

(La Playa)

**There is a wall in Washington and it's made of cold black granite....**

**They say sixty thousand names are etched there in it....**

**In that wall in Washington ...**

Iris DeMent, folksinger

## **Washington DC – November 1996**

John Rawlings zipped his raincoat tightly under his chin as he walked through the wet mist towards the long, black wall. It was more of a double-ended wedge than a wall and it was never meant to hold back anything but it had been built to stand on this spot forever. Here and there other wet people were looking at the wall. Some just strolled through the mist while others looked with intensity. John knew exactly where he was going because he had been here many times before.

The black granite started low, just knee high and then rose in a straight line to its apex in the center. Etched into the stone in small and crowded lines were the names of over fifty-eight thousand men and women. Here was the roll call of the flower of America's youth from late-middle twentieth century. This was the book of the dead from the Vietnam War, the war that America lost.

Walking towards his destination, John he noticed a few memento's laying near the bottom of the wall. There weren't as many now as there had been a few years ago. It was late in the year and most of the tourists were home in their comfortable homes.

He remembered that first day, November of '84. There must have been 50,000 vets in the crowd that came for the dedication. Before then, the men and women who had served were made to feel ashamed that they had gone to south-east Asia to do their duty. They had been called baby-killers and worst by the unwashed masses of anti war protesters.

These men and women who had gave so much, not because they believed that it was right but just because they did what their country asked. In the end, the anti war rabble would have been shocked if they had realized that most of the military had the same opinion of the war as they did. Both sides of this civil strife were right and wrong. Still, through the sixties and seventies most men and women didn't list their tour of duty in Vietnam on their résumé.

On the day of the dedication there were thousands of boony hats and fatigue and flights jackets. John had found and wore his beat-up old baseball cap that proclaimed that the 389<sup>th</sup> TAC Fighter Squadron was represented. For years he had worn a tiny American flag in his buttonhole and, when asked, he proudly proclaimed that he had served and that he had done his duty. In his profession it was important to appear patriotic, so he, like so

many before him had wrapped himself in the flag and had proclaimed that the time for dissention had past and the time for healing had come.

Something caught his eye at the base of the wall. He picked up a note rolled around a faded ribbon. He found a photo of a young man in a flying suit. The ribbon was attached to a Silver Star. It was a very high award that was only given for valor and bravery. Things like this were commonly found here. Thousand of medals, flags and odd bits of memorabilia from the war had been left at the Wall. The Park Service collected and cataloged them and storied them away with the dignity that they deserved. No one had ever said what they planed to do with them but it was implied that as long as they kept coming they would be cared for.

He found the name that he had come for. It was halfway through the names from 1968. He touched it and thought the old thoughts. He thought of the good and happy times and the laughter and love, he wanted to stop there but the other thoughts flooded in. These thoughts brought sadness and hurt and pain, and anger. They were filled with fire and smoke and fear and sudden death and the desperate desire to survive.

He had come to say goodbye, he had enough of Washington with its bad weather and bad politics and all of the crap that he had put up with for the last fourteen years. He was going home to California and he was going soon. He hoped that this would be the last time that he came to the Wall but he knew in his heart that if he never stepped foot here again he would always remember it.

He walked back through the mist to a black limousine that was waiting in a no-parking zone. As he approached, a driver in a black uniform jumped out and held the door for him.

“Let me toss that wet coat in the trunk, Congressman. The car was warm and, hopefully, the traffic will have thinned out by now”

“Thanks Charley” John said handing over the soggy coat and sat in the back. On the seat was a pile of work that he had intended to do during the drive to Virginia. As the car pulled into traffic John took the first folder from the stack and started to read but he couldn’t concentrate. He was thinking of the Wall and his soon-to-end job and home in California.

How free they had been in that little beach town on the clean and beautiful Pacific, how young and naive they were. If they had only known what the future held they wouldn’t have been in such a rush to grow up.