

Hey, Joe!  
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*Author's Note:*

*"Hey, Joe!" Is the story of a guy that wants his buddy's girl. A great song by Carl Smith.*

*"Hey, Joe!  
Though we've been the best of friends  
This is where our friendship ends.  
I gotta have that dolly for my own."*

## A TIME OUT OF LIFE

Our platoon was pinned down by a VC sniper hidden on a hill at the end of the valley. No one had been able to get a hard fix on his location. It was Thanksgiving Day in 1965 but no one was eating turkey. We were in a long valley near the Phu Bai airfield trying to locate a Viet Cong force that had been sending harassing fire at planes taking off and landing.

Earlier the lieutenant had tried to send out a small patrol and the SOB picked off two of them before they even reached the tree line. The LT shook his head and walked over to where I was cleaning my rifle.

The Marines at that time were using Winchester Model 70 30.06 rifles for sniper work. This was essentially a target rifle and they had acquired a number of them over the previous decade. There were complaints that the match grade ammo would cause supply problems but for now that had been overruled. The following year would see a change to the M40, which was based on a Remington model 700-40.

I'd learned to shoot with a Winchester Model 70 30.06 growing up in the hill country of west Texas, so this was essentially the same rifle I had at home. Antelope were real spooky so you had to stand off quite a ways – and the heavy barrel was great for varmints, such as gophers. I knew what I could do with what I grew up with. The addition of the eight-power Unertl scope gave me a much longer effective range than the 2.75X Redfield scope I had at home.

"Danny, anything you can do to help us out?"

I'd been listening to the few shots the sniper had fired and I had thought a lot about the angles involved in the shots at the patrol.

"Yeah, LT, I think so. I'd guess he's within fifty yards of that clump of rocks on the left side of the valley and about half way up the hill. Put a couple of guys quartering around that area with binoculars and have them let me know if they see any movement at all."

We looked over the map and it was a good twelve hundred yards to the rocks. I'd never sighted the Winchester for more than a thousand yards.

After twenty minutes or so, Billy, the lieutenant's radio operator leaned over, "Danny, I saw something move about twenty-five yards to the upper left of the rocks." Laughing a bit nervously, he added, "Hell, it was probably just an animal or something."

"Yeah," I thought, "... maybe."

I got in a comfortable position and turned the knob for a thousand yards. If I did find a target I'd have to wing it for the over-distance. I started at the rocks and slowly moved up and to the left, looking carefully at every inch of the terrain. Finally I saw an anomaly, a straight line. Deciding it was the barrel of the VC sniper's rifle I moved the aiming point slightly for where his head should be located in relation to the barrel. I was assuming he was right handed ... if not, I'd miss.

There was no wind; it was dead calm and hot. I figured he was about fifty yards higher than I was and adjusted for that. Flashing back to the Sniper manual (the military had a manual for everything, even on how to dig latrines) I remembered the example. For a scope sighted for a target at 500 yards, to hit another, unsighted target at 600 yards would be a hold off of twenty-five inches. That worked out pretty good for this target since I was sighted in for a thousand yards and I was taking a shot at close to twelve hundred I wanted to shoot about fifty inches higher than where I guessed his head would be.

I breathed out to the two guys with the binoculars, "Okay, watch."

A sniper is a one shot killer. The average grunt shot upwards of fifty thousand rounds for an enemy kill ... the average sniper's number was one point three – about a quarter's worth of ammunition.

Fear played a big part in what I was doing. All too frequently I would be gently easing back on the trigger and have the sense of a VC sniper taking aim at me. I handled it – controlling my fear was the name of the game. It was all about being in the zone: controlling my breathing by taking slow, steady deliberate breaths. I could feel my heart rate slow and my body coming to a completely relaxed state.

When it was right, I was one hundred per cent in the zone. For that moment time stops, I would feel alive with some nagging sense that I wouldn't be staying that way for long. That moment would seem to last forever for me ... a time out of life. Then I would pull the trigger and know I had taken a man's life.

Looking through a scope at a target is something quite personal. I would watch some guy wipe his nose with his sleeve or the sweat off his brow with his hand. Sometimes I would watch the eyes shift and I would wonder what he was thinking about ... and whether he was married and had kids. Was he looking at me ... wondering what I was thinking? Wondering if I had a wife? Sometimes I just thought too damn much. It was best to think of this as an

intellectual exercise of the dynamics of trajectory, speed and the play of the elements on the bullet on its way to its own violent death.

I eased gently on the hair trigger, images of the startled leap of an antelope made when hit with a high-power rifle. In another world now, I barely heard the shot or the quick kick of the recoil. I'd held steady and had a quick flash of something falling back, streaks of red coating the clump of grass he'd been behind.

I looked over at Billy and he nodded, not saying anything. The LT put his hand on my shoulder and walked away, sending another patrol out to see if the sniper had any documents. I lay down, my head on my pack and looked at the sunlight making a dappled pattern through the trees. Lighting up a smoke my body and mind shut down. I went somewhere that no one ever went with me: a lonely place, a place of cold and ice.

I remembered what the gunnery sergeant at the sniper school told us he had heard overheard some anonymous Marine captain say to some friends in a bar one night in Saigon:

*"You have to be strong enough to endure lying in the weeds day after day, letting the bugs crawl over you and bite you, letting the sun cook you and the rain boil you, shitting and pissing in your pants. Lying there because you know that Charlie's coming and you're gonna kill him."*

No one spoke to me – they had learned not to. Sure, I heard what they said, "He's a cold-hearted son-of-a-bitch." A nurse I'd spent a few days with in Saigon told me my eyes were the hard blue of glacier ice ... but colder. She loved me a little but I don't think she liked me very much.

Well, hell, I knew I was cold-hearted. I never could figure out how I felt about killing people for a living. I had twenty-two kills with twenty-three bullets. The one miss was when I thought I could get an officer standing next to an enemy sniper. I took the sure shot and tried a snap shot at the officer but I'd over-compensated and missed him.

Three weeks later I'd mustered out and was flying home. My granddad was picking me up at the airport in Austin and driving me home to his ranch west of Bandera. I didn't want to come back and live in town, like I'd done before I moved to the ranch. I was now twenty-seven and starting over with my life. On the flight home I kept thinking about my skills: I could ride bulls and broncs and I knew how to kill people from a thousand yards with one shot.

## BACK AT THE RANCH

Daddy Jim was standing there when I got off the plane. He was a big guy with thinning curly brown hair running to gray and a ready grin. He'd taken over most of the running of the ranch since I'd left. He gave me a hug that 'bout broke a rib or two, but damn, it felt good.

It felt like he had lost none of his legendary strength during the time I'd been killing people over in 'Nam. For a guy in his early seventies, he looked damn good.

"Danny, I'm sure glad to have you home, son. You were missed around here."

I was glad to see he brought my truck to pick me up. After my folks were killed in a car crash when I was fourteen, I moved out to the ranch to live with my grandparents. I was pretty down on life and granddad could see that. He found a forty-eight Ford pickup and helped me restore it. We put a lot of time on it together and became very close.

Driving home in my truck we talked and I felt a slight easing in the pent-up tension of the last four years. Daddy Jim – we had always called him that – was one of the good guys. He was patient to a fault, never meddled; yet he always seemed to be there when anyone needed him. About a year after I moved in with them, grandma died of cancer and it was the two of us against the world.

I had a fair amount of mustering out pay – it's hard to spend money out in the boonies of 'Nam. I used some of it to help Daddy Jim get the ranch fixed up a bit. He'd mostly given up on cattle before I had moved in with him and concentrated on breeding bulls for the rodeo. It was pretty good money but more importantly it kept him happy. His animals always scored pretty well at the various rodeos.

Once a bull has shown some talent it can get entered at some of the smaller rodeos. An average bull makes two/three hundred per out in early rounds and a top bull can earn upwards of six hundred for each out in the finals. It can go as high as a hundred grand winning top bull of the year. For a bull with a good reputation each straw of semen can go for several thousand dollars.

I was raised with rodeos even before I moved out to Daddy Jim's place. I would go with him if it were close enough. In high school I was on the rodeo team and was actually quite good at it. I did a little of everything but I liked the bull riding and bareback broncs.

I turned professional after high school and started making some money at it. Then at a rodeo down at Uvalde I got in a fight over a girl in some no name, lowlife bar. I put a guy in the hospital and the sheriff down there gave me a choice of the Army or the jail. I did him one better and signed up for the Marines. I wasn't thinking that four years is a hell of a lot longer than three and a tour of duty in 'Nam as a sniper wouldn't be a hell of a lot of fun. The hard part of it was I never woulda even looked at that gal if I hadn't been three sheets to the wind.

I didn't really want to get back to doing the rodeo – the pain and lifestyle just didn't appeal to me anymore. I talked to Daddy Jim and we agreed that he would handle everything connected with breeding and I would handle all the rodeo stuff. We had a good reputation so it was easier than it could have been if I was just starting up. I would get entries and make sure the animals were transported and treated right. This was a good area to work out of; Bandera considered itself, "The Cowboy Capitol of the World."

The winter tour ran from January through May and the summer one was June through September. I would travel to most of the local events around Texas and Oklahoma and to the rodeos where we had top bulls entered. We had two guys that worked with us that would drive the trucks and take care of the animals. Occasionally we had to ship some with the commercial transporters when we had more entries – this would be at the larger rodeos. We did a few PBR events - the Professional Bull Riders – and I wanted to focus more on this part of the rodeo tour that granddad had.

I settled into a routine. The trips were fun since I knew a lot of people – many of them since I was a kid. People that I didn't know stopped me and asked about Daddy Jim ... everyone called him that. I met a girl in Prescott at the Prescott Frontier Days on the Fourth of July and we were an item until her ex won a couple of events at the Dodge City roundup in early August. She was one of the camp followers that hang around. Truth be told by the time we got to Dodge I was happy to get shucked of her – she was getting a bit too sticky. She was hot though. If a gal's only gonna have one talent, hers was a good one to have.

I was finally able to relax for a while – the last four months were our slack season. I needed an office so I knocked the wall down between my room and the bedroom next to it and incorporated a hall bathroom. I put the office area in the corner where I had light from both morning sun and the late afternoon. It worked out well - I wasn't planning on moving any time soon. It looked quite nice and I spent a lot of time relaxing there.

I started going out on Friday and Saturday nights ... mostly I went to the Silver Dollar Saloon in downtown Bandera. It was a popular place; the dance floor was small and covered with sawdust but it was a lot of fun. It was really more honky-tonk than dance hall but they did pull in great bands. The place had been around since the thirties – my mom and dad used to go there and dance.

It must have been the third time I was there – sometime in mid-November - I ran into an old friend of mine ... more of a drinking buddy really. I think he considered me more of a buddy than I did of him. In fact, when I ran into him I had to stop and think of his name. I knew it was Joe something ... yeah, Joe Atkins.

I waved to him and held my hand out to shake with him but he passed right on by and grabbed me in a big bear hug. Seeing as how I wasn't really a touchy-feely kind of guy, I stepped back and gave him that thousand -yard stare you get after a few years in prison. Except in 'Nam it only took a couple of months ... if you lived that long.

He backed off; looking embarrassed, and stammered something about getting a couple of beers. I thought about him while he was gone. He was a nice enough guy but I'd always considered him not to have much depth. It was like he was an actor playing a role he wasn't familiar with. He had an off-hand, somewhat diffident manner that made me edgy.

As he walked back with two beers, a Shiner Bock and a Pearl, I laughed to myself as I remembered that he had trouble making decisions. Even though he always did well in

school, it was like he didn't even know how to spell decisive. This was typical of him, bringing two different beers just to make sure I was happy.

"Danny, I wasn't sure what you wanted so I got one of each. Is that okay?"

*Yeah, Joe, that's okay.* I didn't answer – just took the Pearl since it was closer. I sure didn't have problems making decisions, especially about which beer to drink – my rule #1 was to always grab the closest beer in case there wasn't enough to go around.

We chatted for a bit. Joe was working as a teller for one of the two banks in town. I told him what I had been doing. For not having seen each other in four years, we seemed to catch up pretty fast.

"Hey, Danny! What was it really like over there, I mean in that place in Asia somewhere?"

*Like he would understand. Hell, I'm not sure I did.* "Hey, Joe! It was great. I got to see the jungle and everything. But it was mostly just bullshit, you know how it is."

Joe nodded, wisely, like he'd been there through it all. I pictured him being in the zone, his life flow ebbing, slowing, his body becoming still. The breathing cycle taking four or five seconds, inhale, one, exhale, two with the shot coming in a two to three second pause after the exhale when the body is at its stillest point. That pause could be extended for up to ten seconds without undue stress, but usually, two or three seconds was plenty. On the start of the exhalation cycle he would place his finger on the trigger, and as the body stilled, start the easy squeeze.

If the scope continued to show a good target he would continue with a steady pressure on the trigger. As the firing pin sent the round off to its final destination he would keep the trigger all the way back with his head held firmly to the stock. He would keep his muscles relaxed and continue to look through the scope tube, avoiding any reaction to the sound or recoil. After the recoil finished he would release the trigger and think about the death that was the object of the exercise. Those deaths would add up and ...

"Danny, hey, you okay?"

"Yeah, Joe. It was all bullshit."

The waitress walked by with a tray full of beers for another table. I reached up and took one, winning a wink and a smile from her. We'd been doing some half-hearted flirting on the nights we were both there. She was the younger sister of a girl I'd dated in high school.

Joe and I chatted for a bit – he was rambling on and on about something. Then some key word filtering through my musings made me pay attention again.

"... anyway, she's real good lookin'. We're kinda engaged, but, well, I haven't exactly asked her. I want to, I mean I *really* want to ask her but I'm hoping I'll get promoted to

Senior Teller at the end of the year and I'll be making a lot more money. What do you think, old buddy?"

"Well, Joe, I guess I'd have to see her. I mean, you don't want to make a mistake, do you?"  
*Like I cared.*

Joe responded, sounding excited, "Yeah, that's a great idea, Danny. Hey, we are coming tomorrow night for the band. Johnny Duncan will be playing – it should be a big crowd but I can save you room at the table. This will be great. You can meet Angie - that's my girl, Angie Seldon – and we can have a lot of fun.

I figured, what the hell, I could always find some girl to pick up. "Sure, Joe. That sounds like fun." *Like tearing wings off flies and killing people for a living was fun.*

I showed up a little late the next night. I had a big blue roan mare, Donna (don't ask – that was the name of the first girl I'd been with in high school), and hadn't been giving her enough work so I took her on a long ride in the afternoon, ignoring the light rain and my slicker. I hadn't slept well the night before – I kept seeing myself back in-country, somehow knowing that a Cong sniper was in the zone, inhaling, exhaling ... and I woke up in a cold sweat. I never had those dreams while I was over there but lately they were coming all too often. Maybe two or three times a week I'd wake up somewhere around oh dark thirty and never get back to sleep.

Feeling in a dark mood I almost didn't go but when it came to staying home and drinking beer or going out and drinking it, I decided on the latter. In my sour mood I put on black jeans and a black, long sleeved shirt and jammed on well-worn black Justin boots and my fairly new Stetson hat. Both of these were from my rodeo days and dressing in black had been my trademark. In that mood I went to meet Joe and his soon-to-be fiancée, driving my fire engine red truck.

## SILVER DOLLAR SALOON

*Now come on Joe let's make a deal  
Let me dance with her to see if she is real.  
She's the cutest girl I've ever seen,  
I'll tell you face to face I mean to steal her from you.*

The rain had ended and it was actually a nice night. Not warm by any means but comfortably cool in my long sleeved shirt. When I walked in the band was in the middle of tuning up. There was a lot of noise from everyone getting settled and making sure they had beer in hand.

Joe saw me walking in and was suddenly pulling on my arm towards a table next to the dance floor. He was walking a bit unsteady so he must have gotten there early to hold the table. I'd

say four beers for sure. When I saw Joe's girl sitting at the table, looking up expectantly towards us, I came to an abrupt stop, almost falling as Joe kept pulling on my arm.

It was like driving in the dark all night for hours and hours and coming over a hill to see the first blaze of the glowing dawn. All around everything would be gray, dull and listless – the bright morning sun becoming the world. It was like that the first time I saw Angie. It wasn't the parts – they were nice but it was the package that hit me all at once. Her brows were a bit too thick, a face slightly too round, lips naturally the red of cherry wine and a mouth a tad too wide but alive now with a ready smile.

As I straightened I became aware of her long, thick coal black hair flowing over her shoulders and her eyes ... her violet eyes taking my heart captive with a lurch that scared me. We stared at each other for a moment - I'd never seen violet eyes before. I'd heard one time that Elizabeth Taylor had eyes like this ... but then I'd never seen her up close and personal.

We stared and her smile slowly faded – later she told me she had never seen such icy blue eyes, and she felt a cold chill down her back that froze her smile.

Joe was standing there confused, looking at his girl then at me ... then back at Angie again. He gave it a brave shot – for him – and started with the introductions. I briefly shook hands with her, the hand stronger and rougher that I would have expected from such a lovely, such a feminine girl. She was medium height with a not overly large bust and hips just wide enough to give the promise of child bearing.

I sat there for a while as Joe talked to her about something - I knew not what. The waitress showed up with beers for all of us as the band started its first number and several couples moved out to the dance floor. Saved for a few minutes from trying to follow the conversation, I stared at Angie, unseen by Joe but Angie suddenly smiled at me and lifted her beer in a silent toast.

I had this ... *feeling* come over me. It was like having been out in bitter cold and coming in to stand close to the red-hot stove. My hands and feet started tingling and I felt a sudden warmth flow over me. Something hard, black and bitter broke loose in my heart; the killing was over – God forgive me! – and I didn't think I would have those damning dreams again.

My face felt like a plastic mask melting in the heat and I felt the strangeness for a real smile forming, my lips curling up at the edges. Later, after Joe left, she told me that it seemed like she could see the glacial blue change to the rich blue of a hot Texas summer day.

The band played a few more numbers and we had another round of beer. Joe didn't seem in any hurry to ask Angie to dance – later she told me that the only time they danced was when she stood up and took his hand – so I leaned forward and asked Joe, loud enough for her to hear, if I could have a dance with Angie. Not waiting for an answer, I stood up and pulled her chair back and we stepped on the dance floor. The sawdust on the plank floor made it perfect for dancing, although crowded because of its small size.



The first song we danced was western swing and we held our own with everyone else. Before the next number Johnny announced the band would take a break after a slow number. Without asking Angie or looking at Joe, I put my arms around her and slowly waltzed to the far side of the small floor.

Angie felt like she had been in my arms forever. We both relaxed into each other and danced as one. I didn't pull her tight but I didn't hold her away either. When the song ended and everyone was clapping, Angie blushed prettily and thanked me for the dance. She went straight back to the ladies room to get ahead of the crush of like-minded women.

I sat down and looked at Joe; he didn't look too good.

"Danny, I think I've had too much to drink. Could you take Angie home for me?"

I walked him over to the bartender and asked him to call a taxi for Joe. He nodded, like it had happened before. I assured him that I'd take care of his girl for him.

As I turned away, I told him, "Joe, you're my friend and all, but I gotta tell you – I have to have Angie for my own."

He didn't answer, just looked at me confused like. As I walked back to the table, I wasn't sure if I'd actually said it but it was the way I felt.

I pulled out Angie's chair as I saw her walking back to the table. The band was settling back in as I told her about Joe.

She looked over at the band for a minute, then back at me. "He's done that a couple of times. He tries to keep up with all the other guys but he really can't hold his booze. I've tried to tell him to drink sodas or something, but ..."

She gave a deep sigh and shook her head slightly, with a sadness in those lovely eyes I hated to see. Her hands were folded on the table and I put a hand over hers.

"Angie, I ..." and she cut me off before I could say any more.

"Danny, don't ... okay? At least not now," she pleaded.

I nodded my understanding but truth was I was impatient to tell her how hard and how deep I'd fallen. We chatted for a while – getting to know each other kind of stuff – while the band was playing some slow tunes. I took her hands again, turned them over, and ran my thumb over the permanent calluses on her palms.

"What's a girl like you doing with hands like these," I asked – knowing as I said it that it sounded pretty stupid.

She just nodded, like it was a meaningful question, then asked, surprisingly, “Take me to dinner and I’ll tell you. Can you remember that it’s only dinner and that I’m not your girl?” Then she whispered what sounded like, “And no one else is either,” with a sadness that tore at my heart.

The band had started another swing number and I wasn’t positive that’s what she said, but the sadness was real. We walked out through the crowded room and started towards the far corner of the lot where my truck was parked all by its lonesome, under the bright light overhead.

As soon as it was clear where we were headed, she came to a dead halt and asked, “Is that yours? It’s a ’48 F-1, right?”

When I nodded she started walking towards it a little faster, and threw over her shoulder, “I’m gonna drive it to the restaurant.”

I tried to catch up with her, saying, “Angie, but that’s a stick shift ...”

She stopped and turned around, “Hey, buster, you think a woman can’t drive a truck? Jeez!”

So she drove over to the restaurant and we wound up with two big porterhouse steaks. She wasn’t a particularly large girl but she ate like a cowhand that hadn’t seen the chuck wagon for three days.

After we placed our order, she started talking about herself.

“I was raised on a ranch over by Fredericksburg. I’m only child and my dad raised me to do everything. I had the same chores I would have had if I were a boy. I got my first pony when I was six and after that spent as much time on a horse as I could. Dad gave me my first rifle when I was ten – it was a Winchester Model 94 lever action 30.30. Two years later I shot my first whitetail with it and dad showed me how to clean it. From then on if I shot it, I cleaned it.

“I was always smarter than everyone else,” she said this like she would say she was short or tall, just a fact, and continued, “so I finished high school when I was seventeen. That meant that I could only do one year of high school rodeo,” she paused and looked askance if I knew what a rodeo was – clearly Joe hadn’t told her anything about me, “And I did barrel racing.

“I would have to ride my horse for an hour a day getting both of us ready. Mostly I trotted her since that gets horses in shape the fastest. All the rodeos require official dress: this means I would wear a cowboy hat, a long-sleeved button up shirt, and jeans and boots. Dad would always make me wear new or almost new jeans.

“You probably don’t know this – a lot of people don’t unless they are involved or real fans – but barrel racing involves riding my horse around three barrels set up in the arena. I had to go around one side of one and circle it, cross the arena floor and do the same with the second

barrel and a third and then back to the gates. Fastest time wins and points are taken off for things like touching a barrel.

“I wasn’t the best but I was pretty good. I’m telling you all this so you’ll know about the calluses. Are you confused, or should I go on?”

I made a gesture with my hand to tell me more.

“Anyhow, I’d always wanted to be a vet – large animals, of course – so I went to school in Manhattan, Kansas. I picked that school because my uncle lives nearby. I finished my undergrad degree in three years including the pre-vet requirements. I took the full four years to become a veterinarian since I wanted to take some extra courses. I just graduated in May of this year.

“I did some of the local rodeos for the fun of it either here during the summer or up there using one of my uncle’s horses. For the three years of my undergrad I was on the equestrian Hunt Squad and Western Action Teams. It wasn’t rodeo but it was fun.”

She looked at me with a searching glance. “None of this means anything to you, does it?”

I smiled, and commented, “Well, it does explain your calluses. So you are a vet now?” At her nod, I continued, “Where do you practice now?”

“I’m right here in Bandera. One of the guys that was doing the large animals moved out of state and I took his place. But my dream is to have my own practice and just do ranch animals. What about you? What do you do? And where do you live?”

“Well, first I live with my granddad, out on 470 just short of Tarpley. You must have heard of him; he does a lot of business with your practice. Everyone calls him Daddy Jim.”

At that she turned white and exclaimed, “Oh, God, you are that Danny, the one that came home from the war. He talked so much about you and ... oh, Danny, I’m so embarrassed. I saw your picture on the wall at the 101 Ranch Rodeo in Oklahoma. You were riding that bad-tempered Brahma, Tornado!”

I smiled at her discomfort, “Well, if you remember the picture I was about six inches above Tornado and moving away rapidly. Yeah, I rode him for all for three seconds. Not one of my finer moments. If I remember right the picture was of the bull, not me”

“But, Danny, you were a professional, and I was running on and on about barrel racing. Your last name is different – I guess he was your mom’s dad – and I never made the connection when Joe introduced us. I feel so silly!”

I laughed a little and gave her a big smile, “Angie, I was fascinated. I have to say that everything about you fascinates me – especially your eyes. They are so enchanting ...”

“Danny, don’t. I can’t ...”

“Angie, can I ask one question?”

She nodded, not looking too happy about it. I took her left hand in mine and rubbed her ring finger, like I was looking for something. I turned it over, then back.”

She looked confused, and asked, “What are you looking for?”

“Joe told me you were engaged. I was just looking for the ring.”

“He said that? He’s never said anything. Oh, I know he likes me – a woman can tell that – but he’s never even hinted ...”

I didn’t say anymore so I paid the bill and we left. She did let me drive her home in my truck. When we got there I jumped out and opened her door. She looked surprised – I guess she didn’t see much of that from Joe ... or anyone else. At her door I took her elbows and looked in her eyes; fell into them was closer to the truth.

I kissed her gently on her forehead, and whispered in her ear, “You felt something between us when we were dancing, didn’t you?”

She looked down; glanced up at me, then back down as she whispered, “Yes,” with a sense of wonder. She turned and ran for her door and I walked slowly back to my truck.

That night I slept the sleep of the just ... even though I knew I wasn’t. I woke with the dawn and lay there thinking. My thoughts of Angie were juxtaposed with those of Danny, the killer. I smiled as I thought of her, her touch, her soft voice and hard hands. Her gentleness and essential toughness at peace with each other – a peace I felt I’d never be able to attain. I feared that when she found out what I had done ... how many I had killed – she would take the safe route and marry Joe. Just from that thought I felt the coldness creeping back into my heart.

TOMORROW ... AND ALL THE TOMORROWS TO COME

*Hey, Joe!  
Now we'll be friends till the end.  
This looks like the end, my friend,  
I gotta have that dolly for my own.*

I saw Joe a couple of days later at the bank. It was almost lunchtime so he asked if he could buy me lunch, “... to thank me for taking care of Angie.”

Feeling a bit guilty – but not too much – I went with him.

“Danny, what do you think about her?”

“Well, Joe, have you said anything to her? I mean, have you told her you love her and want to marry her? Have you brought a ring?”

He looked out the window for a long moment, “No, I haven’t said anything. I’m afraid to. What if she says no? I love her so much I can’t live without her. God, I’d die.”

I felt I had to be honest with him. Everything had to be on the table for all to see. “Joe, I think you should talk to her and see how she feels. You can’t let it drift forever – what if she finds someone else because you waited too long.”

He nodded, but looked scared by the whole thing. I started wondering if he was somewhat unbalanced but I shrugged it off. It wasn’t my problem ... at least I didn’t think so.

“Joe, I’ve got to be fair with you. We’ve been friends on and off since grade school. But I like Angie and I want her myself. This is where we can’t be friends anymore. The only problem is that when she finds out I was a sniper in the Marines she won’t want anything to do with me.”

I knew immediately when I’d said that last part I had made a mistake. Joe was looking out the window at my truck and didn’t look up as I left.

I knew Joe would tell her about the sniper stuff and my burgeoning dreams of love and a new life would fade faster than they started. That night the Viet Cong sniper paid me another visit and my soul felt empty as I came to understand the disgust that Angie would feel for me.

Daddy Jim knew something had happened but he didn’t say anything. I threw myself into planning for the winter rodeo season and working with Jim as he was now asking me to call him.

“You’re as much my son as your dad was but, more than that, you are my friend and my partner.”

I told him I would but it was sure hard to remember. A month went by and I didn’t see either Joe or Angie. I did make a trip with Jim to San Angelo to deliver a couple of calves and that gave us a lot of time to talk. In his gentle but persistent way he got me to talk about everything: Joe and Angie and the whole sniper thing that was weighing so heavily on me.

I told him all about it, what it was like being a sniper, of how I felt when I killed someone. I told him of Angie and her violet eyes – he smiled at that but didn’t say anything, just listened to me. I felt better having talked to him. I’d never said anything to anyone about what I had done and how I felt.

It was suddenly a couple days before Thanksgiving and Daddy Jim - well, Jim - asked, “Do you have any plans for dinner on Thursday?”

I shook my head no, wondering where he was coming from.

“I’ve got a gal said she would fix a turkey if she could join us. You okay with that?”

Hell, I didn’t know the old goat was seeing anyone! “Jim, that’s fine. Do you need me to do anything?”

Thursday morning I was loafing around when Jim came out freshly shaven and dressed nice. I hadn’t planned on doing either – actually I kind of felt like a third wheel.

“Danny, you gonna just lounge around like you don’t have anything to be thankful about? Be proud boy! You served your country, you had great parents, and we got us a nice ranch. Now go shave and get dressed.”

It was easier to do what he said than argue, and he was right. I was drowning myself in the morass of my own problems but on the whole life was pretty good. I shined my boots, put on some new blue jeans and a white shirt. Jim nodded his okay and when the doorbell rang, asked me to get it.

I opened the door with some degree of curiosity – wondering about this lady friend of my granddad’s I hadn’t heard anything about. I was stunned to find Angie standing there, her arms burdened with several bowls of food.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Get the turkey out of my truck.”

With that she stood on her toes and kissed my cheek. I turned and watched her walking into the ranch house, my hand on my cheek where she had placed her lips. She was wearing a sweater skirt combination that showed the promise of her soft curves. I somehow got the turkey into the kitchen where she and Jim were talking like old friends ... as I found out they were – at least since she had started at the vet clinic in May.

I was somewhere, time out of mind, and wandered through the afternoon in somewhat of a daze. That’s not to mean I didn’t enjoy it, I just wasn’t ... focused. After dinner Jim said he had to run an errand so I helped Angie clean up.

Later, we took coffee into the living room. I tried to start but Angie cut me off.

“No, I’d like to have my say first if that’s okay. First, about Joe: I had no idea he felt the way he did. He was a friend of my roommate and we dated some but that was all. He was pleasant and non-threatening. I didn’t know anyone in town so I looked at him as more of an escort than anything else.

“I heard from Harry, who owns the jewelry store, that Joe was looking at engagement rings. He was surprised when Joe mentioned my name. Harry had a mare with a complicated

delivery and I went to his place to help out. We became friends and he and his wife have had me over for dinner a couple of times.

“I knew then I had to talk to Joe before he went too far. About a week later I asked him over to the clinic so we could talk in the conference room. I didn’t want to be alone with him for the discussion we needed to have. I told him how I felt and as I talked he got this weird look on his face and I started getting worried. When I finished, he took a box out of his pocket and took a ring out. He held it up to the light, studying it with an intense look on his face.

“Then he stared at me with a look of furious hate on his face and threw the ring at me as hard as he could – luckily it hit my hair and fell to the floor. He turned and stormed out, slamming the door. I took the ring back to Harry and I haven’t seen Joe since. I also heard that he quit at the bank.”

“Do you want me to talk to him?”

“No, just let it go. Can I talk to you about something else?”

I just nodded, curious now.

“Remember what I told you about hunting with my dad? How I shot my first buck when I was twelve? I got another one the next year but about that time I decided I wanted to be a vet. Suddenly the killing for sport seemed awful to me. Oh, I wasn’t a prig about it. It is part of our culture and I know my dad enjoys it, but it wasn’t for me anymore.

“I started volunteering at the local vet office and I came to understand that there is a difference between killing for sport, or profit or any other reason and killing for humane reasons. We sometimes have to put down a dog or horse that’s vicious. A family pet ages and gets to the point it can’t even stand and euthanizing it is the kind thing to do.

“Joe told me about your being a sniper in the war. I was disgusted with him, as his motivation became clear. But, Danny, this wasn’t something you did for sport or fun. Do you feel like grabbing a gun and shooting some one? I don’t think so. In fact, I know you aren’t like that. I can see in your eyes the pain and anguish you’ve suffered for doing your duty. What you did saved the lives of many of your comrades. That’s something you should be proud of and take comfort in.”

She walked over and sat on my lap and took my head in her hands. “Danny, let the pain go ... it’s not your fault.”

I looked into the depths of those velvety, violet eyes and felt tears come to mine. I started crying, silently, as did she. We held each other for a long time. Later, when I woke, I realized I had been sleeping with my head on her lap. Her eyes were closed but when I reached up to touch her cheek with my hand, they opened and she smiled at me.

In a soft voice, she whispered, “You can ask me on a date if you want.”

I wanted and from then on we would get together once or twice a week when I was in town. Neither of us saw or heard anything of Joe. It was like he dropped off the face of the earth.

It was the middle of January and I was driving into Bandera on the way to San Antonio. Jim and I had decided to take on a partner to do all the work I was doing and I would take over most of the breeding part. I was driving to meet the potential partner for a couple of hours to talk about our needs and expectations. The sun was bright on my too dirty windshield as I was squinting from behind the visor to see the road as clearly as I could. I saw a sudden movement coming from the right – a flash of blue, then ... nothing.

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It was two days later when I came out of the drug-induced coma. I had a small amount of bleeding in the brain from the trauma, several broken ribs and a fractured right clavicle. The doctor didn't even talk about the various bruises and contusions, though I was well aware of them.

Angie was asleep when I came to but awoke right away with the commotion of the doctors and nurses. It didn't look like any permanent damage – just a whole hell of a lot of discomfort. Angie had been by my side the whole time, sleeping on a cot one of the nurses brought in. A Texas State Trooper came to see me but there really wasn't much I could say, and he didn't tell me anything.

After I felt somewhat better Angie told me what had happened.

“It was Joe. I guess he just snapped. He was trying to kill you and was almost successful.” Here she started crying and sat on the edge of the bed, holding my hand. “He didn't have his seat belt on and he went through his windshield into your truck. He ... well, he didn't make it. The trooper said they looked for a suicide note in the wreckage but didn't find anything. They decided to list it as attempted murder and suicide.”

She leaned over on me, crying, but jumped back when she felt me wince from my ribs.

“Oh, God, Danny, I'm sorry.”

I took her hand and pulled her back to the edge of the bed. We talked some more, and then she went home to get some rest.

A week later I was released from the hospital and we put our plans in place. Since Jim was still around, it wasn't going to be full time for me. I had a long talk with Angie and told her I wanted to work with her.

“Angie, I want to do what you do, heal things. I don't want to go to school for seven years but I have been checking into several vet technician programs. If I do that, would you hire me?”



She laughed and said, “You betcha!”

When I finished the two-year program, we put up a building close to the highway - where the drive turned off to the ranch - for a new office for Angie to do her thing. We put a small apartment in the back of the building and Angie moved into that. We had not been in too much of a hurry to marry because both of us were adamant that this was something we only wanted to do once and to do that forever. I still had some healing to do - it took a long time for me to become comfortable with what I had done and while she was sure of our love she wanted to be even surer.

It was three years after I came home from the terrors of war before we joined our lives forever. A year after that, Daddy Jim died, just six months before Big Jim was born. We called him that since he weighed over nine pounds at birth.

My demons have gone to sleep ... although they do visit once in awhile to make sure I appreciate the gifts that God has given me. With Angie’s love I was able to live with the past – and to live for the future with my family.