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Two Fictions

from *The Indochina Safari*

One Rainy Day

It's been raining for thirty-one days straight. I know this because I've checked off each day on the back of the quad map, kept half-assed dry in the plastic case under my flak jacket, along with the smokes and matches. I also know this because the new man's come back.

He's our medical miracle man. A month ago to this day he was taking a leak when a sniper shot the tip of his penis off. This morning he rode up on the supply chopper and jumped out into the mud, where we gathered around him. He pulled down his pants and unswathed the bandage around his cock. "Better than ever now . . . Do you believe it? . . . They gave me an extra inch!" he said, his voice on the edge of hysteria, trying to belong, terrified at being back.

Red comes up to find out what the to-do's about, sees the man exposing his plastic surgery, and gives him his new name on the spot—"Hey, 'Rebuild', welcome back to the safari."

Most of us don't know each other's real names. What we do know is nicknames—that's what we use for working names. We've got a new "Rebuild" and we've got an old "Lopsided Man," called such because one cheek of his ass was planed off by a hunk of shrapnel.

He lost his brother here. He keeps extending, for revenge. He's here for the duration. We've also got a guy called "Cleaver," not because he's a member of that TV family, but because what he did to a prisoner with a machete, after most of us busted out of an ambush, but some of us didn't. We've got a "*Mister* Fuck You To You," not to be confused with "Comin' and Goin', " who's got "Fuck You" in block letters on the front of his helmet and "Fuck You Too" on the back. Of course, we've got a "Short Round"; the smallest guy in every outfit is called that. Then there's Red, big and hairy, raw-boned, carrot-top Red, probably called that from his first day out of his mother.

My own name here is "Watcher," short for "Watch Where You Put Your Damned Feet." It was Red who gave me the name, and on my first day, or night as it was, after I knee-walked my way through the mud on the Liberty Road, to take a piss in a dark grove of trees, and stepped on a Bouncin' Betty mine which, Praise God, had a wet fuse and only hissed at me, smoke rising acrid to my nostrils, instead of the grenade that was meant to. It was Red who snagged me off my one-legged perch, to whom I said "Jesus!" and he said, "not yet boy. I'm just your lieutenant . . . call me 'Red.' "

Only the Captain calls us each by our given names. Of course, even then, rank replaces first names, making for distance, you might say. It was our corpsman, AppleBee, who gave me the key to the puzzle. The lesson occurred just before the rains began. I was with him, with a squad for security, and an interpreter, at the Bru village five clicks—kilometers—west of the hill.

Flies were floating across sunbeams lancing through the trees, too lazy to buzz. A wavery green light filtered down from the canopies above, making a tattooed yellow bumblebee shimmer on a tattooed ever-ripe apple on the sun-browned branch of Applebee's upper

arm. He was treating men, women, and kids in his open-air surgery—a reed mat on the baked-red ground for an operating table—for malaria and worms, and for shrapnel wounds. He even pulled a bullet out of an old man's chest—the bullet had come through his armpit and hung up under the skin above his heart.

AppleBee was squatting on his heels, examining his last patient Bru, a little bare-butt baby with a boil half the size of a grapefruit on his head. I was helping the baby's mother to hold him on the mat while AppleBee eyeballed the boil. I turned to the interpreter off to one side of us and said, "Ask her what's her baby's name?"

He speaks to her, her looking away from me, looking at her baby; then she shakes her head, like she's saying "No."

AppleBee speaks up. "I can tell you the answer," he says, painting the boil with red antiseptic. "He doesn't have a name . . . here, hold his head steady now."

"No name? How come?"

"About three-quarters of their kids," he says, pulling a scalpel from his bag, "they die before they turn sixteen. So they don't even name them until they're a couple of years old, and then they give them names like 'Stupid' or 'Ugly' or 'Worthless.' "

The interpreter, watching us with his flat eyes, clips out a word, "Moi!" and spits to the side.

The mother quick-turns his face away from him like she's been slapped. Applebee's face darkens. He says something, in a tight voice, to the interpreter, who looks up at the trees like he can't be bothered with this mother, or with us.

"What's he say?"

AppleBee responds: "He says they're savages. Maybe they are, at that. But it makes sense if you see it like they do, that the whole world is full of spirits: in the trees, in the rocks, in the river, in the animals, even in the

people. Good spirits and bad spirits. They're trying to fool the evil spirits out for the kids' souls. And when an evil spirit gets its due, when a kid dies, they dig a pit and put a sharpened stake in it, and throw the child hard onto the stake."

"Jesus!"

"They have to do it, the way they believe the world is, to pin down the spirit within the baby's body—to keep it from roaming around, causing more grief."

"What could be worse than losing a child?"

"Oh, for example, all the children of the village dying, say from an epidemic."

"Shit."

"Yep, and that's why they try not to love them too much when they're little. Watch yourself," he says, making an incision, an equator across the boil, little beads of pus appearing on the cut. Then he presses his hands around the boil and squeezes it hard. The pus shoots up like a geyser, the baby squalls, and the mother pulls the baby to her breast, making cooing noises to it. AppleBee starts taping gauze on its head. "I don't think this mom's being very successful," I say, "at not loving this baby."

That's how it came to me, the secret to it, the method to our madness: when somebody we know dies, we won't grieve them so, not knowing their true names, given them by those who love them. "Do what you know what to do" seems a good enough plan when you don't have a better one, but "you become what you do" is the small print to it. All that's for later, though; right now we're dealing with the rain and the mud and the North Vietnamese Army.

The clothes are rotting off us and it's cold at night in these mountains. A man had to have his foot amputated in the regimental surgery yesterday. It was rotted from trench foot, from the constant wet. We're all of us

getting loopy in the rain, minds, as well as bodies, breaking down. A few nights ago, a replacement in my squad cried through the night in fear, in the cold rain. I turned over in my fighting hole, half-filled with water, trying to shut him out so I could sleep awhile, got confused in a bad dream's turning, and damned near drowned upside down. In the morning, the replacement man told me he was too scared to be here—would I break his arm so he could go home? So I did, axing a rifle stock down on his upper arm, laid on a sandbag. They'll have to pin it together; he won't be back. Better not to have a man so frightened here. That I know, but I still feel like dog shit about hurting one of our own.

Only the rats thrive up here, eating on the dead catacombed beneath us, leftovers from the battle for the hill. They've grown big and sleek as cats. Nobody's been able to shoot one yet, when they race over the parapets of the trenches, before they slip-slide into their holes. Regiment sent up word last week that some of them are carrying fleas with bubonic plague. Along with the word, Regiment sent up cases of booster shots, with needles made for horses, making for a herd of sore asses. And Regiment, bless them, sent up a bunch of live traps—"Have-A-Hearts"—to catch the rats. The traps work good; we're catching rats and burning the bastards with a flame thrower.

We're so soggy that the skin peels from our arms and legs like wet paper, leaving the under-skin looking whiter than chalk; the only color on us comes from the green leeches and the blood they engorge. I've been wearing sandbags, wrapped like puttees around my legs, but they don't stop the leeches from crawling up from the mud or from dropping down my shirt from the dripping trees.

This morning we're all squatting in the mud, eating C-rations, the cans heated by lit globs of C-4 explo-

sive. Raindrops are plopping in the open cans of Scrambled Eggs and Ham and—"Motherfuckers"—Lima Beans. The smell of the mess is sick-sweet in the thick air. We're all smoking cigarettes too. They're Camels and Lucky Strikes, bone-dry from the vacuum-sealed bags, just short enough to stay dry for awhile, under the lips of the helmets.

I find a short pack of Luckies, dated 1943, in my C-rat box, and am using the cherry on the butt of one to burn off a few leeches, four on my legs and one—I can see it through the rot-out in the crotch of the pants—wrapped around my cock, right behind the circumcision ridge, like a dark green 'O' ring. "Cocksucker!" I yell out, not really worried about it, more offended than harmed. The leech sizzles to the ground, where I stomp it with my boot, the blood it's taken from me pooling in the mud. Nobody pays me any mind, except Rebuild, who's shuddering. I don't think he's going to make it.

The enemy, we know, is using the weather to mass across the border, bringing up heavy weapons and divisions of men, under cover of the rain. Last week, a TV news crew flew up to the hill and interviewed some S-2 major we'd never seen. "Isn't the situation and terrain here like it was at Dien Bien Phu?," the newsman asks.

"Oh no," says the PR major, "nothing like it. We've got air power the French never dreamed of." I look up. The cloud ceiling's maybe forty feet, visibility's zip.

Our general, so I hear, told the news people that what's up is same-old same-old: "men hunting each other in the green gloom of the forest." The Captain was less poetic about it when he talked to us, a platoon at a time: "We've built up to nine hundred men—a company apiece to hold these hills, the rest to protect the air strip. They want to push us off the hills and kill us in the valley. Let's say they're like a tiger. There's two ways to

kill a tiger—drive him with beaters towards the guns, or stake a goat to draw him to the killing ground. The powers that be have decreed that we're the goat. But they never told me we couldn't stretch our rope and patrol a bit. Let us go find out where that tiger's coming from."

So we patrolled, in a reaching fan toward the Da Krong river, where we figured they were infiltrating across. "Better to be on the move when you're wet than just sitting around like hoboes in it," said Red, "anyway, you all smell like goats already."

The rain is sheeting and the wind is flapping and furling the ponchos around our bodies. Rebuild is yelling "I can't take it, get me out of here!" I turn to see him jam his rifle, barrel first, into the mud, then commence to tear off his boots and then his clothes, crying "get me out, get me out of here!" Now Red is talking to him, calmly, like to a child: "Oh, Rebuild, you're just out of shape. Too much dry-rack time and ice cream on that Repose hospital ship. Gotta be in shape for being pissed on every day and every night. Some of you guys look out of shape too," he says, looking at us, "time for a little PT." So he lines us up in a ragged formation and has us lay our rifles on our packs, then do jumping jacks and push-ups. "Thousands of them," he says, just like we did in boot camp, but here we're in the mud. None of us seem to mind, for Red's doing them too, and the exercise is warming us. Rebuild, his desire to belong greater than his fear, or maybe his body's just responding to the familiar movements, joins us in the calisthenics. Red calls a halt and says, like he's just noticed the naked man, "Rebuild, where are your clothes?" So Rebuild puts them back on, moving like he's been medicated. Red gives him some machine-gun belts to carry and slings the rifle across his chest, cinching it tight.

The platoon has moved about a half click away from the hill. Red splits it in threes, one squad veering

slightly left, one right. Red comes with mine, which runs up and ahead through the middle. The plan is to rejoin before dark and set up night ambushes.

We've been crossing swollen streams all morning, moving up and down slippery slopes, and through swales of elephant grass, paper-cutting our skins. I'm being chief paranoid today—out at point, not trusting anybody else to read the signs—when I come upon a ditch. It's hedged for thirty feet with punjii stakes on each side, planted a hand span apart, facing in, looking like the inward-pulling teeth of a giant gar. Too obvious to my eye—the trap's not hidden, nor are the stakes tipped with feces, like they usually are, for the infection after penetration. They're a feint. "Pass the word back to Red, tell him the danger's not here," I say. "Look to the sides." Too late, though, for I hear a heavy metal snap, then a man screaming like an impaled beast. Rebuild's on the left slope of the ditch, caught in a steel animal trap, the jaws closed below his knee. The trap's four feet long at the base, with foot and a half hemispheres for jaws, teeth as big as thumbs.

"Don't let him move," I yell, "I think there's more to it!" No evidence for it, I just know it. Red's already grabbed him, hugging him upright, him jerking, trying to get away from Red, away from fate, but Red and the trap are holding him in place. He's screaming "cut it off, cut my fucking leg off!" AppleBee has tied a tourniquet on him and is spiking morphine syringes in him, like flags up his thigh, the arterial blood painting AppleBee's face as he works. More men come to hold up Rebuild, maybe less from altruism than from Red's "Goddammit, get your asses up here!" Rebuild's crying out now for three gods to assist him: the first one he ever knew—"mother, ma it hurts"; then the one learned in Sunday school, "Christ, help me"; and finally the last one, the one all of

us meet when hope is gone,"God, oh God, oh God." Then it's only an animal whimper comes from him.

I look along the anchor chain, of four-inch steel links, and see a wire running from it, taut, disappearing in the ground. Probing with the bayonet and digging with my hands, I uncover the nose of a thousand-pound bomb and look at Red, and AppleBee, and Rebuild bleeding in the trap and the other men holding him skyward—all together it's like they're raising again the flag on old Mount Surabachi.

Taking the bayonet now, I voice a communal prayer, "Just, Christ's sakes, don't let him pull it," and pry between the closed jaws, forcing an opening, while AppleBee cuts through the splintered bone, another man jamming in a rifle stock, then he and I pull the jaws apart, dividing out attentions between the wire and each other's hands on the jaws, slippery with Rebuild's blood and urine. It takes all our strength to re-cock the trap, the sheared leg falling sideways onto the ground. Then Red is pulling him straight up and across his shoulders, trussing his forearms and one good leg with his hand, racing with him down slope through the tall grass, Rebuild's head bouncing, open-jawed and roll-eyed on Red's back, the bloody shatter of his leg thrust to one side. AppleBee is hustling to keep up with them. The other men are backing away, then running to get a hill between them and the bomb. That leaves me sitting on the muddy ground alone, elbows on my knees, beneath the leaden sky, to look at the booted leg left behind and the symbol raised on the reddened trip pan of the trap—the double-barred cross of Saint Lorraine, patron saint of traveling Frenchmen. So I just sit there for awhile, resisting the impulse to kick the goddamn thing and get it over with, until the whole of it comes to me: just pour bronze on all of us trying to free poor Rebuild from the trap, booby-trapped to the bomb. We're caught in a

French-made trap, finishing some French colonial dream, fighting a goddamned Frog-made war. Make this scene our memorial. ❑

A King of Sparta

Common beliefs are that every hillbilly boy has carnal knowledge of his sister and can shoot the eye out of a squirrel in the top of a tree. Not me—my mother wouldn't let me hold a weapon, 'cause she lost her father in a gun fight. I had no sisters neither.

I learned to shoot in Sparta. I don't mean that Greek place—I mean the American version of it, the Marine Corps boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina.

I survived the first few months there by keeping my mouth shut and, when standing at attention for hours in the barracks, with drill instructors screaming in my face, by focusing over their Smokey-bear campaign hats onto a nail head in the opposite Quonset wall. On such little things does sanity hinge. The rifle gunny arrived in our lives the day after somebody finally wiped it off, for it turned out to be just a spot on the wall. So I was a little crazy when he gave his first lesson; maybe that's why I dared to do what I did.

Schmidt, Payne, and Rhodes were the platoon drill instructors, DI's for short. Sergeant Schmidt was senior of the three and was the one who most had physical toughness down. A chain smoker, he could still run us all to ground. Sergeant Schmidt's way with those who bucked him was to take them behind the barracks; you wanted to do things right to please Sergeant Schmidt.

Sergeant Payne was from Kentucky and looked like a state trooper, with his round honest face and his jug ears. He could sing cadence in a gandy-dancing chant that would make the mob of us settle down and move as one, make us want to march forever. "Aud a leff . . . hun, too, tree . . . aud a leff . . ."—that's how Payne's

singing came to our ears, just like the sweet sound of hounds arooing over misty green hills.

It was Corporal Rhodes you had to watch, a little because he was just a Corporal and had to prove himself to Sergeants Schmidt and Payne, a lot because he was a rabbit-punching man, a petty bully whose eyes were always searching for opportunities to put you down. An overseer born, that was Corporal Rhodes. A few years before us, a DI marched a platoon into one of the salt-water sloughs on the island. Six recruits in the front ranks drowned, casualties to blind obedience. It was a guy like Corporal Rhodes who bulldogged them into death.

Rhodes had us that afternoon. He herded us into the weapons shed for the first meeting with the rifle gunny, ragging us as he did, for being "too slow, too stupid to be Marines." Stiff-backed on the rows of hardwood benches, eyes to the front we were, Rhodes striding the aisles with his cock-of-the-walk strut, when the man came through the door. He wore the same kind of green utilities the other DI's wore and a campaign hat and boots and because it was raining, a utility jacket. But the resemblance stopped right there. Their utilities were triple starched and their boots were shined bright enough to reflect your face should you be foolish enough to look down there. His clothes were more like the other name for them—fatigues—and his footgear was old WWII horse-hide boots, rough out, buckles on the side. His campaign hat had no jaunty tilt to it either, like Rhodes' did, but was bent down a bit in front, like he wore it more to keep the sun and rain—and snow—out of his eyes. The stripes on the jacket—two rockers up, three chevrons down—gave his rank: Gunnery Sergeant. The name on the breast of the jacket read: KING.

He made Rhodes look like what he was—a barracks Marine, best for squared-away and swagger, for

hustling women, barroom brawling, and scaring civilians. The rifle gunny had no strut to him at all; there was more of a slouch to him as he came through the door. But his eyes tracked over the whole place right away, before he looked directly at any of us. When he turned his head a little, you could see a pucker scar in the side of his neck, mark of a bullet's entry. All eyes and ears were on him.

He held the rifle above him like a Comanche. We hung on his words and were vexed as Moses by their brevity: "This is the M-14 7.62mm rifle. It is a magazine-fed, gas-operated shoulder weapon. It has a maximum range of 1500 feet and a muzzle velocity of 2800 feet per second. Its purpose, which is yours, is to kill our country's enemies. To that end you will learn to be one with it. But you will not touch it until you are strong enough to hold it right. You will not fire it until you can service it. And, you will keep it clean. Are there any questions?"

No one dared to speak but me, who had just one question, a burning one. I stood and braced and yelled it out: "Gunnery Sergeant, the recruit wishes to ask: In Korea, did you know my father? He was a Marine who died there, maybe he was a friend of yours?"

Who'd ask such questions of a god? A dark cloud crossed over his face. Then he scathed me with his eyes, spun on his heels, and strode out the door of the weapons shed, leaving me afloat in a lagoon of carp-mouthed recruits, and the barracuda Corporal Rhodes, who was quick at my side, hands on his hips, leaning from his waist into my ear, saying, "Oh, you're a sweet turd, aren't you?"

Seventy-four Musketeers were we, all for one and one for all, meaning when one screws up, all pay. Corporal Rhodes led us on a "little run" as punishment for my impetuous mouth. With full field packs on, he ran us

until the sun went down, and boys went down, their faces in the dirt, or in their own vomit; one keeled onto his side, like a stroked old man. From the looks I caught, I knew that I'd be visited after lights out by the platoon plug-uglies, Rhode's little buddies, who liked to cram malefactors like me into footlockers and throw us down the stairs, or out a second story window. Maybe I'd even be blessed by a visit from the company enforcer.

They say that the Marine Corps fills its ranks with bullies and mamas' boys, but they don't tell you about circus freaks like this six-five coonass troglodyte, a guy with dull yellow eyes, whose paws the DI's cannot train to lay like a human hand along the seam of his pants and whose lumber they cannot civilize into a march step, a monster whose way is to skulk at night in the head—the big-tiled bathroom—sitting atop a shitter like a gargoyle, 'til you come in to piss, and snap you up quick as an ape with his unnatural-long arms, grab your head behind the neck with one paw, and beat your face to farina with the other. My mother raised no fool—I slept that night with an entrenching tool. I kept my piss 'til morning.

The following two weeks were what the rifle gunny promised. There were days of pushups to strengthen the upper body, watched by our arms-crossed, cleft-chinned Master of Physical Fitness, Sergeant Schmidt, and sung to by our tireless crooner, Sergeant Payne, in open-air concert and in our private ears: "Up . . . Down . . . Up . . . Down . . . Come On Ladies! . . . Up! . . . Up! . . . Up!" "Strength Training," they call it. I call it the pain of men aping donkey engines.

And there were nights of consequences, for the specks of dirt on rifles, that only the superior eye of Corporal Rhodes could see. "Yes . . . looks like a boulder in this barrel, puke," he'd say to some unclean one, hitting him hard in the chest with the rifle. Then he'd make us Musketeers do punishment drill: two footlockers stacked

in front of each pair of us, with galvanized buckets over our heads, we did a dunce's dance: "Step up, one . . . two . . . Clang! . . . Step down, one . . . two . . . Step up, one, two . . . Clang!" Every "Clang!" of those long nights was the sound of buckets hitting the overhead water pipes, every dull "thud" after lights out was the sound of private tutorials in the head.

Then came the bending of our bodies to the bow, the learning of the firing positions, which meant days of dry firing, in prone and offhand (meaning standing), sitting and kneeling, the last two being exercises for contortionists. Always done with thumb knuckles locked in cheek sockets, the exercises built calluses in strange places. Some anthropologist is going to spread our bones on a sorting table one day, and pass his hands over their peculiarities—the worn out rotators in our shoulders from the push-ups, the hairline fractures in the crowns of our skulls from unnatural use of buckets, and the calcium knobs on our cheekbones and on our index fingers—and puzzle until he works it out: "Ditch diggers? Spearmen? Archers? Ah, yes, recruits from the rifle range."

Finally it arrived, the morning to fire the rifle, at one and two and five hundred yards. There were no "Maggie's Drawers" for me, no red disk on a stick held up from the target butts to indicate a clean miss, for all my rounds were in the black.

I stand up with the rifle and a grin, and turn around to find Corporal Rhodes. "Well, well, my hillbilly shitbird," he says, "my curious one. I see you did not pull back the bolt," all sung in a falsetto tone. Rhodes has got me. Though I know the rifle's empty of rounds, it's a serious infraction on the range to not clear your bolt. "Ten Hut!," he snaps. "Port Arms . . . double time . . . Harch!" he barks, and trots behind me, dogging my heels to beside the barracks, where he snaps me to atten-

tion, next to the pull-up bar. Nobody's around. There's a sign on the side of the barracks, black on red, exhorting me: THE MORE YOU SWEAT IN PEACE THE LESS YOU BLEED IN WAR.

"Thought I'd forget about you," says Rhodes, hands on his hips, pivoting around me, burning me with his eyes. "Oh no!," he exults, wheeling in front of me, his nose an inch from mine, "How could I fergit 'bout ewe? It's my job, see, herding sheep like ewe," snapping the last word and heeling me in the chest with a quick left hand, his right hand jerking back into a fist. I regain my balance and resume the position, back braced, eyes ahead. Rhodes opens up the fist, slow, puts his hands on his hips and renews his tight circling. He wheels in front of me and sizes me with his eyes, with his lower lip turned down, showing a row of little teeth—showing his disgust for me. A snap punch to the ribs makes my shoulders cave. I straighten up, again resume the position. Sweat trickles down my sides. Rhodes leans into my ear from behind, his breath hot on my neck.

"Your father? No telling who your father was, you inbred fuck. And there's nothin' I hate more than dufeless, dumbass, ignorant, inbred, fatherless fucks like you!"

Stung by the insult, I turn at him, but Rhodes hits me in a kidney, dropping me onto my knees and hands, the rifle smacking the packed dirt at the same time as my head, the front sight tearing a rip above one eye.

"Good!" says Rhodes, "Good!" happy that I've bit his bait, happy that I've wounded myself—he hasn't put a mark on me, see. He yanks my head back with both his hands and whispers in my ear: "Now make your dead father proud of you, stumpjumper, push that bolt back with your nose."

It's do it or beat him down with the rifle, knowing they'll get to me before I can escape the island; do it or

spend my life in a red-line Navy brig, having to ask permission to cross a line, permission to breathe, permission to live in a cage until I die. It's do it or shame my mother. I won't do that—I won't shame my mother.

I'm on my knees. Rhodes is standing in front of me, hands behind his back, his hat brim angled down at me. His eyes beneath the brim are sot with gleeful hatred.

My eyes, above my nose, fitted onto the steel thumb of the rod that draws the bolt, look upon the hard green crease of his trousers leg; my twisted face is reflected in the mirror shine of his boots.

There's ten pounds of pressure in the bolt spring, enough to callus the palm with use. The cartilage in my nose is breaking, my stomach turning with the crunch. Bubbles of blood and snot are blowing out my nose, falling from my blubbered lips, running in little snaky rills down the stock of the rifle, and pooling around the butt plate. "Ah, God," the "thunk" of metal slotting—the bolt is drawn.

I get up on my feet, using the rifle as a steady pole, and stand to attention. But Rhodes isn't through with me yet. "Get up on the cross," he says, jerking his head towards the pull-up bar, snatching the rifle from me. When I'm hung by my armpits from the bar, fingers clutching onto my belt to hold me there, Rhodes hangs the rifle by its sling beside me, spins it and slaps the barrel upside down. "You hang there until I get back," he says, and wheels away, wiping his hands as he goes from sight.

The sun is going down. My hands have purpled. I'm trying not to cry. There comes a voice from behind me: "You asked if I knew your father in Korea."

The rifle gunny moves beside the bar and slightly ahead, sparing me, I think, the shame of being seen like this. He's looking forward, like a man at a shore will

look out to sea, out past the horizon; then his eyes shift to the sign on the barracks wall, the one about sweating and bleeding. He reaches a hand to the stock of the rifle and turns it right side up. "There were a lot of good men who died there . . . in Korea," he says, his hand still on the rifle. He looks down, then up again at the sign. "When I got hit, I couldn't move. Some corpsmen dragged me through the snow and lifted me on top of a tank. It was stacked with dead Marines, already frozen stiff by the cold, like cordwood. Somehow I lived—they said that I died a few times, on the ship to Japan. When I was in hospital there, I got a postcard from the men in my platoon. They'd all signed it, those goofy bastards, on the front of it, across a picture of Santa and his reindeer, flying over a map of Korea." He gives out a short laugh . . . "How about that?"

Rhodes is walking around the corner of the barracks. He pulls up fast at the sight of the rifle gunny. The gunny continues: "While I was looking at it, a guy in the bed next to mine asked who'd sent it. So I told him what unit I was in." He looks up at the sky, like he's still seeing Santa and his reindeer flying high. Then he turns his head, looking me in the face, his eyes fiercely glistening. "He said that whole platoon was dead."

I look down at the ground beneath my dangling feet. When I raise my eyes, the rifle gunny's gazing out past the horizon again. "Maybe I did know your father, boy," he rasps, "maybe he was even a friend of mine . . . all my best friends are dead men." Then he shambles away, around the corner of the barracks, past Rhodes, who is tripping over his own feet, trying to get out of the rifle gunny's way.

There finally came the day to shoot for qualification. Though I never saw him look directly at me, I thought the rifle gunny might be watching, so I shot each round

as if he were looking over my shoulder. At the end of the day, when everyone had done their firing, Corporal Rhodes formed us up. Sergeants Schmidt and Payne and Gunnery Sergeant King moved off, leaving us with Rhodes. We thought maybe we'd hear our scores; instead, Rhodes told a joke: "A recruit's mother died while he was at the rifle range. The DI yelled out to him: 'Smith, your mother's dead!' The boot passed out. A Captain saw it happen, and told the DI to be more "sensitive " next time. So the next time a recruit's mother died, the DI drew the platoon up in formation and said: "All of you with mothers, one step forward . . . not you, Jones, get back!" Rhodes sniggers at his little joke. Most of the platoon smile, a few even chuckle aloud, but not me—I know you better watch out for Rhodes. "All right," he says, "with that in mind, all of you that qualified . . . one step forward, Harch!" The platoon moves as one. "Not you!" screams Rhodes, driving into the formation to face a man in the middle, striking his chest with the heels of his palms, again and again, bulling him outside the lines. "Not you!," he roars at another man, step-kicking him in the ass, driving him out also. "And for sure not you!" he hisses to another, knocking his soft cap off and slapping him about the face with it.

When Rhodes is finished with his culling, eight men are standing in a miserable cluster outside the ranks, looking scared and uncertain what to do. "We don't know you," says Rhodes with contempt and turns his back on them, closing up the ranks and moving us out in double time. I can hear them running out of step behind us, trying to keep up. One of them is crying.

Sergeants Schmidt and Payne and Gunnery Sergeant King are waiting for us beside the regimental flagpole. They've got their arms crossed on their chests. Sergeant Schmidt has a clipboard. He steps forward and reads off a paper to us: "The following have shot Expert,"

and he calls out the names, mine among them, making me proud, "these recruits scored Sharpshooter . . . these recruits scored Marksmen . . . congratulations to the high scorers." He steps back, beside and slightly behind Gunnery Sergeant King, who says this: "I will not say "congratulations" to you, for as Marines you are expected to be proficient with combat arms. In the war awaiting you, you will be proficient, or you will die." Then he stabs his finger at the band of unqualifiers who have followed us: "Put those failures on the ground, Corporal Payne."

Rhodes leaps to the task, forcing each man down, hard onto the ground. "Faces down, Corporal Rhodes," Gunnery Sergeant King demands, "for they are dead men. Look up at the flag," he commands us, and we look up at the big American flag. "These 'people,' " he says, pulling our eyes down to where Rhodes is kicking the unqualifiers onto their bellies with his boot, "these 'people' failed that flag. They failed to learn their weapon. That's why they are dead men. All of you," he intones, sweeping his arm across us, carving an arc in time, from Thermopylae to Vietnam, "all of you men, remember this: Do not fail your country!"

A stray wind whispering over the salt marshes stirs the flag, making it furl and crack, the dull, slow tapping of the halyard against the flagpole sounding like a dirge of shame. "Run the platoon over them, Corporal Rhodes," orders Gunnery Sergeant King, "have them step on them—they'll feel no pain, for they are dead men."

Rhodes runs us in a tight circle around the flagpole, over the prone men. Though we try to miss them, we soon tire with the relentless turnings and can't stop our boots from stomping on their bodies and on their heads. Every circuit that we make, we pass our grim-faced sergeants and our terrible King, red fury in his face. ❑