

ANTHONY BUKOSKI

Report of the Guardian of the Sick

AL DZIEDZIC'S SON SURVIVED VIETNAM in 1967 by telling himself that things would be different when he got home. Now that the new year had come and he was back in Superior, Pete and his old man, Al, were arguing again, this time over how to clean the claw-footed bathtub. On his knees, Pete used Comet and a washcloth, yet the old man—head buzzing in the bathroom steam—claimed to see rings bigger than the rings of Pluto near the bottom of the tub.

"Saturn," said his son, kneeling by the toilet. He'd been discharged from the Marine Corps and home three weeks, long enough to grow out his hair, which was drying in a towel twisted like a turban. "It's shadowy in here, but your eyes have gone bad if you can't see I cleaned it."

His father was beginning to shrink. To support his back, he'd strapped himself into a beige-colored lady's corset he wore over his t-shirt. Grabbing a lightbulb from the kitchen cabinet, he climbed the chair he'd lugged in. Fumbling with the screws holding the glass globe to the bathroom ceiling, Al unscrewed the bulb, replaced it with a 100-watt bulb.

"See them rings of Pluto in the bright light?" Al said. "Look at the dirt in the tub. It ain't cleaned to my specifications."

"Pass the Comet. You're right," said Pete. To please his father, he sprinkled cleanser again, ran the water, swished it around. A half-hour before he was to meet the guys for a night on the town, and here he was in pajamas, the Marine ex-corporal, yellow turban unwinding so he couldn't see what he was rinsing. It was embarrassing for a war veteran not to pass inspection and to have the general walking around the house in a corset.

When Al went into the living room, Mrs. Dzedzic popped into the bathroom to whisper, "I'll do the tub for you later, Pete. Your dad's back's been bothering him."

As she put away the supper dishes, she called to her husband, "You rest out there, Al honey. You have to work."

It's not his back, Pete thought, but his lungs that make his life awful, lung troubles and me. The doctor might be right about Al developing osteoporosis in addition to emphysema, but it was worse than that, Pete knew. The old man had mental problems revolving around him, Pete. When he'd missed Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, that had riled up the old man. When Pete said he hated the Chmielewski Brothers' polka show on Channel 6, that had riled him up. There were a lot of things Al disliked about his son, including the fact that he'd raised a wiseguy. When Al was asked at The Warsaw Tavern on a summer day when his pride and joy was returning from Vietnam, he would look up from his bowl of beer, order three pigs' feet, and grumble, "He's coming in the depth of winter." He would repeat the last part in Polish, "*w pełni zimy.*"

But there was this, too: Al going to Communion four weekdays a month to pray for Pete; Al, heart sinking, thinking of his boy and praying when he read in the newspaper of the fighting near DaNang.

The war the old man had launched against his son long ago was worsening now that Pete had returned from overseas, however. If it wasn't the old bathtub that would never sparkle, the stringy moustache Pete was growing, or the teeth he'd lost in war, then it was the used car Al thought Pete shouldn't own. The Rambler stood beside the garage in a spot Pete had shoveled. The electrical cord from the tank heater under the hood connected to an extension cord he'd plugged into a garage outlet. The car would never start in frigid weather without the heater to warm the engine block.

His own car parked in the garage, rear bumper sticker reading "YOU BETCHA YOUR DUPA I'M POLISH," Al Dziedzic kept telling Pete in the three weeks he'd been back from Vietnam via Camp Pendleton, California, "It's a waste of electricity having the car plugged in."

But Pete had a good argument: "I'll need reliable wheels if I get a job."

"Apply at the flour mill. There's no place to plug in a car down there. You don't need no car."

"I tol' you I'm not working at the mill. I'll pay you for the kilowatts used on the tank heater," Pete said, but what he offered was not enough to calm the wasps in the laborer's head. Since his son had been discharged from the Marine Corps, Al Dziedzic had begun calling him "*Dupa*, ass."

Eighteen years ago he'd started in on Pete after Father Nowak, a 160 lifetime-average bowler, had told Al, "If you wanted to be happy in life, you should have been a priest like me."

"That ain't a comfort," Al had replied.

Father's words running through his head on a Knights of Columbus League bowling night, Al had missed a 7-10 split. There went the league title, there went the trophy for the Polish parish. He was still teased about it. Not only Father Nowak, but the kids were to blame. The daughter Polly and the son Pete had put the kibosh on a life of fun. Sure, after he married, Al still had the yearly bowling banquet and his weekly league bowling night to anticipate, but now he also had a wife, two children, and a workingman's house to take care of on East Fourth Street. He'd been free once. If days were long working outside of Minot, North Dakota, or Cass Lake, Minnesota, on the Great Northern section crew, the nights in town—before he'd married Wanda Czypanska—were filled with drinking and dancing. He never thought he'd be trapped by having kids.

Destiny for joyless Al Dziedzic was the dust on his work clothes, the dust on the packing floor of the flour mill, the dust in the water of the slip beside the mill. Sometimes Wanda was dust. The kid was dust, like the time Al had asked Pete, home on leave from the Marine Corps, to wear his uniform and drop by the boiler room. The guys during lunch break would be impressed with Al's son in his forest green uniform with the scarlet chevrons. The kid never showed up while Al ate his meat sandwich, finished his windmill cookies, closed the lunch bucket. But there was also this: Al on the packing floor talking about Pete. No matter how he had it in for him, sometimes Al couldn't help but brag about his son. Then two weeks ago, as if to spite him, the kid had left out his partial plate at the breakfast table.

"I forgot to put 'em in. There are only two teeth in front missing. They made me false ones in Vietnam."

"What happened? Where?" Wanda gasped.

"In war, Ma."

Removing his own choppers to tease his son, to lord it over him, Al, who wouldn't let up, said, "You make your bed, you lay in it. 'All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth.'"

Al, the bitter, Al, the relentless: Wanda cut his hair with electric clippers, washed his blue workshirts, packed his lunch bucket, sent him off with a kiss. When the guys gathered in the boiler room, Al, for forty years now sitting in his white, visored, miller's cap, would open his lunch bucket to see which tidbit Wanda had surprised him with. Once, he'd found a wad of chewing tobacco in an Eddie's Snoball. Thereafter, she bought him Hostess products, Twinkies and the like.

For Pete's part, he'd been getting a solid education from all of this. He was being home schooled before the term became popular. In fact, he was nearing the Ph.D. level of his education. He'd heard the academic term from his mother. She'd completed a two-year associate's degree at the college in Superior. She'd also gotten a certificate in "The Palmer Method of Muscular Movement Business Writing." According to her diploma, she was qualified "to execute successfully this system

of Business Penmanship.” Though she had two years of higher education, she still called the credential her college professors had a “Ph—” degree.

“What you’re saying sounds like an acid neutralizer. You forget the ‘D.’ Ph.D., Ma. Remember when I’d go to the store? Your grocery lists read ‘Buy titbit for Dad.’ That’s wrong, too. It’s tidbit,” Pete said, feeling it was high time for him to do the correcting. If, when he was younger, he’d sneaked a Lucky Strike from Al or disrespected the nuns, he’d have been corrected pronto by the guy who’d left the railroad and who, in deference to his corset, was downstairs complaining, “This thing’s squeezing me to death.”

“Come up here. I’ll tighten ‘er for you,” Pete said as he looked through his discharge papers. Now with the temperature eight below in northern Wisconsin, he was out of cigarettes, his hair was damp, and the general was bugging him about things beyond his control. Even Wanda said the tub would never look new. At least he was through with the Corps. On second thought, today’s temperature at Camp Pendleton might be seventy degrees, he thought.

When he needed to escape the old man, Pete found comfort knowing that Happy Hour runs from 8-9:30 in the morning at Hudy’s Polish Palace, then resumes for two hours at 4 o’clock, though there is little to be happy about during the winter or the spring, which in northern Wisconsin is called “Winter Lite.” Say you’re looking for Ted Wierzynski, Bernie Gunski, or Joe Novack. By the time you inquire about them at Hudy’s Polish Palace, they are heading around the horn for cocktails at other East End establishments, The Warsaw Tavern perhaps, Mr. B’s, or The Dirty Shame Saloon. If you escape your neighborhood to stay in drinking shape by having a beer in every Tower Avenue bar in the Uptown three miles away, that is called the “Death March.” Few return to a tavern for a day or two after a Death March. Going around the horn in East End takes less out of you. What puzzled Pete as he hurried through the cold to Hudy’s Polish Palace was where his father had gotten a corset. What other East End man wore a foundation garment?

Standing before the neon “*Na Zdrowie*” sign, a toast meaning “to drink to somebody’s health,” Andy “Hudy” Hudacek was finishing a bag of salted peanuts behind the bar. A line of retired laborers slumped before him.

Shivering from the cold, Pete asked him, “How’s your nuts?”

“Salty. How’s urine?” Hudy said.

“The way you like ‘em. I could’ve been laying in the California sun.”

“How’s your father?”

“*Nie ma Ojca.*”

“Al’s all right,” Hudy said, emptying ashtrays. “You shouldn’t say that. Sure you have a Dad. Don’t deny him.”

“Beer for all, Hudy, courtesy of the Marine Corps.”

In a back booth, two of Pete's friends were planning to join the Polish Club. No one but old relatives—dads, uncles, grandfathers—did this. "We'll go join for a joke," Ted Wierzynski was saying. "First we'll swing past the Accordion Hall of Fame."

During Pete's tour in Vietnam, the Hammond Avenue Presbyterian church had closed. A lady who loved bellows instruments had purchased the building. Deconsecrated, the church was filled with accordions, concertinas, button boxes, sheet music. In this way it was made holy as a place to worship these instruments and men like Whoopee John Wilfahrt who'd made them famous. Over the front door, a cement scroll contained a message as appropriate to the new business of accordions as it was to the old one of religion: ENTER THESE COURTS WITH PRAISE.

"You walk here in the cold, Pete?" Bernie Gunski asked.

"Al never let him learn to drive," Ted said. "Pete's the one that doesn't own a car."

"I do now. Look by the garage sometime. Whose car's that, do you suppose? Bob Kiszewski drove it for me last week when I bought it. Pretty soon I'll get a license for the Rambler. Right now I practice beside the garage in a spot I cleared. When the old man's at work and can't see me, I inch forward and backward. I've driven fifteen inches. I know how to work the lights. Ma doesn't tell Al about me sitting behind the wheel practicing"

"You won't have to worry about mileage driving that far," Gunski said. "You'll go six feet in a year."

"It's plugged in and the engine turns over every time."

"I'll buy this round," Gunski said. Unable to walk straight after an afternoon of drinking, he propped himself against the jukebox.

"We need polka," Mr. Pogoalski said.

"You'll wreck the Happy Hour," Pete said. "Play it when I'm not here."

"We've gotta go, Pete. I've picked up our applications. Let him listen to the jukebox," Ted said.

Inside the tavern, "She's Too Fat Polka" was playing. Outside, beyond the glare of the "Na Zdrowie" signs at other bars in the two-block East End business district, they could see the arch over Fifth Street the ore dock makes. They could see Eddie Meyer's TV-Radio Repair, Sully's Café, the windows iced over. A train rolled toward the flour mill.

"In Vietnam they had miniature trains. Their cars, their buses, everything else was small. We had a fellow nicknamed 'Head and Shoulders,'" Pete was saying. "He had no neck. His shoulders rose up like I don't know—horns on a cow? You know that Irish guy you see in the East End that has a married daughter and rides the city bus from Billings Park out to visit her? His name is Moriarty like in

Sherlock Holmes. He's shameless about farting. People call him 'the Despicable Moriarty.' You ever heard of a guy in a Polish tavern doing that on purpose? He'll say '*Erin go bragh*' and let fly. Sometimes when you're downwind of the fan at The Warsaw Tavern— What do you think my old man is called? I had another argument with him."

"Gunner's passed out. Hand me a beer, Pete."

"No wonder Al can't breathe working in flour dust. He walks around eight hours a day with a vacuum machine blowing dust off of the motors. He blows motors."

"Isn't that a crime against nature?"

"The old fellas work hard," Pete said. "Blowing motors ain't for me."

"Are we here?" Gunner mumbled.

"We must be. The sign says, 'ENTER THESE COURTS WITH PRAISE.'"

"It looks closed. Why's it dark inside?"

"It's a Hall of Fame. Have a beer, Pete. I think I'll have another one, too. Let's go to the Polish Club. This place is shut down for the night."

In the Uptown, they passed The Hub Bar, Flynn's, The Capri. "In the Heat of the Night" was playing at the Palace Theater.

"You know Al's nickname for me? No matter what I do, graduate from high school, join the Corps, build a birdbath, cut the lawn, it's 'Bozo.' Lately he's calling me '*Dupa*.' Did *Dupa* wash the car today? Did *Dupa* do this or that? A bozo's a clown that sits above a tank of water and yells at people to throw a ball at a target and dunk him. Well, I'm high and dry. This Bozo ain't wet. While I was drying my hair at home, I decided I'm reenlisting. I'm going back in the Marine Corps and taking the Rambler. Maybe I'll have a sergeant's stripes the next time we meet."

"Ten beers are too many," Gunski was saying.

"Some night we'll drink twenty beers," Pete said.

When applying for membership in the Thaddeus Kosciuszko Lodge of Superior, you follow certain procedures. First, you fill out the application form as you wait in the bar downstairs. During the waiting period, regular Kosciuszko members sit in the dance hall upstairs. They are following the Order of Business listed in the club's *Constitution and By-Laws*. The Introduction of Applicants for Membership comes late in a meeting after the Treasurer's Report. Twenty lodge brothers scraped their overshoes on the floor, complained about the bitter-cold January.

The dance hall smelled like last year's cabbage, last year's beer and cigarettes. A Polish flag hung on the wall. Dr. Kielbasa, The Wally Na Zdrowie Trio, and The World's Most Dangerous Polka Band had recently held a Battle of the Bands, and aftershocks were still being felt. After Mass at St. Stan's and St. Adalbert's, the Polish churches, and at St. Cyril and Methodius, the Slovak church—and all day and

night in the downstairs bar—people talked about how Wally Na Zdrowie, a local guy, had taken the Polish Club by storm with his hit “I’m from Planet Polka.”

At a table before crossed Polish and American flags, Mr. Grymala, the lodge president, said, “Rise please!” when the sergeant-at-arms led the trio up the dark stairs into the hall.

“Citizens, raise your right hands,” the vice president said to the three beer drinkers, then read from the *Constitution*: “I call on you before God and before the entire Thaddeus Kosciuszko Society to reply to the following truthfully, for if it should later develop that your statement was made not in accordance with truth, you will be expelled with the loss of all rights and privileges. What are your names?”

“Pete Dziezdzic, Ted Wierzynski, Bernard Gunski.”

“Ages?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Nationality?”

“Polish-American.”

“In good health?”

“Yes.”

“Are your wives in good health?”

“We’re not married.”

“Do you promise to abide by the by-laws and constitution of the Thaddeus Kosciuszko Lodge, so help me God?”

“Yes.”

To commemorate the occasion, Mr. Grymala gave them a Wally Na Zdrowie record. On the cover was a photo of Wally in a smoky dance hall, one hand on the keys of his accordion, the other pointing to a group of hippies with granny glasses and long hair. “Polka or Get Out!” the words above the photo said.

When new lodge brothers are taken in, applause rings through the old hall. Seeing the solemnity and joy in the workingmen’s faces, the boys had sobered up. They swore never again to mock polka. When the clapping died, Mr. Grymala nodded to the guardian of the sick for his report.

“On 12/10,” Joe Dembroski, the sick director, said, reading from a sheet of paper, “I visited Frank Rozowski at St. Francis Nursing Home. He’s eighty. He sends a hello to us. The next day, I visited George Ham. He slumps in a wheelchair. When English don’t work, I try speaking Polish. He’s in pain, so I leave him a card for the nurses to read him. I went on 12/11 to see Ed Budnick at his house. He’s bothered by rheumatism. I’m sad about your pa, Pete. I visited there, too, before you got to town. He’s sick with his lung and his back. I don’t know why he works anymore. Al will be proud of you for joining.”

“Hooray for Pete and the boys,” the members said.

“He’ll get a seventy-dollar sick benefit. Your ma and dad, when you were in Vietnam, they didn’t want you knowing he missed two months of work at the mill.”

“He’s crabby as ever. What’s wrong with him now? Aren’t his dues paid?”

“He couldn’t get here to pay them,” Mr. Grymala said. “That shows you how bad he was. June was the last time.”

When Al was at a meeting, Pete calculated that he himself had been wading through road dust that rose to the tops of his boots. A fine dust had veiled the blistering sun, and his friends back home were writing him about the cool summer. According to Mr. Grymala, Al had been operated on twice over the summer. No one had told Pete about General Al Dziedzic, the bowling star, and his misery.

“I know it’s not much of a sick benefit. Same as in 1928 when the lodge started,” the guardian of the sick was saying.

“I’ll tell the old man about it. We better get going.”

The members shuffled about, coughed. The boys saluted them. Pete heard the president pounding his gavel, heard the low voices talking about Al, heard the jukebox downstairs playing. “Are there additions or corrections to the Report of the Guardian of the Sick?” Mr. Grymala was asking.

The car wouldn’t move when Ted started it. It had square tires from the cold.

“It’s lousy, nobody telling me. I go to war, get sucker-punched by a buddy, lose two teeth. I come home, Al’s after me—clean the tub, don’t miss Mass. Can’t we get going?”

“It needs to warm up. Don’t be mad we didn’t say anything, Pete. We knew he wasn’t good. Give the car a minute. There, now we’re set.”

“Can’t you floor it? You’d think Wanda would’ve let me know. Maybe it’s only a bad cold he’s got. That’s it. I can still leave town, drive down the alley, head south tomorrow. When I get to Iowa, I turn west.”

“You haven’t driven your car two feet,” Gunski said.

“When we get to Al’s, pull around so I can check the extension cord. Can’t you go faster than thirty? I gotta get home to pack. It’s a long trip to Camp Pendleton.”

Mrs. Dziedzic wouldn’t stop crying when he came in. Off and on, she made the sign of the cross, raised her hands to Jesus.

“I heard about it,” Pete said.

“He got worse when I telephoned about your reenlisting. He won’t go on long. I’ll have to look after your dad when he can’t walk to the mill.”

She’d taken the rosary from the pocket of her housecoat. The beads wrapped around her fingers.

"It's like we're no relation," Pete said. "He wouldn't tell me about the illness. I'm twenty-two years old, a war veteran gone four years. He was at work or the lodge when I was growing up. I never knew the guy."

"He wanted to take you to the Polish lodge," she was saying. "You were too busy for him. Why don't you write him a note in the ovals of the Palmer Method? Say, 'I'm sorry.' Say, 'I'm going to help, Dad. You, me . . . we'll get through it.' Say the rosary with me."

"Where's my shaving kit?"

"At least leave him a note, leave him something," she said. She crossed herself with the crucifix. The beads clicked. "It'll provide him a sign of love. Tell him you joined the Polish Club. Tell him you're not reenlisting. You're staying home."

"I'm not kidding, Ma. Where's my shaving kit? I don't want you criticizing my handwriting if I write him. He never wanted my car here, like parking it will kill the grass."

"It's twelve below. Your father walks home in twelve below zero weather. All his life, he goes to work, sometimes in blizzards."

"I'll write 'Sorry you're sick.' I've gotta prepare for my trip. When it comes to the Rambler, I don't want trouble. Tell Al I couldn't wait up for him. I've done my part. Here's the note."

"I'll call the flour mill. 'Give your boy the sign he needs,' I'll say. All these days and years I've said rosaries for you and Al, now he's dying, the man is dying."

Pete could hear her on the phone. She was sobbing. "He's going to leave for Camp Pendleton. Do something to show your love."

Mrs. Dziedzic could hear Pete, too. Upstairs, the dresser drawer slammed, a wire hanger bounced on the floor.

Looking at the starlit night, Pete remembered that if the sky is cloudless, radiational cooling occurs when warm air escapes the earth. He didn't know why he'd remember this now. The bottom of the window had frost on it. Reflected in the pane above, he could see himself in the uniform he'd put on. He'd been awarded the Vietnamese Campaign Ribbon, Armed Forces Expeditionary Ribbon, National Defense Ribbon, Good Conduct Ribbon, and a Sharpshooter's Medal for qualifying on the rifle range. Through the window he could see someone a half-mile away. He could see the moon in the clear sky.

Beyond Pete's mirrored face, beyond it and the Rambler that would start with the good tank heater, beyond the hill on the other side of the ravine where alder brush rises out of snow that contributes to radiational cooling, from out there in the moonlit night, here came the millhand. He'd walked off the job to see the son he'd been battling since he was born. The entire walk home, Al was muttering how the kid was ungrateful, how he might as well leave town, let Al die in peace and the

war between them end. But there was this, too: Al recalling how he and Wanda had prayed their son would be safe in Vietnam when he'd gotten his orders.

As Pete looked out the window, wondering what he'd done to deserve such a father, it seemed to him Al was frozen in time, but he couldn't be, for he didn't have a moment to spare on this January night. He'd passed beneath the Second Street viaduct. Who else would be on the tracks down there but a fellow on the way home from a lifetime at the flour mill? Each step brought him closer to the end of his life, thought Pete.

For a minute, he lost sight of his old man as Al, deep in thought, walked down the alley, passed behind the garage. How many times Al had yelled at Pete and the boy at the old man. There would be no sign from the old man, Pete realized when he lost sight of his father. There never had been a sign. If it wasn't the tub, it was something else. Thankfully, with the car he had a way to escape. He'd never come back. He'd reenlist for six years, then eight more. When he got out, he'd be a master gunnery sergeant, a lifer. Who cared about anyone back here? His dad could have the Wally Na Zdrowie LP.

"He's coming, Pete. Dad's on his way to rescue you. He'll save the family," Wanda called from the downstairs hallway.

Then there he was again, good old Al Dziedzic, the laborer, back in view the way he'd been in and out of view all of Pete's life. Wanda was right. There was the former Polish Club president, the former Tuesday night bowler, the former railroad hand, and parish council member of St. Adalbert's. Somehow he'd made it from the mill to the car in the backyard. Pete couldn't deny what he was seeing. There he was circling the Rambler, the old man Al Dziedzic, stooping with his remaining strength to unplug the extension cord to keep his son with him until they both died of the wounds that had been inflicted over the past twenty years.

The author of four story collections, **ANTHONY BUKOSKI'S** newest, *North of the Port*, is forthcoming in 2008 from SMU Press. His stories have appeared in numerous journals, including *Western Humanities Review*, *The Literary Review*, and *New Letters*. His collection *Time Between Trains* was a 2003 *Booklist* Editor's Choice.