

# Chapter 1

## Where Do We Go From Here

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I'm standing at the door of Jimmy's 1970 Pontiac Bonneville Convertible, which I purchased over thirty years earlier. A year ago, I had it fully restored like new and only drove it on the days of my appointments. Placing my hand on the car's roof, I close my eyes for a moment and reminisce about the days before and after I bought the car for Jimmy.

Marie and I were anxiously awaiting the return of Corporal James Evert Stevens II from his first tour in Vietnam in December 1970. James volunteered to join the Army; he and his best friend Günter Wayne went to the recruiter's office together in late 1967, when they were nineteen and enlisted. I could not convince him to stay at home and go to college. His response was always the same.

"I can attend college after I get back."

They figured a lot of guys their age were volunteering for service.

It was in June of 1970 when President Richard Nixon said the Vietnam War was coming to an end as a result of the plan they had instituted. Nixon stated in a conference that the United States would be following a new program called "Vietnamization." Joyfully, Marie was excited to hear the news, as did many others nationwide. Monday night, she complained about the water running in the toilet. I decided to take the next day off work to fix the toilet that ran all night, which annoyed Marie until I got out of bed and turned the water off at the wall. Then, on Tuesday, December 8, 1970, Marie and I were finishing up a late lunch.

I was walking back to my chair to watch more coverage of the war with a glass of milk and a slice of pound cake, and Marie was washing up the last of the dishes when there was a knock at the door. A Casualty Notification Officer and a chaplain waited for someone to open it. I set my milk and cake on the end table next to my chair and answered the door. My heart fell into my stomach, and I immediately knew that James would not be coming home for Christmas. With my eyes closed, I braced myself and stood against the wall, shaking my head. I took a deep breath and covered my eyes with my hands briefly before Marie came out of the kitchen and asked, "Who is it at the door?" She fainted when she saw my expression and the two men in uniform standing in the open doorway.

With a sigh, I take the keys from my pocket, unlock the car, climb in, and close the door. I sit there with my eyes shut, gripping the steering wheel and thinking back thirty years.

I remember opening the garage and staring down at the car, thinking of how I could not bring myself to sell it or get rid of it — it was the one thing that gave Jimmy hope. Oh, how he looked forward to coming home to drive his new car.

The 1970 Chevy Bonneville has a wood-grained sport steering wheel, A/C, cruise control, a power seat and windows, a 370hp 455 engine, and an 8-track tape player installed. The interior

is large and plush, with soft seats and wood-grain accents. After sitting under a tarp in the garage for nearly thirty years, I decided to take it off the blocks, put new tires on, and see what it would take to restore the car to factory condition. I had only ever driven it from the dealership home, and when we knew Jimmy would never drive it, I backed it up into the garage, put it on blocks, took the wheels off, and locked it up for the next twenty-nine years.