Jeff Loeb

Epiphany in Memphis

I went from Boston to Memphis that fall out of desperation, because Wooldridge lived there, and he'd seemed willing, at least from our brief phone conversation, to provide me a safe haven. This was not a task to be undertaken lightly since I'd developed a bad way of letting people down. He was one of the few friends I had left who would still put up with me. It meant intruding on him and his girlfriend, Katherine, in their impossibly small rental house on the poor edge of Central Gardens, but the offer seemed genuine and Katherine was gracious, if somewhat resigned, about it. Though I should have felt guilty about disrupting their life, the fact that he and I had been college roommates right after I'd gotten back from Vietnam, some seven years before, seemed to override such niceties.

Wool got me a job as a bartender in a place where he worked, Huey's it was called, a kind of singles joint near Overton Square that catered to a free-floating mix of druggies, drunks, and essentially directionless people, just the type of milieu that I'd come to thrive in. Not only would I be able to eat and pay Wool a modicum of rent, but, more importantly, I'd be able to avoid myself a little longer. Free access to alcohol—and the sex and drugs that attended thereof—seemed to guarantee that I could keep the wreckage of my most recent failed relationship at a manageable distance. And since I hadn't bothered to say where I was going on the I'm-sorry-but-

goodbye note that I'd so courageously left on my dining room table in Boston, I didn't anticipate any reminders from that quarter. In all, it appeared a workable situation.

One day—a cold, cloudy one that suggested an early winter—sick with a hangover and all alone in the house, I remembered Johnson, who'd been from Memphis. I hadn't thought of him in years. His resurrected image produced a vague unsettlement at the edges of consciousness. After a while, I decided to try and call him.

The scores of Larry and L. Johnsons that I found in the phone book looked forbidding. I dialed the first one. A woman answered—black, it seemed, although it was hard to tell for sure since I was still struggling with the unfamiliar Southern accents. In my dazed state, I hadn't considered beforehand what I'd say, and, suddenly faced with having to communicate *something*, I stammered out, "Is this the Larry Johnson residence, the one who was in Vietnam?"

When the woman finally spoke, I could feel the hostility on the other end: "Ex-*cuse* me, can I help you with something?"

Asshole! She thinks you're The Man.

I started over again, though the effort taxed my condition. "My name is Jeff Loeb, and I, uh, was a friend of Larry Johnson, *a* Larry Johnson that is, from Memphis, when I was in Vietnam, and I, uh, was just calling to see if this is his number. I wanted to talk to him, and I'm just, y'know, calling all the numbers, the Larry Johnson numbers, in the book. Do you know him? He was there in 1968?"

"I think you've got the wrong number."

I tried the next one, with slightly better delivery but the same results. It was harder to dial the third one,

and I was only part way through my explanation when the line went dead.

I pressed the receiver against the ridge of bone above my closed eyes like an icepack and tried to breathe deeply. My life was closing in. I only wanted to make contact, somewhere. I only wanted things to be like they were before—to be like I was before.

I'd first met Johnson when we were both "boots to The Nam," as the saying went, on our way to Khe Sanh. He was from "Mimps," as he called it, or sometimes "Big Ole Mimps." Because we were both new guys, having traveled up from Da Nang and Phu Bai together, first by chopper and then by C-130, he felt close enough to chide me in a friendly way for being from nowhere: "Where? Junction City *where*? Kansas? What's that, some bus stop?"

Arriving together at the maelstrom of Khe Sanh had bonded us right off, allowing us both to pretend that the terrible strangeness of the place had only a small effect on us. The reality was that we were trapped on an exposed, red slash of earth suspended between pockmarked, blue-green mountains, eerie with mist, and there was a constant unseen presence, *always out there*: the North Vietnamese Army, bombarding us, tunneling under us, or just watching, which was the worst. Plus there was the intermittent, nerve-racking thump of outgoing artillery and the sudden screaming terror of incoming, punctuated by the A-4s and F-105s bringing down fire and oxygen-sucking death on targets barely 400 meters away. Most unearthly was the night: our peering into the horribly alive darkness while airstrikes from unseen B-52s high overhead—so-called Arc Lights—made the earth shudder and cave in a mile away. Yet Johnson and

I pretended that all this didn't bother us, that we were as jaded as the saltiest of the Marines around us.

On the rare clear days when there was air cover and we could go outside, Johnson would shadowbox on top of the bunker, which was more or less flat (sandbags covering metal airport tarmac covering timbers covering a large hole) and ringshaped. He had a boxer's body, lean and willowy with hard pecs and sinewy arms, and a boxer's reflexes, cat-quick and decisive. His jabs at the air were punctuated by short, sharp, nasal exhalations that were deeper and more pronounced in the hooks and uppercuts. He worked hard at it, and in a very short time his body would shine with sweat. Despite the humidity, he could go on for long periods without stopping or breaking rhythm. He was really quite remarkable to watch, and all of us lying on top of the other bunkers followed his workouts with our eyes as we wrote letters, talked, and smoked cigarette after cigarette.

He professed to emulate Muhammad Ali, although his size and body style made him more like the boxer Ray Leonard would become several years later. It was the brashness as much as the grace and tremendous ability that Johnson admired in Ali, and so did I. This fact further allied us at the same time that it set us apart from the unit's "boxing traditionalists," virtually everyone but us. They liked Floyd Patterson or Jimmy Ellis or any other stiff that Ali had slaughtered in the past but who had kept his mouth shut and played the good nigger for God and country. These were the peons like us. To the lifers, a category that to us included anyone over the rank of corporal, Ali was absolute anathema because of his resistance to the draft, and by emulating Ali in both deed and demeanor, Johnson earned their immediate suspicion and dislike.

He couldn't have cared less; however it happened, whatever it was in his background, he had arrived in

Vietnam with that most wonderful and dangerous of attributes: an absolute disdain for authority, not just lawfully constituted authority—that resulting from rank—but also the unwritten authority imposed by "time in country." Very quickly, within a week or so, he offered to put a whipping on some PFC who insisted that Johnson perform some miserable make-work job in his stead, and the PFC, surprised and shocked, just as quickly declined to pursue the matter. From that point on Johnson and I (happy to tag along, to share in the largess) were equals with the old-timers when it came to the work parties devised by the lifers.

Johnson's comments were another source of aggravation. He didn't limit his insults to just me; he'd target anyone, no matter how long they'd been there. It was his way of getting close to people without being overt about it, and it was obviously a long-practiced art with him. He didn't pick on people he didn't like, and it was always done for an audience. To Smitty, for instance, who was from Atlanta, and who, like himself, was black, Johnson would say for the benefit of whatever group was present, usually the members of the continuous card game: "Smitty, you about useless. When we get back and I go down on the block in Atlanta looking to see you, is anybody gonna know you? No, because you nobody there, done nothin'. They gonna say, 'Smith? Who's Smith? I never heard of no Smith.'" This brashness was stonily regarded by the old-timers and lifers alike. Clearly they disapproved of this new guy who made his own rules.

That—and his general attitude—is what got Johnson transferred a few months after the unit moved down South to Da Nang. For almost anyone coming from the DMZ, this was the good life: standing guard over the mess hall and seeing only the action excited by the nightly cold beers in the EM Club. Johnson, on the other

hand, thanks to the lifers, was eventually sent to a battalion command post ten kilometers or so south of Da Nang in the hot, flat coastal sand dunes and paddy fields below Marble Mountain, next to an area known as the Riviera. I was never sure whether this name was meant as irony or whether it came about because we still happened on booby traps that the Viet Minh had planted for the French, but it was a treacherous place, all mines, snipers, and sudden night mortar attacks, with no one there to shoot back at.

Through the circumstances of war, when Johnson arrived, I was already there. Immediately after Khe Sanh was abandoned, I had been transferred too, although in my case it was because another unit thought they needed my Vietnamese translation skills. By the time Johnson got there, I had been promoted to corporal and was a squad leader, meaning that I was in charge of five or so unmotivated individuals dedicated to staying high whenever possible and getting home. Our responsibility at that point was standing rocket watch around the clock in a wooden tower some fifty feet tall and located in the middle of the CP. When the local Viet Cong would periodically take it upon themselves to rocket the Da Nang airport, some seven or eight miles away, we were supposed to pinpoint their location and punish the site with tons of artillery, even though they were no doubt long gone. Because at that time we were experiencing a minimum of contact, it was easy duty, if physically miserable because of the climate and the lack of sleep caused by the interminable watches. It was for me, however, a decided step up from the scary villages and leech-ridden rice paddies that I'd had to endure over the previous several months of scorching Vietnamese summer.

Despite the negative report that accompanied Johnson—which normally would have resulted in his being sent straight out to the Riviera with the first nasty

patrol available—I was able to get him assigned to my squad, where we were a man short. Anyone else would have fit right in, but a lot had happened. He'd had several run-ins with authority, nothing serious enough for brig time but sufficient to get him busted. He'd also endured constant petty harassment—endless work parties, guard duty for weeks straight—and he was beaten down. More than that, Martin Luther King had been murdered, and the racial situation, always tenuous, especially in rear areas like he'd recently been in, had gotten downright vicious. Johnson had grown, if not exactly quiet, at least guarded, and very distrustful. The spirit that had previously moved him to easy defiance had turned him sullen.

It was monsoon season by the time he arrived and impossible to dry out. Most of the battalion spent three or four days in the bush living in a hole and then a week or so of slightly less misery listening to the rain pound on the tin roofs of their moldering plywood hootches, getting soaked every time they went to the mess hall or the head. For us, the elevation and open sides of the tower only increased the misery as the blowing sheets of drenching rain hunkered us down in tightly-cinched ponchos. And then there was the watch schedule: perpetually shorthanded, we frequently had to man the tower on four-hour-on, four-hour-off shifts, making sleep brief and fitful.

Before long Johnson began having problems with other Marines in his hootch, all of whom were white. When one of these disagreements came to blows, I moved him out and into my hootch, a disused fire direction bunker that I had managed to appropriate and convert into makeshift living quarters. I also paired with him on watches, and these two moves defused the immediate racial tension, if they didn't erase the underlying political realities. Even though spending some twenty

hours a day together made us somewhat close again, I sensed that he now held part of himself in reserve. I don't think he distrusted me personally. After all I'd intervened twice on his behalf with no benefit to me. But the war had so revealed the military's entrenched ways of favoring white over black that he now instinctively kept a veil, slight but detectable, between us. This impulse was reinforced by the increasingly frequent meetings he attended at the battalion "black hootch" where, as he told me, the African American Marines discussed racial oppression and resistance with increasing vehemence.

One night on watch, a clear moonlit one, I agreed to let Johnson go down to play poker in a hootch near the base of the tower. Even though two people were required on watch at all times, we routinely disregarded this rule. The Viet Cong normally avoided rocket attacks on such bright nights, I reasoned, and besides, it was too early for any such activity. A couple of hours later, about midnight, I heard him frantically calling my name from somewhere down below. I looked over the edge, and in the bright moonlight I could see his shadowed figure, set off in sharp relief against the white sand, dodging between the rows of hootches, pursued by several other figures, all of whom appeared to be white. He pulled up short just below the tower, about fifty feet ahead of his angry pursuers. Neither Johnson nor any of the white Marines were carrying their weapons.

"Put one right here, Jeff, right here," Johnson yelled. "Put one round right here," pointing at a spot between him and his pursuers.

Shocked—at the situation as well as my own poor judgment—I shouldered my M-16 and loudly chambered a round. The snick-click of the bolt being pulled back and then flying home reverberated through the bright, clear night. The other Marines stopped still about twenty

feet from Johnson. They stood looking up at the tower. *I was aiming at them,* not the spot Johnson had pointed to. Their faces were distinct over my front sight. My finger played over the trigger, gently, just touching it. No one moved. I wasn't about to fire. My sense of self-preservation told me that whatever I had done so far could be explained, especially since the tower was only a dark silhouette to them and they probably couldn't actually see who was pointing the weapon. However, firing it inside the compound, even if only in their general direction, would mean serious trouble.

Johnson was nevertheless insistent, edge player and dramatizer to the end. "Put a round right here, Jeff, one round," he repeated, pointing. "Show these motherfuckers somethin'." I still wouldn't fire. Instead I yelled at them, something stupid, movie tough, laughably phony: "Don't worry, I've got 'em covered."

But it was enough. Whatever anger they held was no longer sufficient. They turned as a group and walked away, muttering. As suddenly as it had developed, the situation was over. Johnson quickly clambered up the tower and excitedly spilled out the story—how the grunts had been cheating him, how he had waited for a fat pot and then grabbed the money and run—interspersing its telling with regrets that I hadn't actually fired: that would have been the *right* way to end it, he felt.

Of course, there were repercussions. Dozens of people had heard the interchange, including my noisome demonstration with the weapon. Besides, the grunts chasing Johnson, having failed to achieve satisfaction, had reported the incident, in the process coloring it, of course, with self-righteous indignation to cover their own guilt. I was questioned, but my past record was clean, and, as a squad leader, I rated a break. Plus, like the grunts, I distorted my role as well, ever so slightly, just

enough to appear stupid rather than culpable. I denied either loading or pointing my weapon and essentially pled bad judgment for letting Johnson go below, claiming that he'd requested doing so for some legitimate-sounding reason, one just plausible enough to let the questioning officers pretend to believe me. It was instinctive self-preservation, something I realized I'd always been doing. My ass was saved, and no one was hurt. It was, as I'd somehow come to expect in my life, no harm, no foul—there was always a square-up possible, if one knew the correct posture to take when caught with the goods. I was let off with a verbal reprimand and walked into the bright sunlight feeling chastened but vaguely redeemed.

There was, however, no easy redemption for Johnson. Within an hour of my session with the lifers, the word spread that he had been brought up on charges for leaving his post, and given his past record and reputation, this meant he was facing jail time. An Article 15 hearing—office hours, we called it, sort of military kangaroo court with no particular rules—had been scheduled for three days hence. That same day, he was moved out of my hootch and taken off watch, a not-so-subtle comment on my befriending him.

As his hearing approached, I put off going to talk to Johnson. The redemptive sense I'd experienced following my square-up with the lifers soon flattened into a white deadness lurking at the edges of awareness, something I couldn't quite push away. Finally, the day before his office hours, I couldn't put it off any longer and went to him. I found him sitting alone on his cot in the hootch he'd been assigned to. As I stood in the doorway looking at him, I was suddenly conscious of an image of myself head down, mumbling distortions before a circle of lifers, arranged like monks around me. I stood silent for what seemed a long time. He didn't move from

the cot. If he knew I was there, he gave no indication of it.

Finally, an effort impelled me through the door.

"Larry. How's it goin'?"

He raised his head. He had been deep in thought and apparently had not sensed that I had been standing there. "Say, Jeff."

"Umm, uh, sorry I haven't been around. They've had me on watches, four-on and four-off." I knew he saw through this lie and immediately regretted telling it.

"That's all right, man. I been busy too."

"Listen," I blurted out, "it's a bad deal, Larry. I'm sorry. I wish I could do something."

"It's all right, man. It's in the cards. White, you're right; black, get back."

"Yeah, I know. I don't know why they didn't nail me too. It was me with the rifle."

As the conversation continued in this vein, I was acutely conscious of not telling him about my self-serving denials. And the longer I avoided telling him, the more magnified the lies seemed to become. My cheeks burned as we sat there. But even if I'd told the lifers everything, I rationalized to myself, it wouldn't have helped him. He'd still be looking at charges; only I'd be there with him. What could that help? I thought. So, facing him, why couldn't I then confess to my weak evasions? Why did I let him believe that it was race alone, and not my cravenness, that was going to put him in jail and not me? I think it was because I still clung childlike to the fantasy that this couldn't really happen, a perverse and desperately white faith in American justice, and an innocent belief that all who came under its stern but benevolent scrutiny would ultimately be pardoned, redeemed. I really think I believed, as I sat there, that there would be a last-minute rescue and that my concealments would then seem inconsequential. Nothing in

my life to that point had ever forced me to examine this naive faith, nor made me see that I could afford to have it because justice was arrayed for my benefit, for me to be able to lie and go free, and for Johnson to be presumed lying and to go to jail.

Then he surprised me.

"Jeff, we been tight. I can trust you, man. Listen, us dudes are gonna walk tonight. We're gonna leave this motherfucker. We're walkin' to Da Nang to join some brothers there. It's gotten too bad. Riots down in Long Binh at the army brig, over at Freedom Hill over that hillbilly shit on the juke . . . "

"Larry, whataya mean, walk? You mean AWOL? You can't leave the compound at night, man. It's like mutiny. Listen, you'll only be in the brig for a while and . . ."

"No, Jeff. Listen to me, man, hear me. It ain't just about me and that brig. That caused it, the way they busted me and not you, but that's only part. Look, the fuckin' lifers are comin' down, and we got to deal with it. Man, the shit is spreadin' out. Look at all the motherfuckin' crackers puttin' their Confederate shit all over. Why don't the lifers do somethin' 'bout that shit? No, they want to bust our asses for shit like daps and Afros. We're goin', man, tonight, a bunch of us."

The more he talked the more I tried to talk him out of it, able to see only the grief it would bring him, not the necessities that drove him. But he was unrelenting, and I knew that his resolve came in part from the fact that we were equally guilty—me more so really—but that he was the one being punished. Would it have changed anything—would he have still continued with his plans to march to Da Nang if I had told him? Probably not. Things were too far gone for him to change course. But what about me—why did I persist in dissembling with a person who considered himself my friend? I didn't

know then and I don't know now. In the end, when it was apparent that the conversation had lost its strength, he had told me simply that he had to go that night, speaking calmly really, as if he could see some end to it that was opaque to me, speaking, in fact, like he was already gone. It was the last time I talked to him.

That night, in part because of Johnson's impending hearing, but also in protest of racial conditions in general, he and twenty-five other black Marines walked out of the compound—without weapons so that there could be no reason for Americans firing on them, counting on this, in fact, to force their way past the baffled guards. And, Viet Cong mines and snipers notwithstanding, they marched down the road toward Da Nang until they were halted and arrested.

Years later, on that chilly late fall day in Memphis, I slumped with the receiver pressing against my exhausted eyelids. There was no way, I realized, that the Larry Johnson I had known could have survived this long. The world just wouldn't have allowed that. Even if he had gotten through his brig time—by no means a certainty with sadistic racists for guards and killers for inmates—he still would have had to finish his tour, another couple of months at least. And with his record, that time would have been spent in the worst possible way: all in the bush as a black, buck-private grunt with an attitude and a rap-sheet that all the lifers had seen.

There was no way to get through that. But suppose he had, then there would have been the rest of his time in the Corps, two years probably, and even if he was lucky enough to have gotten kicked out on a dishonorable discharge, there was the street—"the block," as he called it—with its cops and its drugs. He hadn't made it. I knew it as surely as I was sitting there.

I quietly replaced the receiver and closed the phone book. My head was throbbing; I needed a drink or a pill badly. But, there was nothing, nothing I could do or take, nothing to relieve me of myself and the two things I suddenly knew, that I was luxuriating in self pity, romanticizing my failures of character into disastrous losses, and that Johnson was gone. I don't know what I would have said to him anyway. Confessed? Would that have made me feel better? Could I finally have borrowed some of his courage, when I couldn't before, back when it might have meant something? I doubt it. I probably would have just kept on lying.

Vietnam now seems far away. And yet at times that can't be predicted, odd times, maybe with the sudden sight of red dirt against green fields or a whiff of diesel or cordite, guilt wells up and coalesces into an image of Johnson. I'm not even sure any more that what appears at these times actually happened, but the image comes to me quite clearly and always the same. It's the morning after the mutiny, and I get just a glimpse of Johnson in chains crossing the twenty feet between a weathered plywood hootch and a heavily guarded truck. I want to make contact, to talk to him, to tell him, but the nervous, taciturn MPs won't let me near enough. Instead, his face disappears as they close the rear flaps and mount up, and the dirty, canvas-shrouded truck rumbles away to take its prisoner to the Da Nang brig, said by many to be the most brutal jail in the Marine Corps.

I have no reason to think that it wasn't. ❑