

THE KEY

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His chest was being crushed. There was no breath left for screaming. Every gasp took an enormous effort of his will. Other parts of his body were hurting; his knee burned, his head throbbed. The worst pain was in his chest. It felt like a dull knife was being plunged into his heart and then twisted.

Gradually the pain faded away and he was standing in front of his house in Iowa. The corn field stretched out to the horizon and the sun was just setting behind the barn. He remembered that he had a key in the breast pocket of his shirt. His father had given it to him the day he came to say good-bye. The deployment orders had come and in a week he would be in Iraq.

“Here is a key to the house.” His father had said. Henry had slipped it into the pocket of his fatigue shirt, then reached out to hug the broad shoulders of the man who had taught him about farming and so much more. The weather worn features of his lean face had broken into a smile. “I know we seldom lock the door, but I want you to have this key to remember to come back.”

“It will bring you good luck.” Henry’s mother had added in her soft, Southern drawl. After several more quick hugs, Henry had turned towards the door. He remembered the loud clomping of his combat boots on the wooden slats of the front porch as he had hurried off to the bus stop.

Now he approached the door and saw that it was open, so he wouldn’t need the key after all. Henry went into the warm, tidy kitchen. He smelled freshly baked bread. His mother was standing by the stove and his father was sitting at the kitchen table, reading the bible. They both looked up as he came in the door.

Suddenly the pain was back in his chest but taking a breath was easier each time. There were voices in the background. As he looked at his parents they started to fade away. He was lying on a hard surface with bright lights shining into his eyes.

“He’s coming around,” A woman spoke in a hushed tone.

Henry looked up at the masked face of the surgeon and then into the clear, blue eyes of the blond woman who was wiping his forehead with a cold cloth. She smiled “Welcome back to the world, soldier.”

Another man stood on the other side of the table, holding up a small piece of metal with a pair of tweezers. “This little scrap of metal looks like it was chewed up by a tiger, but it saved your life.” He said, grinning broadly as he held up what was left of the key to Henry’s house.

THE END