

# A Soldier's Tale

*A Monologue*

*by Bob Hammond*

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# A Soldier's Tale

**An old man is sitting alone on a park-type bench. He is muffled up against the cold and clutches a large mug of tea, from which he sips occasionally. He notices the audience. (The part is written with a Northern dialect but it is not essential to the character)**

Oh, 'ello. I often come out here, you know. Nice, ain't it? The house manageress, she's not very keen on it, mind you. Me being out here on me own, that is. Can't think why. Don't know what she thinks I'm gonna do. I mean, it's not like I'll jump off the cliff, now is it? No, my days of doing daft things like that are long gone. I think it's just that she's the worryin' sort. But then, I am her responsibility, I suppose. She's a lovely lass, y'know and she works ever so hard. Rushed off her feet at times, she is. Well, they all are. And if she thinks I'm out 'ere, well, she'll come out, just to make sure I'm OK, like. I tell her she shouldn't, 'cause she should have better things to do than worry 'bout me. But secretly though, I think she likes bein' out 'ere 'cause it gets 'er away from everything for a few minutes. She sits wi' me, quiet and peaceful like and we have a little chat about this and that.

Yeah, I like it out here, y'know. I like seeing the people passing by. You get all sorts, I can tell you. Sometimes they'll stop and have a chat, which is nice. One lady even offered to share her lunch wi' me. **(Laughs.)** P'raps she thought I looked hungry, eh? But I like it best when there's no-one else about, like now. Just me and them big ships out there. I watch 'em, see. They come round the headland and I watch 'em till they disappear in the distance. I always wonder where they're going. Far flung places I expect, wi' dusky maidens and dark alleys where you don't go at night, 'cos you might not see the daytime again, if you get me meaning. I been in a few places like that in my time, I can tell yer. And it were lot more exciting than this place, and that's a fact. Channel View Sheltered Housing project, that's what's it called. It's where I live now, y'know. It's just over there **(indicating off-stage)**. It's not so bad really, I s'pose. I got a tidy little flat wi' a sitting room and a bedroom and a kitchen. Oh, and a bathroom, of course. I do most of me own cookin' although we can go along to dining room if we fancy a bit of company. I do sometimes. You know, I never thought I'd end up living somewhere like this. I dunno where I thought I'd end up, mind you. I mean, it's not something you ever think about much really, is it? It just sort of 'appens, some'ow.

Well, it just sort of 'appened to me. And my old man had a lot to do with it. I don't remember much about him before he went away to the army. I were only little then, y'see, but me Mam says he was a changed man when he came back 'ome. And that's how I remember him. He were what you might call unpredictable. You never knew what mood he were going to be in when he came through that door. Sometimes he were smiling and laughing as if he didn't have a care in the world. They were the good days, they were. Aye, we'd laugh and he'd play with me and me Mam would watch us, with that little worried smile on her face, 'cos you never quite knew when he were going to change. Sometimes, it only took a word and then he'd become a different man – hitting out with his fists and shouting and swearing. Me Mam always tried to protect me. And she'd try to calm him down but he always went for her. Sometimes the bruises lasted for weeks. He'd storm out the door and me Mam would cry and she'd cuddle me and tried to explain what had happened... and why. But it weren't till much later that I really understood.

Anyhow, he'd come back home, sooner or later – smelling of drink or filthy dirty and he'd cry and me Mam would hold him and tell him it were alright. I were too little to know what were going on so I'd cry an'all and she'd hold me and then she'd cry. And we'd all cuddle up and cry together. **(Pause, sigh.)** And I s'pose we hoped it would all get better one day. But it never did.

Y'know, I can still hear him sometimes, even now, after all these years, in the night, when it's quiet, like. See, I'd be asleep in me own little bed and I'd hear his noise through the wall. He'd be shouting and yelling at the top of his voice. I never knew what he were saying. I could only ever make one word. Sorry. He'd say it over and over and over again. He'd be sobbing and I'd hear me Mam trying to soothe him down and eventually it would all go quiet.

Somehow, even though I were little, I knew it weren't right. Me Mam got him to go to Doctors but that weren't much help. He got some pills but they just turned him into a ... zombie. He'd sit for days, doing nuthin', saying nuthin', just mumblin' to himself now and again. And somehow, that were worse than before. Then one day, he stopped taking them pills and everything went back to the way it used to be. The shouting and the swearing, the nightmares, the violence.

Me poor old Mam didn't know what to do for the best. It killed her in the end, y'know. It weren't him, mind you – well, not directly anyhow. No, it were the worry and the uncertainty of it all. She... she just couldn't cope and she sort of... shrivelled up.

I looked after her, best I could. He were bloody useless. Sat around all day, moanin' and mopin', sayin' he were sorry. Lot of bloody good that did. I were fifteen when she died and then it were just him and me. He got violent again after she went. Worse than it were before 'cos me Mam weren't there to calm him down, see. Now I were big for me age at fifteen, so he didn't wallop me like he had done when I were little but he were still bigger than me and what with having been a soldier and all, well, he were pretty tough. So I learnt to keep out of his way, as much as I could, just waiting for the day I were sixteen. That's when I joined the army.

You should have seen him when I told him. He just stood there. Then his face sort of... crumpled and tears started running down his cheeks. He didn't sob or nothin'. He didn't make any sound at all. Weird, it were. Just standing there, looking at me, crying. I didn't know what to do. So I just stood and looked back at him. Then he said "No, son, not that. For your Mam's sake, not that."

Well, I didn't know what he were talking about but to bring me Mam into it after everything he'd put her through, well, that were final straw for me. I let rip. I really let him have it. All the hate and all the anger I'd bottled up for the last ten years just came out. I called him every name I could think of. I blamed him for everything that had happened to us. I accused him of killing me Mam. Of not loving her, not loving me. I used every swear word I knew and he just stood there, saying nothin', tears streaming down his face. When I finally stopped, he still didn't say nothin', so I turned and just walked away. I didn't see him again for nineteen years.

The Army gives you a good life, y'know. It were a bit 'ard for me at the start, trying to find me place an'all and, well, you know, fit in with the other lads. Our corporal were a good bloke though, helped us along, made sure we kept our noses clean, like. And the sergeant, well to me, he were like a father figure. The father I'd never 'ad, I s'pose. He were tough. My God, he were tough but he were fair, and he taught us how to look after ourselves. And we learnt to look out for each other an' all, watch each other's backs, if you know what I mean.

They move you around a lot in the army. Barracks to barracks, country to country. Aye, we did a fair bit of travelling, y'know, we saw a lot of the world. Did a lot, too. Learnt to ski, jumped out of bloody airplanes, climbed mountains, learnt to drive. Anything on wheels, we 'ad a go at. Trucks, lorries, cars, motor bikes. I even got to drive a tank once. Oh yeah, and we swam wi' dolphins as well. I'll always remember that. Bloody magical, that was. We 'ad some grand times, wherever we went. And you pick up some good mates along the way, an'all. Mates you know you can rely on, no matter what. And somehow, in all o'that, I found time to meet a lass. We got married and we had a baby son. And that were the best time ever. I were back in UK when he were born and we managed to find a place near my posting so I could see them both, regular like. They were good times, they were. But like everything else, they didn't last. Just after me little lad were two, we were posted abroad again, but this time, we were sent to fight. Some scrappy, shitty little war that no-one had ever bloody 'eard of. And nothin' were ever the same again.

Borneo. That's where they shipped us out to, bloody Borneo. That place. It were closer to Hell than anyone ever deserves to be, and I don't care who they are. The heat, the fever, the insects, the jungle. **(Pause.)** Nothing prepares you for the jungle. And we were never prepared. Then there were the violence and the killings. We never expected anything like that. They'd never warned us about that. Never seen anything like it. Bloody barbaric, it were. Truly bloody barbaric. Some of the things they did. Well, you'd never believe it. I never believed it till I saw with me own eyes. And you know what? It sorta gets inside you, some'ow. It worms its way down into your brain and one day, it just stops meaning anythin', the killin'. And you think, well, if they're doing that to us, then that's what we're gonna do to them. So we did. We did it right back to 'em. We gave as good as we got. Killed anything that moved, we did. Men, women, young, old... kids. Aye, even kids. And that's where I lost my best mate. We was on patrol, in this so-called safe area and we walked straight into it. Bloody ambush. They knew we were coming, see. Our guide, he'd sold us out, the little bastard. Most of the lads were dead even before we could deploy. My mate were wounded but we couldn't get to him, to save him. I couldn't get to him. They held me back, see. I wanted to get to 'im, I wanted to save 'im, 'cos he were my mate. **(Pause.)** And sometimes, after all these years, I hear him calling out for me. To come and help him. But I couldn't. I just had to listen, listen to them killing him. **(Longer pause.)** I didn't look out for 'im, see, like I were s'posed to. **(Longer, reflective pause.)** We went back, later, to find the bodies and bring 'em home. And I'll never forget what we found. **(Pause as he shakes his head, looks down and wipes his eyes.)** Well, after that - well, I don't know what happened. I think I must have gone crazy. They said I killed and killed and killed and kept on killing but... to me, it were all just a blank. Nothing.

I woke up one day, I were in hospital. They told me that I'd had a breakdown and had gone beserk. Then they said I weren't fit to be in the army no-more and they were going to send me home. And that's just what they did. Gave me a medical discharge and sent me on me way. Just like that. After seventeen years. No "Thank you very much", nothing. They just kicked me out the bloody door.

