

JIM KELLY

Instant Gandhi

I Get This Telegram

HERE'S THE PROBLEM IN A NUTSHELL: I'm healthy. It's 1968, I'm eighteen, and I'm healthy. Turn eighteen in 1968 and you register for the draft. You don't register, you go to jail. You register, you get drafted, you pass a physical exam and you get sent off to war. War in a faraway place. Place half way around the world called Vietnam. Place I couldn't find on any map or globe if you put a gun to my head.

The draft gets decided by a lottery drawing on late night TV. Same deal every year. 365 ping-pong balls get dumped into an enormous opaque barrel. Get tumbled and spun. Get picked out one at a time. Every one has a different date stenciled on the side. It never took more than half an hour, give or take, to rearrange all the days of the year. Picked early, you go to war. Picked late, you don't. Simple as that. Me, I got picked right off the bat.

Three weeks later I get this telegram. Official business. Government business. Says I have to report to one street corner in particular, at six in the morning, on a certain Tuesday in November. Take a bus ride downtown. Take a physical exam. See if I'm fit to be a soldier. Some time to be eighteen, healthy and unlucky at games of chance. Some time to be in love.

I'm crazy in love with this brown eyed girl named Annie. One kiss did it. Goodnight kiss, first kiss, kiss in a darkened doorway. Sprung me free. Sprung me out into some crazy good, crazy vast someplace else. Place I never wanted to leave. Then this.

What do I know about being a soldier, a citizen? I'm only eighteen years old, just turned. What do I know about anything? Before I get this telegram the most

important idea I have to handle is what to say or do to make my girlfriend smile, make her laugh.

We take long pointless car rides listening to loud rock and roll music. We walk everywhere, hold hands, say goofy things, delighted simply to be together. We take picnics in hidden away fields, places where a kiss can turn an afternoon into an eternity. Then this.

Day arrives and I'm running late from the start. Cold November rain. Black dark dawn between buildings. City dawn. Running, squinting, blinking at the rain, soaked almost immediately, collar and coat useless.

Too early in the morning I keep thinking, too early in life.

Fifty or sixty eighteen-year-olds in underpants and street shoes, in socks, we wait on cold, wood slat benches for each next test. We wait in an enormous dim building. What light there is stays trapped up by the girders and the skylights, smudging the black-roofed sky with no warmth and no promise of warmth.

Needing sleep, food, clothes and coffee, we say nothing, hug bare chests with cold bare arms. Not yet soldiers, we do as we are told. Strip. Sit there. Turn your head. Cough. Shut up. Keep moving. The usual.

One guy is hugging a fat stack of oversized envelopes to his chest, announcing, to nobody in particular, "No way I'm goin to Nam. No way in hell. I got \$6000 in doctor statements and x-rays." He's right.

Whatever he or his old man paid did the trick. Soon as he got to the back exam the guy got sent home. Free and clear.

A tall guy with bad skin got sent home. "What'd ya get" somebody asked when he walked back our way, back toward the dressing room, a home free slip of paper in his right hand.

"4-F," he said, winking. "They couldn't find my heart."

"Piece of cake" a wit down the bench observed, "All ya gotta do to get outta goin to Nam is get born without a heart. Piece of cake."

Eventually, test by test, all the scabby guys and the crazy guys and the guys with bad parts got sent home. So did all the guys with doctor statements and x-rays. One long disappearing act.

The group of us left around after all that got ordered to get dressed and report to a room down the hall for one last test.

"I'm an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation" said a thin, coffee-soured voice from the front of the room. The voice was wearing a small gray face and a small, rumpled black suit. "You are about to take the Subversive Organizations Test."

Pencils and test booklets were passed around while the bored little voice explained the rules, seeming exhausted by the effort.

"If you are an active member of any organization listed on this form, make a check mark with your pencil in the box opposite the organization's name. Membership

in any of the listed groups makes you unfit for military service, as it is the avowed purpose of these groups to either overthrow or undermine the government of the United States... you may begin.”

Awhile later an alarm clock at the front of the room rang. We were told, then, that our time was up.

“Socialist Worker... Socialist Worker... get your free copy of the Socialist Worker” came a voice from the back of the room. “Read all about imperialist genocide in Vietnam.”

Short guy is shaking a fistful of tabloids, moving up the rows, handing them out, shouting slogans, all noise and movement.

Just like that his noises quit. His sounds stopped. Two wide and neckless guys in black suits are carrying him away. One guy has a hand over the little guy’s mouth. A door opens, closes, and that’s that.

“Did anyone else” asks the tired voice, wonders the gray face, “check any boxes on the Subversive Organizations Form?”

There was, then, the sound of many erasers rubbing much paper.

Awhile later, back out in the rain waiting for our second courtesy bus ride of the day, a scrawny kid, stamping his feet, shivering, asks nobody in particular a question. “Where is this Vietnam place anyway?”

“Just south of Key West, Florida” somebody offers. “Great place to get a suntan.”

Having all just been found fit to kill, nobody felt much like laughing.

Instant Gandhi

Swings in an empty schoolyard. Cold sling seats, late night in early winter. Knees bent back, boots jammed tiptoe into frozen woodchips. We’re going nowhere, Annie and me, considering my options. No moon. No stars. No lights close by. What shined, then, shined up, not down. Here and gone snow glint if we looked, blinked, then looked again.

I got a second telegram. Induction notice. In six weeks time I have to report for duty. Show up and start being a soldier. Six weeks to do something, or nothing.

Some time to not know, and know in my bones, if the Golden Rule meant what it said. If we really do have to do unto others as we would have others do unto us. No matter what.

Kiss, goof and stroll, ride around, get silly and stay silly. Up until then that’s what our world of two had been all about. Now this.

One option was just to do what the telegram said. Show up. Take the oath. Train to be a soldier. Do what I’m told to do. Go where I’m told to go. Price of my citizenship. Kill people, get killed by people I have no earthly quarrel with.

I could run away. Run away and hide. Try not to get caught. Keep running, keep hiding until the war ends, see what happens. Make no contact with anyone I loved

or cared for, anyone who cared for or loved me. Ten years in a federal prison if I did that. Did that and got caught.

I could refuse induction. Show up but not take the oath. Say the war's wrong and I won't have any part of it. Their move if I do that. Five to ten years in federal prison for that one.

Then there's conscientious objection, the not-killing-people option. Trouble is it's an all or nothing deal. No quibbling. No yes in this situation but no in that. You have to say that killing is always wrong, in every situation throughout history, no matter what. Easy enough to say, but how to prove it unless you're a Quaker or a Mennonite, a guy with beliefs to back you up?

Again, Annie asks me the question I can't answer, the question we've been round and round about for hours.

"Tell me why you're a pacifist. Why you won't kill people. Convince me. And it can't just be because you got a draft notice. It has to be based on something. Some set of beliefs. Something you've always believed in. Believed in more than anything. You can't just say, out of the blue, and only after you get drafted, that you're some kind of instant Gandhi. It doesn't work that way."

Silence in a cold sling seat. Silence and darkness all around. Certainty, abruptly, that I'm about to be squashed like a bug by history. A history not of my making, but a history with the nonsense momentum to do anything it damn well pleases with me and anybody else who gets in the way.

I'll See You in Jail

Have you ever had to prove what you believe? Say it and prove it on paper, one word after another? Give examples? Describe yourself doing enough things, in enough situations, to prove your point? To show that you really do live by your beliefs? My first shot at it was in 1968. I filled out a two-page government form saying that I wouldn't kill people, and why.

Nobody can ever honestly say what they will or won't do in every situation imaginable. So, I told a story. Story about when I killed a neighbor kid, temporarily, then hid under a pricker bush for six or seven hours.

That is not what the form asked for. Having no religious training to cite, not being a Quaker, a Mennonite, I told a story. My application to be a conscientious objector was immediately rejected. Here's the story I told:

One hot summer morning I was laying around on a front lawn with friends. We were hot, bored and looking for something to do, some amusement. I noticed a kid across the street. Perfect.

His back will always be to me. He digs, always, in a flower bed along the front of his home. He is digging slowly, doing a good job, a careful job. He is digging with a long-handled shovel.

I sneak up behind him, snatch his shovel and waltz it around his yard, mugging for my pals. I have no plan or purpose beyond making my buddies laugh, busting up our boredom with a clown show, an amusement.

The kid does not shout or come after me. He never moves. He always says the same thing. Says he has work to do so could he have his shovel back. Could he please have his shovel back.

That's when I kill him. Hoist the shovel high up over my head with both hands, swing it down hard, hitting him smack on his forehead. Instantly, he drops down dead. Always, after that, there is a terrible sound. A hollow sound. Then nothing at all. No sound. No movement. Nothing.

I run away and hide, hide under a pricker bush in an alley. Hide all through the day. It's a hot day but I'm cold through and through. Hugging my knees to my chest I squeeze my eyes closed and try not to see what I've done, try to undo it by wishing it so. Nothing works. It keeps coming back, again and again.

Always, it begins with that brief, terrible hollow sound when the shovel hits his forehead. That hollow sound echoing. Then he falls. Crumples. Still and white and dead on bright green grass. Bright red, thick red blood coming out of his nose and ears.

I cannot change what I did or how I remember it. It arrives, unannounced. Sometimes during the day, sometimes at night. It always follows the same sequence. Nothing changes. I have killed. I am a killer, a murderer. I cannot change that, stop it, reverse it, make it, through wishing or wanting, into something else.

They find me, eventually, a group of fathers and kids. Find me and march me down the block to face the music, meet with the kid's father. He comes out on their porch, squinting in the glare of the late afternoon sun.

"If my son dies" he says, "if my son dies I'll see you in jail. I'll see that you pay for what you did."

I saw him drop. I saw him die. But he wasn't dead. He wasn't dead and I wasn't a killer. He was hurt, badly hurt. He

had something called a concussion, a very bad concussion. Nurses had to watch him all through that day and that first night. He recovered.

It is years since this happened. I knew, for hours and hours, alone under that pricker bush, that I was a killer, that I had done the one thing that can never be taken back, undone. That will never leave me. Having killed once, I will never kill again, temporarily or otherwise. I will not be a soldier, and I will not kill people in Vietnam.

The guys reviewing my application were World War II veterans. They never read it. That was the deal in 1968. You wanted to be a conscientious objector, you had to fight for it. Had to appeal and appeal and appeal.

Some time to come of age, 1968, some time indeed.

Religious Instruction

If killing people was the question, of you doing the killing, and if you got a bit of a pause before any of the killing got started, who would you call for advice? Who is it who can say when killing, or if killing is okay, and why? Eighteen and angry, frustrated, I picked a priest. Figured *The Ten Commandments*, *The Golden Rule*, they were his turf. Made a cold call, an appointment on an answering machine, then drove off to see what kind of words the guy had to say.

I'd trained, as a kid, to be a Catholic, but long since fallen away. Hadn't seen the inside of a church, a confessional, in better than ten years.

Arriving early, I started to shout. Started to holler. Needing to scream, I screamed. Not wanting to upset anyone, I mouthed my rant. Pantomime tirade to an empty, stiff-backed chair, a wide clean desk, to a high wall disappearing up into bits and pieces of thick dark books.

Killing people, Father. I need to talk to you about killing people. Killing strangers. People I don't know. People I've never met. People I wouldn't recognize on the street if they came up and bit me. People I have absolutely no reason on earth to dislike or harm, let alone kill.

Abruptly, a wheezing silhouette in the doorway. Settling my flailing hands, composing my contorted face, I told who I was and why I'd come. Told of applying to be a conscientious objector and getting rejected out of hand. Wanting to appeal but not knowing what more to say to make my case, to convince a Draft Board that I wouldn't kill people and wouldn't fight their nonsense war in Vietnam.

He settled into his stiff-backed chair and lit a cigarette. Took an ashtray out of a drawer. Took a glinting decanter out of another drawer. A decanter and two glasses.

Poured himself a full glass of something dark, drained it off in one swallow, then filled the glass again. Filled it brim full.

Eyes moist, blurry behind his glasses, the priest looked like the oldest man alive. Weary beyond any power of words to ever say.

“Let’s get something straight” he said, eventually, his breathing, between phrases, like the slow crumpling of tinfoil, “You don’t care any more about killing people than I do. You’re young and you don’t want to die. You’re a coward, plain and simple. Let’s admit that up front.”

Filling both glasses this time, he slid one my way across the wide and tidy desk. Lit another cigarette, the stubbed out remnants of the first still furiously leaking smoke, and continued. “Somebody told you you could find an out in the Bible, a loophole. Well forget it. There’s nothing in the Bible and there’s nothing in church history to help you. Everybody kills everybody else at one time or another. Always have. Always will. Slaughter all down the ages and blessed on every side. That’s your Bible for you. That’s your church history.”

“You want my advice, say you’re a queer. Say you like kissing boys. They don’t take queers in the military. At least they never used to.”

And that’s what the priest had to say.

What the General Had to Say

The General, of course, wasn’t really a General. That was just a side of the mouth moniker people up and down the block used behind the guy’s back. His day job was doing something in the parts department of a Chevy dealership. But, he’d been in a war, I needed advice and he was within walking distance. Two houses down on the right. When you’re eighteen and in doubt you take your experts where you find them.

The General had done his twenty five years active service, retired, then joined the reserves. Two weeks every summer and odd weekends off and on throughout the year he’d squeeze into a uniform and go off for something called maneuvers. “Keeping America Free for Democracy” he’d announce to anyone within earshot when he was stuffing olive drab duffle into his rusted Chevy wagon.

“Keeping the beer stores of northern Michigan in business” was the shared conclusion, delivered with a collective wink once he’d packed up and gone.

Sitting in a lawn chair in his basement, I explained my situation. He heard me out, nodding every now and again. When I finished he ambled over to an ancient, bloat-front refrigerator and got us two longnecks.

“Your health” he said, clinking bottles.

“Deal is this” he began, “when I die, and we all of us die, my funeral is covered. Coffin, grave, hearse, planting, the whole deal, soup to nuts. Paid in full thanks to our Uncle Sam.”

“I die tomorrow, my mortgage gets paid in full. My boys get a free ride through the college of their choice, within reason, and my wife gets a paycheck every month for the rest of her natural life. Now that’s benefits. That’s security.”

Click, wink, drink.

“My life, my life is over. I got nothing to live for. And that’s okay. That’s okay because I got my bases covered. And that’s the main thing, right? Having your bases covered.”

“Now you, you’re young. You don’t think about things like this. All you want to do is chase girls and drink beer, right, am I right? But when you gonna get your bases covered if you don’t start now, start when you’re young and healthy? Answer me that?”

“I know, I know, I know, you don’t want to kill people. Nobody in their right mind ever does. Makes no sense. I felt exactly the way you do when I was your age. Who are these guys to tell me what to do, order me around. What right do they got to order me around like I’m some kind of robot. I’m a person, see. I got a brain. I can think for myself thank you.”

“Here’s the deal. You get in the military in time of war, like during this Vietnam thing, and you get double benefits. You do your little stint and you’re set for life. Maybe all you do is fill out forms, unload trucks, something like that. Doesn’t matter, you serve in time of war and you’re set for life.”

The General nods at his empty longneck, at mine, looks at the refrigerator. I take the hint, get us another round, sit back down in the lawn chair, see what else he has to say.

“Beauty of being a soldier, you don’t have to think. You don’t got to think about a thing. Uncle Sam, he takes care of everything. He does all the thinking for you. Tells you when to eat and when to sleep, when to shit and when to piss. You do like you’re told and everything works out fine, just fine.”

We clink our mutual good health, take a breather, then he concludes, finishes up.

“Best long-term investment a young guy like you could make, being a soldier in time of war. Take it from a guy that knows. A guy that’s got his bases covered. Got his bases covered and then some.”

And that’s what the General had to say.

Time’s Up

Three times I applied, appealed, to be a conscientious objector. Three times I got denied. Rejected out of hand. No comments, notes or reasons why, just three strikes and you’re out. That’s when I did what the rules said I could do, if I chose, which was to request a hearing in front of the local Draft Board. Make my case in person.

The Do's and Don'ts of a Draft Board hearing were not printed up and passed around before hand. In my case they were explained, one on one, a few minutes before things got going.

Alone on a wooden bench in a long dim hallway, I was reading back through a copy of my application when the door to the hearing room opened. A tall guy, skinny guy, walked my way, leaned in close and told me what was what. Took him one, two minutes tops to explain the protocol for a Draft Board hearing.

“You get forty-five minutes, that's the rules. We use a timer. Keep things fair. You answer our questions, that's it. We ask, you answer. You say anything, anything at all when somebody hasn't asked you a question, that's it. Hearing's over. Finished and done. Clear enough?”

Who was I to squawk? This was 1968. Countries were dominos. Fight in a war in a faraway place or they'd teeter and fall. Turn eighteen and your fate's decided by a lottery drawing on late night TV. Killing is okay and not killing gets you five to ten in a federal prison. So, a hearing where you can't speak, make your case, defend yourself? Why not?

I sat on a wooden chair facing five guys behind a long wooden table. For the first forty minutes nobody spoke. Not a word. They smoked, most of them, one cigarette after another. Smoked, flipped through newspapers, magazines. Said nothing.

Then the skinny guy who'd explained the rules to me started things off. Asked me how you stop a guy like Hitler if you don't kill him. How you stop future Hitlers, crazy guys with guns and bombs and armies. Guys who take what they want by force and kill anybody who stands in their way. Guys who'll stop at nothing, will kill thousands, millions who don't quite fit into their crazy idea of what the world ought to be like.

I started to say something when another guy broke in, asked a question.

Told me I was in my parents' bedroom. Had a loaded pistol in my hand. Across the room a maniac was coming at my mother. He had a butcher knife and if I didn't stop him he was going to carve her up, hack her to bits. So, what would I do then?

Bell went off. Fairness timer the skinny guy told me about before things got going. “Time's up” one of them said. Fair being fair, rules being rules, they all got up and left.

Some time to be eighteen, 1968, some time indeed.

I'm Not From Around Here

The neon dark of the tiny bar was close, dank and frigid. Our group of twelve abruptly unemployed orderlies didn't much care. “Wars stop” one of our lot announced, using his best bad imitation of a nightly news voice, uninflected, omniscient, “when enough people want them to, and not a day before.” Cheers all around. The sloppy refilling of mugs and glasses.

Up until that morning we'd all been orderlies in a city hospital. Conscientious objectors. Guys working off our military time doing civilian service. Since turning eighteen we'd all defined ourselves, understood who we were and what we believed, in opposition to the war in Vietnam. Then this.

The day before we'd all gotten the same telegram. Official business. Government business. Told us our stint was over, our services no longer required. Not a one of us had believed a word of it.

For years the war was everything. Dominated everything. Defined all of our choices. Then, one morning, it was over and we were free to go, our services no longer required. Our separate struggles with ourselves, trying, again and again to say who we were and what we believed. Our pitched battles with Draft Boards, applying, being denied, appealing, again and again. Over and done. Finished, just like that.

After a huddle and a few phone calls that morning we started to believe what the telegrams were saying, that we really were free to get up and go. By nine o'clock we'd quit, linked arms and marched off down the street to the first bar we could find.

A window-mounted air conditioner was running amok, with much laboring racket, just above my head. Somebody else, unsteady on his pins, was giving forth.

"Consider the nightly news. What they showed and when they showed it. Early on, protesters were a joke. Scruffy malcontents and the war was going well. Body counts were up, week after week. Then, this spring, there are way too many protesters to ignore. Not just kids anymore. Everybody and his brother wants this thing stopped."

Pausing to steady himself, refill his glass, the orator continued. "The war didn't end because it was wrong, because it had never made sense in the first place. The war ended because it became the popular thing to be against it. It got fashionable to be against the war, so it stopped. Simple as that."

Cheers all around. Much clinking of glasses. Much spilling of beer.

"Democracy in action," shouted a guy off to my left, rousing to the moment. Up and down the wobbly tables we'd jammed together, mugs and glasses pounded agreement to each next speech, to every jibe and joke.

Head knocking from too much beer, too much air-conditioned air on the back of my head, I settled up and left. Somebody joined me. Quiet guy I hadn't said two words to the whole two years we'd worked together.

Squinting, we stepped out into the glare, heat and stink of the summer morning in the city. That's when he told me his story. Walking along after we sorted out where we were and where we had to get to to get our cars.

"Back when I got drafted I didn't know anything about conscientious objection. Wouldn't have mattered if I had. I can't read or write. Couldn't read any of the

rules. Couldn't fill out any of the forms. I got drafted and refused to take the oath. On the morning I was supposed to be sworn in I said I wouldn't kill people and I wouldn't be a soldier. Simple as that. I got five years in prison. Then, when I got out, another judge ordered me to do two more years. Civilian service here at the hospital with you guys. I'm not from around here. I'm not much of a city guy. I'm from a little farm town up north. Place you probably never heard of. Probably, that's where I'll go back to when I settle up with my landlord. I got nothing to keep me around here now."

We shook hands and wished one another well. City heat was wobbling up off the sidewalks and the streets, shaking everything to bits and pieces like a funhouse mirror.

What had we known, any of us back then, beyond our instincts? In my case, schooled by a kiss, sprung free by a kiss to a better way of being. That and knowing how to read and write.



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