



MAKING SURE

A STORY BY WARREN EUGENE ICKE

THE boarding tunnel to the "Friendly-skies" morning flight had just enough downslope to push each step he took to the edge of control. The hollow-metallic sound of his footfalls, ringing off the walls of the tunnel, reminded him of all those times he'd stumbled over a steel ramp into the belly of an armored personnel carrier. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure it was just middle-class America following him, not the enemy.

A stewardess was taking boarding passes at the door. When he held his pass out to her she hesitated, her smile petrified into place. Then she regained whatever she'd lost for that micro-moment and told him his seat was toward the back of the plane.

Trying not to notice the people who were trying not to notice him, he maneuvered his way along the aisle and plopped into the last seat in the last row. The other seats around him were empty and he suspected they'd stay that way by the looks the people gave him as they shuffled into their seats.

The jet pulled away from the boarding tunnel and taxied toward the runway. He pressed his half-nose against the window and watched the blue mist swirling off the back landing gear of the Pan Am taking off on the other runway. The slow-mo movement of the mist off the wheels threw him toward that fire-base near Laos. Suddenly he was there in that place where he'd pushed away the boredom of too long days and the gurgles of dying gooks and grunts with beer and Old Crow. That old sticky feeling, of sitting in front of his hooch with a pump shotgun in his lap and a Budweiser in his hand, pasted itself to the small of his back and he lost himself to the stale taste of Vietnam's basement air.

Something pushed into his stomach and he felt sick. The jet high-angle sliced off the end of the runway toward the intestinal clouds which were boiling too near the earth. He sat back and closed his eyes. He always got airsick. Even when he was flying, as a medic, in a jolly-green, he got sick. But over there, in that place, he'd kept the nausea away from him with a syringe of Vistaril gunned into his linebacker thigh.

Sometimes, when they were called into a real hot fire-

fight, he'd kept the fear away with methamphetamine. His good right arm made him feel like a god. Nothing could touch him then; there was no need to fear.

But he was afraid now; the old nausea was with him as the jet leveled off and nosed toward his home. He'd counted on going back for so much, for so long, that now he was as afraid of home as he was of Laos's Mung River.

He had counted on home. It had been the one clean immutable fact of his life; it had been the only thing that had saved him in the red-wet of Asia. His home. Most other towns had discovered too much of the world around them and given way to bigger things, their wide-porch swings and corner drugstores replaced by pre-fabs and department stores.

All along he'd known his town hadn't changed, hadn't given up anything of itself. It would still be deeply snugged into the Midwest soil; the tidal wheat would still submerge his county each summer with four white-whale grain elevators breaking the surface to support an azure sky.

He'd known that when he got home, everything would be the same. It just had to be that way. He'd been sure that he'd be able to find himself walking through hip-brushing wheat. He saw it. It had been the only real thing for eleven months. Everything else was the non-real, the dream.

All his trust was in that fact; it had carried him through too many midnight medi-vac flights over corpse littered villages. Even when the family cabled and said they'd found his dad frozen face-down in the west pond's duck blind, he knew his home and mom were still there. Waiting. Then something happened. And he was sure of nothing.

Standing over him, the red-haired stewardess asked if he was all right. He nodded. She told him he'd cried out in his sleep and the other passengers were worried. He half-smiled with his lipless mouth and assured her he'd be quiet so the other passengers wouldn't be disturbed. She dug into the falcon eyes with hers and asked if he'd mind her sitting beside him for awhile. He told her he didn't mind if she didn't.

At first, he said little. But she kept talking about

herself and asking questions about him in the same way his little sister had when he called to say they were letting him leave the hospital. So he began looking back at the woman beside him and said more than a yes or no.

The skin and twisted bone that had once been hands felt the burn of her eyes. He moved them from his lap and tried to pull the things back into his coat sleeves. One of her ivory hands grasped the claw nearest her.

He was going to faint. He was going to pass out in front of her. The softness of her hand drew the strength from him. He had to get away. No one should have to touch him that way. Only one other person had touched him with any feeling since an afternoon's sunshine became gasoline flame and sulphur stench. That other person had been a civilian nurse at the VA hospital where the khakied-docs had fixed him up good. "Better-than-before," the other leg lackers had said. But everyone knew better.

The stewardess saw him tense up. She asked him how he'd gotten hurt and he started telling her about how he'd been a stunt man in a monster movie and everything had gone wrong. She didn't laugh. She told him what he said wasn't funny and since he wasn't really in the mood to joke around he told her just enough about the miracle of napalm. Then he told her he was thinking about becoming a poster-boy for Dow chemical, "better living through chemistry" and all that. It was one of the hospital's stock jokes. She didn't laugh at that either.

She told him about her brother coming home after the '68 Tet offensive without his legs, too. He said he was sorry. Said it was a bad joke. She told him he wasn't a monster. He whispered, more to himself than her, that he hoped he wasn't what he saw in the mirror. She wondered what he saw; he told her about a phantom on army-issue legs. He explained that things happened; he'd just done things over there that made him wonder. She said he was just a man. That's all he wanted to be; that's all he'd ever wanted to be, he mumbled.

She asked him where he was going. He began telling her about the wheat fields, a main street that rolls up after sunset, and four in the morning cow milking. He told her about his family, about his younger sister placing second at the state fair with her angus bull, about his brothers' new wives and how he hadn't met them.

It seemed strange to her that he hadn't seen his family while he was in the hospital. He said it was better that way. She asked how it could have been. Then he told her about the eight months, three weeks, and six days of skin-strippings and new leg fittings. He told her about the families who didn't return after seeing their fathers, sons, or brothers. She heard about the seventeen divorces and nine broken engagements. He described the others he'd left behind, the ones who'd never leave the hospital.

She didn't move away from him. She stayed in the seat beside him and listened. He was surprised. He heard her tell him he must be afraid to go home. He wondered how she knew and wanted to say he wasn't but said he was. He talked even more then. Maybe because he didn't know her name, maybe because she reminded him of his sister he told her things he'd hidden. He spluttered his words when he told her he wished he didn't have to go home. He said he was sorry medi-vac was so fast over there. Just ten minutes more and he'd have been a body

count Walkter Cronkite gave at the end of the day. He told her about his mom. About not wanting to see her or having her see him. About needing to.

He asked about her brother. About what finally happened to him. She described how her mom and dad had visited him in the hospital every day. She showed him pictures of her brother and the wife who had taken him home. She gave him the names of her twin nieces and freckled nephew.

Turning in his seat toward the red-haired woman, he asked if it was all really true. All of it. She laughed and said of course it was. They were both quiet then. Every so often he'd glance at her to see if she'd say she had just been kidding or making it all up.

He wanted to know her name and how old she was. She said people called her "Grit" and that she would be twenty-three in the fall. She asked his name. He told her people called him "P.J." but his mom called him "Thomas." Then he announced he would be twenty-one the next week. She joked about being legal. They both laughed and began talking about favorite things.

Suddenly, they were there. His plane had landed. He didn't move for a long time after the other passengers had filed down the ramp. Grit returned from helping the other passengers and said she was sorry for being so long. When she asked if he needed any help, he pointed toward his seat belt and said he wasn't very good at such things yet.

She bent, unsnapped the buckle, and helped him to stand. As he stood she told him not to worry, he'd do fine out there. Then she helped him with his flight bag and he blinked when she tapped his uniform hat into place. He asked if he could write and tell her how he did. She handed him a piece of paper with her address already written in a firm hand.

They walked down the ramp together. His family was moving toward him. He started to point them out to her, but she was walking, almost trotting away. She turned and yelled back to him to write soon, and then she ducked through a door marked "Airline Personnel Only."

His brothers ran to him and began hugging. He hugged back. His aunts and uncles and cousins and sister folded around him. They smiled. He smiled. No one talked. Everyone talked. He was surrounded by friendly fire.

He asked his oldest brother about his mom. His brother told him she was waiting in the van with his sisters-in-law. He heard his brother say it would be better to see her out there because there were fewer people. His other brother reminded him about how his mom hated crying in front of strangers. Then they were moving.

His little sister, almost big now, hung on to his arm and pulled him along through the airport. She was telling him about her new calf, the cheerleading squad she was on, about the new job his mom had at the bank. He walked a little faster when his sister mentioned his mom. The knotted mob followed. They burst through the airport entrance. Then they were across the parking lot.

His mother was standing in front of the van with two strange women he somehow recognized as belonging there. His mom had her head bent toward the pavement

with her arms crossed on her chest. The rest of the family hung back and let him walk the rest of the way alone. His mother looked up and saw him standing in front of her. Neither moved. Neither breathed. He felt his family standing a little behind him. Waiting. Finally he reached out and said, "Mom?" Immediately her arms were around his neck and she kept saying his name over and over as if it were a new thing to her. He couldn't breathe, she crushed him so. He didn't need to now.

Not saying anything, they sat side by side during the trip home and let the others jabber about the town. Every so often his mom would squeeze his arm and pull him closer. Once he noticed her other hand trembling so he placed his hand over it. A couple of times one of her tears fell from her chin and struck the back of his claw. And he thought about the smell of fresh bread that never left his mom and waited for that first glimpse of the grain elevators that'd tell him this wasn't just a dream, that he'd really made it home.

TODAY was different than she had expected. Different from what official Memorial Day fade-aways, in their rumple-splotched VFW caps, had always said it would be. Today was different because her boy, her youngest son, was coming home. Alone. Without comrades or buddies or bands or torn strips of bone white paper floating through holiday air.

Today was different. And it was the same, the same as it had been for all the boys who'd come home from this war, like her boy, in the choking quiet of too early morning. When no one could see or point or shake their heads.

She knew everything was different than it should be, but she didn't want to think about it. So she buried her hands in the sink of potatoes she was peeling for morning breakfast and let the cold tap water ease her mind from the now and push her heart into the yesterdays.

She remembered the day the boy's father had come home from his war. The second one. The big beach. Normandy. He came home in the afternoon, on a train bursting and bulging and bubbling with faces and smiles and waving hands. Everyone. The whole town had been waiting all morning. The band had had a couple of false starts as they all do in back-behind towns. When the train finally did appear, the bandmaster was in the john so the music started after the town's boys had already stepped out onto the landing and the train was easing away from the station to take the other boys to other towns.

She had gone with her future in-laws, much too early in the morning, and staked out the best of all spots in the station so as to be the first to see him, to hug him, to hold him. A smile moved across her face as she plopped another Idaho white, skinned and dripping, into a bowl. Of course she had wanted to be the first; that was the way you did things back then if you were the girl-next-door and had waited while your boyfriend was in a

strange place winning medals.

When she saw him, she slipped off her Sunday shoes and ran in her stocking feet to throw her arms around his neck. That's the way the big homecomings were always done in the movies. The girl sacrificed her stockings to balance into forgetfulness what the boy had already sacrificed.

Her stocking survived. And she and he were married in the First Baptist Church at the edge of the town's square just as everyone had expected. And just as everyone had expected, they settled down to grow wheat, potatoes, and boys on her husband's family's land.

She could hear her oldest boy and his wife of six months moving around upstairs. They'd stayed over the night before so the family could get an early start for the airport four hours away. Her other boy and his wife walked into the kitchen and, after pulling a chair away from the table for his wife and kissing his mother "good-morning," he sat down to stir his coffee.

No one said much during breakfast; there were the "good-mornings" and the "please-pass-me's," but no one said much. All of their minds, even the little sister's, were on the airport and the afterwards.

She stared at the eggs her stomach couldn't bear and then at her new daughters. Her oldest boy's wife was still blue-jeans pregnant. This time next year she'd have a grandson she told herself. Then she wondered, as a glob of red jam crashed onto her white china, if he'd have a homecoming too. She pushed the thought far from her with words that broke through the room like a fork falling on a plate. It was about time they started she told her family and, as everyone loaded up into the van, she looked out toward the west pond where they'd found her Garth lying face-down last winter.

Him and his damn duck hunting, she said to herself, just when he needed, when she needed the most, he goes out and dies in his duck-blind. Without her. She straightened her back and pushed the air out of her lungs as she climbed into the van after everyone else. Today wouldn't have been quite so different if the boy's father had been there to go into that airport with her, to stand with her, to wait for that stranger who was coming home.

The road rocked everyone to sleep but her and the oldest boy. He stared at the broken center line, on the asphalt, as he drove. She stared off, through her door window, into the darkness. Every so often she'd catch a glimpse of her reflection, on the window and wonder who the old woman with all the wrinkles and misapplied make-up was. She tried but couldn't remember becoming what she saw on the glass.

She remembered the morning her youngest boy was born. It had been this same time of year and she realized that then, as now, she'd watched her face in the old Ford's window. She had been afraid then, too. It was the first time she'd gone to the town to have one of her babies. It was the hardest time, the only time one of them had been born breech.

The first thing she did when they brought her boy to her was to count his fingers and toes. He was all right. He was perfect. He was the most beautiful baby ever born in Wheelock County. The most beautiful boy. He never cried. He always smiled. Even on that first day, when he should have been wrinkled and purple, he

smiled through his smooth pink skin.

They brought him to her, and he slept on the belly that had been his whole world only hours before. And she'd smiled when Garth left to make his rounds through the town to tell everyone what he, the father, had done.

As the van's tires plopped along the road, she remembered all the things about her boy that made him him and all the times that made him hers. She remembered his first day of school, and she remembered his last. She heard him confide, "Don't worry, Mom, I'm not scared," as his blonde hair disappeared through a first-grade door. She heard him declare, "Free at last!" as he tossed cap and gown and diploma into the air.

She remembered everything and wanted to remember nothing, but she forced the memories even if it made going to the airport harder. She had to remember the way her boy had been. Maybe it would make it easier to see him as he was now.

The sun was beginning to squeak, above the horizon. The rest of the family were awake and talking about everything and anything but the airport. Her sons were talking about how the youngest had led the football team for three years. Her new daughters talked about how the girls in three counties had had a crush on him. His little sister said the things she liked most about him was that he took her for walks and listened when she said things. Then there was a longtime quiet, and the family looked into their laps and at their hands.

The little sister asked if he'd still listen to her. Her oldest brother looked away from his driving long enough to say that no matter what happened to P.J.'s outside, he'd be the same inside. No one agreed. No one disagreed. They all thought about the picture P.J.'s doctor at the army hospital had sent when they wrote to ask how bad their brother-son had been hurt.

None of them had wanted to see that picture. None of them had wanted to believe. They'd said to one another that sure, of course, that was him. He still had P.J.'s eyes. He was theirs. But then, in private, one by one they'd taken the picture out of the hutch drawer, where the china was kept, and wondered if what they saw was really a boy, a person, theirs, whose eyes pierced through the torn, healed, and return flesh that had once been a face. They had looked for the hands, for the legs, for anything they could hold onto and know and hope for.

Finally, they each, one by one, had returned the picture to the drawer and went on saying he was theirs no matter what an old picture said. He was one of them.

He was hers. That's what she'd told herself in the middle of each midnight for the last nine months. He was hers. She'd brought him into this world. She'd fed and bathed and scolded and hugged the boy into a man.

She'd made the boy what he was and now, as she looked toward the airport on the west horizon she wondered if she'd done too much.

She made him go. He had come to her and his father, with a draft letter in his hand, and said he didn't know what to do. He told them he didn't want to go to that place. He didn't want to hurt anybody. He didn't understand. She told him about how he was raised, about country and flag, about the medals his father had won.

Her boy asked his father if he'd been afraid of killing or being killed. His father told him he'd hoped his boys

wouldn't have to know such fear; he told his son about duty and honor and what medals really meant when there were no bands. Then he told his youngest son that each person had to decide for himself.

She objected and told her husband he'd never sounded that way before. He told her his boy had never had to go before; then he left the house and went to his duck-blind to sit and smoke his pipe while she told her boy it would kill her if he didn't go.

He went. And today she was going to bring him home. Those two facts clung to the third in her purse. She reached into the leather bag and brought the picture into the morning light. She didn't want to look at the thing. Her hands shook while she held the picture by its sides. She forced herself to not look away from this fact. She made herself look even though there weren't any toes or fingers for her to count anymore.

Everyone poured out of the van, grouped into a bundle, and started walking toward the airport's main terminal. She and her daughters watched the rest of the family disappear into the glass and steel structure. She'd told them she wanted to wait in the van even if it would be another hour before her boy's plane arrived. Her sons' wives said they'd wait with her.

While she waited, each moment seemed twice as long as other moments and the hour twice as short as other hours. Every so often, her hand would reach for the door handle. She'd grip the cool metal with a soft quiver at first, and then, slowly, her grip would harden with her resolve. But just as she'd start to open the door she'd hear the scream of an incoming jet and pull back into herself.

Her middle boy's wife asked her if she'd changed her mind, if she wanted to go into the airport. She told her daughters her mind was the same but thought she'd stand outside the van where it wasn't so hot.

She began to pace the parking lot with her head bent toward the ground. Her daughters stood silent, in front of the van, and watched her trace a slow ellipsis on the asphalt as she moved toward both the van and the terminal.

Every few moments, she'd stop and squint toward the sky as another jet boomed over her and onto the runway. Then she'd walk a little more toward the terminal but would stop at the asphalt's edge when she saw her distant reflection made small on the glass doors. The small feeling always pushed her back to the van.

That's where he found her, in front of the van, with her head bent and eyes closed. At first she didn't notice him. Then a feeling she remembered but couldn't name forced her to look up. She saw him. She didn't move toward or away from him. He didn't move. He didn't speak. She couldn't speak; she was too afraid her voice would break everything if she made a sound.

Then she saw the eyes she'd seen the morning he'd left for that place. From far at the other end of a telescope world she could hear a voice asking, "Mom?" and she remembered the same voice telling her he'd be all right when he left the house too early that day.

She pulled him to her, as she always had when he was a boy, and said his name over and over, to make sure he knew he was still, "Thomas."

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