

DAVID A. WILLSON

TET, Seattle, February 1968

I was in my car listening to the radio when I first heard that South Vietnam had blown apart, that the firecracker celebration of Tet, the traditional New Year's celebration in Vietnam, had turned into a country-wide armed assault on America's strongholds there.

I'd been home in Seattle about three months when the Tet Offensive was launched. I had mixed feelings about the Tet Offensive and about being at home. Most of my closest buddies in Vietnam had gone back home, but still I felt I was missing something big, and I had some guilt about that.

Having spent over thirteen months there, I realized that all we'd accomplished there were fortified enclaves and that the countryside and the night belonged to our enemy, who could possibly be everyone there with an Asian face, including the mamasan in the hootch you lived in who shined your boots.

The mamasan who shined my boots was the first person who popped into my mind. She'd heard scuttlebutt that I was considering extending, again, to the end of my original two year obligation to the Army. I sat on my Army cot watching her polish a pair of my jungle boots. She'd looked at me with her one good eye.

"You go home, Willie," she said.

"Maybe," I said.

“Not maybe. You can go home. You go home,” she said.

“Why?” I asked.

“You dinky dau to stay. Numbah ten thou to stay.”

That was the usual mamasan pidjin talk. I’m crazy to stay. Bad stuff is going to happen. Food for thought. Food enough to tip the balance. Had I been seriously considering staying until January? I’m not sure. I had talked about it and the mamasan who was always around, had overheard me. And for some reason of her own had decided to warn me to leave.

“You go home,” she had admonished me, so I did. I figured she knew better than me.

I also figured she knew better than General Westmoreland, too. He thought we were winning that war, or he said that he thought that. Two different things. Maybe he believed his own statistics. Body count. He and LBJ could see the light at the end of the tunnel. One look at Westmoreland’s starched uniform was enough information that any observer would know that he’d never place his dignity and starch at risk by entering a tunnel. His starched dignity warded off any real understanding of what was going on with our war in Vietnam. Both the mamasan and I knew better, but he never asked us.

In the car, I started lamenting what was happening. There was only Sissy to hear me.

“It’s got nothing to do with you,” she said. “You are home, and out of it.”

“Physically, yes, I’m home, but part of me is still there,” I said.

“That’s silly. You talk like you spent a year fighting in the jungle and rice paddies instead of sitting in an air-conditioned office drinking Coke on ice and typing the occasional letter,” she said.

“Well, I was a part of the war. I was there,” I said.

“Not really. You were an office worker, not a fighter,” she said. “You could have been in an Army office anywhere in the world.”

“If the office was attacked or blown up, then you make a transition.” I said.

“Not if you’re dead,” she said.

“No, not then.”

She had a point. Also I had no weapon at the office. And I’d never been given ammo for the M-14 I’d been assigned when I’d arrived in-country. I’d only seen the thing a few times when called out on red alerts. No ammo then either. No, I had not been a warrior, but I had been there. They couldn’t take that away from me, could they?

Later, in the evening, I watched the Tet Offensive on TV, and saw film shots taken in Saigon on Tu Do Street. I saw the stumps of trees I’d walked past or leaned against, blown off at a couple of feet high. If there was enough fire power on Tu Do Street to damage those trees, what happened to the people? Nothing good. I was relieved to be home in Seattle, as bleak and cold as it was, and unfriendly.

Sissy and I had been invited to eat dinner with my parents. We’d not been over there much since the awful Thanksgiving dinner there, at which George and Anna Mae Squires had dominated the gathering, castigating me for my appearance and just about everything else. I’d said I’d not attend another gathering at my parents’ that involved the Squires, and I had not.

This dinner invitation involved my parents, Sissy and me and my sister, Leanne. Seemed a safe enough group to me. But you never knew. This dinner was announced as being a celebration that I’d been admitted to Library School, that I’d taken a first step, since my return from Vietnam, to amount to something.

Sissy had attended Library School, had graduated and immediately gotten a job working for King County as a bookmobile librarian. My parents had similar hopes for me. They’d made their hopes clear. Sissy could work the next thirty years or forty years for King County Library Systems. If I applied myself, I could also get such a job, maybe also with the King County Library System, using Sissy as a way in, and also work there for the next many decades. Maybe if I were lucky, our schedules would allow us to eat lunch together every day in the employees’ lunchroom.

This was voiced by my mother, hopefully. But heard by me with sinking heart. I knew mother would not be happy with me when I announced to her after I finished Library School that I was divorcing Sissy.

I also hoped I would not be so desperate for a library job that I’d go to work for the KCLS. At that time it had not occurred to me that I would apply to work at KCLS,

and they would not want me. That rejection was way off in my future. It didn't occur to me then that no public library would want to hire a Vietnam veteran, or even interview him. Oh, innocent me.

We drove to Queen Anne Hill, parked at the curb of the apartment house that my parents were living in, right across the street from John Hay Elementary School where my grandmother had worked as head cook for many years, and we went up the stairs. I was already looking forward to walking back down the stairs to go home.

We rang the door buzzer. My sister, Leanne, answered the door. I knew she would. That's who she is. No matter where she is, if a phone rings, she answers it, and if a door buzzer buzzes, she's first to the door.

Why? She's a busybody, yes. But there's more to it than that. She was always bored and had hopes for adventure. Maybe this will be the interaction that will change her life, she thought.

She opened the door and announced over her shoulder to the room in a bored and disappointed voice, "It's them."

"You expected perhaps it would be Elvis and his entire entourage?" I commented.

I felt Sissy's elbow in my side. She did not understand why Leanne and I had trouble getting along and entirely blamed me. She had two brothers and one sister and got along great with all three of them. So did I. They were really great people—congenial, smart and fun to spend time with. Leanne was none of those things. People in Sissy's family were smart and attractive folks. It was hit and miss in my family. To me Leanne was a miss. Others in the family thought I was the miss. It was a family controversy.

"Welcome," Leanne said. She and Sissy hugged awkwardly. I tried to dodge a welcoming hug and partly failed.

"Doesn't it smell great in here?" Leanne asked.

I sniffed the air, but had the thought, we're hardly through the door and Leanne is trying to control us, direct us. I'd thought that maybe I smelled pot roast.

"Yes, it smells delightful," Sissy said. She was always willing to say the nice thing, the gracious thing.

I said nothing.

“Well?’ Leanne asked, looking me in the face.

“Well, what?’ I asked.

“Do you smell the pot roast? You’d better. Mom has been slaving for hours to prepare the pot roast with carrots, potatoes, and onions, just the way you like it. Pot roast was always too meaty and fatty for me. But you like that. It’s your favorite,” Leanne said.

I already felt like turning around and leaving, and I’d not even seem my parents yet. I’d been here one minute and I’d already disappointed Leanne, and been blamed and guilt-tripped by her. Family. My father appeared at that moment.

“Bet you’re glad to be here,” he said.

“Here?’ I asked.

“Here. In Seattle. Not there in Vietnam. Your war is not going well today,” he said.

I came close to doing an about face and leaving, but my mother had been slaving over that roast.

“Give me your coats,” he said.

We did so. We were trapped for the duration, held hostage.

“My war,” I said. Nobody responded.

“Come on in. Stay awhile. Take the weight off your feet. Want something to drink?”

“I could use a beer,” I said.

“No beer,” father said. “Coke?”

“Sure, I’ll have a Coke,” I said.

Sissy said she’d have a diet.

“Your mother has been slaving for hours to make your favorite pot roast,” Father said.

“So we were told,” I said. Leanne had disappeared back into the kitchen to help mother, I assumed.

The three of us sat and tried to chat. Sissy asked father about his job with the Seattle Public Schools.

“Computers. They are the coming thing,” he said. “Take as many computer classes in Library School as you can. They are going to take over the world. Get in on the ground floor.”

I had no intention of taking any computer classes if I could help it. I’d read the Library School catalog careful and currently no computer classes were required for graduation. None. Sissy had taken some, had been advised and admonished to do so by the Library School advisor. I would not give in to such pressure. I had no interest in spending time with a huge mainframe computer or with computer punch cards. The article I’d read in the *New Yorker* indicated that the field was changing so fast that in five years, nothing would be the way it was now and was being taught. So why should I waste my time being taught stuff I’d never use?

“Did you take as many computer classes as were offered, Sissy?” father asked.

“Yes. Yes, I did,” Sissy said.

“You must have really enjoyed them. I wish I had the opportunity to go back to school and take all those computer classes,” Dad said.

I knew he wasn’t kidding. There was nothing he loved more than attending college classes. There wasn’t much I liked doing less, other than any real work that is, such as driving a tractor, picking apples, cutting the eyelids off of dead hogs in a slaughter house. That kind of thing. Or installing asbestos siding. All of which I’d done or come close to doing.

I’d rather fill sandbags or burn barrels of shit than work with a mainframe computer. I would use my considerable talent for deviousness to steer clear of computer classes in Library School. When I’d perused the Library School catalog, I’d been most attracted to the children’s literature classes. I figured I’d take as many of those as I could get away with. But I would not announce that here tonight. That would piss

off Sissy, my father and Leanne if they heard me say it. They all knew I'd never be a children's librarian. Mother wouldn't react one way or the other. She just wanted me to be happy with the pot roast. Which I would make a point of being.

"So, did you enjoy them?" father asked Sissy. "The computer classes."

"Not really. We had to spend most of our time waiting to get to the computer. It was a slow and tedious process. We were told computers were fast and would save time. But they didn't. Those computer classes swallowed up more time than all the other classes put together. But we were told that if we didn't take them, we'd never be "the new breed" of librarian or get jobs in the "New library," whatever that is," Sissy said.

"Do you use computers a lot at work?"

"Not at all. I check out books to little grimy kids. Grimy books with old grimy check out cards," she said.

"They'll soon go to computer inventory and checkout," father said. "That's what all the professional journals say."

"What's soon?" Sissy asked.

"I don't know. I guess we'll find out," he said.

"I predict it will be twenty years," I said.

Leanne appeared.

"Time to wash up for dinner," she said.

My God, she's controlling. Everything out of her mouth is a directive, I thought. She'll be a great elementary school teacher.

We washed up.

"Dinner is served," my mother said, emerging from the tiny kitchen, her face as red as her red apron.

"I made your favorite pot roast," mom said.

"I heard," I said.

"You heard?" Her face looked puzzled. "Oh, you mean you could smell it," she said.

We all sat down at the dining room table. Mother looked to father for the prayer.

For once he kept it short. He thanked God for the food. He thanked God that I was home safe and sound from my war. He prayed that we'd soon be done with our mission in Vietnam and that all Americans could return home as I'd done, go to Library School and make something of themselves. No, I put that last part in. But he did say that for most of my life he'd prayed I'd decide to become a librarian and that he felt God had answered that prayer.

Then we ate the pot roast. It was excellent: juicy and fatty the way I liked it. There wasn't much gravy. The potatoes and onions were very good. The carrots were overcooked. After dinner the girls cleaned up. Father and I sat in the living room watching the Tet Offensive on TV. Marines were fighting for their lives on the banks of the Perfumed River.

Father drank a cup of coffee.

"Did you ever want to be a Marine?" he asked.

"No. No, I didn't."

"Are you glad you learned to type in high school?"

"Yes, I am," I said.

That was the extent of our conversation. Soon the women joined us and the conversation was about dessert. Were we ready for it? Yes, we were.

Soon, mom served us her famous apple pie. We had our choice of vanilla ice cream or cheddar cheese to go with it. I opted for both. I was the guest of honor, so my wishes were respected. The evening soon ended. We said our goodbyes. Leanne hugged me.

"I hope you liked the pot roast," she said.

I did. I did like the pot roast.

“You didn’t get food like that in Vietnam,” she said.

No, I didn’t.