

Shadows Within Shadows

Hutch Hobson sat on the train looking out the window as the wheels devoured land between the Pacific coast and Western Colorado, taking him to a woman who claimed she his wife. The country was timeless as if natives still rode horses and raised war clubs against the white man. In the chaos of his brain, hung the shadow of three beautiful children. The train chugged through a monotonous desert colored the same, but the sandstone cliffs in Utah were stunning. He may have recognized something except for the haunting amnesia. His head had been bashed and beaten in the POW camp. He touched his forehead. It was sore.

He vaguely remembered enlisting in the Air Force to fight in Korea but that was all. It was as if he had died and his spirit floated in a ghostly apparition among the living. According to his military records, he was a saber pilot shot down over North Korea. A camp guard had ripped up his picture of Becky and the kids. He hated the man.

Hutch had spent the better part of a year as a POW enduring severe beatings. It was a complete relief when the armistice was signed and he along with hundreds of others were released across the Bridge of No Return. Just before he boarded the troopship, they gave him a pile of letters from the woman claiming she was his wife. She included photos of her and their three children in stair steps. Dang, they were cute and she was beautiful with milky skin long black hair and blue eyes beneath thick glasses. She looked like a librarian or an accountant.

After twenty hours and fifteen minutes on the passenger train, he was exhausted. As it came to a complete stop Hutch tucked the photos Becky sent into his bag. He had re-read the stack of letters she mailed but remembered nothing about her or anything about where she lived. He sensed his memories were stuffed deep inside a locked chest that only God could open.

He stood and his knees buckled. Damn, he was tired. He was a ghost of the man he had once been. Hobson weakly pulled his duffle bag from the overhead rack and stumbled off the train in Grand Junction into a blast of dry heat. He thought, *So this is home*. He shook his head. *What a strange life I'm living*.

Inhaling deeply, he limped into the station hoping Becky was there with the kids. A part of him was still in North Korea starving in the POW camp. The American doctors said that at some point, his memory should return, “Don’t try to force yourself – good luck.” They had replaced the front teeth a guard had knocked out with a rifle butt. He had to take them out at night and clean them.

He hadn’t expected to be treated suspiciously by intelligence agents during the seventeen-day trip aboard the transport ship. Made him feel like a criminal not a war hero.

Other returning servicemen rushed off the platform and into the arms of their families, but Hobson hesitated because he didn’t know his, and he floated in a foaming eddie of innocence. Nothing looked familiar. He scanned for the pretty woman who sent the photographs. Would she and the kids look the same?

He moved with slow uncertain steps as if the weight of the beatings had buried him along with his memory. After using the restroom, he came out to see the train station clearing of servicemen. His once sturdy frame was now frail, his blue eyes hollow and distant.

In the center stood three older people along with a younger, very pretty woman holding onto two children’s hands. They were watching for someone.

He thought, *Must be her*, and he slowly walked toward the group.

She saw him but stopped herself from running to him. She handed the toddler to another woman. They walked slowly, their eyes on each other’s faces. He waited for Becky to speak – a

commanding silence stilled his breath. He wanted to take her into his arms and kiss her. She was very lovely. It felt like he almost knew her from her letters. He was conscious of the sounds of the other people in the station chating and little squeals of excitement as loved ones met and hugged. Hobson felt as if his spirit floated above it all – a stranger in a strange town.

The children followed the woman and stood silently looking at the man they were to call Father.

God he was tired and hungry and his knees felt weak.

She released the children's hands and ran, throwing herself into his arms and wrapping her legs around his waist. "Hutch it's you!" She kissed him and sobbed on his chest weeping and trembling. "Oh, how I've missed you! I love you so much."

Becky's soft summer grass fragrance hit him like a salute and tears ran from his eyes, yet he didn't know why. He stood stiffly without taking her into his arms, feeling odd.

Her feet dropped to the cold tile floor. The other people with her held surprise on their faces because he stood without emotion as his wife wept and sobbed with tears soaking his stiffly pressed uniform with six medals and five Purple Hearts parading across his chest.

They put their arms around the couple, patting Becky's shoulders as the children grabbed her legs. Her cheeks flooded in streamlets.

He put his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. "I think I love you. Wish I could remember."

She stepped back. "Your face. You had your face repaired! You have an ear and a cheekbone and the scars are nearly gone."

He looked at Becky as a prisoner brought from a dungeon and bathed in the light of her blue eyes that stared brightly, open, and intelligent. She had a wide thin mouth that curved

slightly upward in subtle and sensitive twist. “Yeah, they said that when I checked into the VA in Denver they fixed my face before I re-enlisted in the Air Force.” He looked at the woman, hoping to remember something about her, but nothing came.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” Her eyebrows twisted with anxiety.

Inhaling deeply, he shook his head. “No I don’t remember much, I’m sorry.” He gave an embarrassed chuckle. “When I was in the POW camp I made up an elaborate story about us but I’m sure it isn’t accurate.” He made a silly face and gently wiped the tears from her cheeks.

He was friendly warm and impossibly attractive. She felt scalded just from looking at him. She said, “Until this moment, I was dried up like house dust.”

Molten desire burned in his eyes.

Another lady introduced the children, “This is your father. Give him a hug and kiss.”

The four-year-old boy did but the little girl held back. The toddler was oblivious as he clung to his mother’s leg. Becky picked the girl up and pushed her into his arms. “This is your father Angelica. Give him a kiss on the cheek.”

She looked at her mother.

“Go ahead, he won’t hurt you.”

The two-year-old cried as she rubbed her eyes saying, “He’s big and scary.”

He let out a low murmur of contrition, his voice soft gentle and low. “I’ll be a good daddy from now on.”

Becky saw the pain in his veined and weary eyes. She sat Angelica down and looked up at Hutch. “You are so incredibly thin. I hardly recognized you – especially without the right side of your face disfigured.”

A deep sigh. “Think you can love me again once we get to know each other?”

She wrapped her arms around him. “I never stopped loving you all these years although we thought you were dead. They said you were shot down by a MiG and were listed as missing in action.”

The lady said, “I’m your Aunt Ruth. People in the churches around Delta prayed for you.” She took his hand. “I felt in my heart you were alive and I kept telling Becky to have faith.”

The man asked, “Were you tortured?”

Hutch shrugged. “Guess you could say that. They beat us often if you didn’t immediately do what they wanted.” He almost cussed. “They pounded my head so hard I didn’t know who I was and how I got there until one of the prisoners told me. If you tried to escape you were tortured and shot.”

They waited.

He felt weak and pointed at the door. “Let’s go to Delta. I’d rather talk about it later.” He asked the Sheriff, “So are you my aunt and uncle?”

“Yes, we are.” He was a big man with a bigger smile. He offered his hand. “Folks call me Sheriff John. Your father is my half brother.”

“Are you married to each other?”

They laughed.

John said, “No, we’re brother and sister. Our spouses stayed home so there would be room for everyone in the car.”

Hutch turned to the other woman. “And who are you?”

She smiled softly. “I’m Becky’s mother Pamela.” She took his hand and looked into his eyes searching for a glimmer of recognition. She shook her head. “I’m so sorry you lost your memory after your Pa came to visit.”

“My Pa came to visit?”

“Yes, and he was a creep” Becky said “He was nothing like any of us imagined. He wasn’t a Colonel in the British Airforce. He tried to grab my breasts right off and borrowed money saying he wouldn’t leave until I gave him bus fare. I think that’s what traumatized you so badly that you lost your memory.”

“I think I lost it from the camp guard beatings. They were brutal.” It was all mixed up like a tossed salad. He didn’t remember his father or much else.

Aunt Ruth said, “Our half-brother was exactly like I knew he’d be. We knew he wasn’t a decorated Air Force colonel. He didn’t have the balls.” She looked at her brother, who nodded.

They loaded into Sheriff John’s patrol car. He laughed. “I told the office I had to pick up a prisoner in Grand Junction so we could burn the county’s gas.”

“Guess that was true” Hutch said. He sat in the passenger seat with Becky while the others loaded in the back seat. He looked at her. “Gosh Becky, you sure are beautiful. I’m a lucky man.”

She smiled lighting up the patrol car. “And you’re home. I’m lucky too.”

Aunt Ruth said, “She loved you even though your face was badly damaged during the Second World War. The VA surgeons did a good job on you.”

Hutch asked, “Do you know how my face nearly destroyed?”

All the adults started to speak, then they laughed and gave the floor to John. He told how Hutch had lied about his age and joined the Army at fifteen because Becky’s father caught them

naked at the drive-in theater. He threatened to press rape charges if Hutch didn't enlist. He was the lone survivor when a mortar hit his squad. "It blew half your face off." Hobson was kicked out when they discovered he was only sixteen, but then re-enlisted as a fighter pilot, again lying about his age. Becky added to the story as did Aunt Ruth while they drove across the desert to Delta, filling him in on his past.

He couldn't remember no matter how he tried. He felt stupid and empty – a shadow within shadows.

The patrol car pushed forward eagerly. Hutch looked around and pointed. "It's sure pretty around here. I like the shadows in the draws and the snow on the mountains." He didn't recognize anything.

They told him the names of the landmarks. John said, "That's Grand Mesa with three hundred trout lakes. Snows a lot. This is called Slaughter Grade because it's narrow steep and dangerous. A lot of accidents here. Some people have died down in the canyon."

John turned into Dominguez Canyon to show him the one-room house he had grown up in – his parent's old place.

The old slap-board house was empty. They walked through it and the barn. Hutch shook his head. "I wish I could remember even a smidgen."

They told him about his pigs and chickens and how at the age of thirteen, he woke up alone after his mother took off with a traveling shoe salesman. Hutch had survived for two years on his own by bucking hay and irrigating for local farmers. "You were one hard-working kid. Everyone admired you," John said, "Except you got too proud like your pa after a while." He cleared his throat. "Now Hutch you're too passive and humble. It's like the communists knocked the spirit out of you."

He caught Uncle John's eyes. "You learn to be passive. It's the only way to survive in a prison camp." Hutch said, "I think I would have liked me back then. Wish I could remember." He perceived himself as finite and small. He was a mote without cunning.

Aunt Ruth reassured him, "I'll ask the women to pray for your memory to return."

"Hope that works." He laughed mirthlessly. "It would sure be nice. You can't imagine how frightening it is to wake up and not know your name or anything about yourself – it's almost worse than being in a battle." He got a remote stare. "My ears ring and sometimes I hear shells bursting as sharpnel hits all around me." His palm went to his forehead. "Sorry, I have a headache." He felt flat and empty. He longed to have feelings return, anything, even if painful.

His family watched him grapple with the fragments of his shattered past. The year of captivity had erased his memories like chalk on a rain-soaked sidewalk. He had retreated into himself, haunted by shadows that danced at the edges of his mind. The chasm of his forgotten past seemed vast and insurmountable.

They stopped at Aunt Ruth's house so the children could use the restroom. Hutch took three aspirin for his headache. Afterward, the sheriff took the couple on a tour around Delta pointing out farmers that Hobson had worked for, the Southern Baptist Church, the Egyptian Theater, and so on as they told him more about his past. Hungry and exhausted, he fell asleep with his head against the passenger window.

Becky said, "Uncle John, we need to take him home."

"I'm sorry. He didn't say anything – probably because he's used to suffering from being a POW." They picked up the children and he took them to their rental house.

Hutch crashed on the couch.

When he came to, the women were surprised he didn't eat much. He said, "It's delicious but my stomach is all shrunk up and I have to wait, then eat again." He fell asleep mid-bite, his head dropping to the table.

They got him to bed and Becky kept the food warm.

She put the kids to bed. Hutch woke and told them a story of a father bear who went to war and after many years, returned home. The father bear was determined to take care of his little cubs from then on.

Angelica said, "You're nice. You can be my daddy." She let him kiss her cheek.

Hobson patted her head and gave his sons a big hug. "It will be fun to get to know you; we'll play together."

Hutch Junior couldn't sleep because he was so excited.

He ate a little more, then they quietly went to bed after the boy fell asleep. Hutch was shy and left his underwear on, but she quickly pulled them off and soon they made love. In the dark, he brushed his lips against hers.

She filled with an opening a trembling as he held her. She felt the wind cool through the open window and the silk of her hair lapped over the side of his face like butterfly wings. His body was hard, thin, and taut. He dropped his hands to her breasts. She felt them rise into his palms.

She woke in the night and saw Hutch sleeping and breathing softly, his thick blonde hair tossed, his eyes and lips closed – looking gorgeous. She noticed how long his lashes lay over his eyes.

Hobson woke, feeling the lovely curve of her hips to up under her ribs and the slope of her breasts.

She kissed him hard, wishing he could climb inside her mind and feel the pleasure his kisses gave her. He filled his hands with the soft weight of her breasts. The passion they had carried for each other since they were in seventh grade bubbled up, exploding like a volcano. Her body was engulfed: waves of sheer, exquisite, pleasure.

They resisted getting out of bed in the morning, wanting to feel each other's naked bodies against their own. She had never felt so connected, so in tune with another being. He was an extension of her body.

It was the most amazing delicious experience he had since losing his memory. It shredded the walls inside his head. "Becky I just remembered the first time we made love down by the Gunnison River."

They stared into one another's eyes in the light streaming into the room. They made love again each time unlocking more memories. They stopped when the kids came bouncing onto the bed.

Hutch laughed with joy.