

Thomas

It was early March 1975, shortly after I turned thirty-three years old, when thoughts of my hometown flashed like movie scenes in my mind. And even though I knew my friendships there changed forever, I missed it. I was an Administrative Specialist in the U.S. Army. And during the past two years I had been trying to focus more on Army life. I saw that my thoughts of hometown could surface suddenly, whether I wanted to keep my mind tuned into military life or not. I guess it all depended on what I did to occupy my time.

On a sunbright evening while sitting in the mess hall, suited in a dry-cleaned green Class-A uniform with my feet shod in spit-shined low quarters, eating potatoes and steak, my head held high, thoughts about my homeboy, Thomas Lewis, kept lighting up inside me. I smiled as the memory came full: It was a rainy night, a Friday-conference-playoff-game night, February 26, 1960, scoreboard bright red, showing six seconds with Piney Green High School leading Lake Cole High School by two points.

Thomas bent his knees in a defensive stance. It was the fourth time the two teams had advanced to the playoff; the first time they had competed against each other. Thomas slapped the ball away from Piney Green High's star point guard, ran it down, and dribbled toward his own basket. He used a crossover dribble on a lone defender and he did a twisting and twirling lay-up. Piney Green High's star point guard caught up and fouled Thomas as the ball bounced off the backboard and dropped through the cotton nets. The referee blew his whistle and signaled foul. Thomas stepped behind the free-throw line, eyed the bright orange rim, and snapped his wrist forward, spiraling the basketball through stuffy air. The ball swished through the nets. Newspaper photographers' cameras flashed blue on Thomas. Hometown spectators headed down the aluminum bleachers, dashing toward Thomas.

When I finished eating, I got up from the long white table and walked through the noisy mess hall, towards the open window where dirty dishes were being washed. Then I walked back to my barracks room. I hummed to myself. Because my roommate had already gone home, I had no one to talk to. I kicked my shoes off and slid them under my bunk. I took my uniform off and hung it on wooden hangers in my locker. After showering, I dried myself off, grabbed my white shirt, black pants, and thin necktie out of the locker. Then I packed my green seabag with clothes and jazz tapes. Just as I was walking to the pay phone to call a taxi cab, one crept through the parking lot. I yelled for him. His brake lights glowed red for a brief moment, then he drove on. So I continued to the pay phone. I dropped a

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dime in it, called a taxi. I didn't like to wait for anything.

But fifteen minutes later, here comes the city's quickest cab company's yellow taxi. The taxi took me to the Greyhound Bus Station. The whole station was like a rescue mission, winos came from every corner. I paid the old white cab driver five dollars, grabbed my seabag, and hurried into the bus station. I bought a round-trip ticket to Jacksonville. Then I sat on a splintered bench until the departure announcement was said out loud. I boarded the bus, and sat in the back. What nonsense to sit in the back, I thought.

Nevertheless, when the bus took off, memories of Tammy Dunn settled in my mind: It was the beginning of my senior year in high school; Tammy's small bright eyes went from my head to my toes at a back-to-school dance. That is where we first met. She was dressed in a dark blue dress and black heels. Those feet were twisting, thumping across the dimmed gym floor. Tammy gestured for me to come over to dance with her. I went. And she and I jammed the sweet night away. I didn't imagine that we'd go to the skating rink every Monday night from then on. I trusted she wouldn't go out with another guy while seeing me.

By the time thoughts of my hometown folks stopped reeling in my mind, the sky slowly spread silence over the pines, the red sunset glowed, faded in the distance. I shut my eyes, laid my head back against the seat, took a deep breath, felt the freshness of the chilled air-conditioned air. I drifted into a deep sleep.

When I awakened, the bus was pulling into Jacksonville's small bus station. It was raining a slow rain. I was sitting straight back, arms folded and head cocked, listening to the rain tap, tap, tap. Within two minutes, the rain stopped, losing its sound to darkness. I didn't want to walk out in the rain. I got off the bus, holding my seabag steady against a north wind. I walked into the well-lighted bus station and called my Momma to come pick me up.

Twenty minutes later I met my Momma at the door, with a hug and a kiss. Kept an arm on her shoulder. Then I grabbed my seabag from the polished tile floor. And we walked to the car and got in; then Momma slowly drove along. But soon Momma as usual started off: "How've you been doing, Luke? Particularly the army life, you know—the being away from the family so long, and not seeing any people you grew up with."

"Well, Momma . . . honestly, I've been doing fine; and what is really good I use a lot of my time to attend college classes on Fort Eustis."

"Really," she said.

"So how's Dada?" I asked. "Why didn't he come with you?"

"Oh, Jimmy is doing fine. You know your father. He goes to work and comes back home and sits in his chair all evening, watching TV."

"Yeah, that's Dada. I should know."

"You see, Luke, I've been looking into your face, and I see an uneasiness or maybe something is on your mind."

"I guess you're right," I said after a while. "It's nothing really. I'm just a little worried about Thomas. How is he Momma?"

"He's not doing so well. He looks real bad. I heard he drinks all the time."

"What happened?" I asked, looking straight ahead at glowing tail lights.

“Now, I don’t know that,” she whispered. “He probably got around the wrong crowd.”

“Well, what has Tammy been doing?” I asked. “Is she still walking up and down the road?”

“It’s all beyond me what she’s been doing. But I do know that she’s walking up and down the road everyday.”

“I mean, you don’t know anything Momma,” I said, scratching my head.

“Well, I do know that she worked in the sewing factory for a few years but I don’t know what she actually did.”

“I just don’t know how you can live in the neighborhood and not know what’s going on.”

“God,” said Momma, “I just don’t put my nose into everybody’s business. I have to keep my own house in order just like I’m suppose to.” Finally, Momma and I arrived home. Like an eager child, I got out of the car, leaving my seabag, and hurried into the bright living room. Dada turned off the television, stood up, and shook my hand.

He looked at me, nodded his gray head up and down. “You look great, Luke,” he said. “I see the Army got you standing straighter now.” He thrust his wide hands into his pockets. Momma had just walked into the house, closing the door behind her.

“Thanks, Dada,” I said, smiling as much as he smiled. “You look great yourself.”

“I do?”

“Sure you do.”

It was getting late. I decided to go to Freddie’s Place. “Can I use the car tonight, Dada?”

I asked, rubbing my face. “Don’t you know I got to see some folks?”

“But Luke, you just got here,” Dada wasn’t smiling anymore.

“We’ll talk tomorrow about what I’ve been doing.”

“Okay,” he said. “Yeah, you can use the car.”

Momma slowly handed me the keys. I kissed her on the cheek and left the house. I got in the car, turned the engine on, pumped up the radio, and backed out the dirt driveway onto the road, then I drove.

Thirty minutes later, I arrived at Freddie’s Place. I parked along the weedy roadside. I got out, locked the car, and headed for the door, walked around mud puddles. I walked in, but no one noticed me, I took a seat. The club, no bigger than two tobacco barns put together, was an old cinder block building next to an unused baseball field. I saw a table on the other side. I walked to it, right eye twitching as I looked for Thomas. Dust whirled in a blue-white strobe light that was in the corner where empty soda crates were stacked. My skin turned to dust. I licked dust off my lips. I sneezed again and again.

So as I sat there, I knew my old friend Thomas would enter. No black man had ever been so sure of himself. At the same time, the thought of seeing Tammy prance through the door became clearer to me. And they never thought they’d witness a man so square. But I waited patiently in my white shirt and tie. Maybe Thomas would get here soon. I wondered if he would recognize me now that I’m twenty pounds heavier than when he last saw me.

At that moment I heard a loud cough outside the door, Thomas' cough sounded again. Thomas' foot missed a step in the midnight darkness and stumbled through the doorway. Thomas' feet scraped across the dirt floor as he walked farther into the entrance.

And Thomas saw me sitting at one of only three tables in here. He shook his head and rubbed his eye. He lost the other eye when he wrecked his '63 Chevy. Glass from the windshield got in and cut it up. So he wore a patch over it. It was like his eye was hidden behind thick black cloth, as if he was playing a game. I thought Thomas looked like a pirate. But I was still stunned, smiled so that Thomas would not feel bad. Then Thomas smiled, walked over, and sat at my table. Thomas shook my hand, and again. What a grip, I thought.

Wherever Thomas went, including that club, his hands held a wine bottle. It didn't matter what kind of wine. I remembered when Thomas wouldn't even take a sniff of the stuff. I thought he had everything during our high school days. I'd wished that I had the moves Thomas demonstrated in any football, basketball, or baseball game. How he'd excited spectators. I'd tried to do the things he did.

I remembered a cold night, a Friday-state-playoff-game night, so many years ago, when West Jacksonville Central High School was our opponent. The football scoreboard showed twelve seconds glowing red with the score tied at fourteen, Thomas went into the huddle. And he was the last one to leave. He lined up behind the center, rubbed his hands against his stained pants. He took the snap from the center, dropped back into the pocket. He eyed his lean receiver on the five yard line and tossed the ball just over the outstretched arms of the defender. Helmets and shoulder pads pushed against one another, banged and banged. The receiver, Jim White, caught the ball and leaped into the end zone. Thomas' third touchdown pass for the game. He threw his helmet toward the stadium lights, then jumped up and down. The crowd stampeded onto the field. The band's instruments amplified the lit night air, echoed through nearby woods.

Now Thomas couldn't even dance without falling on the floor. "Oh man, I had some dance moves then," Thomas said. "I didn't even miss a beat. I mean no one could touch me. They wouldn't even try to out dance me."

"Yeah, I used to try to copy your moves, Thomas. You were the man."

"Oh, I could get those move back. Don't think I lose them all, Luke."

"I know you could get them back, man, if you wanted to."

"That's right, Luke."

"Yeah, man!" I exclaim, knowing that Thomas is all washed up now; but I don't want to upset him.

"Let me show you the way to jam," Thomas managed. He got up, went onto the dance floor and danced with himself, falling down. He bumped his mouth. His lips sagged like fat. They were bleeding slightly. Then he came back over to my table and sat down.

I said, "You're trying to throw down, ain't you?"

And he said, "Yeah, man, we jamming." I agreed so he'd hush. His breath smelled like a polecat. And there were stains on his overalls. They could have been blood or wine.

And nothing was in there, except the DJ and his equipment, nine women and five men. They didn't even sell hot chicken sandwiches or pigs' feet anymore. Still, dust rose in the dim light. I sneezed and sneezed. No one else did. Thomas was used to this.