

He felt nothing. No anger, no bitterness, no guilt.

Just numb.

As he looked at nothing out the back window of his dad's Toyota Corolla, no thoughts went through Henry's head. He just blindly watched the trees whirl past the moving car that only went 40 MPH. It never dared go anything but under the speed limit.

Henry could hear his mother quietly sobbing to herself in the front seat. Every so often he would catch the slight motion of a tissue dabbing at her right eye, away from the peripheral vision of his father who would never approve of any emotion in his presence. Not that his father would notice anyway -- nothing diverted his focus on the road ahead. "Never take chances," his father always advised.

Looking back out the window, Henry couldn't help but wonder if other sons who were an only child felt this exact same non-emotional detachment to the situation. Maybe there were other males just like him. He couldn't be alone, although he certainly felt as if he was.

"Are you okay back there, Henry?" his mother asked softly. She turned around slightly on the front seat, dutifully two feet away from his father.

It was obvious she had been crying -- she never left the house without her makeup and lipstick applied perfectly. Her red eyes must have given her secret crying away.

"Yeah. I'm okay, Mom." He gently placed his hand on hers and felt the soft, white glove she so often wore when the family went out of the house for any reason. He started to remove her glove so he could touch her hand just one more time, but she instinctively pulled back. She didn't remove the hand too far, but just enough to protect her aging hand from daylight.

With a slight, awkward smile, she turned back around in her seat and looked straight ahead, just like she had done every time Henry could remember.

He actually started to feel sorry for her. She and Henry were a lot alike -- they had the same smiles, the same wry sense of humor, the same mannerisms. The same fear of his father.

It wasn't as if his father was a monster -- far from it. He was a military man and spent countless extra hours providing food and shelter for the family. He was a hard worker, a man's man. Steady as a rock, no matter how he felt that day, his father would get up at 4:30 am and methodically do his 150 sit-ups, 100 push-ups (military style, of course), and then jog his five mile casual run.

All before breakfast.

Grabbing his black coffee ("Anything other than black coffee will make you weak"), he rushed out of the door carrying his tired briefcase that Henry never saw him open once at home.

He didn't despise his father, actually. In a sense, like any son, Henry admired him. Every boy wants to please his father and to grow up to be like him, no matter how they turn out. It's as if the son has something to prove that he is worthy of the father's attention. Henry had no idea where the notion came from, and he wasn't exactly sure how to please his father, but he never stopped trying.

The Toyota pulled silently into the parking lot and nobody got out. Henry could see his father's glance in the rear view mirror, as if his father's eyes begged him and encouraged him to make the right choice. Henry wasn't sure he was making the right choice, but like so many decisions before, his father was very persuasive.

The father thrust open his door and stepped out while his mother never moved a muscle. Henry's door swung open and he looked up to see his father standing proudly in the glistening sun.

"C'mon son. You mustn't keep them waiting." More advice, he thought.

Henry stepped out of the car and glanced over at his mother who still hadn't moved. He so desperately wanted to give her a huge hug and comfort her, something his father hadn't done in years. "I love you, Momma, and everything will be just fine. I'll survive and I'll make it," he yearned to say, just to get her to stop worrying, something she always did.

But he couldn't. The words hung onto the tip of his tongue for dear life, but he just couldn't muster the courage to say them. He had to say something.

Hopefully, he won't regret that later.

"Let's go, Alice," his father barked. He methodically pivoted on his good leg and started leading the non-following group toward the drab, non-descript building. Like many times before, he walked off with no one behind him.

"C'mon, Mom," Henry half-heartedly mustered. "We can't take any chances." And before he could stop himself, he blurted out, "We mustn't keep them waiting." Just like Dad.

He reached out his hand and noticed that his mother's eyes were puffy. No matter how much you try and conceal your crying, the body always gives you away. Henry felt awful. He never meant to put his mom through this. It wasn't anything she had done or could have done to prevented it. By not standing up to his father, he hurt his mother. Time and time again.

His mother wiped her tears one more time and grabbed his hand. "We have got to go, Alice!" he heard his father yell across the parking lot. Henry did not want his dad walking back to get him. No one wanted Dad to come back for them.

"Please don't do this, Son. You're all I've got. Please don't go." His mother's red tear-stained, puppy-dog eyes searched for the boy's soul, desperately looking for any hope of

changing his mind. It was as if her mind sent messages to his brain, willing him to change and say no to his father.

It's going to be alright, his mind whispered back to her brain, but her ears never heard them.

He helped her limp body out of the car and dragged her more than walked with her. Her crying became much more pronounced. "Please don't do this..." was all she could muster all the way to the door where his father stood at attention.

The Army recruiter's door closed firmly behind them.

The mother plopped down in the corner chair as his father marched up to the recruiter's desk with a mission. Henry stood there, in the middle of the drab, colorless room and only heard sounds. He heard whimpering coming from a corner of the room and a deep, firm voice from the other side. Everything was surreal -- no emotions, thoughts or movements entered him. Memories began swirling around and voices began blending into a vortex, making no sense at all.

"Come over here, Son. I want you to meet Sergeant Harrison." *He called me son. I haven't heard that in years*, Henry thought. "Come on. He won't bite," his father chuckled as he gave a quick glance toward Sergeant Harrison who gave a half-hearted smirk back.

Henry trudged over toward the desk and tall, muscular behemoth stood proudly over his clean and brightly polished desk. The man extended his hand and gave Henry a gripping handshake that hurt him. To say it was firm would be a gross misunderstanding.

"I'm Sergeant Harrison. What's your name, Son?" *Why is everyone calling me Son?*

"Henry, sir." Henry pulled back his hand and discreetly rubbed the pain out of it.

"A fine boy, Sergeant," he thought he heard his father say. "He's growing up to be a good man and I couldn't be more proud of him."

"That's fantastic! We're always looking for a few good men," Sergeant Harrison said. "Isn't that what the Marines say?" his father retorted, giving another chuckle.

As the two men exchanged awkward laughs, Henry basked in the surreal movie he felt like he was watching. This couldn't be him -- it was an out-of-body experience. A proud father, a crying heap of a mother, and a man twice Henry's size looking down at him as if he was sizing him up for dinner.

*Cannot be real.*

His mother's crying became more uncontrollable and she didn't even resemble Henry's beautiful mother anymore.

"Stop your crying, Alice. He's going off to serve his country. We've already discussed this. I told you he needed direction, just like I did when I was his age, and look at me now." This did nothing to stop his mother's crying.

His father wheeled around to Henry and put both of his hands on Henry's shoulders. "Now listen to me, Son," his father began firmly. "I'm very proud of you for deciding to do this. I know it wasn't an easy decision for you, what with how close you are to your mother and all, but we both know this is the best thing for you. I served my country proudly, as did my father and my grandfather. We all enlisted in the military because we love this country. I didn't raise a coward and I know your grandfather and great-grandfather are smiling down on you right now as I'm sure they are proud of you as well." And with that small speech, his father did something he never saw him do in Henry's eighteen years of life.

He saluted him with as much gusto as if Henry were the President of the United States.

Surreal.

The proud look in his father's eyes was something Henry had yearned for all of his life. Caught up in the moment, Henry saluted his father back awkwardly and Henry felt proud of himself. He finally did something that made his father recognize his worth.

Henry couldn't look at his mother because he knew she was the antithesis of proud of him. That's the way it was in his house, who did you want to make proud today? Today was his father's day, I guess.

Sergeant Harrison, unfazed by this show of awkward patriotism, pushed a paper across the desk with an Army pen toward Henry. "If you'll sign here, Son, we can get you started on your new life as an Army man. We are proud to have you with us."

Pausing for a moment to take this all in, Henry blinced moved toward the desk. "I just have one question, sir, if I may." Henry wasn't sure where that courage came from, but he thought he had an idea.

His father lowered his salute, shocked that his son would embarrass him like this. He went through a lot of trouble to set this up and he was determined to not allow Henry to get out of this. Henry needed this opportunity to straighten his life and get it back on track after slacking in school and socially. Even Sergeant Harrison seemed a little taken aback by this demonstration of rebellion.

Henry gathered himself and looked straight at the sergeant. "What are the chances I could die in a war?"

The question was more for his mother than for himself. In the weeks leading up to this, it was all his mother talked about, lamenting that her son would die and she was her baby. She struggled to get him out of his father's firm grip of enlisting and soon she gave up, even un-

characteristically neglected to talk to him the past few days. She could not bear to lose another family member to some senseless action that "proved" he was a man, like her brother.

Henry took a quick glance toward his mother in the hopes that she heard him at least ask the question, but she still held her head in her hands in despair.

"Henry," his father stammered, "I'm sure Sergeant Harrison is very busy and doesn't have time for fool..."

"There's always a chance that you could be called into duty to protect your country, " Sergeant Harrison interrupted, "but there's no war going on right now, Son, and besides, everyone is at peace in the world." Henry didn't quite feel at ease with that answer.

"So, what your saying is I possibly could die in war," Henry muttered.

"You're not going to die," his father dismissed him. "God, you're starting to sound like your mother, always jumping to conclusions. He didn't say anything about dying..."

Sergeant Harrison knew that if he didn't sign this kid, his superior officers would be on his case about his low quotas these past few months. He couldn't afford another transfer.

He tried the honest approach. "Son," he began, "I'm not going to lie to you and say that there is no chance of you getting called to war. There is. However," he emphasized, " the chances of that are barely on the radar. You've got a chance to make your family proud and grow up to be a man. You're eighteen and it's time for you to do this for yourself. Not for your father, your mother, all your girlfriends, your friends or your teachers. But for you." He glanced at Henry's mother. "We will take very good care of you and will never let anything happen to you," he promised.

With that, the sergeant saluted him and his father joined in as he evidently loved to do.

Henry stared at the paper on the sergeant's desk. Overcome with the sense of making his father and this stranger proud of him, yet apprehensive because he didn't believe the sergeant, Henry scribbled his name on the paper and gave the pen back to the man.

"Congratulations, Soldier. You've just become a man. Your country is very proud of you." And with that, the sergeant saluted him again, although his father had not stopped his salute the entire time.

"Here's your pen back, sir," Henry meekly offered.

"You can keep it, Son. It's one of the many things the army will provide you with." His father slapped him proudly on the back as if he had just won the Super Bowl or hit a home run in the World Series.

His mother just continued crying in the corner.

As Henry turned away from staring at his mother, frozen, he glimpsed his father and Sergeant Harrison watching him intently, as if they were concocting something together. Fear coursed through his veins.

“When do you want to start, son?” The thought of actually going somewhere and actually doing something and actually leaving his parents’ comfortable house stunned him. Up until this very real moment, he intended on riding in his parents’ car and heading off to catch a movie.

“Uh, I don’t know. I mean, I have to, uh, well, I was hoping, uh...” Henry stammered.

Like always, his dad stepped in. “He can go right away. He’s ready.”

“Great!” the sergeant interjected. “Report to this address tomorrow and bring your driver’s license, Social Security card, and birth certificate. If you’ve had any childhood medical problems, bring your medical records. Wear comfortable clothing and nothing with profanity or offensive wording or pictures on them. Get a good night’s sleep tonight and don’t bring anything valuable – headphones, watches, jewelry or excessive cash. Report on time...” The sergeant’s voice trailed off in a panic, unbeknownst to Henry.

He had long ago faded out. His brain shut down.

He didn’t even notice his father clutching his chest from a stroke and then crashing down to the worn-down tiled floor or the sergeant administering CPR frantically to the lifeless body.

All he saw were red lights whirling around his head, spinning out of control.

Henry glanced over in his mother’s direction and watched her sitting frozen with apathy, still staring at the floor. Through the noise and chaos, he studied her expression – her only expression -- trying to decipher what she was feeling.

Her crying had stopped. Henry suddenly just felt...numb.