forts and snowball fights that went on for days, the smell of Mom's Christmas delicacies were the memories that stayed with him ... if he cared to remember. Coming home to your house all decorated with lights and tinsel and the Christmas tree smelling a heavy fragrance of evergreen ... it simply seemed that life could not be better. But that was well over 30 years ago, and now Christmas seemed just like more unnecessary drudgery. His wife Molly loved Christmas, however, so more to accommodate her than any personal feeling for the holiday, Ben went through the motions each year. Now that their son Marcus was married and their daughter Carol was in her last year of college, Ben only went through the motions out of rote, and Molly knew it but tried to work around it.

"Ben, honey, would you start on the outside lights?" Molly said in an even tone. "I can bring them in from the garage if you check them for shorts."

Ben had been sitting at his desk going over the first-of-the-month bills. He heard her, but decided to act preoccupied -- thereby postponing the inevitable.

"Ben? Did you hear me?" she began again.

"Huh? Molly, were you talking to me?" he responded, knowing all too well this battle was already over.

"Yes, Ben, I *was* talking to you. The outside lights! If I get them, will you check them out? We can start to hang them later today, okay? Carol will be home later this week for Christmas vacation, and I want to have most of the house decorated. Marcus and Jeannie called and told me that they'll get here on the 20th and I

will not go through a repeat of last year!" She was referring to the fact that last year when Molly was down with the flu just before Christmas, he postponed most of the decorating until the 22nd. And had it been up to him, he would have gone right through the 25th.

"Ben, I just do not understand you," Molly continued. "Your mother told me that you loved Christmas your whole life! When we got married in 1973, you weren't this bad. Would you please tell me why you have this aversion that gets worse instead of better each year?"

Ben stopped his check writing and looked up at her. He felt like he let her down and felt lousy about that, but he couldn't help it. So he did what most husbands would do under the circumstances, tried to BS his way out of it. "Oh, Molly, I don't hate Christmas. I hate the commercialism of it. Every year it gets worse! Buy . . . Buy . . . Buy . . . with all this false bullshit of brotherly love! The older I get, the more selfish bastards I run into, but just two or three days before Christmas everybody is supposed to *love* everybody. Well, damn it, if they want to impress me, how about a little of this brotherly love every day?" He stopped there, not wanting to overplay his hand, but already knew his attempt fell way short.

Unimpressed, Molly just looked at him with her hands on her hips. "Oh, I get it, Ben. You're upset because nobody has the Christmas spirit until December 23rd or so. Is that it? Well, okay, so when are you going to start spreading it around so that it will catch on early?" Molly's face looked determined. "Tell you what, buster, let's start today--and you can get a head start in the garage, okay?"

Nobody ever said Ben was stupid. Oh, a little dumb, perhaps, but never stupid. He gave Molly a wan smile, stood up and headed to the garage. "*I guess the Christmas lights come out today*", he thought. Molly was right behind him.

Ben and Molly's garage was similar to Fibber McGee's closet. It held most everything except their automobiles. Most of the Christmas decorations were in the far corner of the garage, buried behind the lawnmower, two rakes, two gardening shovels, a hoe, Ben's gasoline-powered weed whacker, the box holding the badminton set, lawn darts and assorted other odds and ends. Molly suspected there was reason (at least in

Ben's mind) to this junky madness, but she kept her opinion to herself. For now, she was just happy he was out here.

Almost 30 years of love in this marriage had created a bond between them where talking was not always required. But there was just enough mystery in this man, for whom she had "forsaken all others," to still make him sufficiently intriguing. In fact, she often found her husband enchanting . . . or he made her mad enough to bang on his head.

Several of the boxes of decorations were stored in the rafters in a dusty corner. Pulling various shovels, rakes and a hoe out of the way, Molly headed right for the corner. She let out a muffled "Ooof!" as she banged her shins on a large, green wooden box right under the decorations. "Ben, what is this thing?" she grunted. "Isn't that your old Army footlocker?"

Ben saw it and slowly nodded.

Molly's determined look resurfaced. "Well, this thing has been in this exact spot for better than 20 years. Since you probably won't be leaving to go back to the Army anytime soon, what do you say we get rid of this thing?" She kneeled for a closer look. "Good God, look at the size of that padlock on it! Do you even have a key for it?"

Ben was not sure why, but he felt a snaking feeling of unease, maybe even dread, beginning to inch its way up his back. He looked down at the footlocker and faintly shuddered. "Uh, yeah I think so," he said, trying to remember. "Not sure if I know where it is, though."

"Well, Ben, why do you keep this thing, then? When's the last time you even opened it? What do you have in it anyway?"

Ben began to remember things connected to the box's contents, and forced those memories back. He wouldn't go there now, and as a matter of fact had refused to for almost 30 years. As much as he loved his Molly (and that is how he always thought of her-- his Molly) he had never let her in to that secret part of his life. He always saw that as *his* problem, nothing to burden her with. Nothing that might drive her away. He had spent his entire life trying to be a good man, and good men do not go to war and . . . kill. At least, that is what he remembered reading in the Bible -- many years ago when he used to read it. *Thou Shalt Not Kill*. It seemed like good advice. But then . . .

"I just have some old uniforms and other junk in there," he said to Molly. "Matter of fact, I been thinking about throwing it all out. Maybe this spring I will. I'll have to go through it, sort the junk out. Anyway, after I do that maybe I will use the footlocker for something else. Hey! forget about that, get those lights."

Then he remembered the brown paper-wrapped package that rested inside his long neglected footlocker, along with the journal he once so meticulously kept. *Damn!* he thought. *Not now. Please not now!* He kept the fervent hope quiet inside him.

Molly jumped up on the footlocker and began jockeying for position to get at the Christmas decorations. Ben stood beside her, ready to catch the first box as she pulled it out from the rafter. It was a large one, and she kept tugging it, changing her stance on the plywood footlocker. As she pulled harder, the box was loosened from a protruding nail and all at once flew out, tumbling down and dragging Molly with it. Ben grabbed her to keep her from falling off, the box hitting Ben with a glancing blow on his "hard head," as Molly told it later. The box smacked to the floor with a loud "crunch" of breaking Christmas decorations

"Honey, are you okay?" Molly asked in a worried voice.

Ben rubbed the side of his head "Ouch! Ooo, yeah, I think so!"

Molly inspected his head, and seeing nothing leaking out (Molly had her rambunctious side) righted the box of decorations. "Oops, big guy, I think we're gonna have to buy some more Christmas balls," she said. "Uh, move a second, and let me open this up and see how much damage I caused." Molly tore off masking tape and pulled open the tattered cardboard flaps. Busted ornaments tinkled as she pulled out boxes of tinsel and a few unbroken balls.

"Yep, when I smash 'em, I do not fool around, Buster!" she said with finality.

"Here, Honey, I will get that other box down," Ben offered. He began to step up on the footlocker, but Molly pushed him aside. He knew what was going on, of course. Molly was not one to be thwarted by man nor beast when she'd made her mind up. This was one of those times. She was mad enough about dropping that box to climb up to the roof on

determination alone, just to get the other one. His Molly was not one to take defeat lightly.

"I'll get it," she said. She jumped on top of the footlocker again and began tugging on the lighter box. But this one was even further lodged in than the first. Now angry at herself, she was stomping more than was good for the old footlocker. There was an ominous creak of cracking plywood, but it was as if Molly had not heard it. Ben did, and to him it sounded like the crack of doom. She shifted her footing more to the right of the box, and suddenly it gave way with a piercing CRACK! The lid collapsed.

Ben grabbed her before she could fall again and pulled her out of the now demolished footlocker. "Molly, are you okay? Are you hurt?" He dropped to his knees and began to check her legs for cuts or scrapes.

"I'm alright!" she snapped. Glaring at the box as if it had intentionally thwarted her, she said, "Okay, buster, where is the ladder?"

"Honey, I'll get the ladder and the box. Why don't you go inside and wash off? I'll get it right now."

Molly nodded, and with wounded dignity marched back into the kitchen.

Ben avoided looking at the footlocker. He walked to the other side of the garage and found the ladder behind an old bookcase he had moved into the garage a month before. He pulled out the ladder out and walked back with it to the last box of decorations, but his eyes were drawn to the ruined footlocker. Something was different over here now, something that Ben couldn't quite put his finger on. He felt a very definite sense of unease, refusing to consider what might be causing it.

Molly stuck her head out into the garage. "Ben, before you get the lights, bring me the other box. I want to check how much breakage there is."

"Okay Hon, you bet." Ben was glad to get out of there. He picked up the first box of decorations and carried them into the kitchen. "Hon, is there any coffee left?" Ben felt like a strong cup was just what he needed. "Hey, where is Sheba?" Ben began. Sheba was their German Shepard-Labrador mix. She was 8 years old and as much a part of the family as anyone.

"She wanted to go outside and chase snowflakes. But you are right, I better get her before we have doggie popsicle's." Molly went to the back door and opened it. A light snow was falling and Sheba HAD been chasing snowflakes. Molly whistled for her and she bounded into the house, shaking snow flakes off her and all over the kitchen.

"Come here girl" Ben said, and she ran over to him. He began to rub her on her shoulders, then her ears which she loved. "Good girl, out there giving the old snow the once over, huh girl?" Sheba shook with delight. Her tail was wagging and now banging into the box of decorations. Suddenly she realized that there was something new in the kitchen and she turned and began sniffing the box. Sheba whined.

"Oh, so you are gonna scold me too Sheba?" Molly said.

"Honey, nobody is scolding you" Ben began.

"I am scolding me!" Molly finished. Molly got down on the floor and began rooting through the box. "Busted, busted, busted, and busted!" She was pulling broken ornaments out and dropping them in the garbage can. "Ben, that does it! Where is the checkbook? I am going out right now and getting some new decorations. Look at this!" she said with exasperation. "I think I broke it all."

"Molly, don't worry about it. The checkbook is on the desk, sweetie." Molly marched over to the desk and got the checkbook. She dropped it into her purse and set it by the front door. "I am going to change my clothes and leave. You are going to get the lights, right?"

"Right you are, Boss!" and Ben picked up his coffee cup and headed to the garage. "Come on Sheba, give Daddy a hand."

Ben sipped his coffee and went to the ladder. Sheba was right behind him giving the garage a once over with her doggie nose. Ben got to the ladder, set his cup down and climbed up two steps and grabbed the errant box of lights. He pulled them out and carefully stepped down. He placed the lights on the floor and without looking at the footlocker he folded up the stepladder. Walking it back to the opposite corner Ben set it down. He walked back to the box of lights and sat down next to them and the footlocker. Pushing the lights out of the way he slid closer to the footlocker, almost against his will. Ben was becoming increasingly angry at himself for

this almost juvenile dread, but then the feelings rushed back at him and almost overwhelmed him. He drew a deep breath and then peered in for the first time in almost 25 years. Ben pulled the fractured plywood lid out, and carefully set it aside. He looked in to the locker and pulled an old pair of jungle boots out. The leather part of the boot's was brown with age and wear and cracked. The boots were stiff and smelled very musty. Ben placed them down and reached back in. He pulled out two sets of jungle fatigues, worn and faded with wear and age. The top shirt in the first set of fatigues had several large rips in the fabric and Ben stopped for a second and wondered what in the hell he had ever kept these for. Almost like magic the next item he pulled out was an Army Field Jacket. He saw his name tag, KUBEJ on the front of it with his subdued sergeant's stripes, E-5. He also looked at the Combat Infantry Badge once sewn proudly on the jacket. Next was a boonie hat and then the K-Bar knife. The leather sheaf was old, cracked and green with age. He still had not found it. Digging deeper his fingers found the tattered cover and he pulled it out. Here was his journal he had kept daily during his tour in Viet Nam. On the cover it read "KUBEJ, B.T. Sgt. 5th Mech. 165-74-5515". Opening it to the first page he slowly began to read. "July 3, 1969. Arrived in country, Saigon. Hot as hell, muggy and Jesus, this place STINKS!"

Ben stopped and remembered the smell. Mo-gas, burning human waste in 55 gallon drums drenched with gas and oil, and the smell of Vietnamese tobacco all mixed in an odor not soon forgotten. He glanced briefly at the next entries but skipped ahead to when he was assigned to the 5th Mech in I Corp. After being "hazed" as an "FNG" (a rite of passage of all new troops) he was assigned to his Track (an armored personnel carrier) and became a machine gunner armed with a very lethal M-60, 7.62 MM machine gun. His Track was nicknamed the "Alamo" and he was soon savvy to the ways of "the Nam" as practiced in I Corp. Running convoys from the DMZ to Phu Bai, looking and being badassed on Highway 1. He skipped to October, 1969 in the journal remembering a night ambush he had been part of. The first week of October the LT sent Ben and 3 of his buddies 100 meters in front of the Track's lager. (A night position) They were a listening post to give warning if the NVA or VC attempted to hit the unit. Ben had carried his M-60 with two hundred rounds of linked ammo with him, and his assistant gunner carried another 100 rounds with him, along with his M-16 rifle. (Ben had forgotten this guy. His name had been Walby or Wallaby, anyways his nickname was the Walrus. The journal called him the Walrus) The squad leader then was Bobby Ray Miller, a kid from

Georgia who two years before had been a star quarterback on his highschool team. Now he was a bad assed Track commander with over 40 kills to his credit. "Charlie" had been sniping them for a week. Every once in awhile he would pop out of a spider hole and let loose an RPG (rocket propelled grenade) that would turn a Track into a puddle of sludge. "Sir Charles" had another trick or two up his sleeve, stringing a grenade in the trees that was just the right height to catch with your antenna, knocking it out to explode on the track. (Ben did not realize it yet, but tears began to trickle down his cheek)

That night Bobby Ray shot an azimuth with his compass and they took off. Ben had his machine gun, Bobby Ray lead the patrol carrying his shotgun and two claymore mines. Willis, the radioman (called Chickenman by his squad) carried the PRC-25 radio and the Walrus brought up the rear. After setting up their ambush, each troop took turns on watch. One man stayed awake while his buddies slept, changing guard every two hours. Bobby Ray took first watch, then Ben, next was the Walrus, with Chickenman pulling last watch. It was just about 1:00 AM when Chickenman kicked Bobby Ray awake. Bobby Ray jumped, remembered where he was and froze. He heard the footsteps out in front of their position. He kicked Ben awake, and Ben kicked the Walrus. Ben slid behind his M-60 and slipped the safety off. Looking into the dark he saw nothing, straining his eyes. Bobby Ray turned on his STARLIGHT scope and peered out into the night. He slowly swung the scope from left to right covering about 90 degree's. "Looks like platoon strength, maybe 30 or so gooks" he whispered. "RPG's in front, they got flankers out to our west" he whispered. Chickenman keyed his mike several times in a pre-arranged code. Walrus slid over to Ben unhooking his belt of ammunition. Earlier upon reaching this site, Bobby Ray had set out both claymore mines about 20 meters in front of their main line of resistance. Each man detached fragmentation grenades from their harness and placed them within easy reach and waited.

Ben stopped reading and wiped his eyes. He was quietly sobbing now, remembering what he had tried so hard to forget for 3 decades. Remembering why he was here, he bent the page he had been reading and lay it back into the footlocker. That is when his hand brushed the package that had lain in this box undisturbed for almost 30 years. Ben shuddered.

Sheba had been lying beside Ben with her head in his lap. She sensed something was troubling her master, whined and sat up and began to lick his

face. Ben put his arms around Sheba and gave her a hug then stood up. He picked up the lights and went into the kitchen. He opened the box and pulled the first string out and unwrapped it. He had stopped sobbing, took the plug and put it in the electrical socket. The string of lights lit up, cheerfully blinking. Ben pulled the plug out and grabbed the next set. Same process, another good string of lights. It was the third one that refused to work. Now came the dreary prospect of pulling each tiny light bulb out and replacing it to see if that was the recalcitrant damn bulb that burned out. He had gotten half way through this string when he had enough. Standing up he carried the first two strings of lights into the living room and carefully laid them out. He went back to the kitchen and decided to check the next string of lights. They ended up working so the count was 3 to 1. He carried the working string into the living room and laid them out next to the first two sets. Then he thought he heard walking behind him. Ben turned around and looked but nothing was there. Suddenly Sheba began a furious barking. Ben looked at her and the hair was standing up all over her body. She was barking and jumping around as if she had lost her mind. Ben grabbed her collar, pulling her next to him. He put his arms around her and whispered in her ear trying to calm her down. Finally Sheba quit her furious barking gave one final low growl. Ben continued to stroke her when he heard it. "Benny, my blue eyed soul brother ... " Ben closed his eyes and shuddered, he began sobbing again.

When Molly got home with her packages she saw the three strings of lights laid out in the living room. "Ben?" she called out. Hearing no answer she walked into the kitchen and saw the empty light box with the other string laying on the floor. Picking it up she put it back into the box and walked into the garage. "Ben, are you out here?" The garage was empty, and then she realized Sheba had not greeted her when she came home. Molly went up the stairs and came to their bedroom. The door was closed so she opened it. Ben was lying under the covers asleep with Sheba lying next to him, her head on his hip. She began to wag her tail and Molly sat down on the bed and stroked Sheba's ears. "Ben honey, are you feeling okay?" Ben groaned and turned over.

"Molly? You home?" She looked at Ben and was momentarily shocked. He looked awful, his eyes were red and puffy and it looked like a bruise was welling up on his forehead where the box of decorations banged him on its way to the floor.

"Ben are you alright?" she said a little shook up. "You look like hell. You have a bruise on your head. Honey, I am going to call the doctor." She reached for the phone and Ben sat up.

"Molly, I'm fine. I just had a little headache. I took a couple of aspirin" he said lying. "I got three strings of lights working, but I can't get the last one going. I thought tomorrow I would go out early and buy another set or maybe two and then we can string them up."

Molly looked at Ben still somewhat unsure. There seemed to be something else going on here and Sheba was acting subdued. She reached over and put her hand on Ben's forehead feeling for a fever. "Ben now don't you try to snow me, are you okay?" Ben nodded and then smiled.

"I guess my hard head can't take as many knocks as back in the old days, eh sweetie?" He reached over and pulled her toward him and then kissed her very tenderly on the lips.

"Ok Buster" she said, "but I am warning you if I find out your snowing me under, you are in trouble!" She kissed him and went downstairs to put her packages away and start dinner.

Fifteen minutes later Ben had come downstairs and walked out in the kitchen. "Honey, about how long until dinner?"

Molly checked her watch and said "I am making a meatloaf so dinner will be about 6:00. Why, what were you going to do?" Ben got a drink of water and then said

"Well, I thought I would go out in the garage and straighten out a few things." Glancing at his watch he saw it was 4:15 PM. "Tell you what, I will feed Sheba, and then clear out of here and let you alone. Sound like a deal?" Molly nodded and smiled.

"Okay, you must be feeling better if you are going to offer to clean up some of that junk out there. Get with it buddy." Ben got with it.

Back in the garage Ben noticed it was a lot cooler here than before. He was glad he had put on a woolen sweater but then wondered how much was cold and how much was something else. He walked over to his footlocker and pulled a box next to it and sat down. He pulled his journal

out and turned to the folded page. He ran his eyes over his entries, then his vision kind of blurred and then he was back there. He remembered the hot muggy night, the fear he felt, the almost love for the guys he had served with, no - it was love ... and then what had happened.

Bobby Ray had waited until the gooks had approached to within 10 meters or so of the claymore mines. He command detonated both at once with a tremendous roar. Ben had ducked his head until the mines went off and then began laying down continuous 15 and 20 round bursts from his machine gun. Chickenman and Bobby Ray then both lobbed their frag grenades out screaming "fire in the hole!" Three blasts went off almost as one, then a fourth. The NVA had taken many casualties in the first seconds of the ambush, then the flankers started fighting back. Burst's of rifle fire chewed up the landscape around Ben's position. He changed his hold and began firing at the flankers. Suddenly the Walrus screamed and flopped over on his back. He gurgled and then just quivered and lay still. Ben continued to fire knowing that if he stopped they had it. Bobby Ray fired his shotgun, its booming was hard to escape, until he ran empty. He started jamming more shells into the chamber when a Chi-Com grenade went off just beside him. He didn't even scream, he just stopped being.

Chickenman fired whole magazines in long bursts, reloaded and fired again. The NVA fire had slackened off quite a bit with just single shots ringing out. The tracks behind them, a hundred meters or so had begun firing, big heavy Browning .50 calibers, or as they were known, "Madduces." Taking up the rest of the slack were M-60's firing with a sharper sound, with red tracers flying all about. The NVA tracers were green, and suddenly a whole lot of them flew out of the jungle behind the gooks that Ben and buddies had just mown down.

"Call the command track and tell em' we are coming in" Ben screamed. He had just run out of his two hundred round belt of ammo, and now was looking for the belt that the Walrus had carried. Ben opened the belt feed and fed in the fresh ammunition. Smoke poured off the barrel, and he burned his hand but hardly noticed. He snapped the feed back in place and pulled the bolt, cocking the weapon. Thinking he saw movement he opened up again with a 10 round burst. Chickenman grabbed him and yelled "Okay, I got em' I told em' we are pulling back!"

"Okay, I am going to fire another burst and you pop a frag, there" he said pointing, "then we Book!" Chickenman nodded and readied a frag. Ben fired another long burst and Chickenman threw the grenade. When it blew they were on their feet moving. Green tracers flew all over the field but they didn't notice until they were almost back at the line of tracks. Suddenly Chickenman cried out and dropped. Ben, thinking he tripped, stopped and grabbed him. "Come on Chicken, lets go!" when he saw the huge dark spot on Chickenman's chest. Ben flopped in the prone and felt for a pulse. It had ceased.

Ben stopped reading again. He lay the journal down and reached into the chest. He felt around until he located the old brown paper package. He pulled it out and looked at the address on the front. Tears squeezed out of his eyes as he read the name written in large block letters. It read To: Miss Iris J. Walker, 6544 Cromwell St., Apt. 15, Detroit, Michigan. The return address was Spec. 4 M. A. Sanders. Ben tenderly lay it aside and picked up his journal again.

Marcus A. Sanders joined the unit on October 15th. After the night of the battle of the "Alamo" Ben and his unit were worn down. They lost 4 Tracks outright, and two more would probably have to be completely overhauled. Since Ben was the most senior member of his crew he was promoted to track commander and got to pick from the replacements when they filtered in. Marcus was tall, slender and quick as lightning. Ben wasn't sure he would like him right away but it turned out well. Sanders came from Detroit or Mo-Town. The Motor City with its cool Mo-Town sound. He meshed right into the crew and had a very pronounced confidence about him. Marcus had played both football (a running back) as well as basketball and had very fast reflexes. He eyed Ben up at first, not sure whether he would like this white dude from Pennsylvania but then realized that Ben was just trying to get through the day without stepping on anyone he didn't have to. After the battle of the Alamo Ben had been awarded the Silver Star by the Colonel. As the sole surviving member of the LP, he (despite protesting to the LT) was credited with surprising the gooks who were trying to surprise them. After the ceremony Ben tossed the medal into his locker and didn't look at it again. Marcus was impressed by that but kept it to himself. Marcus was now a gunner on the track and proved to be both quick and alert. Matter of fact he probably saved the whole crew the 23rd of November. They were rolling back up toward Hue City, escorting a Army Duce and a Half truck filled with grunts and passed through a small

Vietnamese ville. Marcus noticed a little girl standing beside a hooch watching them and covering her ears. Marcus yelled and banged on the hatch and Ben had the driver pull over. He jumped down with his M-16 looking around and Marcus pointed at the little girl. Marcus swung his M-60 covering the hooch and said "Say Bro, I do be-leeve that gook kid knows sumpin!" "She be covering her ears an' I know we make noise but hey Bro, not that much!" Sure enough there was a large mine planted in the road. Ben looked up and smiled after they checked the ville. "I do believe I owe you a beer or 50 for that one Bro ... " Marcus just smiled.

After that they became very close. Marcus began to refer to Ben as his "blue eyed soul brother" which was the ultimate compliment. They began to communicate ... Marcus opened up and told Ben about his life. How his father had busted his hump for 30 years wanting to see his son go to college and make something of himself. Matter of fact, Marcus confided, he was pretty damn good in school. "I dug the math, can you believe it my brother? This black ass was groovin' to math. I figured Hey! Between football or basketball I was sure to get a scholarship. But no way dude, they said I was good but not big enough. Didn't have enough ass for those college football teams. I told em', say my man, how much ass do ya need when you be as fast as this dude is? An' make no mistake Bro, when I be scared this nigger can run!" Ben laughed remembering. Later, much later he could hardly believe he could become as close to another human being as he and Marcus became. Some of the other blacks seemed to resent Marcus and Ben's friendship in the rear. Out in the field it didn't matter cause everybody wore green but in the rear it was different. There was tension between the races, blacks felt that whitey was the oppressor, and the white kids felt the blacks sniveled way too much. "Hey asshole, do you see me with a freaken' silver spoon in my mouth? became a white comeback. But Marcus was cool ...

"Say my brothers, the Kube is just a blue eyed soul brother." Ben pretended not to see or hear. And Marcus ended up bending a head or two and then they pretty much left him alone.

A week before Christmas Marcus got a package. Ben had received a handful of letters and was sitting in the shade sliting them open and reading them by date. A girl he had dated before the Army had written him, two letters from his parents and a letter from a high school buddy now attending

college. (That one can wait he thought.) "Say Benny my man, come share my bounty!" Marcus grinned at Ben and held the box up.

"Whoa Dude, what do you have? Goodies I hope! Your Momma send you cookies?"

"Nah, better en' that." He held up another smaller box from inside and pulled out a cake.

"Cake? Alrightttt!" Now Baird, the new driver drifted over.

"Say, Marcus, man I can SMELL CAKE!" Marcus looked at Baird and smiled.

"Why sure brother (with a small b) I got enough! Pull up a chair." As it turned out Marcus had a birthday coming up on December 24th. "Can you believe a shittier trick to pull on a kid than a birthday ONE DAY before Christmas? Man I knew then - it was gonna be a bitch to be a Black Man." Everybody laughed with Marcus. And everybody scarfed up the cake. But there was more. Marcus had a long time girlfriend, Iris. He never tired of telling Ben the wonders of his young woman. They were planning on getting married after Marcus came back from his tour. They had dated since they were both freshmen in Junior High. "True Love my man!" he confidently told Ben. "She is going to college now man, wants to teach the young ones. Grade school. Say, I told her that anything beyond grade school had to suck. I mean look at the school I graduated from. Hell if I would have taught me, shit I think I would have drug my 16 to school jus' to keep me in line." Ben smiled and agreed.

"Yeah" he thought, this chick sounds cool to hear Marcus tell it, wants to teach the youngsters, yeah I can dig that." Iris had sent Marcus a tightly wrapped bottle of Scotch Whiskey. A note attached to the bottle said "Marcus, Happy Birthday Baby. When you drink this think of me and what we are going to do when you get home!"

"Yeah" Marcus said, "true love my brother!"

Christmas came and went like most other days in the Nam. There was a cease fire, (course not all the Charlies got the word or more likely didn't give a shit. Charlie dropped 61 MM mortar's's all over the AO - area of operations.) Just about New Years Eve and back in the field, Ben and

company pulled another night ambush. It had been raining hard and finally stopped for a bit but now it was cold. Ben and Marcus took a briefing from the LT and then came back to brief the troops. Baird, while an FNG, was not quite as new as their other troop Tigth. Ben stopped for a minute trying to remember if Tigth had been given a nickname. Nah, Marcus had just called him "Tee." Baird, the driver was known as "BareAss", also given his moniker by Marcus. Ben had just been the "Kube" and everybody just called Marcus, Marcus.

"Okay, listen up" Ben remembered. "The LT wants us to set up here" Ben had said pointing to a spot on his map. "So, we go out about 300 meters and turn west until we hit the "blue line." On Army maps rivers, creeks, etc. were always called the "blue line." Ergo, water equaled the blue line.

"A "Slick Driver" (Army chopper pilot) saw movement out here. So we gotta be careful, LT says that there will be some other ambush teams out here, here, and here." Ben pointed to the locations on the map. "I wish we had another guy with us but us four are it. Marcus is carrying the "pig" (M-60 machine gun) and two hundred rounds. Tee, your gonna carry another two hundred, okay?" Tee nodded looking like he might shit himself. "Okay, BareAss, you are gonna pack the PRC-25 (pronounced Prick 25 radio) and two claymores. I got two and Tee your gonna take another one."

"Say Kube" BareAss began, "are we expecting to step into the shit?" Marcus looked at BareAss and sneered.

"Hey my man! Here in the NAM you ALWAYS Expectin' to step in the shit! Pull your elbows out your ass dude! Quit asken' dumbass questions!" BareAss stepped back and considered this.

"Say Kube" Marcus began. "What you gonna pack out there?" Ben held up a pump shotgun.

"Nah brother, if you don't mind my saying so, I think that is a bad idea. You might need sumpin quicker. Marcus jumped up on the Track and pulled out a M1A1 Thompson Submachine Gun they had "liberated" off a dead VC. The gun, a WWII model, was in surprisingly good condition and they had scrounged up 10 magazines for it. Most of the magazines they had gotten from a ARVN (South Vietnamese) depot by some deft trading. Ben looked at it considering. He thought Marcus might have something there, so he stowed the shotgun and shells and grabbed the Thompson. He got an

empty sandbag and shoved the extra magazines in it, and checked the rest of his equipment. One thing that was important was a good battery in the STARLIGHT scope. The battery was fine. The guys now painted each others faces with black and green grease paint and stepped back to look at the results. They resembled something out of a very low budget horror movie. Now it was just wait for the time to step out. Marcus stepped over to Ben and said in a low voice

"Say, Bro, you got a sec?" Ben expecting Marcus to give him maybe a heads up on one of the newer guys said

"Yea, sure my man, whats wrinkl'n your brow?" Marcus took him by the arm and walked over to the side.

"Say, few weeks ago I wrote my woman and told her that I wanted to get married next Christmas. I be getting outta the Green Machine come October an' that al' give me time to get my shit squared away back in the World. You be gettin' out afore that, right my man?"

"Yeah, Marcus, I should be back in the "Land of the Big PX" come August or so. Providing everything goes to plan, why?" Marcus looked at him and grinned.

"Cause, my Brother, you gonna be my best man, what you think?" Ben was surprised to say the least and looked Marcus in the eyes.

"Me, Bro? Say, what is Iris or your folks or anybody gonna say about that?" Marcus looked irritated.

"What you mean man, you don't wanna stand for me?" Now Ben thought he might have stepped in it.

"Nah, Marcus, you know better `n' that. I just thought, well you know, me being white an all." Now Ben stopped, kind pissed at himself at raising the question of color. But then Marcus gave him a "Marcus" grin.

"Oh I got it Bro, you be worrying that everybody might think you be from the Klan or sumpin!" Marcus laughed again. "You be there my man, cause we gonna have a PARTY to remember. I don't know if 'n' you white folks can party like we party in Mo Town, but Bro I am gonna teach ya! Christmas be the time for magic my man!" Ben grinned at Marcus and said

"Jus' try and keep me away Dude. You got it Man, next Christmas I am gonna be there to hand you over to that marriage ball and chain! This be one I WILL NOT miss!"

Dusk was upon them when they began the patrol to the ambush site. Ben took point carrying the old Thompson gun. Marcus was about 5 meters behind Ben, BareAss behind Marcus and Tee brought up the rear. The trick was to get out there before it was total darkness, but not to go so fast that you missed something important like a "bouncing betty" mine or a VC or NVA ambush. Ben was pretty fair on point, he had good eyes and realized the consequences if he screwed up, so he vowed to NOT screw up. Reaching the "blue line" Ben held up his closed fist and squatted on his heels like a Vietnamese. Marcus slid next to him grasping the M-60.

"Anything?" he whispered. Ben shook his head and then pointed where he wanted each man to set up. He took out his two claymore mines, detonators and wire and several trip flares. Marcus set up to cover him while he placed the mines and flares in position. Now the claymore mine is a deadly piece of ordnance. It is a sheet of plastique explosive (C 4) weighing a bit over a pound, loaded with 700 steel ball bearings. In effect, it is like a very large shotgun. Designed to impede "human wave" attacks in Korea, it was introduced too late for it to have an effect in Korea, however it worked just as well in Viet Nam. One had to know just how to set the mine up to do the most damage. You had to figure out the route the enemy would take, angle the mine just right then wait for the most opportune time to set the damned thing off. Ben had all that down pat. But if you set it too close to your own position you could do yourself in with it. Unless you were in a bunker or a foxhole, it was a good idea to set them out at least 15 to 20 meters. Here in this place Ben didn't have that luxury of 20 meters, he had to settle for about 15. Now all they had to do was let command know they were in place, set up co-ordinates if they called in arty (artillery) and wait ... again.

Ben set the journal aside, tears once again streaming down his face in silence. Suddenly the garage door opened and Molly stuck her head out. "Dinner will be served, Sir, in 10 minutes. Say Ben, I thought you were cleaning up out here. What are you doing Hon?" Then Molly really looked at Ben and saw there was something wrong. Other than the birth of both kids Molly had never seen Ben cry. Even when Ben's father died he had held it in and if he cried, he did it out of sight. He was holding what looked

like an old tattered book in his lap with one hand and was wiping his face with the other. The look of vulnerability on Ben was almost shocking. In all they years together she had never seen him looking so ... hurt, so alone, and maybe even afraid. In a sharper tone than she meant, walking toward him she said "Ben! Ben what is wrong?" Ben looked up at her and started to speak;

"Mol ... Molly ... its about Marcus."

"Marcus? What Ben, what is wrong with our son?" Ben, for just a second, looked confused.

"No Molly, not our Marcus. This Marcus ... " holding up the old journal, he started to audibly sob.

"Ben" she began, now very confused "what Marcus? What are you talking about?" and suddenly Ben realized that in all their married life together, while suppressing everything about his Army service, he never once mentioned Marcus. Even at the birth of their first child, his son, when he told Molly what he wanted to name the boy, he only told her that he once had a friend Marcus and he had always liked the name.

Now Molly of course knew that Ben had been in Viet Nam and she knew that he had been hurt there, but Ben never spoke of his service and Molly was sharp enough to never pry. She always thought if Ben decided to talk about it, she would be the first to know. Years earlier she and Ben had gone to see the Oliver Stone movie "Platoon" and for the next week Ben was more subdued and sometimes more surly than she had ever seen him. She was smart, she did not ask. But this scared her, a lot. She sat down next to him and took his hand. "Ben, Ben what is it honey? Tell me Ben I want to help." Ben, with tears streaming down his face looked at her. He just looked. "Ben" she began "Ben, who was Marcus? Is this about Christmas and your friend Marcus?" Ben let out another series of sobs nodding his head. "Hon, what happened? Ben, you know you want to talk about it, please Ben, let me in." Molly eyes pleaded now more scared than ever. Ben released his hold on the book, pulled his other hand from Molly's and wiped the tears from his face. He drew in a deep breath, reached into the footlocker and pulled the brown wrapped package out. He looked at it and handed it to Molly. She took the old wrapped object and read the name. "Ben, who is Iris Walker?" Ben began to tell Molly the story about Marcus.

Ben was too worked up, too nervous to let down his guard and rest. He kept his eyes on Tee, this was only his second time out on ambush. Nobody was sure how someone would react to "getting in the shit" until you could witness it. New guys were always a question mark, and while having been out with Marcus, and trusting him implicitly, both BareAss and Tee were still question marks. Marcus sat behind his gun like a statue but his eyes were traversing back and forth across the bush. Ben used the STARLIGHT eyeballing the jungle but it was quiet. It had rained some more and then quit again. Everybody was soaked and cold. Ben thought it was kind of funny. "Everybody back in the world thinks this place is hot all the time, but damn I wish they could see it tonight. I would love to have a coat to put on now."

Marcus kicked Ben. Ben heard it at once, a branch or stick just sounded like it cracked. Somebody walking? Ben grabbed the STARLIGHT and began scanning the landscape. At first he didn't see anything but then he did. Movement with light!

A STARLIGHT scope works by light amplification. It takes existing light and in essence magnifies it. On a starry night using a STARLIGHT scope, it is just like daylight, a "green" daylight but just as bright. With a full Moon it is even better, and if somebody is carrying a flashlight, or in this case a candle, that works well also. Ben observed an NVA trooper with his AK-47 diddy bopping down the jungle path, carrying a small candle to light his way. His whisper carried urgency. "Wake up guys, we got company!" Pulling his Thompson gun next to his leg, he continued to watch first one, then another and then more NVA troopers walk right toward his trip flare. Ben lowered the scope and picked up the switch to set off his first claymore.

The NVA point man walked right into the trip wire for the flare. Suddenly the flare popped and Ben blew the mine. The roar carried through the jungle. Marcus cut loose with the M-60 machine gun and BareAss fired an entire magazine from his M-16. Ben aimed toward the NVA troops and fired short 2 and 3 round bursts from the Thompson. The second flare blew and Ben set off the next mine. Shots, screams and green Communist tracers streaked out from all over the jungle. 3 NVA troopers bravely jumped and ran through the creek firing their AK's at them. Marcus coolly fired a long burst cutting them down. The NVA began throwing grenades toward the M-60. Ben and BareAss threw grenades back. Tee hadn't fired a shot yet, he was hugging the ground trying to burrow into it. "Shoot GODDAMN you!"

shouted Ben as he punched Tee on the helmet. That seemed to snap Tee out of it, he got to his knee's and began to fire when several bullets cut through his flak jacket, knocking him backwards.

Marcus continued to fire long bursts. His position was now being hit by fire coming from all across their front. Ben fired another magazine, BareAss continued to throw grenades and fire bursts with his rifle. Now however the NVA adjusted to the surprise. Groups of 2 and 3 troopers ran forward, dropping to the prone and fired, covering for the next 2 or 3 to advance. Suddenly one of the grenades landed just a couple of yards in front and to the side of Ben. He saw it sail in and land and threw himself face down. It went off with a dull bang. Ben felt as if somebody had slammed him with a ball bat on his left side. He lay for a second and tried moving everything important. It moved. He fired off the rest of his magazine and changed it out. Then BareAss cried out. He flew backwards into the dirt and moaned. Marcus was reloading another belt of ammunition when a grenade blew just to his front. He swayed backwards, then seemed to catch himself. He pulled the bolt on the gun and began shooting. "Marcus! Marcus we gotta get the hell outta here!" Ben shouted. Ben grabbed Tee and shook him. Tee was gone. He crawled over to BareAss and checked him. BareAss moved.

"Can you move?" Ben shouted.

"Yea, man, just point me!" came the shaky response.

"Go on man, I will cover for you" Marcus yelled. He continued to fire 5 and 6 round bursts at the advancing NVA troopers. They now had his range however. Ben grabbed BareAss by a harness strap and pulled him to his feet. Holding onto his Thompson with his right hand they began to jog back towards the line of Tracks. Tracers were now streaking in from all across the front of the ambush site. But Marcus continued to lay down a blistering fire causing the NVA to hesitate. Grenades sailed toward the M-60 position and began to bang. Marcus continued to shoot when suddenly the never to be forgotten sound of an RPG (rocket propelled grenade, a tank buster) whooshed in. A loud BANG! The M-60 fire ceased. Ben ran, pulling BareAss along, prodding him to keep up. Ben was getting very light headed and could not figure out what was happening to him. He felt like he needed to sit down and rest, but continued to jog along with BareAss. He saw the Tracks and shouted he was coming in, don't shoot. That and the

unmistakable American cursing saved him and BareAss from being "lit up" by their guys.

BareAss had taken a hit in the chest just above his heart, in and out. The last time Ben saw him he was still alive. Ben had shrapnel all up and down the left side of his body. He refused to medivac out until he knew what happened to Marcus. A few minutes or so later the NVA hit them. Gunships were called in, artillery turned the jungle in a moonscape, and the .50 cal's. and M-60's turned the first NVA assaults into a donnybrook. They never found Marcus's body to ship back home.

Molly had sat next to Ben watching him with tears streaming down his cheeks, while crying herself silly ... in silence. She had never suspected any of this, and was horrified at what "her" Ben had endured for 30 years ... in silence. She just had begun to grasp what this Marcus had meant to Ben when she realized she still held the package. "Ben, what is this?"

"After I was wounded I was sent down to DaNang to the hospital there." Ben began. "Marcus and I bunked next to each other and his stuff was packed up and shipped back to his home I guess. They figured that I would be back I guess so they didn't clear my stuff out. Marcus had bought that from a Chinese or Indian jeweler down in oh, I think it might have been Phu Bai or maybe when we were up in Hue. I think it was a ring or something for his girl. Anyway, not long before the New Years ambush he had given it to me to send to Iris. I forget why he asked me to, but I had put it in my gear intending to send it out. It must have slipped my mind but then after I was wounded they shipped me to the 95th Evac Hospital. I got one hell of an infection and they had a hard time controlling it with the antibiotics. Anyway they shipped me home and later my stuff was shipped to me. I didn't even look in the footlocker until later Molly, then I couldn't send it off. I figured what the hell, he was dead, his family were dealing with that ... no that is not the truth." Ben started sobbing again and struggled to get himself under control. "I couldn't face them Molly ... "

"Who, Ben, who couldn't you face?" Molly asked in wonderment.

"I couldn't face his folks, his sisters or his girl Iris. Marcus was always so alive, so dynamic, I mean he was something to watch! When Marcus died it was like part of me went with him. He saved me that night, he saved BareAss. If he had not stayed on that gun I would not be here

tonight Molly. He sacrificed himself for us and then we couldn't even find him to send him home!" Ben grabbed the package and clutched it to his chest and then broke down. "When I found this in my locker later Molly I felt so guilty that I had let him down. I thought about sending it to his girl but I couldn't. If I had then I would have had to explain to her what happened that night. How I ran out on Marcus and left him there, I LEFT HIM THERE TO DIE MOLLY! HE DIED AND I DIDN'T! Do you understand?"

Molly sobbed and grabbed Ben and held him to her like one holds a small child. She stroked the back of his head and shoulders and then kissed him on his cheeks, telling him it was okay, it was going to be alright. But she knew that the way it was, it wouldn't be. She then coaxed him to come inside. He carried the package in and lay it on the kitchen counter. She finally convinced him to eat a little bit and then suggested that he go to bed. Molly needed time to digest all this and she knew that right now Ben needed some sleep. Ben agreed.

It was about 1:30 AM when Ben's eyes popped open and he was wide awake. He turned and looked at Molly sleeping soundly beside him. Carefully, so as not to awaken her, he climbed out of bed and found his pants, slipping them on. Sheba was lying on the bed when Ben awoke and she jumped off. He opened the bedroom door and both Ben and Sheba went downstairs. Ben was thirsty so he poured himself a glass of milk and sat down at the kitchen table. Suddenly Ben had a craving for a cigarette. He had quit smoking over 10 years ago and seldom even thought of them. As a matter of fact Ben found the stench of cigarette's offensive but now he wanted one. The longer he sat there the worse his craving became. Finally he thought the hell with it. He was going to go out and buy a pack. There was a convenience store several blocks away, and now feeling guilty as well as craving the smoke he slipped his shoes on, got a ski parka out, checked for his wallet and grabbed the car keys. Sheba whined at the door but Ben wouldn't let her out. "No girl, you stay here, I will be right back." Ben jumped in the car and started it up. There was a light snow coming down and the street was almost surreal with snow, no traffic and blowing swirls of vapor and snow flakes. He pulled out and drove the four blocks down to the store. Entering, he was the only customer there. He looked for the clerk who was just coming out of the back.

"Ah, I want a pack of Lucky Strikes please" Ben said. The clerk pulled a pack down and Ben was surprised when buying it ate up most of 5 dollars. He asked for some matches and the clerk tossed them to him. Opening up the pack of cigarettes, he almost shoved them in the trash can sitting beside the door. Then thinking how damn dumb that was (but maybe not so dumb as lighting it up) he pulled one out, struck a match and took a drag. It made him light headed but he gamely tried again. Getting back in the car he drove the four blocks back home.

Walking inside Sheba greeted him joyfully. He rubbed her ears and went out in the kitchen. Looking for something to use as an ashtray, he grabbed a coffee cup and put a little water in the bottom. Now he decided he wanted a cup of coffee but didn't want to make a whole pot. Remembering he had some instant, he got it down and put some water on to boil. Sitting down he finished the smoke while scratching Sheba's ears. As the water began to boil he put a heaping teaspoon of instant coffee into his cup and added water to it. He took the cup back to the table and sat down and took a sip. Then against his better judgement he lit another Lucky Strike. He had a curious satisfaction as he drew in the smoke and then took a sip of the steaming coffee. Sheba began to growl. He looked down at her surprised and stroked her head. "Sheba, whats wrong girl?" he began.

Ben looked up and to his unbelieving eyes an amorphous shape of what resembled a mist seemingly to materialize out of nothing. His breath caught in this throat as he continued to stare. Sheba was trembling while she watched this amazing sight. She began to whine and try to back up running into Ben's legs. As Ben watched the mist or cloud or vapor took shape and the outline of what looked like a man appeared. The lights in the kitchen seemed to dim and then to Ben's amazement, the vaporous mist took full form and Marcus stood there. Ben's heart was pounding in his chest and he thought he might have a heart attack. He stood up, took a step backward and his chair caused him to sit down.

"Say, Kube, how is my main man?" Ben was not sure he had heard right and stared open mouthed.

"Marcus? Marcus is that really you?" Marcus looked at Ben and gave Ben a warm "Marcus" smile.

"Kube, I been waiting a long time my man. I was not sure you were ever going to get my package out. What took you so long bro?" Ben's eyes filled with tears as he looked at what had once been his closest friend on the planet. He was still not sure if this really was happening or if he was hallucinating Marcus.

"Marcus, damn man, if that is really you I am SO SORRY BRO!" the words broke from the deepest essence from Ben's soul. The tears streamed down his face. All the years of guilt and shame poured out of Ben.

"Sorry? What you got to be sorry about Kube?" The shadow of what had been Marcus looked troubled. "Ben, you got to let go my man. I been watching you for a long time Bro, an' I wanted to tell you that this wasn't your fault. It jus' was my time man. You can't go on blaming yourself my brother. That jus' be how it is. I know you been blaming the Kube for what happened to Marcus. Well, Kube, I be here to set your mind at rest. You have a good woman, you have good kids and my brother you been cheating them come this time of year. I tol' you once Kube, Christmas be the time of magic. I am here to prove that. Now, why didn't you send Iris my package?"

Ben stood up and walked to the counter where Marcus's package sat. He picked it up and walked toward the shadow of Marcus. "Marcus, I swear to you I was going to send it on. After I was hit I was in the hospital and they sent me back to the world. My stuff was sent back later. I didn't even look inside my footlocker until later man. I had forgotten about it, then when I saw it I couldn't! I didn't know how to explain to your folks or to Iris what happened. Why you died and I didn't! Man, when you were gone a part of me went to! We didn't even find you to send home! How was I gonna explain that to your momma or to Iris? Marcus, the truth is I was ashamed! I felt so guilty and this time of year, Christmas, jus' makes it worse! Damn it! I hate this time of year!" Marcus just looked at Ben sadly.

"Now you jus' listen to ol' Marcus, Kube. What happened to me jus' happened. It weren't your fault, it weren't my fault, it jus' happened. Before you booked that night with BareAss, I was hit. One of them gook grenades got me good. I wanted someone to get out of there man. I wanted you to get out of there. All this guilt you be carrying Kube, is pure bull! Listen my man, I COULDN'T get out of there that night and you been

tearing yourself apart for nuthin! I love ya man, and all your guilt been hurtin' me. You was my blue eyed soul brother Ben. You still is. What you gotta remember is, Kube, Christmas be the time for all that love to come forth. Your wife is right, Ben, even though she may not know why. You a good man Kube, you jus' gotta let go and quit holdin' back from your wife and your kids. They never gonna know what you been through, they won't understand and ... that's good. They shouldn't. But you, you Kube, do understand and you gotta be smart enough to understand nuthin' bout this was your fault. Had you died that night with me, nuthin would a changed cept you and your family wouldn't a been here. That was my gift to you Ben, my gift of love for a brother. Now I ain't got much time cause I gotta go. I want you to find Iris cause she needs that package. You understand me?"

Ben watched Marcus in wonderment. Still not sure this was real or the result of the hit on his head Ben hoped it was real. "Marcus, man, I have missed you Bro."

"I know man, I miss you too."

Now Marcus seemed to be fading. Ben jumped up and stepped forward. "No man, don't go yet! I still got so much I want to talk to you about!" Marcus seemed to stop for a second and reached forward with his hand. His hand touched Ben on his chest and Ben felt the pressure of his touch. Suddenly he filled with a warm sensation, a feeling of love that was overwhelming. "Marcus I am never gonna forget!"

"I know man. You find Iris, you hear?"

"I promise, Marcus, I will find her and get this to her. "

"You do that Kube, she needs it." Marcus was gone.

It was not quite 7:30 when Molly woke and came downstairs. Still not wide awake she walked into the kitchen and her nose was assaulted with cigarette smoke. "Ben, were you smoking?" Ben was sitting at the table on the phone. He was writing something down and held up his hand for her to be quiet while he wrote.

"Okay, thanks." he said. "Good morning Molly."

"Ben, were you smoking?" Molly asked now very annoyed.

"Molly, you are not going to believe what I am about to tell you, fact is I am not sure I believe it!" Molly could see that something had changed so she sat down to listen. He held up a telephone number he just wrote down. Ben then proceeded to tell her what had transpired early that morning.

Ben and Molly's daughter Carol got home on Friday from school. Walking in the front door her dad grabbed her and gave her a big kiss on her cheek. "Merry Christmas sweetheart! Geeze it is good to see you!" Carol was a little surprised by her dad's effusive display. She kissed him back and then hugged her mom. "I will be down in a minute honey, I want to talk but I got to finish packing first!" Her dad bounded up the stairs.

"Uh, Mom, is dad okay? Merry Christmas?? What did he mean, he has to pack?" Molly looked at Carol and smiled.

"Your dad is flying up to Detroit for a day or so. He is going to see an old Army buddy's family. He has something he has to give them."

"Huh? An old Army buddy? Daddy never even talked about the Army. Did his buddy call him?"

"No, Carol, his friend is dead but this week while getting our Christmas decorations out your Dad found something he forgot he had. Something that he made a promise to deliver to these people a long time ago. And, Carol, when he found it, I think he found Christmas too. Dad is flying out tomorrow morning and will be back Monday or Tuesday." Now Carol was confused. She, like most kids, always figured that she "knew" her parents, but this was a new wrinkle. She decided however it could wait while she unpacked in her room. She kissed her Mom again and went upstairs.

Molly looked around at the bright Christmas decorations and smiled with satisfaction. The lights on their tree blinked cheerfully. This was going to be one of those memorable Christmas's. She could just FEEL IT!

