

Remember

The pin attached to the velvet red poppy pierces the flesh of a young man on the left side of his chest. It is positioned just off centre to the left, as his heart is.

He stands before the monument wearing army fatigue pants that are baggy and bunch up around his ankles, sturdy large black boots, a gold plated watch, and the poppy. The pin had created a trickle of blood which had long since dried up, leaving a thin red line that trails down to the top of his stomach where it trails off in different directions and fades.

The monument is a statue of a soldier, wearing the trench helmet used by soldiers in the First World War. The rifle is a Ross MK III, and is being used as a cane to hold the granite soldier up rather than a weapon.

A large plaque below, easily as large as the statue above it, holds in place the engraved names of soldiers that the town sacrificed in past wars.

The names of the fifty-three young men who were lost to this world in the Great War are first. Next, one hundred and eighty-five from the Second World War. Then the seventeen who died in Korea. And finally, thirty-one who lost their lives in Vietnam.

The boy glides his fingers over each of the names in order; left to right, top to bottom. Tears flow, and an older gentleman who is passing by on the sidewalk stops and stares, at first touched by the show of respect for fallen veterans. He comes closer to the boy, and when he sees the dried blood, the poppy pinned through flesh, he recoils for a moment and the wrinkles on his face become more pronounced.

“Young man, you mustn’t do that to yourself.”

Without turning he says: “But I must.”

The old man is moved more by curiosity than disgust or contempt.

“How does hurting yourself honour those who died for our country?”

The boy continues to stare at the monument. Brian Kildeer died in 1951 in Korea.

He is somehow satisfied when no answer is returned. He hopes he’s reached the boy. “It’s good that you care, but for goodness sakes, don’t hurt yourself.”

“Sir?”

The boy’s voice sounds far away and faint, and the old man steps closer to hear what he has to say.

“Yes?”

“Are you a veteran?”

“Why yes, I served in W-W-two.”

The boy nods. “Did you ever kill someone?”

The old man steps back and looks up and down the sidewalk. No one else is about on this frigid day, no one to hear him but this disturbed boy.

“I don’t like to talk about it.”

The boy lowers himself onto his left knee and continues to scan names.

John Richardi died in 1968 in Vietnam.

The old man comes closer and leans forward to get a better look at the boy's face. He sees the hair pulled forward and obscuring most of his pale face. Dark brown eyes dance over the names as his finger reveals one after the other.

"Have you been drinking, son?" He asks it in as kind a voice as he can, but he's thinking he must be on drugs of some sort. The old man steps closer still, close enough to touch. Reaching for words he looks at the plaque and sees a name he's spent most of his life trying not to think about.

Deacon "Deke" Williams died in 1945.

The old man closes his eyes and tears are forced out, he pulls in his lower lip and the upper protrudes further. He wipes at his face, and when he breathes in through his nose, the air has difficulty making it through the mucus.

The boy looks away from the plaque for a second in the direction of, but not directly at, the old man.

"World War II. There was an aggressor. There were Nazis. We came to help the victims. We helped save people against evil." The boy looks the man in the eye now. "*You* helped save people."

They stare at each other and the old man flinches first, looking back across the road to see that still no one else is nearby.

"My brother died last month."

The old man looks around, confused for a moment, then realizes what the boy has said. He feels no satisfaction in receiving such a large piece of the boy's puzzle.

"I'm sorry," he stammers.

The boy isn't looking for sympathy, and he continues without acknowledgment. "Someone drove a car full of explosives into the town he was stationed in. Of all the buildings in town, it drove into the one he was working in."

The old man understands. "He was in Afghanistan?"

"No. Iraq," the boy said, returning his gaze to the plaque. "Look at all these names, just from our town. Heroes who sacrificed. No one even knows we have people in Iraq. But there are, thirty of them."

"I read about that a while back." He wants to squeeze the boy's shoulder, but stares at the poppy on his naked flesh instead before checking that his is still attached to his jacket.

"Hunter was really stoked about the exchange program. And now he's dead."

The old man expects the boy to break down and sob, but it doesn't happen.

"He died, just like these people. But it doesn't feel like he's a hero, like you."

"He is, son. He is. He didn't pick the battle. He represented all of us. He risked his life for us. That makes him a hero."

The boy shakes his head. "Do you actually believe he'll ever have his name added?" The boy strokes the bottom right corner of the plaque. Right below Jason Dionne, who died in 1972 in Vietnam. There isn't space for another name.

They stare at the plaque in unified silence for a minute or more until the old man speaks again.

"You asked if I killed someone."

The boy looks at him but says nothing.

"I killed two people."

"Germans?"

“One German.”

“Wha..what...what happened?”

The old man looks at the sidewalk. He doesn't want to talk about it still, but he had already started in spite of that.

“It was in the Hochwald Forest, February, 1945.”

The boy lowers his hand from the plaque and stares at the old man with a look that pleads for him to continue.

“We were on patrol. Listen, I don't want to talk about this, but...”

“Please.”

They both look frightened, so close to the old man's source of pain.

He looks around, shuffles his feet, then continues. “We came into a small clearing. My buddy Deke...” the old man waves his hand at the plaque, as if it somehow embodies his former comrade, “He was right in front of me. We came into the clearing, and I saw them first. Three Germans huddled together near the opposite tree line. Sharing a cigarette. We all looked at them, we were practically on top of them, and they were looking at us. The cigarette dropped out of the open mouth of one of the kids. No artillery, no birds, no sounds at all.”

The man sits down on the curb beside the boy, his back to the monument.

The boy turns to face the veteran. “What happened?”

“We stared, then one of the Krauts scrambled for his gun, so Deke let him have it. I was just standing there, staring at this German kid as he crumpled to the ground. He fell right beside the cigarette. Then it hit me.”

“You were shot?”

“Not right then,” the old man says, staring at his feet. “It was blood. Deke's blood. Deke fell back against my legs but I got one of the Krauts before I took a one in the shoulder. The other guys got the last Kraut kid, then carried us back to base.”

Instead of asking, the boy turns around and looks back over the plaque, his finger coming to rest on Deke Williams' name.

He looks back at the old man and sees his body is shaking. He puts his hand on his shoulder. “I'm sorry, mister.”

Much quicker than the boy would think possible, the old man rises to his feet and faces the boy. His face is red and streamed in tears and he points at the boy's face. The man's cheeks ripple.

“Don't be sorry, but don't you ever think of your brother as anything but a hero again,” the old man says. The cheeks ripple again. Then the anger seems to drift back into him. He lowers his hand. “I watched Deke bleed to death before we could get him a medic... I'm no hero.”

He looks past the boy at the monument once more before flashing a look at the boy, hoping he understands. He reaches out to the boy and slowly pulls the pin back out of his flesh and the boy winces from the fresh pain. With the poppy freed, the old man holds it out for the boy, who takes it, before continuing down the sidewalk.

The boy watches him go. He looks around, but sees no one. He stands before the monument and stares at the granite soldier.