

Missing

1 MAY, 1505 HOURS. I have one hell of a time finding my brother. Partly because he's divorced. Sally, my ex-sister-in-law, don't know squat about where Ronnie is. Today I finally get her on the phone. She ain't seen him and don't wanna talk. She's on her way out, says she's seein' a therapist. Losin' Ronnie, she says, is like him dyin'. She's goin' through a grievin' process now and don't want it interrupted. I can practically hear her door close before she hangs up on me. So I'm standin' at this pay phone holdin' the line and it's dead. I can hear it's dead even over the shift change at the plant with non-stop traffic both directions through the gate and for a minute I forget am I goin' in or comin' out?

16 JUNE 2245 HOURS. I don't give up easy on my brother. If he can be found, I'll find him. I had a lot of practice somewhere's tougher'n this. Sittin' round the apartment, I have a few beers and I get on the phone again. Buddies he hangs out with haven't seen him. Plus some a them I can't find. They moved or had their phones disconnected, got fired, somethin' or other. I get a hold a one and his voice breaks up like it's a loose connection. I call back. The phone rings and rings but he don't answer, he's gone. Then I get some ole boy Ronnie knew in the service and he's solid. Tells me last time he saw my brother was two weeks ago and he looked sick. Face all broken out, sweat drippin' off him soaked his shirt clear through. And I'm sayin', "Ronnie? We talkin'

about the same guy here? My brother?" And he tells me yeah he don't look the same. And I say, "How would I know? I ain't seen him. That's the whole problem." But he don't know nothin' else so I hang up. It's real quiet. I'm sittin' here thinkin' I oughta' take out the garbage except it's kinda late. I hear a toilet flush upstairs.

4 JULY 1225 HOURS. I get to thinkin' even though it's a holiday I'll call the VA and I do. First off I get into one of these new voice mail deals, you know the if you want this then punch that and so on? Course they never say if you want your brother push seven or whatever. Finally I get to talk to somebody who sounds like they might be live. But the guy's a real tight ass. The VA is hush hush anyways. They don't wanna say nothin' over the phone even to next a kin. They got policies, they got rules, they got federal laws. With them everything is confidential. Then I let 'em know I appreciate that because I'm a Vietnam Era Veteran so now they know its not just family but FAMILY askin'. So this guy says put it in writing what I want to know and give my full name and service number and date of separation. He says somethin' else, too, but I don't catch it 'cause a fight breaks out behind me where two guys been standin' at the bar arguin' over whether we lost the war and I have to give 'em my opinion. When I get back to the phone, the guy ain't there no more.

13 AUGUST 2150 HOURS. I ain't heard nothin' back from the VA in all this time. Ronnie he ain't turned up neither. Meanwhile I hear through the grapevine Sally's gettin' married again. And it ain't to my brother. She's marryin' her therapist so I guess she's through her process of grievin'. Me, I ain't even started yet. I'm pissed. I call up the VA again. This time it's some slow talkin' black woman who practically takes a week tellin' me I reached the VA, her name and can she help me. So I tell her what I want and what I already done to get it and

I ain't heard nothin' and all this takes a long time. She's goin' unhuh, unhuh, unhuh like she ain't really listenin' plus I can hear she's typin' on her computer the whole time clicky click clicky click. It ain't puttin' me in a good mood. I finish and she tells me there's a Ronald D. McKay listed as a patient in oncology at the Providence VA Hospital. So I say, "I thought you wasn't supposed to tell me nothin' over the phone. That's why I had to write the letter. That's why I been waitin'." And she tells me she's a temp. And I tell her thank you very much and ain't we all these days? When I hang up the pay phone, I can see I'm standin' in water from where one of the washin' machines leaked behind me. Across the room my laundry spins round and round in the third dryer and I'm wonderin' how much time I got left when all of a sudden it stops.

2210 HOURS. I get in the truck thinkin' my luck has changed. Like in-country you'd know some days was lucky, just felt it. I feel that way now. And that's the time to be careful because there's a million booby traps out there waitin' to fuck you up. Like we'd take the PBR in one a those little canals along the Bassac River or into the Rung Sat meanin' Forest of Assassins and maybe see a rucksack on a bank and know we was close to findin' somebody MIA but wouldn't touch it. Best thing, the old man'd say, would be pump a few rounds into it with the .50 caliber, see if it was gonna explode. An' I was the gunner so I had to go forward an' do it. Same thing with the floaters, just sink 'em an' go ahead. So by this time it's a habit.

I'm real careful. I wanna put the hammer down, but I do the double nickle all the way up Interstate 95. I can't get stopped now and miss visitor's. But it's a traffic jam where they're repairin' the 117 bridge which somebody, not the DOT, saw a big hole in drivin' to work last week. Whole thing was about to fall in an' nobody in

charge knew about it. Now they're workin' on it night and day and the rest of us down to one lane, real lucky to be gettin' through at all.

2250 HOURS. I turn in the lot, first thing I see is a guardhouse with some cop standin' beside it. Not even a real cop, a rent-a-cop, Wackinhut, somethin' like that. He holds up his hand like stop. I stop. He's sees I ain't got a permit. Gotta have a permit to park there. It's a staff lot. He orders me round the side entrance says visitors and outpatients. Okay by me. I followed orders before. I figure I'm gonna change Ronnie's status, upgrade him to an outpatient, take him home. I didn't wait this long to find my brother and not try to take him home. He ain't gonna be like some a those guys I had to leave behind. This side lot don't have no guard, just one a them bars. You push on a button and this thing looks like it sticks its tongue out gives you a ticket and the bar goes up and you go in and find you a place. I punch the button with a fist and take the ticket but the bar don't go up and this thing's buzzin' in my ear like an alarm clock. Funny, ain't it, little things like this? Stack 'em up and they get big. I got my ticket so I drive on through. The bar don't wanna do what it's supposed to, it ain't my fault. Little wooden rail painted white with black cross hatching like the one drops down at railroad crossings. Snap, it's gone. Then I see the lot's full anyways. I circle round and round, wait a little longer. The hell with it. There ain't any spaces so I drive up on the grass, park near a fire hydrant. I set the brake real hard on the pickup and put the alarm on. They wanna tow me outta here they're gonna have to wake up everybody.

2255 HOURS. I cross the lot and step over the curb. They got these lines painted on the walk, different colors lead to different doors where the departments are. Green is visitor's. Red is outpatients. I try the green. Before you can say open sez me this whole glass wall slides

back, a double-wide door on automatic. Whoosh and thank you very much, guess what, I'm still in a waitin' room. But it's very nice. I mean potted plants and sofas look like you could sleep on 'em and ceramic tiles white as baby's teeth and I'm standin' on this blood red carpet leads up to a long high counter made a polished chrome. It makes you feel special but you ain't. It makes you think you're gettin' somewheres but never happen. Once you get to the counter you find out it's a stonewall. Looks like a mirror but it's a wall. There's one guy at the counter got a crew cut and a white shirt and striped tie looks ex-military. I tell him I know it's past visitor's but it's my brother been lost and I been tryin' to find him, seems like forever since he got back in the world and he don't have no more wife waitin' for him 'cause she up and divorced him while he was in-country and I'm the only family he's got left and I wanna see he's gonna be all right not missin' no more. First thing is the guy looks up at me and he's got rimless glasses on catch the light and throw it back in my face. It looks like he don't have no eyes plus he's makin' me temporarily blind everytime he turns my way which he acts like ain't gonna be much longer. Guy won't even verify they got a Ronald D. McKay in the hospital. I keep workin' on him, bring up his tattoo. A blue anchor on his right forearm just above the wrist shows because his cuffs are rolled up like he's gonna get right to work. Yeah, don't mean nuthin'! So I says, "Was you ever in the service?" And he tells me no. And I volunteer I was in the Nam because I'm thinkin' maybe he's one a those guys doesn't want to admit he lost a war. I says, "Don't shit me, pal, I was a Gunner's Mate and I know a Navy anchor when I see one. And he tells me it ain't the Navy anchor. It's one a them anchors like on the state seal and stands for hope. So I says, "Gimme a break here. My brother's like MIA and I'm

here hopin' he's still alive." And this guy tells me you and everybody else.

2315 HOURS. I'm really pissed now. I go back out to my truck and ain't nobody touched it so I climb inside and change into a pair of heavy duty blue coveralls I wear down at Quonset Point where I weld submarine hulls. They got a few burn holes but nobody's gonna see that. I get a pen and a clipboard from under the seat. Before I get out I clip my Electric Boat picture ID to the pocket. Red letters over my face say "Security Clearance." I put on a pair of safety glasses and my Red Sox cap, lock the truck back up and set the alarm again. This time I follow the red line to the outpatient's. Whoosh and thank you very much. I walk past a registration desk, two nurses and a Wackinhut night watchman on my way to the elevators. They don't see me; it's like I'm the one missin'.

2335 HOURS. Oncology's on seven. Why can't they just say cancer? Probably afraid to. I pretend I'm loggin' in the time on the clipboard while I wait for a car. Up on seven the night duty nurse's hard core. I step out, and she gives me a tight little frown, wants to know what I think I'm doin' because visiting hours are over and so forth and so on. So I say "Lady, I ain't just visitin'. I'm workin' on vet stuff. *I'm* a vet. I'm part a the outfit." She don't believe me so my badge don't matter. She reaches for her phone to run a security check on me. So I says "check this" and I rip the phone cord out and start down the hall. She comes right after me snatchin' at one arm and then the other and I keep shakin' her off explain' how I've come to find my brother. But she won't let up and I have to stuff her inna mop closet which ain't easy because she weighs about 250 and the first couple times I try to shut the door there's somethin' extra hangin' out. So the third time I give her a shot in the chops and she

sinks right back outta sight. I figure this ain't gonna take too much longer so I don't try to lock the door.

2345 HOURS. They got these slide-in name plates beside the doors. Fifth one down on the left says McKay in black. The door's stuck but I put my shoulder into it and it pops open like a spring-loaded coffin so I go in. That smell hits me, you know what I mean? Blood and chemicals. And I don't see nobody in there looks like my brother, just this bloated up gas bag under dingy lookin' sheets you'd wanna wash even if all you was gonna do was bury somebody in 'em. There's a rack beside the bed with a bunch a tubes look like water snakes runnin under the sheet. This guy raises up and says, "Shoot me, Dickie. I want you to shoot me."

And I say "Ronnie, is that you, Ronnie? Man, I can't shoot you. You're my brother."

He just paddles his hands in the air like he's floatin' away from me. He says, "Jesus, Dickie, look at me will ya? I remind you a anything?" And I shake my head no, but he does. We both know it. I reach for his hand but he draws it back an' the rack fulla tubes rattles. "Don't touch," he says. "Don't touch my hand. Don't touch nuthin'." Then, he relaxes just a minute, puts on a smile looks painted. "Reminds me of a riddle," he goes on. "Why can't lepers play poker?" Ronnie raises his head; it's fulla big boils like the worst acne you ever seen. "Because they keep throwin' in their hands." I tell him the joke ain't funny. Ronnie tells me it's time to throw in his hand, that he made it back to the world like he promised but he didn't say how long he was gonna stay. I tell him he's gonna make it because he's way tougher than me; he's a Marine. For Christ's sake, he drank agent orange for breakfast and I was just a swabby. He says, "Take a look, brother, it's bloated me up to where I could explode."

I say "don't talk that way, Ronnie. You wasn't ever supposed to say nothin' about that. I been worried sick about you bein' missin' and now I found you and I'm sorry."

"Funny ain't it, he says, "I mean how it turns around on you? You go up and down all them canals cuttin' through a god damn jungle findin' MIAs and you can't even find your own brother in your own hometown?"

"Ronnie," I say, "don't talk no more shit. I found you. I'm here ain't I? It took me a few months 'cause I got the runaround like nobody's business. Your wife ain't seen you. Pardon me, ex-wife. Your buddies ain't seen you. Only one guy seen you and he told me you didn't even look like you no more. But I still find you. I'm takin' you home. Your family, which is only me now, needs you." He passes out while I'm talkin'.

0000 HOURS. My brother comes to. I'm waitin' for him. He stares at me a minute. Finally, he looks over toward the wall. He says, "I'm like one a them floaters. All bloated up. Reach out with a boat hook, try to pull 'em in and an arm'd come off, a leg, somethin', you said. Everything's a booby trap. You remember."

I smooth the sheet down and lean over my brother smellin' death, "Don't say no more, Ronnie. I told you that's classified."

He goes on but his voice's gettin' real faint, "You can't tell who they are; they ain't really nobody no more; you turn the .50 caliber on 'em and they sink. How long you think their families been waitin' to know about them MIAs, Dickie?"

I don't want to say. I know it's a long time.

And he says, "And you know."

I straighten up, "I know."

"Dickie," my brother says, "I want you should shoot me too, just don't keep it no secret this time."

Course, I can't shoot my brother. Not in the world. It ain't no Forest of Assassins. So, I decide. No way I'm keepin' this MIA thing a secret no more. So, I start to feel like I'm back in the world, too. I know it when I hear all them footsteps comin' to find me. They're just outside the room where I'm standin', lookin' at my missing brother. □