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Short

“Get your shit together, you’re going back,” said Sergeant Craig, our squad leader.
“Back where?” I asked.

“Back to base camp. You’re going home in two weeks and the Army wants you to wash your ass and clean up your fuckin’ language before you DEROS.”

DEROS: Date of Expected Return from Overseas. Your DEROS date was your link with home from day one. From your first day in-country you started counting backwards from 365. Everybody here knew their DEROS date. It was imprinted on your military mind like your Army Serial Number and your weapon’s serial number. Next to your ETS, the day the Army allowed you to return to civilian life, your DEROS date was always on your mind.

A cherry once asked me what DEROS meant. ‘Dumb fuck,’ I thought as I looked at this poor, pink-faced kid. When he told me he had been in country only three weeks I changed my mind. ‘Poor fucker’ was more like it. “It’s when you get to go home,” I said as I turned and walked away.

In fourteen days I would wake up, put on a much-traveled pair of jungle boots for the last time and retrace my route back to “The world.” Back to “The land of round-eyed women and the big PX.” Home.

“Catch the re-supply Chinook at 1700 hours. Good luck.” Although Sergeant Craig wished me luck, there was something between resentment and jealousy in his voice, but I didn’t give a shit. He had only been in country a little over two months and wasn’t even close to being short.

Sin Loi, motherfucker! I’m going home!

“Thanks,” I replied. After 351 days, I was about to leave this place behind.

That I was going home in two weeks wasn't news to me, I knew I was short, but I thought the Army would keep me out here until the very last day. I quickly said my goodbyes. I ignored my platoon sergeant, Harvey the hard-on. Our LT was long gone. After eleven and a half months, there weren't too many old faces left in the platoon. Terry had DEROS'd in November; Tom had gotten a housecat job at battalion, Bob and Jerry were gone, medevaced after a mine blew them to Japan then all the way home.

At 1700 hours I heard the familiar, deep 'whopping' sound of the incoming twin-rotored Chinook. After dropping its slingload of supplies, the pilot slid the aircraft sideways and landed in our FSB. It dropped its ramp and shit out a load of cherries, discernable by their dark green jungle fatigues, their pink arms and faces, and their look of fear and uncertainty.

“Good,” I wanted to tell them. “Always be afraid. Don't be ashamed of fear. It will keep you alive.”

Along with several other heavily tanned and filthy passengers, I walked up the rear ramp of the big cargo chopper for the noisy but final ride back to my home away from home, base camp. Through the round porthole of a window I took one last look at our FSB. In the center sat the sandbagged TOC. Nearby was a rectangular mess tent surrounded by an earthen berm that had been hit by enemy recoilless rifle rounds the day after Thanksgiving.

You missed, motherfuckers! Check your calendars, you were a day off.

As I sat there holding my M-16 between my legs, staring at the floor, taking in the cool and cleansing air that blew through the aircraft, the sound and vibration brought back memories of another flight when AK-47 rounds came through the floor of the Chinook, right where I was staring. When I pointed out the small jagged holes to the crew chief, he yelled to the pilot over the intercom that we were taking ground fire. The pilot dropped the big chopper down to below tree top level and flew all the way back to the airfield at a height that had to be less than ten feet. The pilot was running trucks and water buffalo carts off the road. “Doan mean nuthin,” mumbled one weary passenger. I couldn't hear him over the roar of the engines, but I could read his lips. I knew the phrase well. It meant don't bother complaining. Nobody's listening. Nobody gives a shit 'cause there's nothing you can do about it. Fuck it, doan mean nuthin'.

Back at the airfield the Chinook disgorged its passengers and taxied away. As I stood waiting for a ride back to the company area, I looked around at all the aircraft.

The gooks would love to get hold of this place and fuck it up real good. Chinooks, Cobras, UH1-B gunships, slicks; all the aircraft that bring smoke and hardtimes on their asses.

An empty slick lifted, nosed forward and raced down the runway, picking up speed as it rose and passed over me. I looked up into the face of one of the door gunners as it passed and thought I saw the crew chief who ordered me off his Huey one day back in June. The pilot had said the aircraft was overloaded. The chow, water cans, ammo and other supplies had priority, so one of the three passengers had to unass the aircraft. The crew chief pointed to me and motioned with his thumb to get off and wait for the next resupply chopper going out. Awash in the rotor blast, I watched the aircraft lift, tilt forward, and begin to fly off. About 75 yards from liftoff the nose of the Huey dropped and the aircraft fell, hitting and tumbling across a rain-soaked and muddy bunker line, throwing ammo crates, water cans, and men out into the water.

“Holy shit,” I mumbled as I watched one helmet-less man stumble away from the broken aircraft holding what appeared to be his broken arm. The Huey didn’t burn, though; it crumbled and collapsed into a twisted pile of smoking, whirring metal. No longer having any blades to turn, the gas-turbine engine whined until someone in the cockpit hit the master switch. An E-5 from supply who witnessed the crash turned, kicked a rock and looked away. The Huey that passed over me at the airfield didn’t crash though. It flew off, climbing until it disappeared into the distant gray-blue rain clouds.

I caught a ride back to my company area in a deuce and a half from headquarters supply. Once past division headquarters, the driver took a right, past the spot where a Sp/5 from Headquarters Company accidentally drove his 3/4 ton truck into one of those deep, water-filled drainage ditches that bordered the main roads inside base camp. When his truck rolled over, the guy was pinned underneath and drowned.

“Fuckin’ shame,” said one PFC whose tone was just short of sad.

Back in the company area I walked into our empty squad hooch, glad to be alone. I didn’t want to talk to anyone. I stood and looked around: eleven empty Army cots, footlockers, a small black-and-white TV in the corner, Playboy centerfolds taped to the walls and corrugated metal ceiling, shelves made from empty ammo crates that held brown boxes of M-16 ammo, cans of fruit, pictures of loved ones, radios, wrinkled and ripped paperbacks, clothing and green towels hanging on commo wire, and other damp and musty-smelling gear lying in heaps on the floor and the four corners. Two bare light bulbs hung from the ceiling, but I left them off. For a

long while I sat alone on my bunk and took in the relative quiet of the cool, dark hooch. I could still hear the occasional muffled boom of artillery fire, but it was off in the distance, and outgoing. The distant sound of Hueys bringing men and supplies out to the field or bringing the dead and wounded back in to the 12th Evac Hospital was a reminder that, although the war was almost over for me, many still had a long way to go till their DEROS. Another two cots, Bob and Jerry's, would remain empty when the battalion came in for stand down. Three other cots waited for replacements, three green and pink-faced cherries who, over time, would turn brown, dirty, and quiet.

Tonight I would sleep in a bed, only a crude folding canvas Army cot really. No sheets, just a wool blanket, but it was dry and up off the ground and I had a real pillow, sort of. The hooch was screened in. I didn't have to share my bunk with mosquitoes, snakes, scorpions, centipedes, red fire ants, or anything else that crawled into my clothes or flew around and around my head until I wanted to fucking scream. During one firefight I thought I had been shot. The pain in my chest took my legs out from under me. I rolled around on the ground in agony, feeling for the entrance wound and blood. Instead, my hand found a large scorpion crawling away off my chest.

No flush toilets, but there was the relative privacy of a five-hole, screened-in shitter with an unlimited amount of toilet paper. And I wouldn't have to take my M-16 with me, just a copy of last month's Playboy.

This is my rifle, this is my gun. This is for shooting, this is for fun.

Although my weapon was clean, the rest of me was worn and filthy. I wanted to rid myself of clothes that still reeked of that all-too-familiar damp, musty stench that mingled with diesel fuel and LSA, smells that emanated from men who had been marinating in their own sweat for days on end. I hadn't really washed in days or changed my clothes for over a week, but back here I could take a hot shower every day for the next fourteen days if I wanted. Except for the seven baths I took on R&R, I could count the number of showers I had taken in the last 351 days on one hand. When Nancy, my R&R girlfriend, first saw me with my shirt off, she smiled and said I had a nice tan, but after an hour-long soak in the tub, I dropped two, maybe three shades of brown. I had to change the scummy-gray water twice.

And I was thirsty for anything other than piss-warm, heavily chlorinated water or the unsweetened Kool-Aid that we added to take the bite out of the water, and hungry for anything besides the monotonous C-Rats. I could get real food and cold milk in the mess hall. Even mess hall food would be a welcome change.

After I had taken off my helmet and flak-jacket, dropped my web gear in the corner, hung my M-16 from the nails in the overhead rafter, I looked around again and blinked several times, trying to comprehend that it was over for me, and that I would be going home in fourteen days. My eyes burned from lack of sleep. Too many nights on guard or ambush patrol, or sitting out on LP followed by long, endless days searching for an enemy who would not allow themselves to be found. There was a good chance that tonight I would be allowed to get at least eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. I could probably sleep though a mortar attack. There were times in the past when I had.

As I began to unlace my boots, a faint stain on the toe of the left one reminded me of the blood splatters I washed off late last March—it was Easter Day I think—near a town named Suoi Da in the shadow of Nui Ba Den. A man standing next to me had been shot in the neck. When he went down, the blood spurted like a pulsating fountain onto the ground next to him and onto my boot. Just a foot or two to the right and it would have been me. I saw him medevaced out, Plasma bottle hanging over his litter, but I never found out if he survived. He was a local Vietnamese, a one-legged vet who owned a bar—which side he fought for was a mystery. I didn't know his name and I didn't ask. I didn't want to know. I didn't want to put a name with the face. I wanted to throw these boots onto the tarmac at Bien Hoa for those replacements getting off my plane to see. They could have them for all I cared. They were well broken in, but they carried memories I wanted to leave behind. Maybe I would have the Vietnamese man who burned our shit every morning burn my boots too.

These were the same size twelve boots I wished were about ten sizes smaller when we discovered we were in the middle of a mine field one warm morning. When a track from second squad ran over a mine while moving up to the front of the platoon column, we realized we were probably in the middle of, or at least on the edge of a mine field. Everyone slowly retraced their steps and climbed back up on their respective tracks. If they could talk, these boots had stories to tell, but not to me, I would be leaving the boots and the stories behind in fourteen days.

It was safe back here. Relatively safe. When you were out in the field, safe was when you were deep in a hole with overhead cover during a mortar attack. Or behind a berm when green tracers are looking for you. When you're back at base camp, safe meant you're out of the deep shit. There was always the threat of a mortar attack, even back here, but an occasional mortar attack was nothing.

Piece of fuckin' cake.

Surely the enemy could find bigger targets than one 20 year-old, 135 pound, raggedy-assed, used-up white boy like me. There were ten, maybe even twelve or fifteen-thousand other, more important people here, people who could do them some harm. Surely they would aim for the high priority targets like the airfield, ammo dumps, or division HQ. I was spent, useless, ready to check out of the net. Right about now I didn't give a rat's ass who won. As far as I was concerned, I was out of the game, standing on the sidelines, watching the game clock wind down.

Looking down the long empty hooch past the empty bunks, I could see through the screen door at the other end and across an open area to the mess hall. It was chow time and the housecats stood in line with the short-timers. One particular face reminded me of the kid from Recon Platoon—Rodriquez I think his name was—or was it? Why can't I remember his name? I remember his face and big smile.

"Short!" he yelled as he got into line.

"How short are you, Rodriquez?" asked one Sp/4.

"I'm so fuckin' short I can walk under the mess hall door," he laughed.

And so it went. Back and forth. Laughing, grateful, exhausted men who were going home soon.

Later that day Rodriquez took a shell fragment in the head from an outgoing 105mm short round from one of our own artillery batteries inside base camp answering a call for fire—killed just one day after coming in from the field for the last time. He was sitting on his bunk, they said. Just sitting there sorting through his footlocker, trying to decide what to give away, what to toss out, and what to take home.

'Friendly fire,' it was called.

"Ain't nothing friendly about a shell fragment the size of your hand taking off the top of your fuckin' head," said another short-timer standing nervously in line at the chow hall next day. "Nothing friendly at all."

"Fuckin'-A," replied another, looking over his shoulder in the general direction of the offending unit, still firing from somewhere on the north-west side of the base perimeter out into enemy territory in support of a unit that had stepped in the shit.

But as safe and comfortable as it was compared to the field, base camp wasn't home or even close. It was one step closer to home and the real world. One step away from the darkness and one step closer to the light of reality and what we all knew to be the truth about life. It was a place to blink and try to figure out what had happened the last eleven and a half months. It was a way station; for the line companies in on stand down just a temporary respite from the field. For guys like me, the short-timers, a kind of purgatory, not quite heaven but definitely not hell.

A place between the hell of the bush and the heaven we called home. To the Army it was a place for short-timers to decompress before they went home and back to civilization. A place to reacquire some sanity, maybe even remember simple table manners. I always wondered what would happen if the Army just snatched a man out of the field and dropped him off back in his old neighborhood, all in the space of, let's say, about twelve hours. The Army knew what would happen and that's why they tried to give a man at least two weeks to try to wind down. Let the spring uncoil a bit.

Here we could begin to rid our vocabulary of words like 'fuck,' 'motherfucker,' 'cocksucker,' 'asshole,' 'shithead,' 'dickhead,' 'dipshit,' 'numbnuts,' and try to replace them with mild expletives you could use in front of your grandmother. We even joked about it; "Hey Mom, pass the fucking salt."

Home would be a place where we would never again hear the word 'incoming' or 'medevac.' A place where you would call for a pizza instead of a fire mission. Base camp was a place to begin to readjust to civilian sounds and smells. Back in the world there would be none of the constant ear-shattering fire from weapons, large and small, ours and theirs, or the ever-present stench of foul bodies, week or more old clothes, decaying vegetation, warm piss, burning human excrement, and diesel exhaust.

There were times when I wondered if I would ever again see the projects back home. A lot of close shaves, many bumps and bruises, and one big-ass mine that left me lying semi-conscious in the middle of a dirt road a few clicks east of Phuc My. Our track hit a mine and bucked like a bronco. We all flew in different directions; I landed on my head and shoulder.

After a good night's sleep—must have been ten hours at least, I don't remember falling off—I reported to the First Sergeant the next morning. I was told that I would spend the next two weeks pulling either nightly guard duty on the perimeter bunker line or nightly CQ runner in the company orderly room.

"No sweat," I said to nobody in particular. I could do the next two weeks standing on my head. I'd of even filled sandbags and burned shit if I had to. I was out of the real shit. No more search-and-destroy missions, ambush patrols or LP's. No fire fights, mines, mortar attacks, snipers, or RPGs. No more monsoon rains that kept you and everything you owned wet, cold and moldy for days on end, or relentless heat and humidity that could make your eyes roll back in your head and drop you in your tracks. No more sights, sounds or smells of death or dying.

Sitting alone in the empty and silent hooch, I had time to think about other things besides that night's patrol or tomorrow's sweep. I had time to think back on

the last eleven and a half months. That's what happens when you finally get enough sleep; the fog clears, and your mind begins to function again.

When I reported for duty on my first night as CQ runner, I met the new company clerk, a guy named John who had been in-country only two months or so. He briefed me on my duties; what I had to do from 6 pm till 6 am—1800 hours till 0600 hours Army time—answer the phone, run errands for the Duty NCO, stay out of the CO's desk, stay awake, stay sober.

Piece of fuckin' cake.

I had electric lights, a radio, small black and white TV, a big fan, cold soda, snacks. Almost like being back at Fort Benning, only nobody was trying to kill you there; it was against Army regulations.

John was a Yale-educated Southerner with a BA in English. He was a slim, wiry-looking guy who proudly sported a non-regulation moustache, his way of saying "Fuck you" to the Army.

"I used to talk like a hillbilly but Yale taught me the King's English," he told me one day, smiling. Although Yale had taken him out of Kentucky, it hadn't taken the Kentucky drawl out of his voice. He asked what I was going to do with my life when I got out of the Army besides burn my uniforms, take long hot showers, drink beer and get laid. I told him that I had just been accepted by a small New England college near where my father and his second wife lived. I was hoping college would be my way out of the city housing projects.

Someone in the admissions office must have had a sense of humor or maybe they'd been in the Army. On the application my mother had sent me, where it said "Present position," I wrote, "Sitting in a hole." Not looking past that day, and not thinking any college would accept me, especially with my poor high school grades, I really didn't take the application seriously. I pulled out a pen and filled out the papers right then and there, sitting in a hole out in the Bo Loi Woods, M-16 leaning against my leg, two grenades and a Claymore clacker sitting on a sandbag to my left. I had just finished digging in for the night and sweat dripped on the application, mingling with my grimy fingerprints. I had a good hoot, as John would say, filling out that application. I think I might have even dropped a pinch of dirt into the envelope.

Sometimes John lingered in the office after duty hours and told me about all the great literature he had read as an undergrad. When I told him I might major in English, he gave me his copy of W.W. Norton's *The American Tradition in Literature*, which he said he probably wouldn't have time to read now anyway.

“Don’t understand why I even brought it,” he said, sitting behind his gray Army desk with a slightly puzzled look, feet up, hands behind his head. Maybe he thought it would be one of his ties to home, one of those ties you’re afraid or reluctant to let go of.

“New Haven seems a million miles away right about now. Funny though, the Army thought that because I had a degree in English, I’d make a good company clerk. There’s no connection whatsoever, except when I have to write up citations for the officers. Then my love of fiction kicks in. I can make a dumb-as-dogshit-officer look like John fuckin’ Wayne.”

We both laughed. One day our battalion commander landed his C&C chopper in a clearing, got out and poked his head in an enemy bunker complex that had been uncovered by Alpha Company. The battalion S-3—the operations officer—put the colonel—his boss—in for a Silver Star.

“The clerk in S-1 who wrote up that recommendation should have been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in fiction,” said John, shaking his head and smiling. “But that’s the way it works. The officers have to get their tickets punched before they move on to their next assignment or go home.”

Before I’d allowed the Army to take over my life and thoughts, I loved to read. I was a lousy student but a voracious reader, as one teacher told my mother. I could always be found in the library. Although I resisted at first, I eventually came to appreciate Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy, Emily Dickenson, and especially Damon Runyon, who always wrote in the present tense. But here, in this place, I found it hard to focus on a book or anything other than how to make it to the future tense.

In English class I refused to diagram sentences and couldn’t tell the difference between a direct or indirect object, but when Miss Mirante made us read and act out Macbeth, I begged to play the lead. I memorized Macbeth’s famous soliloquy in act five and acted my heart out:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Mrs. Mirante's mouth dropped when I acted out my lines. For the last 351 days, though, I hadn't read Shakespeare, Damon Runyon or much of anything. I found it hard to focus on any reading matter of any substance.

"Get your head out your ass!" the lifers would yell at anyone who wasn't 100% focused on the task at hand, the mission, the moment. Here, if you lost your focus, you could lose your life. Attention to detail. Besides, nothing I had read in high school seemed to have any relevance here. Nothing I learned in high school had prepared me for this place. Some guys, the rednecks and the brain-dead lifers, read the latest Playboy or Marvel comic books; they gawked at and joked about Miss April with her big tits and perky nipples who hoped to "Sing Rigoletto or Rigatoni, or whatever at Carnegie fuckin' Hall some day," or get a Ph.D. in astro-fuckin' physics.

One night—I was down to ten and a wakeup—I was told by the First Sergeant to drive the battalion S-3, Major Johnson, out to Ann Margaret, a collection of bunkers that guarded the bridge over the Suoi Ben Muong, a stream just outside our division perimeter. This defensive position was named Ann Margaret after the actress who visited the men manning the bunkers on one of her morale-raising tours. One PFC said that two of the bunkers reminded him of Annie's enormous tits—"She can raise my morale any day"—so for this reason and for her kind and risky gesture of support, the position was called Ann Margaret. That night a guy from another company—a short timer I heard—had accidentally blown himself up with the Claymore he was setting up as part of the routine defense measures taken to guard the bridge. As he was leaning over the Claymore, it detonated, sending him up in the air and separating his head, arms, and legs from his torso. As I carefully drove down to the bunker, I could see what appeared to be a large piece of smoking red meat in the faint blackout lights of my Jeep. The medics gathered the body parts and collected them in a body bag, but they never found one of his legs. This was the second time I had to deal with some fuckup who had blown himself away with a claymore. With ten days left, I really didn't want to deal with this shit again.

This shit isn't supposed to happen back here, man.

Back in my empty hooch I turned on the light over my bunk and opened my *American Tradition in Literature*. I needed to focus on something other than the dead short-timer. I lost myself in the heavy book filled with stories of other times

and places. One poem by Archibald McLeish stood out and reminded me of this place:

Death is here:
Death is another place, not among strangers.
Death is under the moon here and the rain.
I promise you old signs and a recognition
Of sun in the seething grass and the wind's rising.
Do you ask more?
Do you ask to travel for ever?

I wasn't sure if I understood what this poem meant, but something clicked in my head. I was a tourist here in this country. Just visiting, seeing the sights, killing people. Do I want to travel forever? Fuck no. When I get home I'm never leaving again.

I reached up and grabbed the light that was slowly swinging back and forth from a long black electrical wire, making small arcs, like a pendulum. The light reminded me of that illum round that passed over our NDP one night, slowly swinging in the night breeze, casting long deadly shadows as a sniper popped away in the distance.

I looked over to Terry's old bunk and thought back to the time not that long ago when a mortar round landed where I would have been walking if I had gotten up when he told me to. Instead, I lay there on top of a sand-bagged bunker trying to snatch just a few more minutes of sleep. That morning our CO had some hot chow flown in thinking we deserved it after the previous evening's entertainment—A body count of one KIA, three WIA; ours not theirs. The enemy saw the chopper, the chow line, much of the company lined up for eggs and pancakes and figured it would be a great time for an encore. Only I was just too tired to even get up, even for pancakes. I spent half the night dropping M-79 rounds outside the perimeter. The other half I lay half awake expecting a ground attack or at least some RPG's.

"See, sometimes it pays to be a lazy-ass motherfucker," I laughed, nervously. If Terry hadn't stopped to try to get my tired ass up, he too would have been in line.

Now that I was short, I could turn in most of my equipment. When I picked up my flak jacket from where it sat in the corner, a jagged piece of shrapnel fell out of the pocket, a souvenir from an enemy recoilless rifle round that hit not far from our bunker one night. I heard the explosion, far enough away I thought that there was no need to find cover—or maybe I was too tired to move—then a whizzing sound rapidly heading in my general direction. I should have known better, my ear was

attuned to all the sounds of this place. The shrapnel hit with a thud, landing in the sandbag next to me. When I pried it out, it was too hot to hold. When it cooled off I kept it as a souvenir of another near miss. Something to show the folks back home. A souvenir for my uncles to prove that I too had seen war. I was part of the club. The initiation was a mother fucker but I was one of them now.

As I stood in line at the PX, the eyes of the Vietnamese cashier reminded me of a wounded enemy soldier who had been hiding in a spider hole in a trench. The wounded man stared at me for just a moment until his face contorted in pain at his wound. I stood there and stared back. The guy behind roughly pushed me aside and blew his shit away. The dead man was dragged out of his hole and dropped on the ground for all to see. The dead always seemed to lie in unnatural positions, their tired, empty eyes staring out at nothing. Some men stood over the body and joked.

“He had to be the dumbest mother fucker in the NVA,” said one SP/4 staring into the dead man’s face. “He emptied a whole magazine at us and didn’t hit a God damned thing.” I stared at the body.

You missed, motherfucker.

There were too many near misses. Too many memories. I wanted them out of my head. Alcohol or weed were the usual ways to dull the brain, wash away the memories, push back the faces, close the eyes, but instead I used John’s book. It was my anchor, my link with sanity, with another place, another time, the future. I wanted a clear head, just in case. Didn’t want to lose count. No accidents, nothing to keep me from getting home. I didn’t want to drive into a ditch, rollover and drown, or get blown away by my own Claymore.

“What’s that you got there?” asked my bunker companion eyeing the big, black anthology the first night I pulled bunker guard.

“It’s just a book of short stories. Something to do out here. Besides, I’ve already read this month’s Playboy,” I lied.

“What kind of stories?” he asked. By his clean and dark green jungle fatigues and unstained web gear I could see he was new in country. He carried an M-16 in one hand and a Playboy magazine in the other.

Just don’t get any on me, I thought to myself.

“Just short stories. I’ll take the first shift, you take the next. We’ll rotate, OK?”

“Sure.” He said, taking off his web gear, leaning his M-16 against the wall, and climbing into the lower bunk with his Playboy, flashlight, and wool blanket for a pillow.

Out on the bunker line I could bring my book, sit on top of the bunker and read until the light faded, then inside, by flashlight under my poncho. Bret Hart’s “The

Outcasts of Poker Flat” reminded me that I too was now something of an outcast, no longer a part of my old squad, what was left of it. I was an outcast here—the locals were trying to chase me out of their country. When I got home would I be an outcast because of what I had seen and done? Would I fit in? Hart’s people were cast out and died in the wilderness. Would I survive all this just to die crossing some street back home because I lost my focus and didn’t see the truck coming my way, or would I die alone in an apartment on Pacific Street, surrounded by empty beer bottles, slowly rotting away?

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in,” wrote poet Robert Frost in “The Death of the Handyman.” Would my family take me in? Of course they would. Except for what they saw in the news, they had no idea what really went on here, no fucking clue. My father had been a medic in an Army hospital in England during the Second World War. The only shit he saw was in a bedpan. My step-father served in a sub out in the Pacific and since there are no windows on subs, at least for the enlisted men, he didn’t see shit either. Outwardly I had changed very little. Coming home in January they would notice my tan. I was thin. I had deeper, more thoughtful eyes. But would they see behind my eyes? Would they see into my mind? My foul language might be a clue, but I was determined to clean that up. If someone asked, “Did you kill anyone?” What would I say? Would I lie? Or would I tell the truth and say “Yes,” so they would leave me alone?

A platoon of passing tanks running up the road to the safety of base camp before nightfall took me back to the night when a platoon of tanks passing by our ambush position fired up their big-ass Xenon searchlights, illuminating our position. I waited for the flechettes from the 90mm bee hive rounds to come hissing our way, but the tankers must have recognized us. They turned off their lights and moved on, down the road, leaving several of us with shit-filled pants and thumping hearts under our shirts. Another near miss.

With seven days left, the Duty NCO let me visit my R&R buddy in the 3/13th Artillery, about a half mile down the perimeter road. It was 1930 hours and the sun was long gone, replaced by cool and damp night air. Bob and I had shared a bathroom at the hotel in Kuala Lumpur; two rooms, one bath. We had a sink with both hot and cold running water, a flush toilet, unlimited toilet paper, and a bathtub, which we took turns soaking in, trying to cleanse away months of accumulated filth.

I didn't know Bob before we met at the hotel, but we became friends, sort of. We had shared some good times in Malaysia so I wanted to say goodbye before I left the division. When I got to Bob's battery, however, neither of us had much to say. Bob still had three months left in country and I was going home in seven days. After a few beers and some meaningless conversation, we shook hands, I wished him good luck and left, heading back down the dirt road to my company area.

As I slowly walked back down the road, a full moon was just coming up over the horizon. I could clearly see its craters and wondered, half in jest, if someone had called in an air-strike. I wondered if my friends and family were all looking up at the same moon. Was it tomorrow or yesterday back home? What were they thinking and doing right now? I stopped to listen to voices off to my right. On the other side of a large drainage ditch several men played pool in their EM club. Outside, others sat on long benches, watching a movie at an outdoor theater. Through a side door of the club I could see a soldier leaning over a pool table, pool cue in hand, intently lining up his shot. Others stood around watching, some leaning on their cues with both hands, others sipping cans of beer.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught the bright flash of heavy weapons fired at night. It came from outside our division perimeter, and was immediately followed by the thumping sounds they made in the distance. Light travels faster than sound I remembered from high school science. From the flashes and sounds, it looked like four; probably mortars or recoilless rifles.

I instinctively yelled "Incoming," even though I stood alone in the road. Before I could move, the soft whoosh of rounds passed closely overhead was immediately followed by a clang and a thud. One of the four rounds had gone through the corrugated sheet metal roof of the EM club and buried itself in the pool table where that soldier still leaned over his shot. The round was a dud. One second he and his friends were there and then they weren't; I blinked and they were gone. Two more rounds, neither of them duds, landed to the left of the club. The fourth landed farther away.

When another round landed between the club and me, sending dirt but no shrapnel my way, I jumped into the ditch and squatted in the water. The cool, slimy and stagnant water filled my boots. A second round, landing on the edge of the ditch, sent me prone. I buried my head deep in the water. I held it under as long as I could without drowning. When another round landed in the ditch, a few meters down from me, sending up a fountain of dirty water, I scrambled out and threw myself on the ground near the EM club.

Were they after me, I wondered? Having lost my hat in the water, I covered my head with both hands, as if that would do any good against flying metal screaming to take off the top of my skull.

Wham! A round hit between the club and the theater.

Wham! Another landed to the right of the club, sending clumps of hard clay up in the air and back down onto my arms and legs.

Fuck! I'm too short for this shit!

A sharp clang was immediately followed by another explosion. A second round went through the roof of the EM club, but this one was not a dud. It blew off part of the roof and one wall, but everyone who had been playing pool had already smartly unassessed this target, crawling for the nearest bunker.

Wham! Wham! Wham! Three in rapid succession. They had the range now and were dropping rounds in the middle of the theater where they knew Americans were watching the movie.

Wham! This one to my front and so close I could feel the concussion and the heat from the blast on my bare arms.

Wham! Clumps of dirt fell on my arms and back.

They're gonna drop one right on my ass and blow my balls off!

I didn't think I was going to die right then and there, just go home minus my nuts and other precious parts I would need when and if I ever got back to the land of the big PX and round-eyed women. No more fogging up the windows of my '55 Chevy Bel-Aire at the Stamford Drive-In on cold winter nights.

I was lying there, out in the open with my ass hanging out. No cover, no hole to hide in. But I wasn't about to get up and run.

"You run, you die," one old NCO told a class of cherries in ambush school. "If the rounds are close, just get down. It has to hit you right in the ass to kill you, so just get as flat as you can." And that was my worry, taking one in the ass.

Another explosion, but back in the theater where I could hear voices, some loud, some soft, some shouting orders, some screaming, others softly begging.

"Medic!" They yelled. "Medic!" they cried.

A distant Carrump! They were dropping rounds on another target, shifting fire, not too far away but far enough for me to didi the fuck outta here, I thought.

I jumped back down into the ditch and ran towards the battalion area, splashing through the cool water, falling, getting up, running, falling again, tripping on some unknown object. Up and out, across the road, leaving muddy wet footprints in the dirt, over the chest-high barbed-wire fence and into our company area. I could still hear the distant sounds of rounds impacting the airfield and other priority targets.

I stopped and stood there, breathing heavily, looking across the road and back down along the ditch. To the right, outside our perimeter, I could still see the flashes of the enemy mortar and recoilless rifles. To my left I could hear the distant sound and see the soft flash and sparks as these rounds hit over by division HQ and the airfield. They were looking for Hueys, especially the gunships who could fuck up their evening if they ever got off the ground.

I was watching the show now, no longer part of it. I was a spectator, no longer a participant—better yet, no longer a target. Another near miss.

“Hey, what the fuck are you doin’? Get in a bunker, asshole,” someone yelled from within one of those large buried bunkers that could be found between the hooches. But I knew I was safe now. They were no longer after me.

Another Carrump! off in the distance.

“You missed, motherfuckers!” I yelled to the rounds landing off in the distance. “I fuckin’ win!”

“Hey! What’s your fuckin’ problem? Get in a bunker!”

“I don’t have a fuckin’ problem. I’m short,” I yelled, laughing, still breathing hard, but not as hard as before. Still breathing was what mattered.

“You’re one crazy motherfucker!”

“Yeah, I’m one dinky-dau G.I.”

I wanted to yell at the men hiding in the bunker; “Come on out you bunch of pussies! Come out and enjoy the show!” but I didn’t want to piss off anybody who could keep me here any longer than the seven days I had left. No last minute “Who you think you’re fuckin’ with?” paperwork glitches.

Yeah, I was crazy, all right, but they missed. I was alive. Soaked through but still breathing. Not looking up from inside a body bag. As I slowly came down off my adrenaline high, I decided it might be better to get down into the bunker after all. Maybe they heard me and would come back. I quietly sat down in a corner. I was soaked through and covered with slime and mud, but I didn’t care. They missed. “They fuckin’ missed,” I said to myself, but nobody was paying attention. They were listening to the rounds landing on the other side of the division perimeter, hoping they wouldn’t come back. Just across the road was the battalion ammo dump. I passed it as I splashed down the ditch.

I sat there, alone in a corner; I don’t remember how long. My breathing was regular now. I thought back to one of my nightly talks with John about one of the stories I’d read in the literature anthology he had given me, a short story called “The Open Boat” by Stephen Crane. I’m not sure why I chose that time to remember that story, maybe it was the water in the ditch that made me think of it.

“If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees? Was I brought here merely to have my nose dragged away as I was about to nibble the sacred cheese of life?”

I told John I wasn't sure what it meant, but I asked if maybe it had something to do with living in an uncaring universe that didn't make any sense. And what's this shit about some sacred cheese of life? And why does the oiler die in the surf instead of the captain with his injured arm?

We both agreed that a lot of what happened here didn't always make sense. You could dig the deepest hole and lay down three layers of sandbags for overhead cover and a mortar round could drop right down through your entrance and blow your shit away. Or you could be standing right out in the open and a round might land five meters away, like tonight, but you lived to laugh about it.

Doan mean nothin'.

Why did Rodriquez have to die on the very day he came in from the field, before he had a chance to nibble the sacred cheese of life? Why did that truck driver have to drown in a ditch? “If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?”

I could still hear the distant Carrump of rounds hitting the base, only farther off in the distance, on the other side of the airfield. They were after the Chinooks now.

“That you? Where you been?” asked a familiar voice coming from the dark, from another corner of the bunker. It was John. I wanted to tell him that I almost had the sacred cheese of life snatched away tonight, but all I could say was, “Yeah, it's me. I was down the road visiting a friend.” But that's all I said. For some reason I didn't want to admit that I almost died in a water-filled ditch seven days short of going home.

“Yeah, stupid fucker died seven days short of his DEROS.” I could hear them say over my bodybag. “Hit right in the ass by a mortar round. Blew his shit away, among other things.”

But I was not dead. Not yet. Like the captain in Crane's life boat, it wasn't my time.

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