**A Yellow Dress…A Red Bow**

He remembers.

Bits of sunlight rip through the darkness. The smell of freshly cut grass fills his memory. A little girl runs away from him laughing in a bright yellow dress.

A flash of white light and white-hot pain wipes the little girl away.

He wants to reach for his head, but finds that he can’t. His hands and arms are being restrained by something. He struggles to free himself, but the restraints are too tight…too strong.

Where am I, he thinks? He hears laughter again. The little girl comes back…just out of reach. He’s chasing her…he thinks. He can see her better now. He can see that she’s chasing something as well. She turns back, still laughing, and says, “Come on, daddy, he’s getting away!” Taking his eyes off of the little girl, he wonders. His daughter? He’s not sure, but he keeps running.

It feels so good here. It feels so good, he thinks to himself. He keeps running.

Just ahead of the little girl, he sees a small bundle of brown and black fur with a red bow tied around its middle. The puppy lets out little sharp yaps as it runs just out of reach. A few seconds later, it stops suddenly for some unknown puppy reason and tries to get at the red bow with its teeth. The little girl stops and stoops down to help him. She’s laughing even harder as she joins the struggle to remove the bow. It’s infectious. He’s laughing too. He collapses on the grass next to them in exaggerated exhaustion. This feels so good…so right, he thinks again.

White light! White-hot pain!

The little girl is gone again.

He remembers.

Bits of flying metal rip through his body. He doesn’t want to be here. The pain. Where’s the pain, he wonders? He was expecting pain. He remembered pain. The scene rewinds and he watches in a mixture of fascination and horror as the bits of metal rip through him in slow motion, but he doesn’t feel them.

“Where am I?” he yells. People are screaming all around him. Someone’s hurt, he thinks. He tries again to break loose from his restraints.

“Get him stabilized,” a disembodied voice shouts from somewhere behind him! “And keep him still,” the voice adds!

“Where am I?” He asks no one in particular. No one hears him. This is not now, he realizes. It’s the other now…the before now. He feels himself being lifted. This time he feels it coming and braces for it.

White light! White–hot pain!

He remembers.

He feels the warmth of a first kiss on a winter evening, the softness of her lips, the feel of her in his arms, and the view of Manhattan from The Promenade. He didn’t/ doesn’t want to let go. They sit there for hours staring across the water at the skyline, neither of them feeling the cold. He pulls her tighter as the scene starts to change around him. He feels everything slipping from his grasp. The two Towers across the water, the girl, and The Promenade all crumble around him.

He’s crying now as the train starts to move. He can see his mom and the little girl on the platform. They are crying too. The puppy barks excitedly next to them and wags its tail. There are others as well. He can’t quite make out their faces, but he feels the outpouring of emotion. They all wave at the train. They all came to see him off.

He feels guilty about leaving them, especially his mom and the little girl, but he has to. “Oh, God,” he thinks to himself from somewhere deep inside, I have to. And all of his many selves, his many incarnations -the father, the son, and the soldier- agree.

The train picks up speed. All around him, uniformed soldiers settle in for the trip. He watches as the heads of his fellow passengers move in unison with the motions of the train. He wipes his eyes. Marines don’t cry, he thinks to himself. He laughs. It’s a 19 year-old’s sentiment. It’s a young man’s thought. Marines do cry. He takes one last look out of the window.

White light.