

Selected excerpts from *A Soldier's Son*

A novel by Jack Estes
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Memories Of War

Last night, when the moon was gone and the neighborhood was quiet, I grabbed my coat and walked down the hill toward Wilderness Park. With me was my squad of young marines, dead and wounded, yet still living in my memory. The air was wet and cool as they followed me down the block, gliding under streetlights and sliding past parked cars. At the bottom of the hill, we turned silently into the thick, dark woods.

As a marine in Vietnam, I hated moonless nights in the jungle. It was impossible to see. My imagination would soar; I could hear my heart beat and feel the adrenaline surge. When we were dug in on the side of a mountain, trees became moving shadows, and the wind was the enemy brushing through the broad leaf. Back then, Jesse was in the hole next to me. Padre, Stoner, and Buddy were invisible down the line. A snap of a twig was an enemy footstep, but we had been warned, “If you throw a grenade, you best have a body in the morning.”

Now, after thirty-five years, I long for moonless nights. I like working with my squad as we edge deeper into darkness. These are gentle woods, I know, but jungle memories still hang in the chilled evening air. I can feel my brothers, frozen in time, and I imagine our younger days, when we fought in the mountains near Khe Sanh, in the rice paddies and villages near Da Nang. I remember their names and faces and the cruel, violent last moments of their lives as our chopper went down. Buddy was different. He was psychologically wounded, but it took twenty years for him to die – from a drug overdose in Boston.

Being A Dad

He is touched when he sees the photo of Jake as a small boy standing in front of the memorial, holding Mike's leg. It pleases him to see the photo hung up by Jake; it reminds him of a better time, when his boy thought he was a hero instead of control freak.

Jake backs off and gets in a boxing stance, does an Ali shuffle, punches Mike in the arm, and then tears off for the passenger side with a wry smile, laughing.

“Come on, Pops. You're burning light.”

Mike loves being with his son. He relishes the idea of being a father and loving Jake in the way he wishes he was loved growing up. He feels good giving him opportunities, talking about baseball and school, and sharing his advice. Even though Jake rejects most of that, Mike still feels content as they climb inside and pull away, coursing through the neighborhood. It will be great to see him hit.

Healing Is Hard

Mike knows it's not easy ignoring his demons. Or admitting he has them. After the war, he simply thought that was unique, that the trouble he had in his mind was his alone, not shared by anyone else. It was his secret. He never once considered not keeping it secret. And he thinks he's hidden it pretty well

all these years. Only his family really knows. Sure, he has written about his troubles and pain, but always with a sense of distance. He has learned from letters from vets and from soldiers that come up to him at readings that he seems in control and over it all. Writing eloquently is his control. But he'll work through it. Who, except another soldier, can understand what it felt like to reach into a buddy's gut wound, blinded by the night, to feel the warm blood entrails, not sure you can stop it? How could any therapist know how it felt to have a wounded corpsman shot again and again while lying on top of you, crying, "Jesus, they're cutting me up."

What the hell do these assholes who are trying to counsel us know? Did they ever see a stack of bodies bloat and blister in the sun?

Mike stops at the door, shaking. He takes a breath and collects his composure. He thinks of Claire and all the times she said to him, "You have to go into your pain if you ever want to get beyond it."

Married To War

She blew up. She threatened to leave him again. She threatened and pleaded and begged Mike to seek help. He said he would seek help. But it was no use. Either he was too busy, too important, or too ashamed,...and now it is too late.

The phone rings and rings and finally stops. The room feels dead. Quiet, as if no one else lives here, as if she is a stranger in her home. She stops packing and stands at the window, arms folded. The lake is churning, and the wind lifts the water in waves. The rain blows sideways. The phone rings again and again until finally Claire picks it up. She doesn't speak.

"Claire. Claire. Please don't hang up. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm just...I...I was upset. I know I was wrong. I...I'll try Prozac. I'll get into counseling. I swear to God I will."

Claire doesn't say anything for a long time. In a way, it has been pleasant with him sleeping in the extra bedroom and leaving for work before she gets up.

"Mike... I can't take it anymore."

"I'm sorry. I won't ever get like that again. I swear to you. I'll keep going to the VA and get one medication. I'll do anything. Please don't leave me."

She's heard this before. "I don't believe you. You're a liar. I've got to go." Claire hangs up, sits on the bed, and starts to cry. Twenty-five years she has put into this marriage. Twenty-five years filled with anguish. She'd be crazy to stay. Tears roll and turn into sobs. She fumbles for a tissue, blows her nose, and hears a gentle knock, on the door.

"Come in." She looks up and Jake is standing in the doorway. He looks concerned and helpless as he makes his way toward her, sits on the bed, and puts an arm around her.

"Mom...don't leave us."

Raised By A Soldier

"This is different. Vietnam is stuck in his head, and Iraq makes him act like a psycho. I just want to get away from him, have an adventure, do something exciting. You don't know what it's like living with a combat veteran who wants to protect and watch over you like you're a four-year-old. I'm a man. I'm eighteen. That's how old my dad was when he went to Vietnam. He acts like I couldn't hack it. I'd be a great marine...Let's talk about something else. OK?"

“I don’t want you talking about the marines. You know I hate that. What about baseball? You said it was the most important thing in your life.” Megs touches Jake’s face, his hair, and kisses his cheek.

“I’m sick of baseball. I want to do something important.” For a moment, Jake imagines joining the marines and how sharp he’d look in combat gear. And he can see himself rescuing a child from a building’s rubble. The moon turns translucent and lights Jake’s face as Megs kisses him again.

A Son’s Choice

“What’s going on? It’s like a morgue in here.”

Claire looks at Jake hard. “Tell your father what you’ve done.”

Jake hangs his head a bit and keeps reading, eating.

“Go on, Jake. Tell your dad. Tell him what you’ve done!”

“What is this?” Mike asks. “Oh no! Is Megs pregnant?”

Jake looks up defiantly and says, “Griff and I joined the marines.”

The room freezes. Mike is speechless. It’s a blow to the gut that triggers every fear and anxiety he’s ever had. He imagines Jake on a gurney. Blood and broken bones. A look of disbelief in the boy’s eyes. He feels how it must feel to see his son die.

“Jake…Son.” Mike shakes his head slowly. He pushes the intrusive thoughts from his mind: Jake bleeding, Jake without legs. He feels like he’s about to fall down. “Are you crazy?” He shudders. “Are you out of your god-damned mind?!”

“It’s my decision. I thought you’d be proud of me.”

“You’re not doing shit! You’re going to college and playing baseball.”

“I’m eighteen; you can’t tell me what to do!”

“Bullshit. I’m not going to let you go out and get yourself killed. I’ll break your goddamned leg if I have to, but you’re not going!”

Jake stands up, angrily throws his chips, and pushes his dad against the cupboards. Mike roars back, grabs Jake’s shirt, and slams him against a cabinet door, dishes crashing.

Claire rushes toward them screaming, “Stop it, Mike! Stop it!” then she forces herself between them, clutching the spoon.

“Go ahead and hit me, Dad. You’re the reason I’m leaving. I’ve never been good enough for you. Tough enough. Remember when you used to tell me to quit being a pussy?”

Mike lets go. In that instant, he knows his son will die or come home horribly wounded and fucked up inside just like he is. He takes a deep breath, exhales, and speaks softly, “Son, you can’t go.”

Jake straightens out his shirt and looks Mike squarely in the eyes, lifts his chin and says, “Can’t go?...I’m already gone.” He flies out the kitchen door. Claire backs to the sink. Mike sits down at the table, lowers his face into his hands, and closes his eyes. Claire’s eyes are red, and she looks as if she has aged a dozen years. She looks at Mike with disdain, shaking her head. Her words come out filled with despair. “You promised me this wouldn’t happen.”

Father & Son Alike

Now he feels agitated and afraid. Soon his son will lose his innocence and learn how to kill. He is trapped in a free-falling vision of his son’s life. *He will end up just like me and all the others in every goddamned war. He’ll feel terror and grief and great remorse. He’ll learn how to remove himself from all feelings. How to be flat inside when a Humvee rolls over a land mine and soldiers are blown in half. Soon my son will shut down at the sight and smell of bloated bodies in the cooking sand. Bodies he helped kill days before. He’ll numb himself and feel nothing when a gaggle of kids appears, some missing arms and legs, dragging themselves through streets of rubble, begging for scraps of food. Maybe one of them will smile and toss a grenade in the back of his passing truck. Maybe he’ll see a woman holding a child and wonder if she is a bomber trying to kill him. And as the days and weeks grind on, he’ll be tough and feel invincible. Or shake uncontrollably after months of IEDs and mortars, machine gun fire and suicide bombers blowing themselves up in a spray of flesh and bone.*

Mike starts walking back up the block, thinking, talking to himself. *Then one day, my boy will come home with his mind messed up. No medication or therapy can stop that. He’ll have the same kind of nightmares and intrusive thoughts I do. And for years he will crave the same kind of unbelievable adrenaline surges I’ve always had – those heart-pounding moments of hyper alertness that come when you’re surrounded by enemy or stalking them at night.* Mike’s eyes water as he realizes the truth: My boy will be just like me.

A Wife & A Mom Knows

“My son knows I support him. He knows I would give my life for him. What he didn’t know when he left – what he was too young to know -- is that this and any other damned war is awful. And the sad thing is that this noise we’re making might not change any of that.” She shifts the weight in her feet from side to side, looking for the Marine Mom sweat shirts and some kindred spirits to draw strength from; she sees Nancy. Nancy gives her two thumbs-up, and then the words just spill out of her with no hesitation. “Our soldiers are dying now, every day. Or they come home with arms and legs missing and the war stuck in their minds.” The tent is quiet.

“My husband Mike used to say our soldiers will come home with their minds damaged, their thinking affected, perhaps forever,” Claire continues. She is confident and poised now, with the fervor of an evangelical pastor. “Mike was wounded, shot through the chest. That healed. The wounds inside him never did. Even now, he sometimes scares me with that cold, faraway look in his eyes. So cold that I have to go out of the house and take a breath and walk around the block and remind myself it’s not me he hates, it’s what happened to him. He’s a tortured soul and has been for more than thirty years. Do you think this war will produce anything different than broken souls?”

“They’re heroes!” someone shouts.

“They’re all heroes,” Claire responds, and now the crowd is listening to each word. Listening to how it sounds and hangs in the air with mental images and feelings so deep that they trigger some great sadness inside most of the people in the crowd.

“But what good are heroes when our kids come home so damaged inside?”

Missing His Son

I still feel this huge need to see Jake. To hug him and feel his strength. I remember when he was a baby, and I used to take him in the shower and rock him in my arms and say, "How you doing, big buddy. How's my buddy wuddy?" The shower and the soap. I can almost smell the soap and feel his tiny body in my hands. That was so important for me. It made me feel like I was decent and good and that I could take care of this child that God entrusted me with. Maybe that's why I came over here, to feel decent again. I don't know, but I've got to see Jake and let him know how much I love him.

And I miss you and can see that I've caused you enormous pain over the years. I'll be better man, a better husband, Claire. I promise you I will.

Please give Katie all my love and tell her I miss her. And tell Megs I'm thinking about her and looking forward to a grandson. Mike.

Human Nature

I think deep down, it's against human nature to kill another man. Especially if you grow up in a religious society where life and creation are so important. Where bringing children into the world is so important. I once read an article about an Iraqi woman whose son was a suicide bomber and had just blown himself up. She said she was happy and only wished she had more sons to give. That disturbed me for a long time. It seemed inhuman. For our soldiers, killing is against God and society. It takes training to learn to do it without hesitating. And then decades to get over it, if ever.