

Fragments

from *The Second Tour*

I awoke one morning with a leech on my dick. I tried to piss it off, but finally singed it with a cigarette. Some leeches were big like snakes. I at first despised them, but anything surviving that climate deserved respect, so I studied their habits, long and hard. It gave me a sense of purpose.

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We woke one morning just about light. I fired up a couple of heat tabs and started the water. Stricklyn, tossing, said he was beat. I nodded and tended the heat. Murphy sat up and yawned while the water boiled. Coffee, brewing, woke up Watson and Wiskey as the light peeped through the trees.

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Stricklyn lit a joint, cupped in his palms, and passed it to me to Watson to Murphy to Wiskey who flicked it. Small fires dotted the hill. I moved to my rifle and sat there cradling it in my arms, my back to the others, thinking about cleaning it; and dreaming, dreaming about home and going home.

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We crossed the bridge when we came to it. Money was first but Money wasn't anything, so I went second and second is nothing. A breeze swayed the bridge and we dropped like pointers, noses sniffing, senses wired. Money went first again, but I was faster, so I'm here to tell about it. Tracers traced, flashes flashed, and we lost fourteen in two hours.

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Nebraska we called him and I liked him a lot. Three machine guns pinned us down; you'd think he'd be scared. Grenades are like baseballs, he said. Watch this. He got two, but they got one and our loss was greater.

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It was pouring the night Charlie hit at dusk. I was sittin' on some sandbags in a bunker, writing home. Lieutenant shit his pants and I could see why, but it was still funny. Fire broke out in the C.O. tent and he stunk like hell, barking orders and running in circles.

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Shot an elephant with a LAW. Blew a hole in his side four feet square. I felt bad about it, but it was pitch black and he sounded like a whole damn regiment. Shot a cobra once. The Vietnamese kids I was trying to help out were jumping up and down pointing and yelling VC! VC! and I was yelling back SNAKE, GODDAMMIT, SNAKE! I nailed him with the fifth round, and then Raven bit him in half, just stretched that snake out real tight, chomped it in two with a big grin on his face and then spat out a hunk of raw flesh.

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R&R was A-okay. I went to Bangkok, a name that speaks for itself. Bookoo women in Bangkok, just for the pickin' and \$11 a night. Had my own cab driver too, on call twenty-four hours—thirty bucks and a carton of smokes for five days service. Mr. Eng was his name. I called him Iggy. He called me Boss Man when he wasn't calling me Doctor Zhivago. Said I looked like Omar Sharif. Two Aussies jumped me on a dance floor one night—Iggy busted ass.

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Got back in time to ship out on patrol. Nothing in the area, Recon said. Leave your helmets and flak jackets, said Captain Kody. It's 140 degrees where we're going. I wore mine anyway. Before the next afternoon, guys I didn't even know offered me

hundreds of dollars for my flak jacket. Mortars, rockets, and artillery were blowin' holes all around us. Ontos 106s shattered the atmosphere in retaliation, launching fireballs tearing up their ground cover like crashing four-inch meteorites. I hid under my helmet, or tried to. Jeffrey was right there one second; a hole took his place the next. I was gonna visit him in St. Louis when we got back. It was a short round that got him. PAYBACK IS A MOTHERFUCKER! I cried. Who you pay back? asked Raven. You tell me, I said.

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One thing we didn't do was take captives. Raven concocted stories for why he had to empty his .45 into some gook's back. No shit, Rootie, that mutherfucker called my momma a faggot. Said it plain as day, and in English too. I had to shoot his raggedy ass. Six fuckin' rounds man? I said, in the blind side? Well, he pissed me off, Rootie, then tried haulin' ass. A .45 ain't all that accurate. I had to make sure. You make me sick Raven, I said to him. Yeah, he said back.

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Sergeant Rotan hated officers, especially lifers and Ninety-Day-Wonders. They do six-month tours in the field, then rotate to the rear about the time they learn what the fuck they're doing. He shot our Ninety-Day-Wonder Second Lieutenant one night. I didn't blame him; the Lieutenant was an ignorant asshole, but if all ignorant assholes needed shooting, Sergeant's work would never be done.

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Whut's gon on Home? ast Watson, strolin' up for chow. Hey brotha! say Benjie, givin' him five. Ain't nuffin gon on, C-More say, joinin' in. Whut chu be eatin', Rootie, ast Watson, curious. Dates, I answer. Dates? he laff. Where you be gittin' dates? Back home, I say. From my church sisters. Sho nuff? he say. Sho nuff look like candied roaches, laff C-More. E'body else be laffin' too. I lit a joint, den pass it round. Bout third hit, Watson spoke.

Know whut lock my jaw? he ast. Probbly yo brain, say Benjie, jivin'. Mos likely he mouff laff C-More. I be serious now, say Watson, cuttin' eyes all round, then snickerin' he self. Know dat bidness, bout all mens be crated equal? Bout how us splib dudes be from crater, where it be hot, an dat be why we's all black. Whut chu be gittin' at? ast Benjie, impatient. Be koo man, say Watson. Jus want know how comes we not all equal, why dey be blacks `n whites firs' place, why dey wold be so prejis gen blackfolk. Wo! say C-More. White dudes be nuttin' but elbinos, man. Be fucked up splib dudes' all. White dudes alway be lookin' fo scapegoat, say Benjie. Goats be white, mos'ly say Watson. Sheeps be black. Ain' nobody prejis gen honkies is dey Rootie?

Speakin' fucked up, say Benjie, crushin dope unner his boot. Looky dis shit comin'.

Tenent Little come mosin' up den, disruppin' choe. Rootie! he order, you and Benjie report to Corporal Seldom for shitter duty. O, man, say Benj. We be burnin' shitters all mornin'. Git some others here do it. Come on Benj, I plead whisperin', pullin' his arm, my back to Little. We cleans dey ossifers' shitter, then talk to Mortars. Maybe plant a short round in it nex time the shit hits dey fan. Plant a short round up his ass, he say, too loud neath his breath.

Little look at him mean. I want both barrels burned clean come dark, he say. Benj stan up sudden. You be so all fire up git it done, he say, whyn't chu come stir? Little face round at him square. Gon be bad any second, hadn't Kody come along.

Why are these men sitting around idle? he ast. Get them workin, Little, cleaning rifles if need be, but get them doing something. Yes sir, saluted Little. Doing just that, sir. Benjie and Rootie just volunteered for shitter duty. Watson and C-More are going to police up the area, then haul water.

Fuck! swo Watson. Ain' so much prejis gen blackfolk as gen no rank. Shit flo down till so deep cover us privates' haid. Ebbody laff-n-laff at Watson's play on words. Watson just stan dare shit-eatin' grinnin'. Don' be makin' fun my smile, he say Smack you dudes silly. Little walk off feelin' tall, fowlin Kody.

Dysentery is the shits pure and simple. Saw a Corps of Engineers man hugging the top of a phone pole and grimacing in pain as crap, ballooning his bloused trousers, flowed uncontrollably twenty minutes and twenty feet to the ground. Flies stormed the lower half of his bent body, attacking, buzzing, and zagging like neutrons.

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Hill 602 took three lives the first time. Took Tommy Baker's lower jaw too. I couldn't look him in the eyes that saw so clearly through all of us to the horror we saw in his mangled face. No teeth bestowed upon him the look of a man wizened with age. He was wise enough to walk out on his own power, saving time and four of us the hassle of carrying him. Baker died at the foot of 602.

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A .51 caliber burst a hole the size of a softball in Roger's backpack. Ham and limablood sprayed all over me. The hole in Roger's chest was only as big as my thumb, but he was dead.

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I'm here, Benjie, I said. Help me, Rootie, my legs won't move. Breathe deep, Benjie. Breathe real deep. But he'd already died. I covered him anyway. I covered him with my poncho, and I covered him with my own warmth.

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A crashing explosion ripped apart a three-foot thick tree stump a few yards away. I rose from Benjie in a daze, apologizing for having to leave him there, and stumbled across a dry rocky stream bed toward the calls for help. The cries were behind me now, and I whirled as a grenade bounced off a rock, rolled toward Benjie's body and exploded. Benjie jerked. I ran, firing my rifle and lobbing grenades. I remember the smell of burning hooches and the abrupt silencing of baby cries. A dog barked once. A decapitated

chicken do-si-doed to the music of machine gun fire.
Branches, leaves, and straw snapped and sizzled. □

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