

An Inchworm Takes Wing

by

Robert Hays

Copyright 2020 by Robert Hays

All rights reserved. No part of this story may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the publisher, with the exception of brief quotations in a review.

This story is a work of fiction. While some of the historical references may be real, characters and incidents within the story are the product of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to events or persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Thomas-Jacob Publishing, LLC
USA

This book is dedicated to all those whose most fierce demons reside within their own minds.

“Above the world is stretched the sky, no higher than the heart is high.”

—Edna St. Vincent Millay

Table of Contents

1 / I dream
2 / Jan and Doctor Morrison
3 / I'm not important
4 / Marilyn and Bucky
5 / I am
6 / Marilyn and Bucky
7 / I look back
8 / Jan, Kendra, and Marty
9 / I know the shadow world
10 / Kendra and Jan
11 / I wish I could believe
12 / Jan and Phil
13 / I think of Nita
14 / Marilyn and Greg
15 / I remember his words
16 / Jan and Marilyn
17 / I remember my father
18 / Bucky
19 / I saw a cannonball tree
20 / Marty and Jan
21 / I worry too much
22 / Annie
23 / I knew war
24 / Bucky and Annie
25 / I hear the music
26 / Jan
27 / I smell the rot
28 / Sissy
29 / I may be confused
30 / Kendra
31 / I did my duty
32 / Marilyn and Margie
33 / I did the white room
34 / Jan and Doctor Morrison
35 / I hate the world
36 / Marilyn and Bucky
37 / An inchworm takes wing
Other Books by Robert Hays
About the Author

1 / I dream

I JUST HAD A clear vision of paradise. It was not the heaven you learned about in Sunday School, but nonetheless a peaceful world without war and bloodshed and dead children and temptation and wanton betrayal, and there was no hate and no violence and no deceit and no hurtful repercussions. Nita and Bucky and Marilyn and my children and grandchildren and innocents from the war were there, and I looked them all in the eyes without shame and they looked back and smiled and it was as if those things never happened. But they did. And although I was rescued for a time from all the pain and guilt that permeate my conscious hours, this was only a dream.

I suppose I was sleeping; dreams are said to be the creation of a brain at rest. My dream of paradise mercifully interrupted a more familiar one about war and people dying all around me, a nightmare in which I see and feel and hear and smell the carnage just as I did when it was real. This is my usual dream. It is the one I fear, the one that often causes me to dread the coming of sleep even when I need it and want to and should embrace it.

In the war I learned to treasure sleep like life itself because sleep, when you could get it, was the only temporary respite from the ugliness of the real world stage on which I was an unwitting player. The play may be over now, but my role seems never to go away. It is as if I wait in the wings for my call and there no longer is an escape. I yearn for that peaceful sleep but find it most elusive.

Even though they offer vividly contrasting views of reality, asleep and awake are separated only by the finest of lines in my current state of awareness. I can distinguish one from the other only because at times I hear sound around me or see light or dark above me and moving shapes I think are people. All these, through my wakened senses, are fragmented and uncertain, while perceptions in the dreams that come during sleep are vibrant and unambiguous as if my mind is determined to make me accept a world where what has come and gone or a new universe where things are as I would like them to be is the real here and now.

I hear music. Relentless guitars. Lynyrd Skynyrd, I think. “Free Bird,” maybe. Or the Allman Brothers Band, “Ramblin’ Man.” But sometimes I get confused between the Allman Brothers and the Dooby Brothers. And the music may be only in my head. They wouldn’t be playing loud rock music in a hospital, and while my normal senses are muted and my brain may be scrambled and confused I know that’s where I am.

I think I have been here, in this hospital, for a day or more, though I have no clear sense of time—days and nights, the real time that controls your life, time you read on the face of a clock or a calendar on the wall. Time over the long span is another matter.

Days and weeks and months and years from the past are as alive in my memory as if they were yesterday. There is so very much I want to forget, but a lifetime of ups and downs plays out endlessly in my head, like a movie that just keeps rewinding and running again and again. No matter how hard I try, I cannot stop it and make it go away.

Say what you will about hospitals, they have morphine. Or maybe something new I haven’t heard about. I’m no authority on drugs—legal drugs, in any case—but whatever it is they are dripping into my veins, I feel no physical pain.

My body is battered and I sense I am being kept alive only by modern medicine and medical

technology and those skilled in their use. God bless them—though I should feel hypocritical even to express this thought. God and I don't communicate anymore. I'm sure He's had enough of me and I have my doubts about Him.

My grandmother would say God was with me in the wreck, otherwise I would not be here now. I'm inclined to think it was the care of first responders or maybe nothing more than luck or fate or whatever you want to call it, rather than the hand of God. It doesn't matter. I survived. Marilyn still has a husband, Annie and Craig a father, the littlest among us a grandfather, and Bucky a best friend.

I remember just before the accident and right up until I knew it was happening, but nothing after that. They say traffic on Interstate 57 always is heavy. It certainly was then. There was a short construction zone in the northbound lanes and a few miles farther on a second one that seemed endless and we got all bunched up, one vehicle too close to another, and then everything had to be squeezed into single file. All at once there was a speeding eighteen-wheeler in the passing lane and no place to merge and a terrible collision right in front of me. I tried to stop but was rammed hard from behind and then there was a series of grinding chain-reaction crashes, like a fast train running into the side of a mountain and one car slamming into another from front to end.

What had been moving vehicles were left nothing more than a mass of steel and glass and plastic and rubber and leaking fuel tanks ready to burst into flame. My little Subaru was demolished.

I took a merciful blow to my head in the initial impact and everything went black. I didn't feel anything after that. I know I was trapped and I don't know who got me out.

I hope I'm wrong, but I think some of those injured were children. A few miles back I passed a minivan and there were kids in it who waved and I think it was close behind when we got slowed by the construction. Innocent children, with their whole lives yet to live, should not be hurt like I was. If God was going to be with someone, surely He would have been with the children.

This time, I did nothing wrong. The familiar cliché about merely being in the wrong place at the wrong time honestly applies. I wish this was not exceptional, but there have been too many turning points in my life when I had choices and made bad ones. The face in my mirror is that of a man who cannot declare himself a good person. Not an evil man, not one who ever intended to do wrong, but a man who has hurt other human beings when he didn't have to and cannot claim credit even for trying to do the right thing.

I could not have stopped the killing of innocents in the war. But if I had taken a stand, if I had stood up against what I knew was wrong, there might have been others who would have joined my protest and innocent lives might have been spared. I was a coward and did nothing. The blood cannot be washed from my hands. No matter how horrid the nightmares, they are mere reminders of the truth and this truth never shall set me free.

It has been almost five years since I last saw Nita. I still saw Bucky several times a week before we moved and a chance to spend a few days visiting with him was my only reason for this ill-fated trip to Chicago. Bucky is the best friend I've ever had and the six months since we last had any time together seems like years.

Why did I ever think it was a good idea to move? Did I truly expect to crest a brighter horizon, or was I only running away? No matter. The deed is done and now I am terrified at the realization I might never see Bucky again.

I understand why Bucky is the way he is, and I think he understands me. We were not together in combat, never side by side in some swamp or jungle or on a battle-scarred hillside, and he was not present that awful day in that remote village nor a couple of days later when I got hit, but we were in the same war at the same time and came out of it all with pretty much the same wounds to body and spirit. Our war never really has ended. Bucky and I still fight it every day, and I miss having him beside me in our battle now. We've leaned hard on one another through the roughest stretches and it goes without saying that each of us stands ready when the other needs support.

We are not equal in this battle, though. I admire and respect Bucky for the way he fights his demons and I wish I were half as strong. Every man has his breaking point. I can't say I know mine, but I am sure I've come close more than once. I've been to the white room. If I leave this hospital alive I know my ultimate surrender will come before Bucky's, even though I still have Marilyn and he no longer has Nita to cheer him on. Nita was good support in the beginning, but actually added a lot to Bucky's anguish in the end, and to mine, too, because I was part of the mix and Bucky is the last person in the world I ever would deliberately hurt.

Bucky always is straight with me. I cannot make the same claim. One night, when we'd had too many vodka martinis and he went on a crying jag and said he hated himself because he didn't have the guts just to go walk in front of a train and end it all, I almost confessed.

They say conscience is one thing that elevates humans a bit over other animals. I don't think this is entirely true, because I remember how Nita's cat used to try to make up after he'd bitten or scratched her in one of his little temper tantrums, but to the extent it is true I can't help but envy the other animals. My conscience never will be clear.

I don't have many friends left. I'm not comfortable at social events and once I stopped teaching I never felt as if I had much in common with any of the people Marilyn wanted us to hang out with. She probably got tired of trying to think up new excuses and simply quit making commitments. I doubt she would have agreed to leave Chicago and move to the other end of Illinois, nearly four hundred miles distant, had I not become such a social drag. But she thought the forests might help me find peace and she did it for me. Marilyn never has put herself first.

I believe Marilyn loves Bucky almost as much as I do, and I know she considers him among her dearest friends. She pushed me to plan this trip, bought us tickets to a couple of Cubs baseball games, and assured us that she wanted this time for the two of us and she would rather not come. She and I could come back to Chicago any time, she said, but these days were to be ours—Bucky's and mine, alone.

I think Marilyn is here. She will stay by my side just as she always has, no matter what. I love this woman so very much. She deserves someone better than me. I wish I could tell her this, and let her know how much I love her. I want to tell her that no matter how many times I've failed her, it never was her fault. I want to tell her I'm sorry. And one day, maybe, I can tell Bucky, too.

And I need to tell Marilyn everything. I've avoided too long the worst of what I've done, the grim story I'm so ashamed of, afraid that even she could not find it within herself to forgive such a transgression. I've kept from her the sheer horror of that one ghastly day when inhumanity reigned and the unending guilt I've lived with ever since. Not sharing this unbearable secret with the woman who has been the center of my universe has left a barrier between us that I know she feels but cannot understand. I want with all my heart to live to speak to her again and tell her what I should have confessed years ago but didn't, and I can only hope that replacing this darkness with

light may finally bring me peace.