

Impulse

Steve Joseph peered out the window as the tour bus moved down Clark Street, rolling past vintage houses and buildings he'd seen many times before and had absolutely no desire to see again, especially on a summer day filled with sunlight and promise.

At the front of the bus, a young man wearing khaki pants and a yellow polo shirt was speaking into a chin mike, describing in detail the glorious history of the city through which they were passing—with history being the operative word. There didn't appear to be much glory left.

But Steve wasn't listening any more than he was studying the scenery. He had stopped listening more than ten minutes ago. Now, he was just bored and restless, wondering why he had sacrificed a full day to join this pilgrimage sponsored by the East Covington Senior Center. Mostly, it was to please his only daughter, who, at forty-nine, was now of an age to worry about him—as if he was a feeble old man who needed someone to worry on his behalf. And maybe he did—he had stopped worrying about himself more than a year ago.

Sitting alone near the back of the bus, he replayed the conversation with his daughter while the voice of the young tour guide droned on in the background: “Dad, I'm worried about you,” Christy had said, sounding more like her mother every day. “It's been more than a year since Mom died and you barely leave the house. You used to love to go places. When was the last time you went anywhere?”

Steve rolled his eyes. Being interrogated by his well-meaning daughter was not something he welcomed. And so he hadn't felt he needed to answer the question that sounded more like an accusation. Besides, wasn't it just last month he had gone to his grandson's high school graduation, dutifully sitting on hard wooden bleachers in a stuffy gymnasium while Connor got his ten seconds of fame?

Christy tried a different tack. “Okay, look, Dad, I know you're still grieving. But staying cooped up inside isn't healthy.” She smiled and touched his hand, a gesture that always got his attention. “I've looked into the East Covington Senior Center and they have a lot of day trips. I really think you should check it out. Please.”

He didn't exactly like being alone with his grief and his memories. But he had become comfortable staying within himself. For nearly fifty years, he had done practically everything with Marian—as a couple. Where is the joy in doing things by yourself? Still, he loved his daughter and understood her concern. He probably would have issued the same directive to his own father, but, unfortunately, the old man died before Steve had the chance. “All right,” he said. “I’ll look into it.”

And so here he was, three weeks later, trapped on a bus twenty miles from home, surrounded by couples talking and touching and exchanging quips only they understood. Three women who were most likely widows sat up front, giggling frequently and obviously enjoying each other's company, along with the attention of the young tour guide—some feelings never completely go away. Steve was the only unattached male among the pilgrims, and he felt as though he was being conspicuously ignored, literally the odd man out.

He glanced at his wristwatch, noting that it was eleven twenty-five. They were scheduled to stop at Lawnview Cemetery, and then, after they had paid homage to the city's founders, it was on to the historic Demeter Tavern for lunch.

With Marian, he had been to both the cemetery and the tavern more than once. The cemetery was marginally interesting—if history was your passion, which it had been for Marian but not for Steve. The food at the tavern was passable, if you liked Brunswick Stew or hamburgers cooked the old-fashioned way. He closed his eyes and sank into the cushioned seat. A veil of loneliness began to descend over him. Without warning or provocation, a tear formed in the corner of his left eye and started to roll down his cheek. Quickly, he wiped it away with his index finger, leaving behind a damp smudge on his face.

A few minutes later, the bus stopped. Steve opened his eyes and glanced out the window. “Folks, this is Lawnview Cemetery,” the young man declared, in case it wasn't obvious. “Most of the city founders are in the northeast corner. Look for the granite mausoleums. This is a thirty-minute stop. Please be back on the bus by twelve.”

The bus door opened and old people dressed in a wide variety of colorful summer outfits rose from their seats and began filing out like a well-behaved class of first-graders on their first field trip.

Steve watched them go, watched the young tour guide count them one by one as they exited. He nearly laughed at the apparent absurdity of it.

Once all the other pilgrims were off the bus, the young tour guide looked back at Steve and smiled. “Everyone off, Steve,” he said.

The directive sounded pleasant enough but came across to Steve almost like an order. He bristled at the use of his first name. For forty years, his undergraduate students at Bledsoe University called him Professor Joseph. Today, even though he knew very well the reasons for it, he was sorry he’d retired, consciously sacrificing both the prestigious position as chemistry department chair and the respect that went with it in order to spend as much time as possible with his ailing wife. Now caught in the loop of a memory he couldn’t control, Steve didn’t move from his seat.

The tour guide’s clean-shaven features clouded with concern. “Steve, are you all right?”

The question got Steve’s attention. Physically, he felt fine—he had always felt fine. It was Marian who had gotten sick. He remembered how her struggle with congestive heart failure escalated into a crisis just two weeks before her death from a sudden heart attack. At least, she managed to die in her own bed. It was the only thing he felt remotely good about.

Out of the corner of his escalating grief, he saw the tour guide start toward him. He shook the images of his dead wife from his head and held out his hands, palms up. “I’m coming,” he said.

The smile returned to the tour guide’s boyish face and he stopped. He half turned but waited until Steve was standing before moving toward the door. He pointed to his watch. “Please be back by twelve,” he said just before exiting.

“Jawhohl, mein Kommandant!” Steve muttered under his breath. A part of him wanted to shout it out the bus window. But he restrained himself as he stretched his legs. The kid’s only doing his job.

A minute later, he stood alone in the parking lot and let the warmth from the late June sun envelop his head with its crown of thinning gray hair offering little protection. He watched his fellow passengers parade toward the northeast corner of the vast cemetery, with its seemingly endless rows of granite and marble headstones, a rolling monument to the lasting power of death.

He thought of Marian. As much as she appreciated history and looking at old headstones, she didn't want to go through eternity as a corpse in a wooden box slowly rotting under six feet of perfectly good soil. So, he'd had her cremated and, along with their son and daughter and three grandchildren, scattered her ashes in a secluded area of her favorite park. That had been a good day, one of the last good days he could remember.

Once again, he shook the memories from his head. Marian's dead and I'm not. Time to get on with the business of living. With that thought prodding him, he walked toward the nearest weathered stone mausoleum. After he read the name he didn't recognize and wouldn't remember thirty seconds later, he moved on, aimlessly picking his way through the grave markers while beads of sweat formed on his smooth, pale forehead and began to drip down his face. He wiped away the moisture with his handkerchief and remembered that he'd left his hat on the bus—just an old ball cap that Connor had given him for Christmas when the boy was still in grade school. But it was comfortable and effective in keeping the sun out of his eyes.

With sudden determination to retrieve the hat, he turned toward the parking lot. When he reached the edge of the asphalt, he noticed that the bus's door was open and someone appeared to be moving around inside. He smiled, thinking that he wasn't the only one who had tired of the cemetery. Maybe he would finally make a friend, form a bond with someone who was apparently just as lonely and bored as he was.

However, as he approached the door, he could see that the person in the bus wasn't one of the pilgrims. Nor was it the tour guide or the driver. He stopped short, sensing danger. Forgetting all about the hat, he started to turn away.

Then, for a brief instant, he was a nineteen-year-old kid six thousand miles away from home, cleaning his M16 in preparation for the invasion of the Central Highlands of Vietnam in the spring of 1967. He had been scared every minute since he had gotten off the plane two months before until he resolved not to be, realizing that fear in the face of danger you can't avoid is counterproductive. He had

survived that encounter unscathed and had since reduced it to the status of an adventure he had no desire to repeat.

At seventy-three, he was no longer that nineteen-year-old kid. But he still understood fear; he had seen it in Marian's eyes as she neared the end. Now he was a man who, like that nineteen-year-old, knew how to exchange fear for adventure. He squared his shoulders and steadied his hands, ready for anything, including the possibility of death, perhaps just another adventure awaiting him.

Thus resolved, he stepped aboard the bus and watched a young man wearing faded jeans and a black tee shirt reach into a canvas handbag one of the pilgrims had left in her seat. Steve took a deep breath. "What are you doing?" he asked in a voice calm enough to mask his anxiety.

The young man looked up, his eyes wide. The bag slipped from his fingers and dropped onto the seat with a thud. He glared at Steve like a cornered animal. "You're on the wrong fuckin' bus, old man," he shouted. "You need to get the fuck off right now and walk away."

Steve thought of Marian, how he had promised to protect her. He had fulfilled that promise to the best of his ability, protecting her from everything but herself and time. He thought about how much he wanted to be with her. "You're the one on the wrong bus," he said. "Put back whatever you've stolen and get off now before I call the police." His eyes never leaving the young man, he reached for his cell phone.

The young man thrust his hand into his front pocket, pulled out a knife, and extended the blade. "You touch that phone and I'll fuck you up, old man. Now, get the fuck off and walk away while you still can."

Steve looked down at his hand, somewhat surprised that it was steady. He looked again at the young man and saw the fear and uncertainty in his eyes. Steve felt good for the first time in more than a year; he felt alive. He took his cell phone from the belt holder. "Do what you have to do, kid," he said. He punched 911 and held the phone up to his ear, his eyes never leaving the knife blade.

"Shit!" the young man exclaimed as he listened to Steve calmly tell the 911 operator that he had confronted a thief on his bus parked at the Lawnview Cemetery. "Shit," the young man repeated. "I ain't no killer."

“Good to know,” Steve said right after he ended the 911 call. He managed a small smile as he remembered saying I’m no killer over and over again while simultaneously pulling the trigger on his rifle as fast as he could, sending round after round into the bush, shooting at small thin shadows that were supposed to be North Vietnamese soldiers. Of the more than seven hundred bodies they counted after the battle, he didn’t think he had shot any of them. Or at least that’s what he told himself.

Still, when his unit returned to its home base, he requested a transfer and was subsequently assigned to guard duty at a weapons depot outside of Saigon. He never fired his rifle again. He was no killer.

For a long moment, Steve and the young man stood where they were as though frozen in place, each waiting for the other to make a move. The knife loosened in the young man’s trembling hand and the blade drooped downward toward the floor.

“Look, kid,” Steve began, now sensing that he had the upper hand. The danger had all but passed. “The police are on their way. Drop what you’re carrying and get out of here while you still can. I won’t try to stop you.”

He nearly laughed at the irony contained in that statement—an old and unarmed man ‘allowing’ a much younger man armed with a knife to escape. The whole idea of it was ridiculous.

But apparently the irony was lost on Steve’s young adversary. He let go of the knife; it dropped to the floor with a clatter and came to rest on its side. He looked helplessly at Steve. “I didn’t take nothin’. Not much here worth taking.”

Steve nodded and took a step backward toward the driver’s seat, allowing a clear path to the door. Warily, the young man moved toward the exit. “Tell me you got a gun or something,” he said as he passed the older man.

Steve didn’t answer him. Rather, he was momentarily distracted by the sound of a siren heading in their direction. “You better hurry.”

The would-be thief gave Steve one last look then jumped out the door and into the sunshine just as a police car approached the parking lot. Steve watched him sprint into the cemetery and disappear like a wisp of smoke.

Steve's legs crumpled as though they had carried a thousand pounds up a mountain, and he slumped into the driver's seat. He began to pant; he could feel his heart pound in his chest as though it would rip a hole in his sternum. In his mind, he could hear Marian's voice. She was calling him a hero and a fool at the same time.

He closed his eyes and let everything around him fade away. He tried to imagine Marian's face, her body, her smell, the feel of her small hand on his cheek. Instead, he got her scolding voice saying, "Wake up. It isn't your time yet. It isn't your time."

Never one to go against his wife when she used that voice, he opened his eyes in time to see a grim-faced police officer approach the bus, his automatic held tightly in his right hand. Another officer, also with gun drawn, began to circle the bus. In the distance, the young tour guide was walking rapidly, fear and uncertainty clouding his features.

Steve smiled, took a deep breath and tried to think of what he was going to say about this encounter, this adventure, when faced with the inevitable questions. His stomach growled, and he thought about lunch at the Demeter Tavern. This time he just might order the half-pound hamburger cooked the old-fashioned way. He had already determined that this would definitely not be his last pilgrimage with the East Covington Senior Center. Maybe next trip he would sit up front with the widows.