

One Road Home

by Mark Porter

He looks out of the window every few minutes now. The gravel buried driveway snakes to the road beyond the mail box and cars pass in either direction; somewhere at the edge of his vision, chrome and glass glints. The day is already humid. Heat shimmers across the surface of the land and he knows the dog will be hiding beneath the porch, sleeping or panting.

He looks again at his daddy's photograph. He tries to remember what he sounds like in person, in the room. The phone calls have been infrequent. His voice, broken with static and distance has become fractured in his memory. He wants to be lifted by daddy's hands, thrown into the air and caught again. He knows daddy would never let him fall.

Outlined against the sunshine and dust motes, the boy's mother stands in the living room doorway. Her size offers significant clearance between her and the frame. His mother is a small woman but this morning she seems larger, more confident. This morning she wears a perfume that Leon has not noticed in a long time.

"Leon, baby. The wait will be longer if you're sitting there all day watching for the car."

"I know," he says. He wants to help her. He wants to be a good boy and to help with the trimming up. He wants the first glimpse of daddy. He wants everything all at once and above all, he wants to be the one that shouts "He's here! He's here!"

Leon's grandfather sits beside him and his arm pulls the boy close.

"You know, your daddy will be just as excited to see you."

"Do you think so granddad?"

"Son, I'd bet my life on it."

Granddad is a good man. He fills Leon's life with fun and laughter. He makes things, builds dens for him and never runs out of batteries. But Granddad isn't Daddy. He isn't as tall. He can't throw the ball so far.

Leon becomes aware of his mother and her father hugging behind him. He thinks he can hear the sounds of muted crying but he isn't sure who it is coming from. He watches the road. He has to keep watch. Keep guard. He has to let Daddy know that he never left his post.

"Do you think he'll be the same man, dad?" says Leon's mother.

"I think he may need to get his feet under him, Belle. But sure, he'll be the same man."

Leon isn't sure what they are talking about. Adults have a way of speaking all around the point and saying nothing directly. He knows when they don't want him to understand them.

"Granddad?"

"Yes, son?"

"Did my Daddy really kill someone?"

The question occupies the room. No-one present seems to want to touch it. Granddad joins him again on the arm of the chair.

"It's not always good to know whether or not a thing happened, son. Whether your Daddy did or didn't, he's your Daddy and we love him."

"Jesus said it was wrong to kill people."

"Life's not always that straight forward, son."

"Jesus said it's wrong to tell lies."

"Sometimes the truth can be worse than a lie. You'll understand when you get older."

"Do you think he's nearly here?"

"Hard to tell. Tell you what, why don't you do all of us a really big favour and keep watching the track for that car? How's that?"

Leon doesn't respond. He doesn't need anyone to tell him to watch the track. He wonders if his Daddy will seem different, bigger or smaller, whether he will be quieter.

Daddy had sent Leon a calendar with today marked on it.

July 23rd.

Home.

It had been so long ago and Leon had crossed the days off every morning before school, like in the prison movies.

Leon decided to head outside and walk down the path. It was a long way to the road but he didn't mind. He would rouse Bruno and take the dog with him. They spent a lot of time out there and knew all of the best hiding places. By the side of the track and down a steep banking, overgrown with grass and wild flowers, Bruno liked to swim in the stream that ran away from the house. Sometimes he would swim the entire distance and climb out at the road, shaking the water off. Most of the time he would be carrying a stick or part of a branch. Leon usually carried his cap gun and sometimes Bumblebee or Optimus Prime.

The gravel crunched beneath his feet as he walked. He tried not to walk too quickly. He wanted to walk like a real grown up, calm and cool. In no hurry to get anywhere. He tried to pretend that he was just walking for the school bus. That it made no difference how quickly he

got there. High above him, flying into the face of the sun was a plane. It was a small twin engine craft and Leon had seen it many times before. He knew that his Daddy had flown last night. That he was to stop over somewhere and hire a car. He had called and told Leon's mother that the car was red so the boy would know what to look for.

His stomach pulled at him and tied everything inside into tight little knots. He wanted to burp, the lemonade swishing around in his gut made him want to pee. He was worried that a burp might make him throw up.

Bruno came to him and licked his hand, nuzzled his huge brown head into Leon's belly, maybe trying to undo the knots. Leon wondered if his dog was excited or nervous too, if it was possible for him to know that things would be different after today. That they would all be together again.

He couldn't find anything on the radio that made him feel less anxious. The music hit him in the gut. Every song had something to do with love or heartbreak. He thought about Belle. The conversations before he went away. He remembered them lying still in the darkness, trying to hold onto something that would keep them together.

The boy would be six now. He felt like his son was changing so quickly that he might never again know him as he had. Would he still laugh so easily or would he be resentful at his father's absence? Belle had told the kid that his daddy was a hero but all kids think their daddy is a hero at his age. They think that right up until the point he has to go away and leave him there in a half empty house, with no stories or games. The photographs had been a comfort but they had also deepened his sense of separation. Leon was losing his infantile chunkiness. He was slimmer now; freckles camped across the bridge of his nose. He had told his son to be a man and to look after his mother. The boy had cried and held onto his legs and he had hated himself for prying those small fingers apart and offering him to Belle's arms for comfort.

How could he repair the damage? How would Leon look at him after all this time? He was almost as consumed by this question as he was by the questions surrounding Belle.

Their marriage had suffered before the separation. They had seemed so far removed from the young couple taking walks in the darkness just to look at the stars and find an excuse to be together. Money had been tight. Their parents had helped to buy and subsequently repair the old house.

When Leon was born they had fallen into the roles their parents and everyone else in their small town had already mapped out for them. Michael was to be dependable, earn for his family, remain loyal and work hard.

Belle was supposed to shine with motherhood, to take to her new life naturally and to bide her time until another baby, perhaps two, would make their family complete.

Michael had been jarred by the constant hints and suppositions regarding them starting a family when they had first married. Small towns qualify shopkeepers and people in the street to openly discuss family planning with young couples. Leon had still been on the bottle when the same people started to enquire about a brother or a sister for the little guy.

Belle had grown restless. Michael had known she craved something else. She loved her son but she was just twenty when they had married. She needed distractions. She had been forced to grow up and accept responsibility before she was ready. There had been arguments about the division of duty. Belle had spent so much time crying that Michael could scarcely remember what her laughter sounded like anymore.

Michael had grown sullen. He spent time and money at the bar that their already strained marriage could ill afford. When his father-in-law had suggested the army to him, it had seemed like the perfect solution. They would have money and stability. They could rekindle the embers of their earliest time spent together when the only things they cared about were enough money for a good time and finding private places to sleep together.

Michael had left town weighted with bad feeling. He had hit a neighbour over a fence dispute, had hit another man in the bar when he considered his comments about Belle to be out of line. He had never been a violent or possessive man but, he had felt Belle slipping from him and his reaction had been to hold on so tightly that his grip would bruise them both.

“You’re smothering me.”

“You take me for granted.”

And so they went. Clinging on and pulling away.

During those first months apart, Michael had been drawn so deeply into survival that he had rarely given his young family more than fleeting attention. They were on his mind but occupied little space. His energy was taken by getting through the days and nights of slam and scream. Long periods of quiet would be broken all at once by a flashing activity of pure violence. Men died out there. It wasn’t a place to hide behind the fear in your heart.

Michael switches the dial to a sports talk channel. League positions, opinions and statistics. It became background noise against the static of his misgivings. Pulled home by the invisible thread of family and commitment, he was no surer now of his happiness than he had been before. He felt relief more than anything, relief at being alive and at Belle and the boy having got through the time together, unscathed. Somewhere in his thoughts, the sense that mother and son would now have a bond that absence would not allow him to penetrate was growing inside him. Perhaps their small family was smaller now.

Leon failed to notice the car at first. He was sat in the dirt scratching his name into the soil with a stick Bruno had dropped at his feet. His mind had taken him to Tombstone and the

last days of the Old West. Leon was trying to imagine how cowboys would have felt on first seeing cars. Would they have known that their lives would soon change forever, or did they believe their horses could never be replaced?

The low rumble and accompanying dust cloud of the red hatchback caught his attention but so many cars had driven by without slowing and Leon was beginning to think that today must be the wrong day. As the car drew nearer, Leon could make out the wide shoulders and cropped haircut of the driver. When he spotted the camouflage of his daddy's jacket he sprang to his feet and sprinted toward the car. The nerves were gone. The worry forgotten. Daddy was home.

The two of them rode up to the house with Bruno in the back. Leon talked until he felt he might just lose his voice. His daddy wore a patient smile, glancing over here and there and throwing in the odd comment. He told Leon how proud he was of the boy and how surprised he was by how much bigger he had got. He asked how Belle was. Was she pleased he was coming home? Leon had replied that they were the happiest family in the whole town.

As he steps from the car and hoists Leon onto his shoulders, he notices the bunting across the front of the house. 'Welcome Home Michael!'

He pauses in the driveway momentarily to take the house in. It needs some paint here and there and the grass could do with a trim. Other than that, everything is more or less as he remembers. His father-in-law's van is parked by the side of the house. Michael's mother-in-law had passed away whilst he was in Iraq. It would seem strange not seeing Margaret in the house. She had always supported him, always believed in him, even when others had turned their backs. He hadn't had time whilst away to fully process her death and he knew it would hit him hard now he was home. No longer an abstract idea, her absence would be keenly felt. Michael's relationship with death and the grief that it bore had changed in Iraq. He had grown numb to an extent. The expectation of it had been all around him. It carried a smell that hung across streets and marked civilians every bit as much as those on duty. His buddy Julius Cochrane, a good soldier, a better man, had told him that you couldn't wake up fearing possibilities. You had to live each moment with a purpose, stay focussed and never forget who you were. Julius' death had been sudden. War fatalities generally are. He had been ambushed in the Hammam province; he was supposed to be on a scouting detail. The vehicle that had carried him had been hit by a mortar. Julius, twenty-six — the same age as Michael — and with a one year old daughter at home, was gone. Others, less capable, less courageous, lucked out or scraped through. There had been no sense to the selection process.

The door opened and Belle stood smiling, hesitant for a few seconds and then came to him, arms outstretched. She buried her head into his chest and the way she held him was complete, full of feelings he had not detected in too long.

They held each other there like that, not wanting to speak, not wanting to acknowledge the problems that had arisen between them before. For this moment, Michael knew where he needed to be and what was expected of him and he felt at ease with it.

The night passed with a steady stream of well wishers, they drank wine and ate well. Michael read Leon the longest bedtime story he ever had. When the small boy drifted into sleep

as he spoke, he kissed his head, tucked him in and stood back to watch him. His son's world was a small one but his head was full of ideas and dreams that small boys place no limitations to.

Belle asked him how it had been, how the war had changed him, and he replied that he had no idea yet how he was affected, other than to say that he felt guarded and tired.

They held each other into the early light and at last slept for a few hours before Leon crashed into the room and onto the bed between them.

Michael thought about Julius and his daughter and how they would never share another moment like this. He thought about a little girl who would never be able to welcome her Daddy home.