

Forever  
by Janie Brunson

Gary walked the dismal streets of Manhattan, slowly making his way home from the funeral. There was no hurry. Ever since his father, Paul Brent had left this world, nothing seemed worth hurrying toward anymore. Nothing seemed worth looking at, laughing at. No one seemed worth talking to. Nothing was worth noticing, because nothing seemed to matter anymore. The air felt damp and clammy, and somehow as if it was wrapped around him, like a great icy hand squeezing the energy out of Gary's body. As he kept walking, Gary realized that it wasn't the air that was draining his will, it was the sheer despair. The weight of the sadness felt physical, tangible, a cruel thing with no knowledge of mercy. He stopped walking and leaned against one of those newspaper stands outside Starbucks. He remembered the time when he used to walk these streets as a little boy, staying close to his father's side where he never failed to feel safe and protected. Paul Brent had always had an aura that extended to envelope Gary with warmth and light whenever they were together, a light that cleansed the mind of all stress and worry. Gary couldn't stop replaying those memories in his head, no matter the agony it caused him. Now, Gary's sins and pain would never be washed away by his father's love again. Gary would have collapsed against the newspaper stand at this point if a gruff voice hadn't snapped "You want a paper or what?" Instead of crumpling to the ground, Gary turned around, fighting grief, not really caring who had spoken but looking automatically. It was a big man with greasy black hair. He had obviously been waiting to get a newspaper and he seemed very irritated. Gary mumbled an apology, grabbed a paper from the box just to disguise the reason he had been there in the first place, and walked away, searching for somewhere else to sink back into grief. After a few minutes of walking with his eyes to the ground, he came upon a small park, and slumped onto a bench. He used to go to the park with his father when he was a very young boy, he recalled with a stab of longing. It had been such fun then. He would swing on the swings, and go down the slides and play with whatever other children were around at the time until he was exhausted. How perfect things had been then, Gary thought. Now, it felt like he would never have fun again. Gary didn't know how long he sat there, but finally, the cold made him stand up. It was getting dark, and he should be getting home. For the first time, Gary took note of his surroundings. He didn't know if it was the aura of sadness hanging over the small war memorial, or simply because it was there for people like his father, but something made him walk toward it.

It was very small indeed, in a rather inconspicuous location.  
Only one tortured by death's cruelty would have noticed it.  
He knelt down and ran his finger over the engraved names.

JEFFREY WHITE  
SCOTT ADAMSON  
JOHN FINNEGAN

Names of brave men like his father, who had died before their time,  
men who didn't deserve to be dead right now.

Gary wondered what his father would do if confronted with this memorial.

He would probably read all the names, and offer up a special prayer for each and every one of them.

And he would think to himself that, even though these men were dead, they had died fighting for what they believed in.

Even though their families and friends would be terribly sad, they would know that their fathers, brothers, sons, and friends had died like heroes, just as Paul Brent had.

He had been Gary's hero until the day he died.

And although Gary would miss him, just as the families of these men missed them, he made a decision then and there not to mourn like this forever.

His father had died happily and peacefully, knowing that he had given his son a good start in life.

Gary read each and every name on that plaque again, and prayed for each and every soul, adding his father at the end.

Then, Gary Brent stood up a brand-new man, changed for life by the simple understanding that love lasts forever.