

Absent Without Leave

Robert Perron

Specialist Perez wished he had the dexterity to kick himself in the ass—so intent on impressing Lieutenant Quinn, he'd failed to grasp the aftermath. They'd been on an errand, Perez guiding their jeep along the potholed road back from division headquarters. Eyes ahead, Quinn said, "Fucking D'Amato, he's out a week now." The lieutenant talked like that, a flat voice, not looking at anyone, Perez never sure if he was being addressed, but ready with a reply.

"Bad news for him when he comes back, sir."

A week prior, Private First Class Vincent D'Amato had re-upped for six years, a rare coup for the division's reenlistment team. They were still toasting their good fortune a day later when D'Amato took his re-up bonus off-base and failed to return.

Quinn rotated his heron-like neck and addressed Perez, Adam's apple bobbing as he spoke. "What's the scuttlebutt on D'Amato?" The lieutenant liked scuttlebutt, a backdoor, so he thought, to the inner workings of the company. And Perez saw no harm in humoring the lieutenant. It boosted his ego, Perez with his ear to the ground, the lieutenant clueless.

"Everyone says he's at the Turkey Farm, sir."

"The what?"

Perez grinned, catching the lieutenant's bewildered face with a sidelong glance. "The ville outside Camp Ross, sir. Know why they call it the Turkey Farm?"

"No idea, Specialist Perez."

"It's because the girls there gobble."

Quinn didn't react.

"Gobble, sir. A blow job, sir."

Quinn chuckled. "Of course." Several seconds went by. "Can I assume you've visited there?"

"Sure. I mean yes, sir, a few times. Everyone's been there. I mean, the enlisted men, sir."

"Who knows?" said Quinn. "Maybe a few officers."

Perez echoed the lieutenant's laugh. "Good one, sir."

It was at this point, with Perez patting himself on the back for furthering the lieutenant's field training, that Quinn dropped his bomb.

"We should go down there and find him."

Perez shifted his pupils toward Quinn. Not a bad guy, this lieutenant, but green. No street smarts at all.

"We can't do that, sir."

"Whoa! watch out for that ox cart."

"I got it, sir." Perez steered left and right, threading the jeep between an ox cart on their side of the road and a bicycle coming the other way. No need to get excited.

"Why can't we go down there?" Quinn said.

"It's a jungle, sir. Thousands of girls. Thousands of hootches. I mean thousands. Once you get off the main drag, it's this wild maze." Perez bore right at the approach of a military truck, a deuce-and-a-half spouting diesel smoke and raising a tumult of dust. "It'd be like finding a needle in a haystack." In truth, Perez had no idea if D'Amato was holed up at the Turkey Farm, scuttlebutt being scuttlebutt. But either way, finding him—impossible. And wandering around the Turkey Farm during daylight hours with an officer in tow—nuts.

"Sir, he'll come back when his money runs out. Where's he gonna go in Korea?"

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Perez made a show of checking the oil. He closed the jeep's hood and made a show of cleaning the windshield. Finally, Quinn exited the Quonset hut that served as the company's command post. He came out through the orderly room, which housed the first sergeant, the company clerk, and the company's paperwork. The far end of the hut, accessed through the orderly room, comprised a smaller space with desks for the captain and the lieutenant.

Quinn approached Perez with a smile. "I sensed some reluctance, but we're all set. Chow down and be back here at thirteen hundred."

"We really going down there, sir?"

"Absolutely. Great idea, and I gave you credit for bringing it up." Quinn turned away, then turned back. "Oh. Before you do anything else, the first sergeant wants to see you."

As Quinn wandered off toward the officers' club, Perez pushed open the CP door. It was the middle of May, and stoves had been removed the week before. That left the CP chilly, but not as cold as the countenance on First Sergeant Nowak's face. Next to him, the company clerk, who everyone called Scoot, smirked. Perez thought it prudent to come to attention and accomplished the maneuver with a snap of his heels.

In a hoarse whisper, Nowak said, "What the fuck is this Turkey Farm business?"

"First Sergeant, I can ex—"

"Do you like your job, Perez? Do you like driving for the lieutenant?"

"Yes, First—"

"Because if you don't, I know a rifle squad that could use a five-foot-eight multilingual pecker—"

"First Sergeant, I can—"

Nowak jabbed a forefinger at Perez in the style of a jackhammer. "Just get Lieutenant Quinn down there and back without incident. Is that understood, Specialist?"

"Yes, First—."

"Godammit, Perez. D'Amato will come in when his money runs out. Can't you take care of one lieutenant?"

"Yes, First—"

"You're lucky the old man thinks it's funny." Nowak redirected his forefinger toward the captain's inner sanctum. "He's still laughing his ass off."

"Yes, First—"

"Dismissed."

* * *

Perez parked the jeep inside Camp Ross's main gate and led Quinn on foot onto the ville's main drag, a wide thoroughfare of packed gravel and dirt, lined with bars and shops. In contrast to what would come later, early afternoon saw an empty street. A hundred meters along, Perez turned into a wide alley, almost a plaza. At the far end, it sprouted half a dozen dirt paths.

"This is where our guys come, sir, when they want some action."

A girl approached—an older girl, at least thirty, with red hair and matching nails, dressed for business in a mini-skirt and heels. More girls gathered, a few in mini-skirts and heels, but others in traditional wrap-around dresses and rubber shoes.

"Hey, Lieutenant," the redhead said, "You wanna good time? Eight dollah, can do." The standard price for a lieutenant between paydays.

Quinn's face and neck turned as red as the girl's hair. "Ah, no, you see—"

"Six dollah."

"Ah, thank you for asking, but, you see, actually, we're looking for a soldier."

"Whah you say?"

Perez jumped into the conversation. "We look for GI. Tall like Lieutenant. Thin like Lieutenant." Perez used his hands to show a height of six feet and a waist of 32 inches, the lieutenant and the private having similar builds. From there, they differed, Quinn with a straight nose, blue eyes, and waspy skin, while D'Amato bore darker Mediterranean features.

"GI go AWOL," Perez said.

"AWOL number ten," the redhead said, but the girls didn't react further to this intelligence. No surprise. Even if D'Amato was there and they knew where he was, they weren't about to rat him out. Especially if he was still dispensing his re-up bonus.

Quinn drifted to the end of the alley, where it split into paths, trailed by the redhead. She continued to pitch him. "Wassamatta, Lieutenant? No wanna good time?"

The other girls gathered about Perez.

"Hey, Specialist, you wanna blow job? Two dollah, can do." The speaker drew closer to Perez. "Good deal."

It was a *great* deal. For some seconds, Perez wondered, since they were there anyhow, whether the lieutenant wouldn't spring for a side mission. But First Sergeant Nowak's visage, like Marley's ghost, roused Perez from his reverie—followed by Quinn's outcry, in the manner of a drill sergeant. Perez had never heard the lieutenant at such a high volume.

"D'Amato," he yelled. "Private D'Amato. Listen to me. This is Lieutenant Quinn. Every extra day you're out makes it worse." Perez looked about at the gaggle of girls and rolled his eyes. Quinn prattled on. "Your best bet is to come back now. Better me than the military police."

Two fools, Perez mused, on a fool's errand. But as Quinn continued to exercise his stentorian

voice, Perez swore he heard D'Amato's join in. He swore he heard D'Amato say, "Give me five, sir." Perez walked to the end of the alley and stood next to Quinn. Down the leftmost path, a portico fronted a line of hootches, and there, midway on the portico, D'Amato sat lacing his boots. When he stood, Perez saw that his fatigues and field jacket were clean and unwrinkled, and he wore polished boots. Not only did he look sober, he could have passed for soldier of the month. With a quick-step, he marched to Quinn's front, halted, and threw up a salute.

"Sir, Private D'Amato reports."

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D'Amato sat in the middle of the rear seat. Halfway back, he leaned forward and said, "It's the drink, sir." Quinn twisted his body and looked into D'Amato's long face, visible to Perez in the rearview mirror. "I get to drinking, sir, and just lose it. I didn't even know I was at the Turkey Farm until the next morning." Quinn offered no comment. "Then I was afraid to come back in."

Plus—Perez couldn't hold back an eye roll—he had all that re-up money to spend.

"What's going to happen to me, sir?"

"Unfortunately, Private D'Amato, you've been AWOL twice before. The captain will probably want a special." A special court-martial.

D'Amato's face lost all color. "Is there anything you can do for me, sir? I came in when you called. I didn't run or put up a fight."

Another eye roll. What bullshit, but the lieutenant was sopping it up.

"Ever since that firefight," D'Amato said.

That was true. He'd been in a firefight with casualties. But so had other guys.

Perez brought the jeep to a halt in front of the CP, and Quinn jumped out.

"Wait here," he said.

Nowak and Scoot came out of the CP bareheaded, passing Quinn on his way in.

"Hold off with him," Quinn told the first sergeant. "I need a word with the captain."

Nowak circled the jeep, eyeing D'Amato. Scoot stood to one side, eyebrows aloft. D'Amato remained seated with a lopsided grin. Perez wanted to tell the first sergeant that, while the lieutenant had reeled him in, he, Specialist Perez, had provided the navigation, but sensed that keeping his mouth closed was the better course of action. Nowak completed a second circuit of the jeep and stood in front of D'Amato. "I'll be a monkey's uncle," he said.

The captain saw D'Amato an hour later. Scoot, who took notes at the proceeding, gave Perez a blow-by-blow. How D'Amato stood in front of the captain's desk at rigid attention, except for a tremor in his hands, while Nowak sat to one side of the captain's desk. Scoot sat at the lieutenant's desk with a pad of paper. Just the three of them.

"Against my better judgment," the captain said, "I'm offering you nonjudicial punishment under Article-15 of the Universal Code of Military Justice, and I'll tell you ahead of time the punishment if you accept it. You will be reduced to the rank of buck private. You will lose seven days' pay. You will be confined to quarters for sixty days. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have the right to refuse this Article-15 and demand a court-martial. It would, in fact, make my day, Private D'Amato, if you'd turn down the Article-15, so we can court-martial your ass. What do you say?"

"Sir?"

"Do you or do you not accept punishment under Article-15?"

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A month and a half later, Perez stepped out the back door of his barracks, a single Quonset

hut lined with double bunks on either side of a center aisle, and employed the hut's piss tube. It was a mellow June night, with a full moon resting on the massive mountain to the east of the compound known as Easy Queen. Perez's barracks housed one platoon of infantry—three rifle squads and a weapons squad. Perez reported to the weapons squad, but his duty assignment was driving the lieutenant. D'Amato belonged to the same platoon, reporting to one of the rifle squads. Perez examined the moon. Amazing that sixteen hours from now, his compañeros back in the world would be looking at that same heavenly body.

Perez returned to his berth, a bottom bunk near the rear door. Hours later, the bunk tilted sideways. Perez grabbed the railings to save himself, then realized he was waking from a falling dream—and looking into the face of Johnson, D'Amato's squad leader. Johnson was squatting, his face level with Perez's. He spoke in a whisper.

"D'Amato's gone."

"What time is it?"

"Oh three hundred."

"Maybe he's down the latrine."

Johnson shook his head. "I've checked all over the company area. He's gone."

"Fuck. What are you going to do?"

"What can I do? He goes on report at reveille. Unless you want to wake up your lieutenant. Maybe your lieutenant can save his ass again. You want a smoke?" Johnson dragged a butt can alongside the bunk and lit two cigarettes. Perez half sat up, leaning on one elbow. Johnson was an acting sergeant, an E-4, the same pay grade as Perez. He didn't have to tell Perez about D'Amato—was just looking for somebody to commiserate with.

"What do you mean, *my* lieutenant?"

"Take it easy. Keep your voice down."

"I'm not his mother," Perez said. "Do I look like his mother?"

Johnson gave a low laugh. "Take it easy, Jimenez."

"My name's not Jimenez."

Johnson rendered another low laugh.

"The lieutenant's gonna be pissed," Perez said. "More than pissed." The smoke from the cigarettes hung between them, in the light of the full moon filtering through the hut's windows.

"I bet," Johnson said.

"He gets in these moods, sometimes, like when the captain tells him to do something he doesn't want to do. Only this is a lot worse. He thought he saved D'Amato. It was a big deal."

"He was a jerk for bailing him out, if you ask me."

"I don't know," Perez said. He dropped an inch of ash into the butt can. "He had me fooled, going on the way he did, how he was gonna straighten out. Well, he's fucked now."

"Oh, yeah. Six ways from Sunday. This will go to a special. He'll get stockade time."

"You think?" Perez said.

"Maybe a dishonorable discharge."

"No," Perez said. "A special court can't do a dishonorable."

"There's something else. A bad behavior discharge or something. Anyhow, he'll get two months in the stockade, I bet." Johnson drew on his cigarette and stubbed it out in the butt can.

"Do you know how old he is? Nineteen. Half the guys in this hut are teenagers."

"Are you sure?" Perez said.

Johnson nodded. "He told me. He enlisted on his seventeenth birthday. He was two months short of his three years when he signed the re-up papers. Nineteen."

"How old are you?" Perez said.

Johnson laughed. "Twenty."

Perez laughed. "Me too. The lieutenant's twenty-four."

"Back in the world, this shit wouldn't happen," Johnson said.

"What shit?"

"If you don't show up for work, you don't go to jail. You might get fired, but you don't get thrown in jail. Back in the world, you can tell the boss to go fuck himself."

"Yeah, well, we're not back in the world."

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There were five soldiers in the orderly room—Quinn, Nowak, Scoot, Perez, and D'Amato. D'Amato had come in when his money ran out, and stood before a special court. He turned his olive green duffel bag upside down and scattered its contents onto the orderly room floor. Nowak ran his finger down a list. "Where's your poncho?"

"Dunno, First Sergeant."

"Jesus." Nowak addressed Perez. "Go over to supply—"

Quinn interrupted. "I'll take care of it, Top."

A half hour later, three of the soldiers were on their way, Perez driving, Quinn up front, D'Amato in the back seat with his duffel bag. Nowak had told Quinn he needn't be the one to take D'Amato down to the stockade—he could detail the trip to one of the platoon sergeants. Quinn shook his head. "It's alright, Top."

It was a three-hour drive to the Eighth Army Stockade on the other side of Seoul. The prison had an outer perimeter with a drive-through gate and a parking area. Perez stopped the jeep at the drive-through gate's guard shack, and Quinn reported his mission. The guard, a specialist,

made an entry in his log and wrote out passes for Quinn and Perez. As he handed over the passes, he said to Quinn, "You have to leave your sidearm here, sir. I'll give you a receipt."

"I'm not armed," Quinn said.

"What? You're bringing in a prisoner, and you're not armed?"

"Correct."

"That's against regulations, sir."

Quinn took a deep breath. "Nevertheless, here we are."

"Sir, what if he tried to escape on the way down?"

Quinn took another deep breath. "Are you suggesting that if he tried to escape, I should shoot him with a forty-five caliber pistol?"

"It's against regulations, sir. A prisoner escort has to be armed. You can park over there."

Two parallel fences, topped by barbed wire, surrounded the stockade. Quinn, Perez, and D'Amato walked through a gate in the outer fence, stood for a visual inspection, then passed through a gate in the inner fence. The inspecting guard directed them to a Quonset hut for in-processing, where, upon entry, they faced a counter manned by a staff sergeant.

"Back here," the sergeant told D'Amato. As D'Amato circled behind the counter with his duffel bag on his shoulder, Quinn stepped up to the front of the counter. Perez hung back, as if the staff sergeant might reach out and grab him, too.

"Dump your duffel," the sergeant said.

The sergeant looked from a clipboard to the contents of D'Amato's duffel bag, pushing with the toe of his boot as necessary. "Take off your clothes." Still checking his clipboard against the items on the floor. "Everything."

Perez felt a flush of embarrassment, staring at D'Amato's lean profile—his long face, shallow

chest, uncircumcised cock, and bare feet. In the barracks or the showers, it didn't matter.

Everyone ran around naked. But not in the glare of the in-processing hut's overhead lights with everyone else dressed.

The staff sergeant reached beneath the counter and produced a military right angle flashlight—the type that takes two D batteries. He turned on the light and looked in D'Amato's right ear, pulling on the lobe, then repeated the performance for the left ear.

"Open your mouth. Wide. Stick out your tongue."

Completing the oral exam, the sergeant said, "Bend over and spread 'em."

The sergeant dropped to one knee and illuminated D'Amato's anal cavity. After a five-second inspection, he turned off the flashlight and stood up. Back at the counter, he filled out a form in triplicate, flipped it around, and handed Quinn a pen.

"Need your Hancock, Lieutenant."

The sergeant tore off the bottom copy of the form and handed it to Quinn.

D'Amato still stood stark naked. Quinn looked like he wanted to give him a parting word, but what could he say? He and Perez exited the in-processing hut and made their way through the double fence. At the jeep, Perez said, "I don't know about you, sir, but I'm glad to be out of that fucking place."

Quinn gave the stockade a last glance and climbed into the passenger seat. At the drive-through gate, the guard said, "I should report this, sir, not having a sidearm."

"Do what you have to," Quinn said, and returned the guard's salute.

As they drove, Perez tried to make conversation. "The roads down here are something else, sir, don't you think? Tar. Smooth. We could use a little tar up north."

A minute later, he tried again. "You know, sir, when I first got here, I thought Seoul wasn't

much of a town. Being the capital city and all. But a few months up north—it sure looks good now.”

Ten minutes later, Quinn broke his silence. “Did you hear that dickhead?” Quinn mimicked the gate guard: “I should report this.”

“That won’t go anywhere, sir.”

“I’m supposed to be armed. What bullshit.”

Perez nodded.

“If you were guarding D’Amato,” Quinn said, “and he made a break for it, would you shoot him?”

Perez didn’t have a response at the tip of his tongue.

“They think I’d shoot a man for running away?” Quinn said.

“Maybe in the leg, sir.”

Quinn rotated his neck and looked at Perez. “Do you know the damage a forty-five would do, even in the leg? If it hit an artery, he’d bleed out.”

“Good point, sir. You’re right, I wouldn’t shoot him.”

A few minutes later, the tar road turned to potholed gravel.

“Where’s he gonna go in Korea, anyhow?”

Robert Perron is the author of the novel *The Blue House Raid*. Past life includes high-tech and military service. His short stories have appeared in *As You Were: The Military Review*, *The Lowestoft Chronicle*, and other literary journals, plus a collection, *Wasteland and Other Stories*. Visit his website at <https://robertperron.com>.