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How I Came Home

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HOW I CAME HOME

Less than twelve hours back in the States after thirteen months in Vietnam, December 1970, sitting in the backseat of my parents' car, sixty minutes from the Columbus airport to Lexington, Ohio. In ten days I would turn twenty-one.

Cold in the backseat, vinyl stiff and unyielding. A day earlier, Da Nang had been seventy-eight degrees and sticky. I wiped my hands on my pants, uniform wrinkled from my flight—didn't matter, last time I'd wear it. My parents were saying how everyone at church would be happy to see me.

I tried to pay attention, but the snow dazzled me, everything so white. "Well, son, was it really as bad over there as everyone says?" My father had served in WWII, crewed supply planes from the Philippines to Japan after V-J Day, spent most of his time drinking and gambling. This was before he accepted Jesus Christ as his personal savior, became a minister.

"Yeah, Dad," I said, "it was really fucked up"—hearing the syllables too late, squinting, wanting the words back. My mother jerked visibly, and my father's eyes cut quickly to the rearview mirror, then back to the road.

"Sorry," I said. "My language might not be what it should for a while. Sorry." I glanced out the window, embarrassed, flexing my hands, which felt tight and raw.

"We love you, son," my father said. "We're glad you're home." My mother reached over the seat, found my hand, squeezed with all her strength. I looked down at our hands. My mother's felt small and frail, and her arm looked uncomfortable twisted over the seat. After a minute, I let go. The car's windshield wipers clacked as they smeared snow back and forth across the glass. I watched the road unwind.