

This is dedicated to a young man who became a tragic statistic and to all the statistics that should still be living souls walking among us. Sometimes the cost of poor choices is too high!

Payne Wept
by Jared Walnum

The wheels of the small red pick up truck made a dull thud of complaint as it slowly veered into the uneven, grassy terrain at the side of the highway. It gradually slowed more grinding up gravel with a crunch like chewing crushed ice until it came to a complete stop. The door locks popped up, the handle thumped the internal works, and the door swung slowly open. Payne Toplin stepped slowly out ducking the door frame. He stood at the drivers side leaning on the top of the door and stared with pained eyes a short distance beyond the front of the truck.

“Damn,” he sighed in disbelief although it had been months. He stopped here everyday as he passed on his way to work. “It still doesn't seem real.”

Payne moved around the door and started to walk slowly, at a funeral pace, never diverting his gaze from that same location. The spot at which he looked so intently was a small roadside memorial for his son who died right at this spot on that terrible night months ago. It was all homemade, a simple wooden cross decorated with yellow, red and blue ribbons bearing the legend, “We Miss You Troy.” His wife Eliese had put it all together and insisted they both come to set it up where it now stood. It stood alone at the border of the tall grass beyond the mowed right of way. A large wounded live oak canopied the spot and cast a long shadow in the early morning sunlight. The festive colors of the ribbons belied the solemnity of the cross and its message.

Payne's frame was slumped and broken, a man bearing a great weight that he can not put off. The bright low sun caused him to squint dully as he walked. He stopped and crossed his left arm over his belly using it to support his right elbow with the forearm upward. His loosely closed fist was pressed lightly to his lips.

He was a large man. Some might say a man's man. He was not large in the sense of excess body fat but was tall and muscled to the point of a stocky, broad shouldered physique. Dark hair streaked with silver sprouted from beneath the Gators cap that he wore. He also had on a blue pocket T and blue jeans. His feet were spread apart in an “at ease” sort of stance resting in worn, brown work shoes.

At one time his presence could have been described as commanding and he would have exuded a great inner strength but now he was just that broken slump shouldered man who stopped here day after day finding no peace. He insides felt vacant but for that indescribable physical sensation of emotional pain that would not abate. Yet all this time the tears had refused to flow. His head had throbbed daily as it did now. His stomach was always twisted. But Payne did not cry.

His anguished brown eyes seemed to beg a different reality as he softly spoke. “If only you had listened I would have spared you this.” This was his daily recitation.

And Payne had tried to tell him, tried to spare him. That amazing day of Troys graduation party. That day when the sun set into an evening with a bright spring moon. That day that started with the promise of great and wonderful beginnings. That day that seemed many millennium ago before the dark eternity had begun.

“Yo. Dad,” Troy had said, “I'm taking off with the guys now. Great party! Thanks.”

“Okay, Troy, but no drinking. Right?” answered Payne.

Troy cocked his head backward in mock surprise and innocently declared, “Of course not. Why would you even say that.”

“Hey, look, Son. I'm being serious. I want you to have a good time but I don't want to worry

about you being safe. You've turned it all around so well I don't want to see you blow it now.”

Troy swayed impatiently. He was ready to be off on the town, young and carefree. He wasn't up for the lecture. “Don't worry,” he said shaking his head.

“Well, we do have a history.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I'll be fine. Don't worry!”

“You certainly deserve to celebrate. I'm real proud of ya. Just be safe.”

“I will. Don't worry.” And he was off.

Troy climbed behind the wheel of light blue Mustang, turned the key and listened to the contented growl of the engine. Getting his act together had paid off nicely. It had taken awhile to get it all together and to win back his parents trust but check out this ride!

The restored '78, metallic blue Mustang had been a combined 18th birthday, graduation, going straight present. His folks were not made of money but with both sets of grandparents going in on it, too, they were able to make it work. He loved her sleek lines and leather seats and the way she commanded the road everywhere she went. And that didn't count the covetous stares of the “I wish I was driving that” passers by. Yep, this was like living in Disney World every time he took it someplace.

It didn't hurt his standing with Alyssa either. Troy figured he had the hottest car and the hottest girl around.

He judiciously backed out on the road and drove slowly around the corner and out onto the county highway. When he turned onto CR90, he nailed the throttle and wove a cloud of smoke off the rear tiers. After a couple of blocks and some scolding stares from the public, he let the high powered car coast down to the speed limit.

“Hey, she can't help being a little sassy,” he said out loud to himself. He waved to the indignant stares as though he was riding a float in a parade.

First stop would be picking up Alyssa, he thought. Beauty and the beast. He didn't know if he was the beast or if the Mustang rumbling beneath him was but there was sure no question who Beauty was.

“So, I guess Troy's off to the next party,” said Eliese. Troy's mother. She had seen him talking with his dad out of the corner of her eye and then he vanished out the front door.

“Yep, he's off in his new car to get Alyssa.” replied Payne.

“You sure it's good,” Eliese. queried with a mother's concern.

Payne's face went momentarily pensive before he declared, “It's good. He's got it back together and I couldn't be prouder of the boy. Boy? No, he's a young man now and we've got to let up on the reins so he can start making his own life.”

Eliese's tentative expression still lingered.

“He'll be fine,” he insisted with a great deal of outer confidence even though the inner man still struggled with those doubts that will persistently cling after broken trust.

Troy had been dating Alyssa for most of high school. He had been immediately taken with her when they first shared home room but it had take most of the freshman year to get his nerve up to ask her out. Now it was graduation and she still made his breath catch at the sight of her. They had been together for nearly 3 years!

It had been a hot day and the cooler evening air was pleasant flowing in through the open windows of the old blue mustang. The wind batted her dark hair around her pretty face masking then unveiling her soft green eyes. Her heavily painted lips posed in a contented grin.

“So this is it,” she said with a celebratory tone. “High School is finally over. No more Ms. Dean. No more Mr. Forester. Free at last! Free at last!” She cast a sideways glance over at Troy in the driver's seat to see if he was appreciating her good humor.

Troy chuckled lightheartedly. “You must have been pretty close to Forester. You hung with him after school enough.”

She slapped Troy's arm playfully. “Stop it! That was detention and you know it.”

“Well, it's a good thing your pretty 'cause it doesn't seem like you know how to behave.”

“And you love it.” she said coyly with a wink and a blown kiss.

“So how many times did you get busted smoking on campus?”

“Enough. I lost count. Oh, that reminds me...” Alyssa dug in the purse laying on her lap and pulled out a pink cigarette case. She snapped the clip on top and started to pull out a white cylinder.

“I thought after a million hours of detention and 4 bucks a pack you decided it was time to loose those things,” Troy wondered.

“I did. Cigarettes anyhow. But not this!” She held up the hand rolled cylinder with twisted ends.

Troy jerked his head in a mock flinch and said, “where may I ask did that come from?”

Alyssa chuckled at his faux seriousness. “Careful I might mistake you for Ms. Dean.”

“Na, she has a much thicker mustache than me. But seriously, I really shouldn't.”

“Why not? They're not doin the old pee test anymore. It's party time, Dude. Let's celebrate the great escape!”

“Na, I better not.”

“Oh, come on, Troy,” she grumbled crossing her arms over her chest and pursing her lips in a pout. “I love you but don't be a party pooper. Not now. This is celebration time. You can be Mr. Straight-lace when they send you off to that holy roller college in the fall.”

“So what, you're gonna get all snotty on me 'cause I don't wanna get buzzed.”

“I just wanna party this summer. Life will get all serious soon enough. Let's call it a last hurrah.”

Troy stared straight ahead through the windshield. He was torn between a fresh start that seemed to have been working for him and pleasing Alyssa. Why'd it have to get all complicated all the time? No one seemed to get it. He really decided it was time leave all this stuff behind. Getting busted, the months in rehab- that was all a real wake up call for him. But this was just a little weed. And he sure wanted to lighten the mood again. Maybe...

“Okay, fire that sucker up!” he declared.

“Oh ya,” she chirped and put the joint between her lips. She turned the roller on the lighter a couple of times to get a flame and held it under the joint as she drew deeply. A seed popped with a small crackling sound as she drew and then held the smoke in her lungs. She handed the joint off to Troy. He also took a deep drag causing the spark to glow brightly.

“Oh ya,” Alyssa chirped again.

“Oh ya,” echoed Troy but perhaps a little guiltily. He was trying to ignore the feeling inside that this was a really bad idea.

Payne and Eliese had said goodnight to the last of their guests and were lazily dropping the trash in the can and putting plates and glasses in the sink.

“Dishes can wait till morning,” said Eliese with a big yawn.

“Sounds good to me,” agreed Payne. “I'm beat.”

“I don't guess Troy'll be in 'till real late.”

“No, I wouldn't think.”

Eliese toyed aimlessly with a spoon laying on the counter. “I'm sure glad he finally joined up with the youth group at church.”

“Me too.”

“It made a big difference.”

“Yep.”

Elise stopped toying with the spoon and stared blankly into the distance. “Still...,” she began pensively.

“He'll be fine, Elise.” Payne hoped his tone instilled confidence. In his own mind he thought, I'm doing my best to believe you, Lord. And to believe in Troy. He's a good kid... isn't he?

For years Payne had heard people at church saying God told me this and God told me that but he had never really thought God had ever spoken to him. Maybe God spoke to him through the pastor's sermons and things like that. Something had certainly pulled at him in the service where he gave Jesus his heart. But to say God spoke to me, in that just me and God way. No, not that he could tell.

He tried to listen in his spirit now hoping for some re-enforcement that everything was good. Take care of it, Lord, he thought and then they were off to bed.

'Okay, Troy don't kill the buzz,” groaned Leo pushing a bottle of beer into his hand. “It's a party, Dude. Like you haven't already done a little weed. You think I can't tell. I know you better than a brother.”

Troy hesitated briefly before grinning with coy submission. Then he chugged deeply on the beer Leo had offered and sighed contentedly. That did taste good. And he was feeling good. Surely it was not a big deal. It's not like he was doing it all the time. This was just a lark, a primal scream before getting back to the business of towing the line.

“Ya man,” perked Leo. “Now it's getting loose.”

From then on the drinks were flowing and the smoke floating. Neither one passing Troy unaccosted. Mingled with the beer was also deep colored bottle of hard liquor passed freely about. Some people politely sipped at mixed drinks but Troy had liberated his inner animal and nothing much was off limits. Even Alyssa was beginning to cast uneasy glances.

“Who rules!” shouted Troy as he climbed up on the coffee table.

“Troy rules!” chorused fellow party goers.

This was evidently going to be one of those nights in which sleep was going to be evasive, dancing just out of reach like a teasing flirt. And, of course with sleeplessness comes endless circles of thought.

Troy was going off more or less on his own in just a couple of months. Sure, he'd still be living on Mom and Dad's dime. But he would be miles away at college making his own decisions and judgment calls. There would not be the accountability of having to come home to Mom and Dad's house every night and be subject to their scrutiny. It really did seem as though Troy had his head on straight now though.

The marijuana arrest had been a shocker. Payne thought that they should have seen that situation coming and continued to blame himself. It was at least partly his fault or so he thought. He should have seen the signs and nipped it in the bud. On the other hand he thought, you can't just run around making accusations with out evidence.

But there had been signs. Troy's usually exemplary school work had begun to fall off drastically. When he would come home he would always covertly slip into his room before coming out to be with the family and sometimes didn't come back out at all. Then there was that uncharacteristic agitation and defensiveness all the time. You couldn't say, “What's up” without him taking a defensive posture. That part could have been a side effect of the drug, fear of getting caught, even guilt, or all of the above,

Payne supposed. Whatever the case, it was evident enough that something wasn't right.

Then came the joint that Payne found.

Eliese had asked his help to strip the bed in Troy's room while she started the laundry. Normally Troy would do this himself but this Saturday he had gone off with friends early and forgotten. Troy was always very protective of his room and his privacy. But beds had to be changed and laundry had to be done.

As he pulled the fitted sheet loose his finger brushed something just under the mattress. Curiously he had lifted the edge of the mattress not expecting to find what he found. Kid's probably hiding some girly magazines, he had thought. What he found looked like a stub pencil made of twisted paper. He knew immediately what it was.

At that time, Troy had fessed up and sworn there would be no more. They had grounded him for a month and then taken him at his word. But, then the very day his punishment had ended, the cops nailed him and his friends with a DUI. The car was filled with grass and booze.

At first Troy had sworn that he was with them but had not drank or smoked. They had wanted to believe him but there was that nagging fear. Troy's lawyer was a nice enough guy but he was also very pragmatic and suggested they needed to go through everything Troy had. They had to make sure that he stayed clean as a whistle and that he couldn't be caught again. The lawyer said how he understood that they wanted to believe it was over with and Troy was telling the truth but they couldn't just trust their feelings.

So Payne searched Troy's things and sure enough, buried under the clothes in his drawer were rolling papers, a clip and even a small glass pipe. This pipe was too small for smoking marijuana. Payne thought, he must be smoking hash, too. But then there was the baggy. The one with small, white, rough shaped cubes. The cubes were about half the size of a cherry.

This was not hash.

Troy bobbed, contorted, twisted and spun in a madman's choreography. The party was on and he was fueled for the duration. The brew of alcohol, drugs and redundant driving rhythms contrived a spell of powerful energy and mindless motion.

He ricocheted around the room like a pinball on legs bouncing off furniture and fellow dancers. Some good naturedly smiled and shoved him off in a new direction. Others cast an annoyed glance but quickly turned back to their own dance, indulgence, or conversation.

Troy spun away from Allysa in a near blind pirouette barely conscious of the other partiers around him. He spun like a hurricane in the open space that had been cleared for dancing and moved toward the sitting areas. He made landfall tumbling over a coffee table and rolling onto the floor.

Allysa helped him climb back to his feet suggesting, "Babe, maybe we need to sit a couple out. I can't keep up with you."

"Who da man!" snorted Troy. He bent at the waist, balled his fists and cocked his head in a ritual not unlike a peacock boasting his tail feathers.

"You da man," returned Leo who was passing by. "Hey, Buddy, I'm headed out to do a little restocking before everything shuts down. It's like nearly three so I got to fly."

"Yeah, don't let the well run dry," giggled Troy.

"Wanna come with me and catch a little air?"

"Yeah man, but let's take the Stang."

"You okay to drive?"

"I must Stang," declared Troy who was amusing himself greatly with his word play.

"But c-a-n y-o-u d-r-i-ve?"

"Come on, Leo. Like you're all sober and righteous. Let's ride bro!"

Troy and Leo serpentined through party goers, furniture, and doors and made their way to Troys

classic Mustang. Upon approaching Troy stroked her hood affectionately.

“Sweet thing, you *are* a beauty,” he cooed.

“Should I be jealous,” said Allysa who slid up from behind.

Troy spun around and squinted her direction in pursuit of recognition.

“Never my princess,” he announced. “You are the only thing in the world even more beautiful!”

“How gallant of you,” she replied adopting a regally aloof pose.

“But now let's take this sweetheart out to stretch her legs a bit,” Troy said tapping the hood with an open hand. “We have an important mission to accomplish.”

“Let's ride!” encouraged Leo.

“Let's ride,” chanted Troy and Allysa in return.

The three tucked themselves into the car speed out of the culdesac to get more booze before alcohol sales shut down for the night.

Red and blues lights blinked through the window and projected across the bedroom ceiling. Payne had awoke in that same instant with tense anticipation gnawing at his gut. It was hard to tell whether the flashing lights demanded waking or whether intuition had intervened first. Both seemed simultaneous.

“Somethings up,” he said rolling and nudging his wife. “I think Troy's in some kind of trouble.”

They had nearly already made it to the door before the bell even rang. Payne opened the door quickly and stood without speaking. He only cast an inquisitive look at the officers standing on his stoop.

“Mister Toplin?” asked one of the officers.

“Yes.”

“May we come in? We need to speak with you.”

“Is Troy alright?” asked Eliese from behind Payne.

“No, mam. I'm afraid he's not.”

Eliese groaned and collapsed.

“Oh my god,” croaked Payne in disbelief.

The mustang had been traveling in excess of 90 mph when it crossed the median and slammed head on into the semi heading the opposite direction.

One passenger was ejected by the impact. He wore no seat belt. It was hard to know if he was already dead when he flew from the car but he was certainly dead by the time his body came to a rest on the pavement.

The female in the front passenger seat was torn from the shoulder strap though the lap belt held her fast. The windshield, dash, and glove compartment were shoved back so far and so rapidly that, combined with the forward lung of her upper body, she might as well not have been tethered at all. The door broke loose and she slumped through the opening. Her head and upper torso were dragged on the pavement as the mustang crumpled and skidded beneath the giant truck.

The driver's seat belt never had a chance to hang on or release it's charge. The steering column had been driven back into his chest with tremendous force. It both impaled him and pinned him as the rest of the car caved in on him.

All three were dead before all things in motion came to rest.

The distraught truck driver was unharmed. He paced the scene reciting over and over, “There was nothing I could do.”

One of the officers, who arrived shortly, inspected the scene and vomited on the side of the road.

The odd car still out on the road at that hour would pass by the army of emergency vehicles

with lights flashing in the night. They would see a blue car wedged beneath the nose of a large truck. It was crumpled like waded up paper. They would see a stretcher and a figure on it draped fully in a sheet. Blood would be seeping through the fabric. They would see another figure in the road also draped in white. It would appear oddly contorted for what was presumed to be a human being.

They would also see a crew working to extract what remained of Troy Toplin from the wreckage. They would shake their heads sadly and knowingly.

Payne stood near his wife, his posture stiff, almost military. His arms were folded tightly across his chest and untangled only to receive the offered hands of conveyed condolences. Some of the women would hug him lightly and modestly. Others practically draped themselves on his shoulders like wilted vines as they tried to express their sympathy and even their own grief. Many eyes were moist and shiny and many cheeks streaked by tears. Payne's were not.

Why did he not cry? Payne was not a crier by nature but he had just lost his only son. It seemed that tears were warranted. A great deal of tears. But there was only a dull, numb, hollow bleakness bleeding out of him from somewhere deep inside.

He glanced over at his wife, Eliese. Typically her presence was meticulously orchestrated. Her dress would normally be flawlessly fitted to her slim frame, her face artfully painted, and every thread of light brown, slightly sun streaked hair sculpted to perfection.

Today was a different study, a study of deep grief. Her normally bright and pretty face was dark and drawn and her make-up seemed a random blur of color and tone. Her black dress hung limply on her like Spanish moss on a withered old oak trunk. If her hair was sculpted at all, it was an ancient Gothic sculpture heavily worn by the elements and in this case the elements were not weather, but rather enormous grief and distress.

And so it went. Hymns had been sung, prayers said, memories shared, and a life too young to have been wasted in such a pointless manner had been duly memorialized.

Pastor Ray had just hugged Eliese and whispered something, maybe a short prayer in her ear. He now slid over in front of Payne with his head turned slightly downward and to the side with a pensive expression on his face. After a moment he said softly, "I can't even imagine what you must be feeling, Payne. I just hope that you know how sorry I am."

"Thanks, Pastor," Payne replied blandly.

Pastor Ray hesitated and seemed to measure his words. "I'm not going to try to reiterate all the platitudes that I'm sure you've already heard over and over but I do want to encourage you to talk with God. Listen for what he has to say to you."

A spark of anger fired off in Payne's emotions as he said with a soft growl, "I guess God *gave* his only begotten son. But I never offered him mine."

"I know. I know. But just try. Will you?"

Payne could see the Pastors genuine earnestness and felt apologetic but was not ready to let his anger go. "Ya, I'll try," he said ruefully, "but I can't imagine what he has to say right now that I want to hear."

"I know you're angry. And that's okay. Tell him about it. Tell him everything you're feeling."

"You know what Pastor Ray? I've never really heard a word from God. And guess what else. I'm not sure I'm interested anymore."

Pastor Ray nodded slowly. "Well Payne, just know how sorry I am. And I *will* be praying for you none the less."

Over the ensuing weeks it seemed that Payne heard the "God told me" phrase a million times from other people. Sometimes "God told" them to say this or that to him. He knew on some level that they were well intentioned enough but their words, or God's words if they were, rang hollow in his

ears.

Payne was inconsolable.

He finally just stopped going to Church. He was tired of hearing it. Truth be told, he just tired of a God who steals a man's son without explanation. Nothing to say. Not that Payne wanted to hear it.

On the last morning he went he rose in a particularly foul mood. He was not able to steel himself for the perceived onslaught of sympathetic looks and supposed words from God. Enough, enough, enough!

It was on that morning that Levi came up to him.

"I know you really don't want to hear from me but..." Levi paused contemplatively. "I really believe the Lord wants me to tell you this."

"Oh really?" quipped Payne.

"Yeah, really."

"Well by all means let's have it."

Levi threaded the fingers of both hands together over his belly and gazed down pensively.

"God knows how bad you're hurting. He says, 'I get it. I know that hurt. My son also suffered and died.'"

"Oh please. It's not nearly the same!"

Levi paused patiently and then continued, "He said, 'And I've felt it a million times when my children have forsaken me and suffered so much needlessly.'"

Payne shuffled irritably but Levi persisted, "He said, 'You say you want to hear from me but I've spoken to you ever day of your life and you've never heard my voice. Now you need to hear from me but you don't want to know the truth. I have some things to say to you but you only want to feed your hurt and your anger. I want to heal you. But to be healed you first must hear.'"

Payne was caught off guard by the apparent insight of Levi's words. Had he ever said anything to Levi about hearing from God? No, he barely even knew Levi. The church was large enough that there were many faces and names but many were only passing acquaintances. But he had talked to Pastor Ray. People overhear. People talk. It was easy enough to discount.

"Well I'll give you this," said Payne. "Your God said was a bit more wordy than everyone else's."

"Listen, Payne," Levi pressed earnestly. "You're going to hear from God soon but before God can speak to you, you need to be willing to hear."

"You know what? I'm done," said Payne. "Tell Eliese she'll need to catch a ride home from Sue Jenkins."

Payne turned on his heels and stomped toward the front door. Levi began to call after, "Payne..." But he was gone.

Time was spent. Time was wasted but never invested. As the weeks pasted, Payne continued to function but not live. Activity was half-hearted and listless when it occurred at all. He went to the construction site and did his job enough to merit an income but not with any gusto nor with his former excellence. His paycheck purchased his right to continue to exist but not to embrace that existence.

In the midst of this he came home from work one evening and found the house empty. Eliese was gone shopping, or visiting, or church... Somewhere. And Troy... Well Troy would never be here again. Would he?

Eliese bore the outside image of being alive again. He wondered what she felt underneath. She professed a great deal of comfort from her faith. Payne could not share that.

Payne tossed his keys onto the coffee table in front of the couch and they bounced off Eliese's open Bible and onto the floor. As he bent to pick them up, his eyes came to rest on these words: "Jesus wept." He remembered that verse being read in church once. It was the shortest verse in the Bible. Jesus had come to late to prevent the death of his friend Lazarus. Jesus saw how all those who were

there were grieving Lazarus. When they showed where he was buried Jesus wept. Was he moved by his own grief? Was he moved by compassion for those who were gathered? Maybe both.

So here he was rehearsing his once again ritual. The same one he'd rehearsed for months. Would it ever end?

Finally, Payne felt the last of his composure siphon out of his being. His knees buckled and he fell to the ground on them, his head hanging forward like a man awaiting execution.

“So, what is it, Lord. You got plenty to say to all these other people but I'm not hearing anything.” Payne shook his head disparagingly.

The breeze moved lightly shuffling the leaves of the old injured oak making a crinkle like paper only softer. But there was no voice, still soft, or otherwise.

How long had he been here wandering through his dark memories of a son long gone. What was the point anyhow? Would any of it bring back Troy? How many dozens of times had he stopped and lived out this cruel ritual? Would as many dozens of more times bring any peace or resolve? Enough! Enough! Enough! He couldn't take anymore.

“So there it is, Lord. I can't stand it! And you... you've got nothing to say. When does it end? I'm beaten and I'm broken. I've got nothing left. If you're gonna talk, now would be the time. I really need to hear something from you if you're listening at all.”

When the end of Payne's fortitude had been spent, when the inner emptiness was as large as emptiness could be, when there were no more resources in the depths of his soul; it finally came. In his mind the words of the Bible's shortest verse echoed, “Jesus wept.” That was swiftly followed by scripture of how Jesus had lived like a man, experiencing the things that men suffer and suffering on man's behalf. And then, what was it? Something about how often he would have drawn his people under his wings but they would not. They weren't willing.

“Okay, Lord. I *am* willing. I'm willing to hear now.”

Payne's body quivered slightly as an almost electric tingle passed through him. It was less words than simply knowing- intuitive and consuming. It was a knowing that opened in his spirit, that untraceable somewhere that lives inside of men and knows even beyond words. This was the knowledge that finally coursed through his spirit. “I know your pain. I've felt it a million times and would have spared you this. Still, life is life and it will always have suffering but know that I will always be with you. You are my child and you can not cry a single tear that I do not share. Can't you feel my arms embrace you?”

Payne quivered again filled with the knowing as the tears began to roll. And the tears began to wash out the crippling pain, both emotional and physical. It washed out like the cleansing of the world in a fresh spring rain. He had finally heard God's voice and now he could make his peace. Sure there would always be a place of hurting, a shrine of mourning, but Payne knew that he would now be alive again and have the capacity for joy. And the joy of having shared a son's life would at last be greater than that hollow place his passing had left behind.

Payne wept.