

# Daniel Bradshaw

# Missing the War

**“H**ey, sport! Let’s go!” George motioned toward the back door with the football he held. “Let’s see if you’ve still got that varsity quarterback arm.”

John gave his mother Donna a glance, begging for an excuse to stay in the house. She gave him a light nudge toward the door with a grin on her face.

“Go ahead. You can do it.”

John Parker didn’t feel right being at home again. He’d left for the Vietnam War a week following his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. Now, one year later, he found himself in the backyard playing catch with his father. He couldn’t even remember the trip home.

The back yard wasn’t very long but decent enough for tossing the football around. Donna stood just inside the screen door watching the father and son

team she’d feared would never be together again.

“Let’s try some warm-up tosses.”

George threw a loose spiral at John’s chest. His young hands received the impact, and he turned the ball, finding the stitching on its front. He gave a slight grunt as he released the pigskin. The spiral of the ball was tight and precise, just like back in high school. It hit its mark squarely on George’s chest.

“You’ve still got it,” George chuckled as he motioned for his son to come closer. “Okay, time to run some routes. How about a basic post pattern?”

“Dad, there’s something we need to talk about,” John said in a low tone.

“Well, you can talk and catch at the same time, can’t ya?” George replied, playfully punching John in the arm. “Post

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pattern on three. . . set. . . hut. . . hut.  
". HIKE!"

John bolted across the yard as he was commanded, his lungs filling with the cool fall air. He cut to his right, looking back for the ball to be thrown when his feet came out from beneath him. John fell hard to the ground.

*"Parker! I'm going over top! Cover me!"*

*John opened his eyes and looked around. He was lying against a trench wall. A machine gun sat in the mud beside him.*

*"Parker! Give me some cover, dammit!"*

*John obeyed the voice and grabbed for the gun. He turned over the trench, pulling the trigger back. His body shook with his weapon as is sprayed bullets not really aimed anywhere. John fell back down against the trench wall, trying to reload. His grimy hands shook as he positioned the new magazine and locked it into place. It was hard to keep his footing on the jungle floor, and his head was ringing from the explosions and gunfire that seemed to get closer and closer. John didn't dare pray for silence. Everyone always told him, "you never hear the one that gets ya." Between the explosions he heard the cries for mothers, for fathers, for God, for death. He looked across the field to put faces with the cries. Hutchinson and Smith were either dead, or close enough. John wasn't about to join them in their status. Just as he raised himself to the top of the barricade he heard the closest explosion yet. His eyes burned with a flash of yellow and white, and he fell to the ground clutching his face.*

*"Johnny! Johnny! It's ok!"*

The back yard. George was on the ground, holding his son's arms.

*"It's alright, son. You're home now. It's all over. It's all over."*

Donna stood beside her son, fighting back tears as George helped John up from the grass. John stared into his eyes as if he didn't recognize his own father and pulled away from George's hands, storming into the house without a word. He could hear the screen door slam behind him as he made his way into the bathroom. The water was cold as John splashed his face and looked to the mirror. He searched his own wide brown eyes trying to decide what was happening to him. John pulled the hand towel from its usual place and dried the drops of water and sweat from his face. He hurried down the hall and into his bedroom. Not even bothering to turn on the light he threw himself onto his bed and pulled the familiar pillow over his head.

The whole house smelled of ham and sweet potatoes when John woke up and came out of his room that evening. Nobody in the house had spoken a word since the back yard, and the silence was unbearable at the dinner table. The scratching of fork and knife against the plates seemed to echo in the small dining room.

"So, what is it you wanted to talk about?" George broke the silence.

"Huh?" John asked, not looking up from his nearly empty plate.

"In the yard you said we needed to talk. About what?"

"I'll go ahead and clear the table," Donna said, stacking the empty plates and silverware. George put his elbows where his plate had been and leaned forward, waiting for a reply from John.

"Okay," John sighed. "Dad. . ." *Crash!* The plates fell from Donna's hands to the hardwood floor.

*"Ambush! It's an ambush! Get down, Parker!"*

*John dove under the green folding table, trying to take in his surroundings. The ground was covered with half-eaten rations and tin plates. Gunfire, sirens, men running and screaming orders. Bill Stevens ducked into the tent behind them and returned with a couple of guns and grenades that he dropped in a pile on the ground. John helped some other soldiers flip the table on its side like a barricade and scrambled for the small stockpile of weapons. He pulled the pin on one of the grenades and heaved it over the edge of the table into the direction of the gunfire. It didn't seem to help at all. Stevens jumped up from behind the table and opened fire, screaming and cursing at the enemy until his voice gave out and was merely emitting a high-pitched squeal. When his bullets ran out he reached to his belt for a grenade. The left side of his chest burst open with three or five bullet holes, and Stevens fell limp to the dirt, his hand still clenching at his belt. John crawled over to Stevens' body and grabbed his hand.*

*"I'm right here, Bill. Can you hear my voice? Squeeze my hand if you can hear me, Bill."*

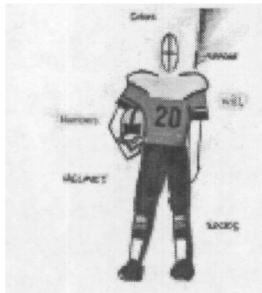
*John felt a slight pressure from a few of Bill's fingers. They twitched a little and then slowly released their grip.*

*"You're gonna be just fine. We're both gonna go home soon. Our lives aren't over yet! Don't leave me here alone!"*

*Bill didn't listen. His blue eyes stared upward in a fixed position and his breathing slowed to a complete stop.*

*"Johnny, can you hear me? Johnny?"* George stood over his son once again. John looked around at the disheveled dining room. The oak table was on its side and food covered the floor. A chair was lying in John's arms and tears ran down his cheeks. He could hear his mother trying to hide her own sobbing in the kitchen. John got up from the floor and helped his father lift the table upright.

Late that night, John sat on his bed, absorbing the surroundings of his room.



It hadn't changed since the day he left it a year ago. The football trophies stood on his dresser with the small bronze figurines on top in a frozen state of motion; his high school diploma hung in its black frame over his desk. Below it, pictures from

homecomings and proms with girlfriends he'd kept for maybe a month or two each. Those were times he'd suffered through, not knowing himself yet. Not sure of what he wanted. He knew very well what he wanted now. Telling his father what he wanted was the difficult part. His father, the proudest man John had ever known. How could he bear telling him how he felt? It would crush him. He'd never speak to him again, probably put him out on the street.

"Your mother said you wanted to talk to me," George interrupted his son's thoughts. John jumped, startled by the intrusion.

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"Sorry, I didn't hear you come in." John got up from the mattress and walked toward his desk at the foot of his bed. He pulled out the thin wooden chair and motioned for George to have a seat. John paced for a moment, wringing his clammy hands together.

"Dad, I learned a lot about life and death during the war. I grew up really fast in some ways and... well... I learned a lot about myself, too."

George leaned forward in the chair intent on hearing every word his son had to say.

"Dad, I'm gay."

John looked to his leaning father's eyes for a response, but found nothing.

"Your mother said you wanted to talk to me," George repeated just as before.

"Don't do this, Dad. I know you heard me. I'm gay. You know that guy Bill that I always wrote home about? Bill Stevens. The man who died in my arms during an ambush? I loved him and he loved me."

"Well, if you're not going to tell me what you want to talk about, I guess I'll go back to watching TV."

"Dammit, Dad! I'm gay! Say something...anything."

George stood up slowly from the chair, his eyes staring at the floor. His voice was quiet but tense.

"And just what am I supposed to say to that? Huh? Do you want me to tell you how proud I am? Ask when the next parade is gonna be?"

"Tell me you love me. Hell, call me a faggot, I don't care! But don't ignore me! I'm still your son!"

His father's face was turning red as he began to push the chair back toward the desk. George kept facing the wall, refusing to look John in the eyes and his tone was no longer quiet, but booming.

"My son left a year ago for the war. My son was a star on the high school football team. My son was a good man who went to church every Sunday and had pride and dignity. My son is still somewhere in Vietnam!"

With that George threw the chair against the wall knocking the prom picture to the floor and breaking a leg of the chair. A splintered piece of the wood rebounded and hit John's right temple.

*"They're everywhere! Parker, get down! Quit daydreaming about home! We're under fire!"*

*John stood again in the jungle of Vietnam hearing that commanding voice. A soldier beside him pulled the pin of a grenade and reeled his arm back to throw but was shot in the process. The live grenade fell from his hand down to the mud, and John turned in vain to avoid the inevitable. He collapsed to the ground repeating to himself..*

*"I'm your son. I'm your son. I'm your son."*

*He never heard the explosion.*