Heroes

Robert Cormier

**Chapter 4**

 I tell myself that I will not visit the Wreck Center, that there is nothing to gain by going there just as the visit to Nicole’s house on Sixth Street brought back only loneliness and regret.

 Yet even as I acknowledge the futility of such visits, I am walking in the direction of the Wreck Center at the far end of Third Street, bending against the never-ending March wind.

 Then a hand grips my shoulder, stopping me in my tracks, and a voice whispers in my ear:

“Land mine?”

 Turning, raising my eyes under the visor of the Red Sox cap, I find Arthur Rivier looking at me curiously. The curiosity is softened with sympathy.

 I shake my head, not deserving his sympathy.

 “Grenade, then?” he asks.

 My silence provides him with his answer and he murmurs: “Tough … tough …”

 His eyes are bleary and bloodshot and there’s no recognition of me in them, for which I am grateful.

 Before he enlisted in the army, Arthur Rivier had been a star first baseman for the Frenchtown Tigers and hit booming home runs over the fence at Cartier’s Field. I remember when he returned on furlough in his khaki uniform with the corporal’s stripes, along with the other servicemen home temporarily from the war. I wanted to be like them, these heroes, fighting the Japs and the Germans, going off to battles on land and sea. I was impatient to reach the age when I could join them in that great crusade for freedom.

 Arthur Rivier points to the entrance of the St. Jude Club and says: “Come on, I’ll buy you a drink …”

 The club is where the young men of Frenchtown gather to shoot pool and play poker and drink beer and wine and hold Saturday-night dances for their girlfriends after a long week in the comb and button shops. The rules require a member to be twenty-one years old before joining and every Frenchtown boy looks forward to that birthday.

 At my hesitation, Arthur says: “You deserve a good drink …”

 Inside, the club is crowded and smoke-filled, billiard balls clicking and everyone talking at once and a sudden blast of music from the jukebox, “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree with Anyone Else but Me,” which I last heard on a radio in the English hospital.

 Familiar faces turn toward me. Big Boy Burgeron and Armand Telliere and Joe LaFontaine and some others, all of them veterans and survivors, ballplayers and shop workers who became fighting men in uniform.

 “Beer,” I answer, raising my voice above the din when Arthur asks me what I want to drink. I drank beer for the first time in the English hospital when Enrico bribed a male nurse on the late shift to bring us a few bottles. The beer was warm and bitter but at least a change from all the medicine I had to swallow every day.

 I gulp the beer now, lifting the scarf, as Arthur enters into a discussion with Big Boy Burgeron about whether it would be better to become cops or firemen now that the war is over.

 Big Boy, who weighed about three hundred pounds before entering the service and is now sleek and hard with no soft edges, says firemen offer the best career because you don’t have to march or walk as a fireman. “With my luck, as a cop I’d end up walking a beat. And I’m not walking anymore—the infantry spoiled my feet …”

 “I could never climb a ladder,” says Armand Telliere, speaking to nobody in particular as he lines up a shot at the pool table. “Besides, they say cops will be riding in cars on patrol from now on. Walking or riding, no more piecework at the shop for me …”

 “College for me,” Joe LaFontaine announces, holding up his beer and studying the way light strikes the glass. “The GI Bill. The government’s willing to pay, so I’m going …”

 “You didn’t even graduate from high school,” Arthur Rivier says but in a joking way, laughing. Others join in the laughter, creating a camaraderie in a bar, a fellowship that I wish I could be a part of.

 “I can make up the studies,” Joe LaFontaine replies. “They’re going all out for veterans.” He takes a swift gulp of the beer. “I’m going to college,” he proclaims, raising his voice so that everyone can hear. “I’m going to be a teacher.”

 “Sister Martha must be turning over in her grave,” Armand Telliere says.

 “That would be a trick,” Arthur says. “I saw her just last week. Still knocking guys around in the eighth grade. No bigger than a peanut and she still knocks them around.”

 “The way she knocked you.” Big Boy laughs.

 And everybody joins in the laughter, and someone calls for another round and the jukebox plays “I’ll Be with You in Apple Blossom Time,” such sweet voices in the air.

 Arthur turns to me. “You don’t talk much, do you?” he says.

 I want to ask about Larry LaSalle, if anyone knows when and if he’s coming back, but I don’t want to call more attention to myself. The scarf and bandage are enough to cause curiosity.

 “That’s all right,” he says, “you earned the right not to talk.”

 What if I told him that I was little Francis Cassavant who shagged balls behind the bases when the Frenchtown Tigers played their crosstown rivals, the West Side Knights, for the Monument championship? That I am not the hero he thinks I am, not like the other veterans here in the St. Jude Club.

 As the big argument resumes about cops and firemen, I slip out of the bar unnoticed, into the March dampness of Third Street. I make my way through the throng of shoppers and the schoolkids leaving St. Jude’s school, my identity protected by the scarf and the bandage. My head is light from the beer because I haven’t eaten since my breakfast, when I forced myself to drink the coffee and eat the oatmeal.

 I am on my way, of course, to the Wreck Center.