

A Time for Charity

Don Deveau

Prologue

Dear Mona,

I hate it here—but not everything. The country is the most beautiful I have ever seen. And the people have such a spirit. The destruction and death that they have lived with has been going on for generations. There is no one who has not lost someone, and many have lost their entire families. Yet it seems that nothing in heaven or on earth could kill the spirit of these people. I believe that we are fighting a war that we cannot win. Most of us grunts over here feel about the same way. We go where they tell us and do what we are told, but most of the time we have no idea about what's going on. Half the time we're not even sure who the enemy is. The other half of the time, they are long gone before we arrive, like they know our every move. The catchword here is CYA—cover your ass. There is only one real objective—to get out of this place alive—to get back home hopefully in one piece. But we all know that nothing will ever be the same. I'll never be able to watch a John Wayne movie again. What's happening in country is nothing like you ever saw on the big screen. But don't believe everything you hear. We're not all freaked-out crazies running around killing babies.

Anyway, enough about that stuff. It's really crazy how things happen. You wake up in the morning and you never know what the world is going to send your way. It still seems like only yesterday when I think about waking up next to you in the Mustang. What a night that was. As I climbed aboard the bus that took me to Fort Benning, I thought that my head was going to explode. My last night of freedom and what a drunk! It would have been totally wasted except for you. It was nice of Rita to provide you with an alibi for your parents. And I'll never tell anyone the difference!

The shoulder is still tender. They said I was lucky that the bullet went clean through. Hitting my head on that rock as I fell probably did more damage. I still can't believe that I'll be coming home soon. I might even make it in time for David's birthday, but don't tell him. I want it to be a surprise. I really miss him. I hope that he gets into college because if he doesn't... well, you know him... the army is going to totally freak him out. I really don't think that he would be able to survive the freakin' haircut. Know what I mean?

I'll have to close soon. We're supposed to be moving out within the hour. (I can't say where—just in case this letter falls into enemy hands—ha ha). I miss you and the old hometown. I can't wait to see you again. Before you know it, we'll be cruising down the road once again. I hear that the “Golden Arches” have a new location over in Hartford. That will have to be our first date when I get home. Unless you just want to spend a “quiet night” under the stars up near Tom Clancy's Rock, of course. (I know—wishful thinking, but you can't blame a guy for trying, right?).

Anyway, you'll be seeing me before you know it. So, save the last dance—and those sexy long legs of yours—for me.

Signing off for now,
All my love,
Ellis

Part I

Chapter 1

David

For me, the day the music died had nothing to do with Buddy Holly or even music. It was late summer, 1969, my life was in the bottom of the ninth with two outs. Not only was there no way to win, I didn't have the energy to go up to bat just one more time. And I felt completely out of my league. It was my nineteenth birthday, and my first present arrived in the morning mail, the rejection letter from NYU, regrettably informing me that my SATs fell just slightly below their acceptable standards. If I should apply the following year, I may be considered within the "guidelines for mature students." Like I would still be alive in a year. New York University was my last hope, and I threw the letter on top of the dozen or so others bearing the same bad news.

My second birthday gift of the day was a telephone call from Joey Fowler, a neighbor and friend of my brother Andy. They were about the same age, a couple of years younger than me. It was unusual for Joey to ask for me on the phone, and I already had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach even before I heard the cracking voice, as he related the news that I didn't want to hear. The telegram to the Fowler residence from the U.S. Government was short and to the point. However, it made no mention that Ellis Fowler, PFC, killed in action, was the only brother of one Joseph Fowler, or the best friend in the entire universe to one David Next-in-line-for-Vietnam. It also neglected to note that the said recently-deceased was perhaps the coolest, most thoughtful and gentlest life-loving teenager to have ever come from any Smalltown, USA—only to be used as fodder in some megalomaniac's war machine 10,000 miles away. My anger knew no limits, but the tears just would not stop.

Since all good (and bad) things seem to always come in three's, it was really no surprise when I received my third gift of the day, in the early afternoon. At least she had the courage or grace to come by in person. Since receiving the news of *my* friend's death, I was not fit for company anyway, but I still felt grateful when Susan arrived. Preoccupied, I was totally unaware of her own state of agitation. Everything had taken on a quality of unreality, so when she patiently explained that she was leaving me for another guy, after three years as my steady girl, I could only answer her with, "How can you leave me for Freddie the Fruit?"

Believing that I was being obnoxious with jealousy, Susan stormed away, slamming the screen door behind her. She had no idea that in fact I was not trying to be facetious at all. For all his good looks, his charm, and his father's money, Freddie really was a flaming fag, and only he and Susan were ignorant of the fact. Angrier than ever, but the tears seemed to have no limits this time.

In a strange kind of way, watching Susan's departing back, I felt relieved. "One less loose end," was the thought that popped into my head. Thinking back, I can now see that I had already made a decision before I was even aware of it. "May you and Freddie live happily ever after," I whispered through my tears. My next thought brought the entire day into sharp focus: the day after tomorrow, Monday morning bright and early, I had an appointment with Uncle Sam, with my draft notice in hand. I went inside to look for Mom.

She wasn't home of course. I had forgotten that Saturdays and Monday nights were reserved for her "Single Abandoned Deserted Mothers Club," better known as "SadMoms." Since Dad ran off nearly ten years before, she had joined more organizations than is humanly possible to keep track of, and SadMoms was her favorite, her being the founding member and chairperson. This was in addition to her career as a real estate agent, since "someone has to feed this family." If Andy and I had not become such experts at using a can opener, this family would seldom have got fed. So it was no surprise to find that Mom was absent on this particular Saturday in August. Neither was it the first birthday that had somehow slipped her mind. Oh, well.

I was stuffing some things into my old army surplus duffel bag when Andy quietly entered my bedroom.

"Always sneaking up on me," I chided, continuing to empty my dresser drawers into the bag: faded t-shirts, underwear, faded and patched jeans. I hadn't really noticed before, but he filled the doorframe. He must have taken a growth spurt this summer, while no one was looking. He had that look on his face that never failed to remind me of Dad. There was a kind of uncompromising hardness in the set of his jaw, an accusing look in his eyes, that otherwise gave no hint about what he might be feeling. Although we resemble each other somewhat, Andy didn't inherit any of the softness of Mom that might otherwise have kept *him* from looking so old before his time. Andy and I are different in many ways. He is tough, not just in the way he impresses the world, but tough on the inside. Although he was only five when Dad left us, I never once remember him crying... and not just about that but about anything, no matter what... ever.

"You're leaving, aren't you, Davey. You're running away, just like *him*." It was a statement, spoken evenly and matter-of-factly, which also carried with it the unspoken: "Isn't that just like you."

I couldn't look him in the eyes, as I responded over my shoulder with, "Road trip."

"What about Susan?" he asked in the same even tone.

"She just informed me that she prefers the company of Freddie the Fruit," I replied, continuing to pack.

"What about the Fowlers? You and Ellis were like brothers, and..."

I cut him off before he could continue. "Don't you think I know that?" I replied icily. "Give them my condolences, okay?"

Unperturbed, he pressed on. "And Mom, should I give her your condolences as well?"

I slowly straightened up, turning around to face him for the first time. "No," I said, controlling my voice as best I could, "Just thank her from me for the swell birthday party, okay?"

"What about me?" he whispered.

For the first time in my memory of our lives together I saw Andy as something more, and perhaps less as well, than my little brother, the "iceman." He seemed to be offering me a once-in-a-lifetime chance to glimpse beyond the armor which shields him from the outside world, and to see the soft and vulnerable parts within, the parts of him which make the armor necessary. Even the hard lines of his face softened at that moment, and I was reminded of the little boy he once was, in those good days before... It was as if he was offering me a reluctant gift too hard to give and just as difficult to receive... and too late as well. It was the only worthwhile gift presented to me on this birthday that I might always remember as the one to forget.

Whether I was just too dull, too self-absorbed, or simply preoccupied with the half-formed plan I had set in motion—to borrow a phrase from the space boys at NASA—I missed

my window of opportunity. Perhaps under different circumstances, I might have recognized that Andy was trying to offer me an alternative to my plan of flight.

At any rate, in my mind I was already gone, and all I could say was, "I guess you'll be the man of the house now."

I could see the cold armor restored in the hard line of his jaw once again, any sign of softness vanished from his face. "Keep in touch," was all he said, as he turned on his heel, and fled from my doorway.

I finished packing. In the garage I found the old Coleman camp stove, covered in a ten-year layer of dust, since we had not gone camping since Dad left. The cooler had been used a few times since, but not often enough to be missed. I then raided the fridge and the cupboards: canned beans, instant soup mixes, macaroni & cheese dinner, hotdogs, and sardines. I remembered the can opener at the last minute. Finally I retrieved the ancient Maxwell House coffee tin, tucked in behind the unused cookie jar on a top shelf of the food cupboard... Mom's stash. It contained mostly fives and tens and a few twenties. I carefully removed three tens and four fives, and just as carefully replaced the coffee tin, after inserting the pieces of my torn up draft card among the remaining bills.

Although I knew that I would not be missed for a while, the money certainly would be. I kept thinking that I should be feeling guilty or something, but the truth of the matter is, I didn't feel anything... except perhaps a slight foreboding of what might lay ahead of me. As I loaded everything into my old VW van, the only nagging complaint in the back of my mind was Andy. I should have said something more to him. I should have let him know somehow that I had no choice, that I wasn't really like Dad... that I loved him. As I pulled out of the driveway and headed for the Interstate however, I remembered the look on his face and I experienced one of those rare insights, a blessing or a curse, it's never clear at the time, and I thought, "I never meant to be like *him*." Speeding up the street, tears once again blurring my vision, I had the feeling that Andy was the one loose end that might someday unravel me.