

The Parade

By Brit

Memorial Day 1976

It had sounded like a good idea.

At least at first. A Memorial Day picnic with the Dobeys, burgers on the grill, Edith's secret recipe potato salad, nerf football on the beach with the kids, dozing in the warm May sun with good friends sounded great, actually. Starsky was having the time of his life, finally finding someone his age to play with, well, mental age, anyway.

Yeah, it was perfect until I realized that this is where they began to gather for the parade. Don't get me wrong, I love parades. I was even in a few back home in Duluth, all of us Sea Scouts marching proudly along in our uniforms, hoping that everyone we knew was watching as we tramped down Union Avenue. It's just that my partner has avoided these kinds of things for as long as I've known him.

You see—Memorial Day parades mean veterans. And don't misunderstand me here, either. Those who served deserve this kind of honor, and a whole lot more, really. All the vets do. Including the Vietnam Vets. Like my partner.

He never says much about his tours of duty over there. Tours. *Plural*. One night he got rip-snorthing drunk after a really hard case involving another man who served in the war...I hate to call it a "Police Action". Talk to anyone who served there, survived there, and you know it was war—brutal, horrific, devastating war. "Police Action" sounds like you're breaking up a bunch of rowdies at a *Who* concert.

Anyway, this one particular case led to Starsk having to use deadly force. It was me or the perp, no two ways about it, he had me dead in his sights. The nightmares drove Starsky nearly insane, putting him back in the jungles, only in his dreams he kept turning his M-16 on his own platoon. And then on himself. But when he put the muzzle under his chin, pulling the trigger—nothing would happen.

This finally drove Starsk to my doorstep one Friday night, almost Saturday morning actually, with a case of beer and a need to talk. It took him a while to finally get around to it, the talking that is, the beer didn't require much time at all. He began talking about the nightmares, the action he'd seen, the horror of it all. The senseless deaths, destruction, the loss of friends, the loss of innocence. The first time he was shot. The first man he ever killed. How he wept. How he could no longer weep. And finally coming home to the country that sent him to uphold what was right, what was worth believing in, dying for.

But when he finally came home, many in that same country that sent him into the jungles met him with scorn and disgust: *Murderer, Baby Killer, Butcher*, they called him. He who was decorated twice for Valor. Purple Heart. Serving in Vietnam was made to be something to be ashamed of, never to be discussed, hide and forget the whole messy, embarrassing and nauseating business. But how could he? How could we?

Starsky's never talked about his experiences there since.

We had noticed the bands and floats arriving earlier, but it was too soon to politely skip out on our hosts. Starsky began checking his watch every fifteen minutes and probably started thinking up excuses of why he couldn't stay to watch the parade. But apparently we lost track of the time because the assorted groups of participants were beginning to form a line along the park drive, getting ready to step out onto Oakdale Boulevard.

An older caddy pulls into the parking spot closest to us, and a small group of WWII Vets step out and start unloading their gear. Starsky can't help but watch them, though I know he's uncomfortable. So we stop in the middle of our noisy tag ball game and make room for them as they get ready to add the flags to their trappings. Three American Flags, a California State Flag and two regiment flags are set in holders placed by the table to wait until their bearers are ready. It's a small group of some rather old war-horses, some with their uniforms a bit too tight. But they look proud and dignified in their uniforms, flags unfurling in the light westerly breeze that flirts with them.

Rosie's thrilled at the prospect of a parade and runs ahead to gather her parents and to find a place curbside for us all to watch from. Cal takes the ball and runs on ahead to help gather up the lawn chairs and cooler and such. I meet my partner's eyes and raise my eyebrows—an inquiry. It's his call. If we leave now, we can probably sneak through the growing traffic before the parade starts and completely blocks us in.

Starsk gives me that smile of his, a little sad, a little resigned, and shrugs. We'll stick around and put up a brave front. He nods again, urging me to join the Dobeys and turns to make his way down to the beachfront, avoiding the crowds and parade altogether.

I give him a look that he reads for what it is—does he want me to come with him? He smiles again and gives his head a little shake—he'll be fine, go on ahead. I'd rather go with him, but I respect his privacy, his need to be alone, knowing I'll be beside him in a heartbeat if he so much as twitches.

I watch as he turns to make his way toward the ocean when a gust of wind blasts through the park. Laughter follows as band members right their tufted caps and paper plates fly off unsuspecting tables. One of the older gentlemen in the group of vets loses his cap to the errant breeze and it proceeds to nestle itself against my partner's feet. Starsky reaches down to retrieve it and walks it quickly over to the older man. This man, who I can see now was a captain, offers Starsky a handshake and a toothy smile which is reciprocated. But the man doesn't drop Starsky's hand. It appears that he asks a question or two to strike up a conversation while the rest of his group finishes their preparations. I can tell

this is awkward for my usually verbose friend, but he's honest and polite if nothing else, and responds to the man's question.

The vet looks at Starsky knowingly and offers him a seat beside him at the picnic table. I wonder how he knew? What has he read in my partner's face? His pain-filled eyes? Now Starsky's really uncomfortable. I'm about to walk over and interrupt, rescue him, but he surprises me by sitting down next to the old man. The others in his group get the captain's attention and indicate that it's time to join parade formation, but he simply waves them on and turns his focus back to Starsky.

Starsky spends a lot of time studying his hands or the ground, but they are talking. For some reason I know it's best to leave them alone, so I move off to join the Dobeys at the curb. I sit in the proffered lawn chair, but turn it as such that I can keep one eye on my partner. The parade starts with the usual marching bands and civic group floats, scout troops and clowns, all stuff that delight Cal and Rosie. How odd that the festive roar of the crowd and the boisterous music of the bands are such a strange counterpoint to the quiet and sometimes intense discussion taking place behind me.

I watched Starsky's face as the old man talks with him, asks him questions, draws him out in ways that I didn't know how to. The way only someone who had shared the same type of experience could. Knew the same fears, experienced the same pain, triumphed over the same obstacles that threatened to destroy you and everything you hold dear. Starsk said after that night of catharsis that I *did* understand, that he and I fought on a different kind of battlefield, but a battlefield all the same. I appreciated his words because I wanted so desperately to reach him, comfort him, affirm him...but I think the words were more for my benefit than anything else.

I watch Starsky's face as he talked more, became more animated. I saw glimpses of sorrow, bitterness and regret dance across his dark features. I could feel myself tense as my focus turned toward the captain, waiting for just one change in his features that were condemning or accusing. I would be all over him in a heartbeat if I did.

But my fears were groundless. I watched as Starsky eventually seemed to relax more, nod occasionally at a point the older veteran made, wipe discreetly at his eyes. And finally I saw him raise his head and look the old man straight in the eye. Finally. They held each other's gaze for a moment until my partner nodded ever so slightly and a ghost of a smile graced his lips. The older vet returned the sentiment with an even broader grin and clasped Starsky by the shoulder—a comrade's gesture. A healing gesture.

Starsky stood first and offered the senior a hand up, which was gratefully taken. As the captain adjusted his flag harness, my partner moved to the other end of the picnic table where Old Glory had been quietly waiting in the stand for her bearer. Starsky holds her for just a moment, and I can see his features change to a look of quiet resolution and acceptance.

The captain joins Starsky and they hold each other's gaze for a few more moments. Then the gentle WWII vet pulls himself into rigid attention, and raising his right hand, salutes my partner.

I can't really describe the emotions that flitted across my partner's face at that moment, but the last one was gratitude. Starsky returns the captain's salute and hands him the Stars and Stripes.

The older veteran grips the younger one's shoulder one last time, then trots raggedly off across the park. He'll still be able to hook up with his group before they turn the corner onto Rolondo.

I figure Starsky needs a minute more before he heads on down to the ocean. Then I'll make our excuses to the Dobeys and follow him there. Watching yet another high school marching band pass by, I'm more than a little startled when I feel a familiar hand on my shoulder.

After my heart starts beating again, I stand up next to Starsky with an inquiring look on my face. He meets my gaze steadily and gives me a little smile. This time though, there's something different in his eyes—peace, acceptance, and a little healing. I smile in joy and gratitude, and give him an affectionate slap on the back.

We turn back toward the parade just as another group of veterans come into our line of vision. Korean War Vets. Behind them another marching band's song haunts and surrounds them.

*America, America!
God shed His Grace on thee
And crown thy good
with brotherhood
from sea to shining sea!*

The crowd cheers and applauds, and I can see a quiet pride and strength on every one of the vets as they stride past. Well-deserved pride, and the appreciation of a free nation. I felt something in my chest tighten with gratitude for these brave men and women marching by, for those who fought and served our country before and after them, and for a kindly captain that gave my partner back some of the dignity and self-respect he deserves.

It's funny how the two of us don't need words, but I really felt like I had to say something just then.

“Starsk?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

He turns and looks back at me quizzically, ready to ask me *‘for what?’* when I nod out toward the group of vets passing by. He follows my gaze to those marching on to the boisterous appreciation of those who benefited by their sacrifice. And he understands.

And my thanks is enough for him. For now, because I know it won’t always be this way.

“You’re welcome.”

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