

# The Heretic

*A Novel*



Michael Deeze

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# Prologue



It had been almost six months to the day since I had left upstate New York in early July without much of a plan for the future. The only thing that I knew at the time was that I couldn't or shouldn't stay where I was any longer. At that time, sitting across a dining room table from my friend, David Dean, something had clicked in my consciousness. David had the unique ability to see beyond current situations and visualize possibilities hidden in even the darkest of places.

Without expressing it openly, he had laid out my circumstances at the time and teased my thoughts into action. In the space of a thirty-minute conversation, I realized somewhere inside of me that I did actually want to move on.

I had returned from Vietnam almost four years previously and although my wounds had healed, my thoughts had not. I returned to a different world than the one I had left, into a world and a society that did not want to acknowledge the war or those returned from it. I returned an outcast. Instead of leaving the violent experiences of war behind me, I brought them with me. My consciousness and sense of self believed that society's shame for the Vietnam war translated to shame for me, and my response had been to accept it. I had become someone that I personally hated and embraced the darkest activities that I could find. I had become someone that no one would want as a friend, because I believed that I deserved it, and my life had begun to resemble the nightmares of my sleep.

Since returning from the army, I had met many people that I feared and more that I disliked. Anyone that had demonstrated one iota of integrity had been taken away from me.

Through his strength of character and his words, David was possibly the first person that I respected in a very long time. David Dean had shown me that I might have the potential to be someone else. He awakened in me the germ of an idea that I might not be the unscrupulous character I had been trying to become, that I might actually be a good man that had been trying very hard to become the

opposite. He had teased my thinking into the possibility that I could move beyond my negative beliefs.

What's more, I needed to, and although I was still unclear about what I would discover over the horizon, I no longer feared it. With that realization, it seemed that a door had opened just as another closed, and I was going to step through it and take my chances.

I left New York and took the long way to wherever I was going. A long time ago—a lifetime ago it seemed—Chrissy, another and a much prettier friend, had stared into the sunset on a California beach and told me that if you didn't know where you were going, then just about any road would get you there. I pointed the truck west and took the time to see Niagara Falls and the Rainbow Bridge. I had crossed the broad flat expanse of southern Ontario, only angling south and crossing the border when I arrived in Sault St. Marie and the Soo Locks at the eastern end of Lake Superior. Once again back in the States, I crossed the extreme northern edges of Michigan, Wisconsin, and finally into Minnesota. Crossing all three states but still traveling along the southern shoreline of the immense lake. In Minnesota I left the lake behind and continued into the deep native forests of the north woods. I had spent the last days of summer in the Superior National Forest, fishing, hiking—and thinking. In those two months, I didn't speak to more than a handful of people and no more than a handful of sentences. It had taken that long to work through who I wanted to become next, and if not why at least how.

As the nights began to cool and color touched the edges of the maple leaves, I packed my tent, camp stove and gear into the old truck and turned south. I had spent the time to be sure that any decision I made was going to be my decision and not directed by anyone else. In the quiet solitude of the deep woods, there was no David Dean to offer deep insight, or Jaimie Claire, the woman I had left behind to take these last steps to get here, to tell me that it would be all right no matter what. The parade of people could no longer speak for themselves, yet haunted me, admonishing me to make something of myself. And most of all, in every dark corner hidden out of the light was the memory of Dutch. Of her light, and unreasonable belief that I could be more than what I believed I was. I began to sense a call to purpose. Perhaps for the first time in my life, I had wanted to take responsibility for what was going to happen next instead of allowing circumstances to dictate my choices and direction and having something or someone else to blame for bad outcomes. I had taken stock of the tools and talents I possessed and resolved that this time, it was up to me to accomplish whatever that purpose might be. The days had been spent in an epiphany of reflection, the nights in a tug-of-war of self-doubt versus new-found optimism.

When I can look Life in the eyes, Grown calm and very coldly wise, Life will  
have given me the Truth, And taken in exchange—my youth.

~Sara Teasdale



# Foreword



*I swear to fulfill, to the best of my ability and judgment, this covenant:*

*I will respect the hard-won scientific gains of those physicians in whose steps I walk, and gladly share such knowledge as is mine with those who are to follow.*

*I will apply, for the benefit of the sick, all measures which are required, avoiding those twin traps of overtreatment and therapeutic nihilism.*

*I will remember that there is art to medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug.*

*I will not be ashamed to say "I know not," nor will I fail to call in my colleagues when the skills of another are needed for a patient's recovery.*

*I will respect the privacy of my patients, for their problems are not disclosed to me that the world may know. Most especially must I tread with care in matters of life and death. Above all, I must not play at God.*

*I will remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being, whose illness may affect the person's family and economic stability. My responsibility includes these related problems, if I am to care adequately for the sick.*

*I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure.*

*I will remember that I remain a member of society, with special obligations to all my fellow human beings, those sound of mind and body as well as the infirm.*

*If I do not violate this oath, may I enjoy life and art, respected while I live and remembered with affection thereafter. May I always act so as to preserve the finest traditions of my calling and may I long experience the joy of healing those who seek my help.*

***Hippocratic Oath***

# Introduction



My name is Robert Emmett Casey. In my life I have been called many things and many names. Each one had a meaning and each one at those times had meaning for me. For a long time during my life I attempted to live up to those names, or live them down. I no longer care what people call me anymore. Because at last—I am my own man.

Old Bill Travers was lying on the gurney between the two of us. He was not blinking, staring hard at the hanging overhead light and trying not to listen to our conversation. Bill was a ‘good old boy’ who ran the local auto salvage yard on the outskirts of town. He had lost his footing while cutting up sheet metal, fallen and had laid open the front of his right thigh on a sharp piece of steel. He had been chosen as my Guinee pig.

“Here, now watch and learn.” Tom Dunbar was all business. “The suture is very strong so you can’t really break it. But you can pull it out of the skin if you pull it too hard or too tight. You’re supposed to be gentle anyway but I know how ham-fisted you can be at times, so be gentle but firm.”

When I had arrived in rural Wisconsin, I was fresh out of university and full of the impassioned zeal of a converted heathen. With my diploma clutched in my sweaty hands. I couldn’t wait to heal the sick, help the lame to walk again, and the blind to see. But reality had come quickly. There were multitudes of patients that definitely benefited from my chiropractic ministrations, but there were the others too. For every five patients, one of those I couldn’t help. They were beyond my skill set. They still needed help but were just in the wrong office. What they needed was medical intervention, but who they trusted was me.

Tom Dunbar was a physician’s assistant who had undertaken to teach me some simple Army field hospital first-aid procedures. Today we were both dressed in scrubs and masks standing at a gurney in the Emergency Room. The poor guy

on the table was not upset, other than wanting to get back to work, but the wound was fairly deep and widening with every flex of his leg muscles.

Tom, along with some of the other medical doctors in the group had repeatedly encouraged me to learn how to stitch open wounds. This was partly due to them wanting to reduce their own workloads but mostly due to the sometime need for expediency. I frequently encountered serious injuries far from the hospitals while doing house calls, and sometimes minutes mattered.

Tom deftly looped the first stitch around the fingers of his right hand, making a cross.

“Now around the middle finger and pull. Cinch it tight and then cut it behind the knot.”

He pulled the finished with a flourish and held out his hand, palm up.

“Your turn.”

Picking up the needle, I clumsily tried to emulate the motions I’d just seen Tom perform.

“This kinda goes against all that zealous chiropractic dogma doesn’t it?”

“What d’ya mean?”

“You know, chiropractors...no medications...natural healing. With hands only crap. It’s like a religion with you guys.”

“Well I’m learning to practice the ‘water-ever-it-takes’ technique. Just because my philosophy says one thing, doesn’t mean the patient doesn’t need something more.”

The thread slipped out of my fingers just as I tried to pull it through the loop. With a sigh from Tom, I started over again.

“So then...you’re some kind of chiropractic heretic.”

This time I pulled the silk through and cinched it down across the open wound.

“I guess so. I looked up at his eyes above his surgical mask. “So be it.”

# The Heretic



The light is slow to come on these winter mornings. The biting cold presses in from the outside, causing the old house to groan and crack as the cold seeks to compress it into a smaller colder space. Standing at the kitchen sink, I wait for the coffee pot to boil and feel winter's frigid touch pressing against window glass, frosting its way onto the inside without asking permission, making beautiful snowflake landscapes in thick Jack Frost patterns.

Even in my woolen socks and slippers, I feel the chill of the wooden floor under my feet, causing them and my calves to itch. The cold makes my knees ache more than usual. I shift my weight from one foot to the other patiently waiting for the little percolator to sputter and drip my coffee, filling the small chilly kitchen with the aroma of fresh coffee and candle wax.

The electricity is off again. The storm that blew in Sunday and stayed through most of Monday and into Tuesday took care of that. It is not uncommon for us living so far out in the country, even in summer, to lose power once or twice a month. Winter outages are more frequent and for my old bones, more inconvenient. Thankfully I still have gas in the LP tank in back of the house, so the stove still works. Taking a cup down from the cupboard, I pour coffee. The dogs follow me as I shuffle to the front room. In the fireplace, a fire crackles cheerfully, filling the room with welcome warmth and the pleasant, faint smell of wood smoke. The darkness of the early winter morning creates a sense of coziness in the comfortable little room. With the electricity off, the fireplace is the only source of heat in the house, unless you count the dogs, both of which throw themselves down on the hearth with a thump and a sigh. I pull an afghan off the back of the recliner, wrap it around my shoulders and ease my aching knees down into the high-backed wing chair close to the fireplace, careful not to spill the coffee. Cradling the cup between my hands, I lean forward and stare into the fire.

I am an old man now. Aged by the mileage of experience and the erosion that years bring. The frenetic energy that fueled my life has finally burned itself out. My body, the vehicle that I have used all these years, has arrived at this point broken and patched. Only now, at the far end of my life, appreciated for its former abilities and accomplishments. The end is much closer than the beginning. I marvel at the dependability this body provided and wish, as all old men do, that I had taken better care of it. The doctors smile and tell me that I am doing just fine, but the look in their eyes tells a different story, and I understand.

We are alone now, the dogs and I, all of us too old and worn for any more adventure; hopefully, too smart as well. My children, grown and gone to lives of their own, call on Father's Day. She too has been gone many years now. The passing of time has softened my memory of the hard years together and brightened memories of the good ones. I stare into the fire and reflect, turning back through the chapters of memory. I recall the different lives that I have lived, and the lives that I have touched all in this one lifetime. The memories arrive unbidden, random and not in sequence. Instead, each one is connected to the next by the emotion it stirs, triggering the progression. They are not distinguished by time or date. Yet they are not random but related at a deeper level. I try to recount these lessons and victories that came with a cost. I recognize that every person's journey is storied with tragedy, love, sorrow, pain, and joy. Mine has been no different in that regard. I think about the people that have passed through my life and the impression they have left on me. I consciously give thanks—for all of them, the good and the bad.

I take a mouthful of my too hot coffee. Setting the cup down, I lean toward the fire and rest my elbows on my aching knees. The dancing flame, hypnotic in its ability to conjure past experiences and their lessons. I remember those more vital times, sorry and glad at the same time that they are no more.