

Veterans Day



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It was Saturday morning, November 2. I was sitting alone, as usual, in "Oswego Gold," a coffee shop for the town and college that shared the name.

I was catching up on the news before doing some work. I wasn't in any rush; it was the weekend but I usually coded here after having my morning coffee. I scanned my usual news sites, learned about the congressional dead-lock of the day, weather events meteorologists were hyperventilating over, and local events that were theoretically of interest.

One headline caught my attention - a Veterans Day service in my hometown. There would be a service honoring all of America's heroes, with a special ceremony for Bill Caldor. I groaned to myself. Bill and I went to school together. He was the town's fair-haired son. Curious despite myself, I read the remaining details.

It was on Veterans Day, at three. There was a picture of the high school principal and the head of the local Veterans of Foreign Wars association shaking hands in front of the school's trophy case. Behind them were the two state wrestling trophies the team had won when Bill was the captain. I smiled thinking about another trophy Bill won but no longer had.

When I looked up from my screen I choked on my coffee. Bill Caldor was standing in front of me wearing his Air Force dress blue uniform and hat.

I looked away, not wanting to attract his attention, meet his eyes, or see the admiring looks he was getting from all of the women and a few of the guys. I guessed he was in town for an

ROTC event, back to impress his former classmates and probably get laid.

I stared at my computer screen, tried to start writing code, and realized it was useless. Bill Caldor strikes again.

I gulped the cooled coffee in my to-go cup, shoved my laptop into its bag, and shrugged into my winter coat. I bought a refill and poured it into the mug, added extra cream and sugar, and replaced the lid. Bill walked over and stood silently beside me all the while. I contemplated spilling coffee on his perfectly pressed uniform but didn't want to cause a scene.

When Bill didn't move, I went around him, passing crowded tables to get to the front door, mumbling apologies to the people I smacked with my bag. I stomped out and wished I had just shoved the oaf out of my way.

I decided to go to my work cube in the Information Systems department. I started there part-time my first year in college but since I didn't mind working weird hours for a ridiculously low wage they offered me a full-time position.

I would work unmolested until the 5:15 bus came and be home within fifteen minutes. That would give me enough time to order pizza and get ready to watch the "Aliens-among-us" movie marathon. Thinking about that put me in a better mood than remembering all the attempts Bill had made to get me to say or do something to make me look stupid.

When the wind blew the Lake Ontario frigid air into my face, I decided to use the underground tunnels connecting the campus buildings.

It was early enough for Saturday morning classes to still be in session, so the doors were unlocked. I went inside and took the first set of stairs down to the lower level. I knew my way around the campus but checked the signs by habit. The first hallway or "tunnel" to the left led to the Liberal Arts building. The second hallway on the right led to the Information Science

Department and my office. As I approached it, I saw Bill Caldor walking toward me.

I kept my head down and watched the floor as I walked. My breath sounded loud and huffy in the confined space. My shoes squeaked loudly with each step. I stopped and listened and realized Bill made no sound as he approached. Naturally. Everything was always perfect for Bill Caldor.

Rather than have him behind me, I took the next stairwell up to the ground floor. I would have to go outside again to get to my building but once there I knew I wouldn't run into Bill; only employees had the pass code to get in.

At the top of the stairs I exited the door and was greeted by another blast of icy wind. Still aggravated by my repeated run-ins with Bill, I pulled my hood up and stomped across the open space to the nearest door of the Information Science building. I punched in my code and the door unlocked with a buzz. My computer bag slid down my arm, I hiked it up, and yanked open the door before it locked again.

Bill was blocking the doorway.

"Excuse me." I said without thinking.

Bill blinked down at me and smiled. I backed away, remembering that smile from junior and senior high school, and slammed the door shut.

I could feel my heart pounding in my chest and realized I wasn't going to be able to focus on work at all now. I was too upset and afraid. There was absolutely no way for him to know what I did, no one else knew but me. Besides, it wouldn't make sense for him to be chasing me down about it while in uniform. I checked my cell phone for the time. I could still catch the next shuttle home. I hurried to the bus stop in front of the building, looking over my shoulder for Bill.

I was just in time for the shuttle.

Winded, I flopped into the first empty seat ignoring the inquisitive looks from the other passengers. As I caught my breath, I wondered why Bill was back after three years.

I first met Bill in my seventh grade advanced math class. His family moved back here when his father retired from the Air Force. He quickly became one of the popular kids. Everyone liked him, even the geeks and thespian wannabes. So, of course, I took an instant dislike to him. He had rolled high numbers for every attribute in his life and didn't understand what it was like for those who hadn't. He tried to charm me like everyone else, but I saw right through his laughter and jokes.

In high school, Bill became the varsity wrestling team captain despite being a junior. He led the team to the school's first state championship and did it again the next year. Each time teachers, students, and the town went nuts. They couldn't talk about anything else for weeks. The rest of us were forced to attend school rallies where the head coach and principal ridiculously embellished his achievements and their importance to the school. At the end, they presented each wrestler with their own trophy. Bill's was the largest. His picture as well as the rest of the teams' was installed along with the team trophy as the centerpieces in the school's trophy case. Each time I walked passed it, my teeth gritted in frustration because no one else could see Bill for what he was.

After graduation, I thought I had seen the last of Bill, assuming he had gone on to a big wrestling college. When I saw him walking across the campus on the first day of classes it was like a punch in the gut. He spotted me and waved but I pretended I didn't see him. I ran into him several times over the years but he joined the ROTC program and majored in Aeronautical Engineering while I went into Computer Science. Our paths, thankfully, rarely crossed.

One day, the wireless system in Bill's dormitory building stopped working and my boss sent me to handle it. To fix it, I needed access to student rooms, including Bill's. I saw and recognized the trophy immediately and without thinking about it, I stashed it in my backpack the moment I was alone with it – a little bit of payback for all Bill put me through. Not sure what to do with it, I brought it to my apartment, gloated for a few weeks, then forgot about it as other things I collected covered it.

The shuttle stopped at my apartment complex. I stood up and caught my computer bag on the seat. The woman behind me chuckled. Embarrassed, I went down the steps without looking up. Bill was standing beside the shuttle stop sign. Startled, I fell awkwardly to the ground.

"Leave me alone!" I yelled at Bill, who stood laughing. The woman behind me stopped to help.

"Are you OK?"

I nodded at her, glaring at Bill beside her.

The woman glanced curiously over her shoulder. "Are you OK?" She asked again. "Do you need help getting up?" She added, turning to the shuttle driver with a look.

"No, I'm fine. Thank you," I said, lumbering to my feet. I brushed down my clothes. The woman shrugged and walked away with a wave and pitying look.

"Happy now?" I asked Bill. "You made me fall and look stupid. Congratulations. Now go away." I was hunched over, upset, and he was towering over me.

"I need your help," Bill said, surprising me.

"With what?" I asked, unable to stop myself.

"I'm not sure," he said, a confused look replaced his smile. "I want to sleep but I can't."

"Then take some pills." I looked at him more carefully now. His confusion reminded me of my mother on one of her "bad" days.

"Something isn't right and I have to fix it." A chill went down my spine. He sounded out of it. His uniform was clean, pressed, and immaculate.

When my mother was feeling bad, she barely remembered to comb her hair let alone look this put together.

"If you can't fix it, what makes you think I could?"

A cold blast of wind blew off the lake and I pulled my coat tighter around me. Of course Bill's crisp white hat didn't budge. He didn't even blink with the wind blowing in his face.

The wind blew again, catching my bag and I nearly dropped it. When I looked up, Bill was gone.

I pushed open my apartment door and threw my coat on the stack of boxes next to it.

Rather than think about Bill, I let myself get distracted by the electronics, old computers and peripherals that lined my hallway. I picked up an old portable PC, knowing I was going to fix it soon and give it to a local elementary school. Next to it was an almost perfect portable radio that just needed the rust removed and new dials. I could give it to one of the night security guards. I had been planning to do both for months but never got around to it. I didn't want to think about that.

I moved a pile of papers off the table and powered my computer up to find out about Bill Caldor and why he was in town this weekend.

First, I looked at his social media page. He was a First Lieutenant in the Air Force and currently lived in Dayton, Ohio. His relationship status was blank, so there wasn't a girlfriend. I was surprised, given how popular he was.

I was also surprised to see charities among his interests, even the food pantry in our town. My mother went there when she ran

out of money, which, given how much junk she bought at yard sales and thrift shops, was fairly often. I shook my head. Bill volunteered to boost his academic resume, nothing more.

I scrolled through his online pictures. Each showed his smiling face alongside any number of individuals and groups. Some were at the beach, others skiing, a lot of them were of him doing something silly. I paused when I came across a picture of him next to my mother in the food pantry. I had no idea they knew each other, let alone well enough to capture their relationship digitally.

Irritated with my train of thought, I clicked on Bill's main posting page. One posting was from a month ago, from Meredith Singer who went through school with us. "Went apple picking today. It wasn't the same without you. Miss you Silly Billy."

The next posting was from three months ago by a person named Ron. "Been thinking a lot about you this week. If you hadn't helped me, I know wouldn't have gotten into grad school. I start next week. Thank you for your service and sacrifice. God bless you, Bill."

Ignoring the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, I searched for Bill's name. There were several hits, each with his name, his Air Force rank, and date of his death more than seven months ago. Bill had been at a base in Afghanistan when he had been killed.

"You have a lot of stuff," Bill said as the first human in the movie died from an alien disease. He stood, still in full dress uniform, in the narrow space between my couch and a stack of old computers.

"What do you do with it all?"

I hated that question. The few times mother brought someone home, that was the first thing they asked. It was obvious. They made her feel safe. Things never left, never died, never hurt her. She trusted things more than people, including me. After my father died, my mother took down all of the photos, hid photo albums, and deleted online pictures. She stopped looking at my face. I copied her, avoiding looking in mirrors, knowing I wouldn't like what I saw there any more than she did.

"I like it."

"I bet you don't know what most of it is."

"I know everything I own."

"What's the third computer down from the top of the pile behind me?"

"It's a portable with super microprocessor, a ten gig hard drive, and a mega video ram card."

Bill laughed.

"I'm dead, not stupid."

I blinked at his admission, still resisting the idea.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I'm supposed to do something but don't know what. I was hoping you knew."

"How the hell should I know?"

"Because you're my oldest friend."

"I'm not your oldest friend."

He frowned.

"Yes, you are. You are the first kid I met when I moved to Vulney. We were in classes together every year. We did homework together and co-chaired our yearbook."

I had forgotten about our high school yearbook club. He did all the photography and I worked on photoshopping them into shape.

"I don't think so. You gave me a wedgie every year in junior high!" I reminded him.

"For National Wedgie Day!" He laughed. "I held the record for getting the most in seventh and giving the most in eighth grade."

I rolled my eyes and he laughed again.

"Are you really dead?"

He nodded.

"Why haven't you, um, moved on?"

"I told you, every time I try to sleep I can't. I have something to do."

For the first time in my life I felt bad for Bill. He was the kind of guy that was used to knowing what to do.

"Did you have a girlfriend?"

He shook his head.

"Did you owe someone money?"

He scrunched his face which meant he was thinking. The teachers always laughed when he did that.

"I made her a promise!" He told me, his face lighting up.

"Who? What did you promise her?"

His face fell.

"I don't know!"

As usual, I woke up on the couch. My routine was to have coffee and scroll through a variety of websites to catch up on news but I couldn't concentrate. I kept thinking about Bill's immaculate uniform in this messy apartment.

I hated to admit it but Bill's pointed questions embarrassed me. I started cleaning. I planned to do it before his appearance, at least that's what I told myself as I collected as much trash as would fit into the eight garbage bags I found under my kitchen

sink. I realized the place had gotten bad. I ran the bags and more pizza boxes than I wanted to count to the apartment garbage dumpsters and decided to shower.

I took my comic book collection out of the bathtub and turned on the hot water. Once the mirror steamed over, I took my clothes off and showered. I dried off with a towel that hadn't been laundered for months and put on my equally grimy bathrobe before stepping out of the tub. I avoided seeing myself reflected in windows or mirrors, especially naked or without a shirt on. I even grew a beard to skip watching myself shave.

I took my towel and carefully wiped just enough steam from the mirror so that I could see only my forehead and hair. I reached for my comb, knocked it from its precarious perch on the back of the toilet, and caught it before it landed in the water.

Bill was gazing back at me in the mirror. I didn't jump this time, just sighed. I combed my hair and turned to face him. There was something different about him. "Where is your hat?"

"Gone. If I don't keep my promise soon, my whole uniform will disappear and me with it. I'll never sleep. Please help me!"

The fear in his eyes made me want to help him, surprising me. He faded before I could tell him that. I didn't know what his promise was but it had to do with that stupid trophy. What other connection did I have to him?

Afraid that my idiotic moment of victory would somehow lead to Bill's eternal haunting or something worse, I grabbed my clothes from the floor and went into the dining room to look through the piles for reasonably clean ones. I normally did work on Sunday but I couldn't get the trophy off my mind.

I stuffed armloads of dirty clothes into laundry baskets I found hiding underneath them, hoping each time to find the trophy buried there. Not wanting to just move the clothes from room to room, making it more difficult to find the trophy, I lugged a year's worth of laundry down the stairs to the

apartment building's washers and driers. Then I cleaned the dining room table where I could fold and keep the clothes out of the way. After that, I used the baskets to carry dozens of things I knew were junk to the dumpster.

I passed Gary, the apartment handyman, on my last trip.

"Glad to see you cleaning, Ryan. You're not a bad looking guy but that apartment will scare any girl away before you can have any fun." He laughed and kept walking while I grew teary-eyed. How sad was my life that only the handyman knew anything about me and was the first person to pay me a compliment in years?

Tired and back on my couch, I felt a sense of accomplishment thinking about the newly straightened dining room with clean, folded clothing. The feeling didn't last. I still hadn't found the trophy.

"I saw you moving all this stuff around. You're pretty strong."

I didn't jump this time but glared at him anyway. Bill just smiled.

"Thanks," I said. "Did you find your hat?" He still wasn't wearing it.

"No. It's gone. So are my shoes." He looked upset and I felt bad for bringing it up.

"So why did you join the Air Force, anyway?" I asked, not wanting him to bring up his promise again, since I hadn't found the trophy. I hoped he'd remember his promise when he saw it.

"My dad retired from the Air Force the year we moved here. He flew B2 bombers. He loved the job and the Air Force. I wanted to be just like him."

"Did you like it?"

"I loved it." He was smiling again. I was glad it made him feel better.

"I don't understand why. The ROTC people were always running, saluting, or getting yelled at."

Bill laughed.

"It may look like that to you but for me it was great. I was in shape, learned how to be a leader, and to follow orders when others were in charge. When I first joined all of us were strangers but as we worked together, we became friends, then family. I could count on them to have my back and I had theirs. I really miss it."

I looked away from his pain and longing, knowing he lead a better life than I did, and realizing I wanted a life like that, too.

"It may sound corny to you, but I loved serving and protecting the United States of America. I loved being part of something bigger than myself and knowing I could count on my team. There's nothing I want more than to be able to continue to serve."

"No, I admire that," I said, then looked away before he saw my face. Too late.

"What?"

"Maybe if you weren't in the Air Force, you'd still be alive."

He shrugged.

"Maybe. But I died in service to my country. I wish I was still alive but don't regret joining and wouldn't change that, even if I could." My envy and jealousy turned into admiration.

Unhappy with the realization that I had misunderstood someone I had known most of my life, I leaned forward to look under the coffee table, in case the trophy was there. When I looked up again, Bill was gone.

I finished taking garbage out to the bin from the bathroom and the vanity under the bathroom sink. The trophy wasn't in

there. Sweaty again and in need of another shower, I shut the bathroom door and looked at the now clean bathrobe hanging on the back. For the first time in years, I left the robe on its hook and took off my clothes without steaming up the mirror first.

Stealing myself, I brought my head up and looked. Two blue eyes, a nose, clear pale skin, thin red lips, and longish black hair. Individually, each feature was well-formed and within normal range. Collectively, they assembled a face that, objectively, was average to, perhaps, marginally attractive.

I was no "Bill Caldor" but I wasn't a complete troll either. I'd even gotten a compliment today!

After I showered, I had to spend time writing code. I had a project due the next day at work. If I finished early, I would look for the trophy again before bed.

Things went back to normal for a few days. I worked, people asked me to accomplish the impossible on a shoestring budget, and I did it. I found myself meeting people's eyes more often, smiling at their jokes and even greeting them in the mornings. Bill didn't appear but I spent each lunch hour emptying file cabinets and throwing my accumulated junk out, thinking I may have brought the trophy to my office.

During the week I normally eat dinner at a local bar that served wings and pizza but instead I cleaned more of the apartment so I could find the trophy and give it back to Bill before he lost any more clothing.

When I got home Wednesday night I hung my coat on a newly-assembled coatrack.

"You didn't like me, did you?" Bill said from behind me. I jumped and nearly knocked the rack over. I swallowed the lump in my throat. Bill had figured it out.

"No, not really." He was still hatless and missing his jacket now as well. I saw we had the same height and build. I had a beer gut and slouched but for the first time I realized he didn't tower over me, I just thought he had.

"Why not?" He sounded hurt. I sighed not liking or wanting to share what my recent realizations revealed about me.

"My feelings weren't about you. I didn't like a lot of people because I didn't like myself. I was jealous of you and everyone else who was confident and happy."

"Do you like me better now?" I almost gave him a snarky answer out of habit but stopped. He deserved better treatment. He had never been my tormentor. I had been my own.

"Yes, I do," I answered.

Relief showed on Bill's face and the stiffness left his shoulders. "Good." He smiled. "That means you'll help me keep my promise, right?"

"Yes. Do you remember what it was?"

"No, but she needs to know I kept it!"

"Who?"

"I don't know!" Bill simmered with frustration, then shook his head and disappeared.

Bill had transferred his anxiety to me. I tried but couldn't sit still so I finished straightening up the living room. Then I worked on the second bedroom which was just an over-stuffed room full of things from computer store close-outs or office building dumpsters.

It was crap I never needed. I shook my head at my stupidity. I grew up hating my home because of the junk my mother surrounded herself with, then I did the exact same thing. At least my mother had an excuse.

I cleaned until four in the morning. I was exhausted, and still hadn't found the trophy. I called-in sick for the first time ever. After leaving a message on my boss's voicemail, I went to bed.

I woke up at noon, panicking until I remembered I'd called-in sick the night before. I got up, made a pot of coffee, and wandered through the apartment, pleased by how much room I had. Then I thought about Bill and wondered what might happen if I couldn't find that damn trophy.

Determined to keep trying, I finished cleaning the only part of my apartment I hadn't gotten to yet: the second bedroom closet. I sorted the contents into trash, recyclables, and things I wanted to keep. I put most of into trash bags and ran them down to the dumpster in two trips. As I did, I kept an eye out for Bill.

With one last look into what I thought was a dark, empty corner, I saw a trash bag with a pointy object inside it. I felt a wash of embarrassment and shame seeing it. When I stole it, it had been a moment of triumph, now I realized it was closer to the height of stupidity and ignorance. I dreaded what would happen when I took it out.

"Where did you get that from?" Bill asked. I didn't jump, expecting him to appear.

I looked up. He was wearing a white t-shirt and his dress-pants. His socks were gone, along with the rest of his uniform. I could feel the blood heating my face. Regardless of all the stuff I thought he did to me over the years, I felt horrible for stealing his trophy, especially now.

"I stole it from your dorm room one day." I was horrified when my eyes welled-up.

Bill laughed.

"Sorry to ruin your joke but I didn't know it was missing. I thought it was at my parents' house." He laughed again, not noticing my tears. He looked around the room and then walked into the hallway.

"You've really cleaned the place up. It looks good," he told me, sticking his head around the corner of the door. I knew I could let myself off the hook and not say anything but he deserved better than that. He deserved my apology.

"Bill. Listen. I didn't take your trophy as a joke. I took it to get even with you." My one spiteful act of retaliation against the only person who had considered himself my friend.

"Get even? What for?"

He still didn't understand why I disliked him. I wanted to list my litany of wrongs I felt he and everyone else in school and life had perpetrated against me over the years. I wanted to hide behind all the crap I just threw away and continue to shut the world out but knew, if I did, I'd never have a better life.

"For everything you had and I didn't. You had two normal parents that loved you. My father died and my mother hated the sight of me. You were always happy, good looking, and people liked you. I hated myself and thought no one could or would like me. I was an idiot for not realizing we could have been friends. I'm sorrier about that than I am for being a jerk and stealing your trophy. "

Bill was shaking his head, a small sad smile on his face.

"You're right on some things but still wrong on most. You were a jerk for stealing my trophy. But you are wrong about not having parents who loved you. Your mom has always loved you. She told me all about you every time we saw one another at the food pantry. She showed me photos of you and told me the story behind each one. She was so proud of you and your grades. She knew she was ill and it was affecting you. I was always trying to figure out how to tell you about it but let's just say you didn't make it easy for me."

"You knew my mother that well?" He smiled.

"Your mom was one of my favorite people. But you're becoming more and more like her, losing yourself in your junk

and work." There was sadness in his voice now. I looked up and could see through him now. His spirit was fading. Again I had been an idiot, spending precious time talking about me and not trying to help him.

"Bill! What was the promise?" I got up to grab him, to help him stay and remember but my hand went right through him.

"I don't know. Ask her yourself."

I paced around my now clutter-free apartment but took no joy from it. I had to figure out who the woman was. Then I remembered the Veterans Day service at my high school I read about right before Bill first appeared. Maybe she would be there.

I called my high school to get more information about the ceremony and found myself talking to the principal's secretary, Ms. Marston, who had been there when I graduated. I wanted to talk to her and reminisce about Bill, but was afraid to lose any more time.

"I read about the Veterans Day ceremony. Can you tell me more about it?" I skipped giving her my name.

"It will take place at three o'clock, in the auditorium, and the principal, Mr. Wallander, and Mayor Cannelli will be there. That's all I know for sure. If you want more information, I can give you Ms. Cena's number. She's organizing it."

"Elizabeth Cena?" I asked.

"Yes, that's correct. Would you like her number?"

"No, thank you." I hung up the phone. I already had my mother's cell number.

I hadn't spoken to my mother for months. I spent the first eighteen years of my life living in the sad, junk-filled warren she created. Between my anger about that and the fact she couldn't stand to look at me, I left the house as soon as I got into college. By the end of my first semester, when I went home for the holidays, my old bedroom was overrun with moldy coloring books, food-stained clothes she found in garbage cans, and boxes filled with melted chocolate-covered cherries. That was the last time I went back. We called each other sporadically at first but over the years the length of time between the calls increased until it wasn't unusual for us not to speak for more than six months at a time.

I wasn't sure how I felt about her organizing the tribute. Before my father died, she had been a normal, happy person who took me to the park to play and the library to read to me. After he died, her depression and mental illness kicked into high gear and organizing anything complicated appeared beyond her.

I called and left a message on my mother's cell phone with a place and time to meet for lunch tomorrow. I picked a place she liked because they served fish on Fridays. I told her I wanted to participate in the Veterans Day ceremony, specifically the tribute to Bill. An hour later she texted me back, putting the lunch off until Saturday morning.

Frustrated, I decided to take Friday off from work as well. I'd never taken a vacation day and had more time than I could ever use. My boss was shocked when I called and asked for the time. He gave his permission immediately after he made sure I was OK.

I looked for the only other two women I knew of in Bill's life - his mother and Meredith Singer, the girl from high school who posted on Bill's site. I looked up her family's phone number and spoke with her father. He didn't know if she was going to the

ceremony but promised to pass my name and number along to her.

When I called Mr. and Mrs. Caldor, Bill's mother answered on the second ring. She was hesitant when I asked to come talk to her but when I told her I wanted to talk about Bill, to keep his memory alive and vital for as long as we could, she quickly agreed. She asked me to come over that night after dinner when her husband would be home.

"Bill looks just like his dad," I said, uncomfortable using the past-tense when I was still talking with him. I didn't know how to find out about Bill's promise either. They smiled and his father pointed to walls around the table, full of pictures of Bill and the two of them.

"He gets...got his sense of humor from his mother," he said, the sadness showing in his eyes after corrected himself. He steadied himself. "What exactly can we do for you, Ryan?"

I reached down, took the trophy out of the bag, and put it on the table. I took a deep breath to steady myself. "I want to give this back to you. I stole it from Bill when we were in college."

"You stole it?" They were smiling. Just like Bill, they assumed it had been a practical joke. I wondered if I would ever see the world in such a positive way.

"Yes, to get even with him," I told them honestly, hoping it would be the first step in being more like them and Bill.

"Get even? What for?" His mother asked, puzzled. Mr. Caldor frowned.

"Because I was stupid. I thought he was making fun of me. I didn't understand he wanted to be friends. I'm such an idiot. I'm so sorry..." To my horror I started crying.

"We forgive you," Mr. Caldor said, getting up from the table to put his hand on my shoulder. "We know you didn't have it easy as a kid."

"I'm sure Bill didn't even know it was gone, he was always misplacing things." Mrs. Caldor said and they chuckled and I choked back a laugh.

"Thanks for understanding but I can't let that be an excuse anymore." I wiped my eyes and pulled myself together.

"Do you know of any promises that Bill made? I'd like to help him keep them, if possible." They exchanged puzzled looks.

"The only promises Bill made were to the Air Force. To have integrity, to strive for excellence in all he did, and to put service before self. He kept all those promises, especially the last." Mr. Caldor's pride and sorrow mixed in his voice.

How could I help Bill keep his promise if I didn't know what it was?

Principal Wallendar greeted everyone. As "Taps" played, an Air Force honor guard presented the flag to the Caldors.

The mayor, two high school wrestling coaches, and one of Bill's Squadron Leaders from his time in ROTC took turns speaking about Bill's contributions to the school, community, and country. Bill's mother spoke next. Bill was so much like his mother. Her speech was positive and upbeat and filled with funny stories about him. Again, I felt like an idiot for not having him as my friend.

I was amazed when my mother got up to speak. She hated to talk in front of anyone, let alone a room full of strangers. She stood in front of the small podium, keeping her eyes down and holding on to its sides with iron grips.

"I don't like public speaking or getting people together but I owed it to Bill. He was a special person. He was kind to me and didn't judge me like everyone else. He listened to me and helped me more than any shrink ever did. When I was broke, he helped me get food at the pantry. When I was sad, he made me laugh." She spoke quickly and in one breath, then paused and looked up and at me for the first time since I arrived.

"When I cried because I was making my son Ryan crazy like me, Bill would hug me. One day, when they were older, I went to the Pantry after Ryan and I had a big fight. It was about all my stuff again. I knew I was driving my son away, ruining his life. He was ashamed of me and lonely. I didn't know how to stop or help him. Bill promised to be Ryan's friend, to help him be normal, not like me. He kept his promise. Ryan is here now, from his job at the university, nicely dressed and handsome, just like his father, to talk today about Bill." She looked at me the entire time and even smiled a little.

My eyes welled again, but I didn't care.

"Thank you Bill Caldor, you were a good friend to me and my son." Then she walked away from the podium and sat down again in the front.

The principal waved to me. It was my turn.

"I made this for Bill," I told them, then turned on the computer and the projector which others had used and put in the DVD I made. I went back to my seat to watch.

Songs began to play and glimpses of Bill in junior and senior high school, his ROTC days, and afterwards appeared. Some showed his sense of humor and others his focus and determination in everything he did. They saw his pride of being in the Air Force, his love of the United States, and willingness to defend and serve it despite any cost. As the pictures and music played, I kept watch for Bill.

I worried it was too late. I knew now what his promise had been - to do whatever he could to help me live a normal life. He had come back from the dead to keep it, visiting and prompting me to know my life could be more than it was. Because of him I was changing already and reaching out to people, something I never did. I knew I wanted more, a sense of meaning in my life, of fulfillment and family like Bill had.

"Thanks Bill, you really are a good friend," I said quietly to myself.

He appeared in front of the first row of people, next to the podium and the American flag. He was in full dress uniform, hat, and shoes. Expressionlessly he saluted the flag. Then his look softened looking at his mother and father. He gave a short wave to my mother, who jumped as if someone had tapped her shoulder. Then he smiled at me. It was the same broad smile he used to give back in high school and for the first time I gave him one back.

I blinked to clear the tears from my eyes and he was gone.