

## HARDEST OF TIMES

By

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Lee thought about leaving a note, but sipping morning coffee, he knew his wife would understand and could explain everything. She seemed to be adjusting well, immersing herself in work, attending church services, interacting with friends in social circles. And their daughter, Francine, was starting to come around too. Increased appetite, improving grades, talk of a senior prom, late night giggles over the phone were all signs of typical teen behavior.

It was him, Lee Ellison, who seemed to be having the hardest of times. Nothing felt right anymore. Sleep was as elusive as grasping a hand full of wind, food always needed more seasoning and he couldn't force himself to laugh even when something was funny. It was as though the world had been knocked off its axis and was now revolving at strange obtuse angles around his life.

At one point the future revolved around plans of retirement and travel, but now had become a long winding road turning back upon itself always ending in the exact same place it began: His son. Thomas, 19 years old, his only son. Nineteen. A tender blade of grass in the morning dew, a young colt discovering the strength in his legs, a new star rising in a galaxy of light. And with each

passing day memory increased with the intensity and frequency of a bright Christmas morning running behind his son on a shiny new bike without training wheels watching him fade into the distance with strength and confidence or those summer Saturdays sitting in the bleachers shading his eyes from the sun while number 32, his son, patrolled centerfield like a 12 year old Willie Mays or sitting besides Thomas on his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday after Sunday supper on deserted back roads instructing him not to engage the clutch too soon when shifting gears. Or being momentarily blinded by flashbulbs in the high school auditorium, his son walking across the stage receiving handshakes and diplomas, the both of them weeping upon one another's neck after caps had been tossed into the air. And there were others. But Lee managed to keep them at bay knowing that he had to get himself together. It would soon be time to go.

Lee thought about pouring himself another cup of coffee, checked his watch instead. Standing before the full length mirror, he laughed aloud at the thought that all he needed was a stiff breeze and somebody somewhere could run him up the nearest flagpole. His brown and white cowboy boots were spit polished and shined, blue jeans freshly starched and creased and as Lee buttoned the next to last button of his red, white and blue shirt, he thought he would fit in as well as anyone.

He examined himself in profile, then facing a frontal reflection, thought it'd be a good idea to practice one more time. He held his cell phone in the air with his left hand as though he were taking a picture, flashed an unctuous smile,

patriotic hand wave with his right hand before reaching it into his back pocket once he got within range. For weeks, ever since he'd heard that the President was coming to Memphis, he'd rehearsed it that way. He set the alarm, locked the door and walked out of his home the way he had always done for as long as he could remember.

Merging onto Interstate 40, it struck Lee that even at nine in the morning it was awful warm for the middle of October. He flipped on the AC, adjusted the radio where Thelonious Monk increased in volume; he accelerated the black Ford pickup to seventy five. Every time Lee heard Monk's music he caught himself smiling in spite of himself, like driving down a steep, winding mountain pass, holding on for dear life to avoid the side of the cliff, but enjoying one hellava ride all the way to the end. And Lee was feeling pretty damn good. A bright clear Indian summer's day, jazz music in stereo and he was going to meet the Commander in Chief. Everything was going to be alright, he told himself setting the vehicle on cruise control and bobbing his head to the saxophone solo of Charlie Rouse.

Its was so easy to get lost between the notes emanating from the trumpet of Art Farmer. The fluidity of Farmer's ideas, roundness of sound and warmth of tone led Lee back to the kitchen table sitting opposite Thomas on a Friday night in November when he was home on a break.

“Dad. I joined the military. Two days ago. I signed up for the Army.”

He felt like he was talking to his son through dense fog and could barely judge the distance of his words, the outline of his face. “Now how you gonna join the Army and go to college too?”

“I quit school . . . feels like I should be doing something else with my life right now.”

Lee grunted, rubbed his chin and allowed his gaze to wander, resting upon a far corner of the room. This was not what he wanted for his son. He wanted Thomas to have a college degree, to be in a position of authority or somebody’s CEO or own his own company or maybe practice law or be a doctor or a senator even. The military is the last thing he wanted for his son. He’d seen too many of his friends who didnt make it back from Vietnam, alive. They put on uniforms for Uncle Sam and Lee chose to do battle with supervisors, union reps and the threat of waking one morning to find the company’s doors padlocked. Seemed like those were the only two legitimate options back then, that and selling dope. But things were different now. Thomas had opportunities he could only have dreamed of when he was his age. But his son was nineteen, had quit school and joined the Army. And it wasnt anything Lee could do about it.

Lee passed a road sign 35 miles from Memphis and a bumper sticker that read: Kansas: There’s no place like home. For Lee home had become the place where on a Saturday morning four weeks ago the doorbell rang and on the other

side were three Army officers in dress uniforms, two white and one black and a Captain Sam somebody stepping forward and introducing himself and asking was he Lee Ellison the father of Private Thomas James Ellison and that he had an important message to deliver from the Secretary of the Army and could he come in and Lee noticed how Captain Sam somebody cleared his throat and took his time preparing for a calm delivery of a speech he'd rehearsed several times and knew by heart and Lee felt the floor give way beneath him before Captain Sam somebody said a word and the walls screamed and the whole house convulsed but it was Katherine lying on the floor behind him and by then Francine came downstairs in her pajamas and fell atop her mother both beseeching God for mercy as Lee stood with his hand on the doorknob with Captain Sam somebody's voice coming through in desultory waves as if Lee had taken a blow to the head or were leagues beneath the sea.

Approaching the city's limits, he maneuvered into the center lane of the expressway, eased off the gas, allowed his pickup to close ranks upon the rear of a late model Cadillac. Charlie Parker was frenetic and blew all the way into the news at the top of the hour.

The President was in town. The Commander in Chief was to meet with the mayor, a press conference to follow. In Memphis Tennessee. That's what the news said. It was 10:01 when Lee came off exit 10B and zoomed toward the

Second Street exit, making his way toward Third and then Adams and on to City Hall on North Main. The nearest parking garage was four blocks away and by the time he exited the pickup and emerged from underground, beads of perspiration covered his face. And the farther Lee walked down Main Street and the closer he got to City Hall, the denser the street became with American flags. It reminded him of the times when he and Katherine visited the beach and how he walked toward the water until it rose past his waist before he dived headlong into it or be overtaken by it. Right now, Lee was in a sea of red, white and blue. Flags on every street pole flapping in the wind. That's where a flag belonged, Lee thought, on a pole and not draped over his son's coffin while a Sargent played Taps on a bugle before the report of a three volley salute and the Honor Guard folding the flag and handing it to he and Katherine with the casing of one of the volleys inside.

The crowd of spectators erupted in an uproar of approval, rousing Lee from a three week old dream. He was later than he thought but right on time. The President was concluding his remarks and as Lee pushed and twisted closer toward the platform, he could hear the same old thing he'd been hearing for the last month about the surge, the surge, the surge and how more troops had to be deployed to sustain the surge. More nineteen year olds to return home with mental disorders, physically disabled or in body bags pulled by horse drawn

carriages. But not if he had anything to do with it.

The President was working the crowd with handshakes, smiles and kisses for small children and Lee was in line 50 feet away and the President was coming his way. He was ready. Somebody had to do something. That congregate of cowards in Congress had promised to make a change, but they were bigger liars than the President. It made no difference who the President was, Lee thought. If he or she were sending nineteen year olds off to die half way around the world for nothing, then someone would have to stop him or her too.

Lee Ellison was ready. With the President five feet away, he smiled bright and wide and held his cell phone over his head. It was just he and President and silence. He could see lips forming words, feet moving and flash bulbs popping and he was sure somewhere a band was playing and he couldn't even hear himself laughing when he reached into his back pocket and stepped between two women and grabbed the wrist of the President's outstretched hand and tried to slap a pair of handcuffs on it.

"Citizen's arrest! Citizens arrest! You're under arrest for the murder of my son . . . for all our sons . . ." In less than a second, men in dark suits and dark glasses removed the President from the crowd and other men in the crowd dressed like regular people grabbed Lee and when he was slammed to the ground he could hear once again: handcuffs clanking to the pavement, shouts of "gun," screams

of panic, stampede of feet, screeching tires and the sound of sirens before everything went black and the world deaf once again.

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