# In the Field

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Reading #5

At daybreak the platoon of eighteen soldiers formed into a loose rank and began wading side by side through the deep muck of the shit field. They moved slowly in the rain. Leaning forward, heads down, they used the butts of their weapons as probes, wading across the field to the river and then turning and wading back again. They were tired and miserable; all they wanted now was to get it finished. Kiowa was gone. He was under the mud and water, folded in with the war, and their only thought was to find him and dig him out and then move on to someplace dry and warm. It had been a hard night. Maybe the worst ever. The rains had fallen without stop, and the Song Tra Bong had overflowed its banks, and the

muck had now risen thigh-deep in the field along the river. A low, gray mist hovered over the land. Off to the west there was thunder, soft little moaning sounds, and the monsoons seemed to be a lasting element of the war. The eighteen soldiers moved in silence. First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross went first, now and then straightening out the rank, closing up the gaps. His uniform was dark with mud; his arms and face were filthy. Early in the morning he had radioed in the MIA report, giving the name and circumstances, but he was now determined to find his man, no matter what, even if it meant flying in slabs of concrete and damming up the river and draining the entire field. He would not lose a member of his command like this. It wasn't right. Kiowa had been a fine soldier and a fine human being, a devout Baptist, and there was no way Lieutenant Cross would allow such a good man to be lost under the slime of a shit field.

Briefly, he stopped and watched the clouds. Except for some occasional thunder it was a deeply quiet morning, just the rain and the steady sloshing sounds of eighteen men wading through the thick waters. Lieutenant Cross wished the rain would let up. Even for an hour, it would make things easier.

But then he shrugged. The rain was the war and you had to fight it.

Turning, he looked out across the field and yelled at one of his men to close up the rank. Not a man, really—a boy. The young soldier stood off by himself at the center of the field in knee-deep water, reaching down with both hands as if chasing some object just beneath the surface. The boy's shoulders were shaking. Jimmy Cross yelled again but the young soldier did not turn or look up. In his hooded poncho, everything caked with mud, the boy's face was impossible to make out. The filth seemed to erase identities, transforming the men into identical copies of a single soldier, which was exactly how Jimmy Cross had been trained to treat them, as interchangeable units of command. It was difficult sometimes, but he tried to avoid that sort of thinking. He had no military ambitions. He preferred to view his men not as units but as human beings. And Kiowa is a splendid human being, the very best, intelligent and gentle and quiet-spoken. Very brave, too. And decent. The kid's father taught Sunday school in Oklahoma City, where Kiowa had been raised to believe in the promise of salvation under Jesus Christ, and this conviction had always been present in the boy's smile, in his posture toward the world, in the way he never went anywhere without an illustrated New Testament that his father had mailed to him as a birthday present back in January.

A crime, Jimmy Cross thought.

Looking out toward the river, he knew for a fact that he had made a mistake setting up here. The order had come from higher, true, but still he should've exercised some field discretion. He should've moved to higher ground for the night, should've radioed in false coordinates. There was nothing he could do now, but still it was a mistake and a hideous waste. He felt sick about it. Standing in the deep waters of the field, First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross began composing a letter in his head to the kid's father, not mentioning the shit field, just saying what a fine soldier Kiowa had been, what a fine human being, and how he was the kind of son that any father could be proud of forever.

The search went slowly. For a time the morning seemed to brighten, the sky going to a lighter shade of silver, but then the rains came back hard and steady. There was the feel of permanent twilight.

At the far left of the line, Azar and Norman Bowker and Mitchell Sanders waded along the edge of the field closest to the river. They were tall men, but at times the muck came to midthigh, other times to the crotch.

Azar kept shaking his head. He coughed and shook his head and said, "Man, talk about irony. I bet if Kiowa was here, I bet he'd just laugh.

Eating shit—it's your classic irony."

"Fine," said Norman Bowker. "Now pipe down."

Azar sighed. "Wasted in the waste," he said. "A shit field. You got to admit, it's pure world-class irony."

The three men moved with slow, heavy steps. It was hard to keep balance. Their boots sank into the ooze, which produced a powerful downward suction, and with each step they would have to pull up hard to break the hold. The rain made quick dents in the water, like tiny mouths, and the stink was everywhere.

When they reached the river, they shifted a few meters to the north and began wading back up the field. Occasionally they used their weapons to test the bottom, but mostly they just searched with their feet.

"A classic case," Azar was saying. "Biting the dirt, so to speak, that tells the story."

"Enough," Bowker said.

"Like those old cowboy movies. One more redskin bites the dirt." "I'm serious, man. Zip it shut."

Azar smiled and said, "Classic."

The morning was cold and wet. They had not slept during the night, not even for a few moments, and all three of them were feeling the tension as they moved across the field toward the river. There was nothing they could do for Kiowa. Just find him and slide him aboard a chopper. Whenever a man died it was always the same, a desire to get it over with quickly, no fuss or ceremony, and what they wanted now was to head for a ville and get under a roof and forget what had happened during the night.

Halfway across the field Mitchell Sanders stopped. He stood for a moment with his eyes shut, feeling along the bottom with a foot, then he passed his weapon over to Norman Bowker and reached down into the muck. After a second he hauled up a filthy green rucksack.

The three men did not speak for a time. The pack was heavy with mud and water, dead-looking. Inside were a pair of moccasins and an illistrated New Testament.

"Well," Mitchell Sanders finally said, "the guy's around here somewhere."

"Better tell the LT." "Screw him." "Yeah, but—"

"Some lieutenant," Sanders said. "Camps us in a toilet. Man don't

*know* shit."

"Nobody knew," Bowker said.

"Maybe so, maybe not. Ten billion places we could've set up last night, the man picks a latrine."

Norman Bowker stared down at the rucksack. It was made of dark green nylon with an aluminum frame, but now it had the curious look of flesh.

"It wasn't the LT's fault," Bowker said quietly. "Whose then?"

"Nobody's. Nobody knew till afterward."

Mitchell Sanders made a sound in his throat. He hoisted up the rucksack, slipped into the harness, and pulled the straps tight. "All right, but this much for sure. The man knew it was raining. He knew about the

river. One plus one. Add it up, you get exactly what happened." Sanders glared at the river. "Move it," he said. "Kiowa's waiting on us." Slowly then, bending against the rain, Azar and Norman Bowker and Mitchell Sanders began wading again through the deep waters, their eyes down, circling out from where they had found the rucksack.

First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross stood fifty meters away. He had finished writing the letter in his head, explaining things to Kiowa's father, and now he folded his arms and watched his platoon crisscrossing the wide field. In a funny way, it reminded him of the municipal golf course in his hometown in New Jersey. A lost ball, he thought. Tired players searching through the rough, sweeping back and forth in long systematic patterns. He wished he were there right now. On the sixth hole. Looking out across the water hazard that fronted the small flat green, a seven iron in his hand, calculating wind and distance, wondering if he should reach instead for an eight. A tough decision, but all you could ever lose was a ball. You did not lose a player. And you never had to wade out into the hazard and spend the day searching through the slime.

Jimmy Cross did not want the responsibility of leading these men. He had never wanted it. In his sophomore year at Mount Sebastian College he had signed up for the Reserve Officer Training Corps without much thought. An autamatic thing: because his friends had joined, and because it was worth a few credits, and because it seemed preferable to letting the draft take him. He was unprepared. Twenty-four years old and his heart wasn't in it. Military matters meant nothing to him. He did not care one way or the other about the war, and he had no desire to command, and even after all these months in the bush, all the days and nights, even then he did not know enough to keep his men out of a shit field.

What he should've done, he told himself, was follow his first impulse.

In the late afternoon yesterday, when they reached the night coordinates, he should've taken one look and headed for higher ground. He should've known. No excuses. At one edge of the field was a small ville, and right away a couple of old mama-sans had trotted out to warn him. Number ten, they'd said. Evil ground. Not a good spot for good GIs. But it was a war, and he had his orders, so they'd set up a perimeter and crawled under their ponchos and tried to settle in for the night. The rain never stopped. By midnight the Song Tra Bong had overflowed its banks. The field turned to slop, everything soft and mushy. He remembered how the water kept rising, how a terrible stink began to bubble up out of the earth. It was a dead-fish smell, partly, but something else, too, and then later in the night Mitchell Sanders had crawled through the rain and grabbed him hard by the arm and asked what he was doing setting up in a shit field. The village toilet, Sanders said. He remembered the look on Sanders's face. The guy stared for a moment and then wiped his mouth and whispered, "Shit," and then crawled away into the dark.

A stupid mistake. That's all it was, a mistake, but it had killed Kiowa.

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross felt something tighten inside him. In the letter to Kiowa's father he would apologize point-blank. Just admit to the blunders.

He would place the blame where it belonged. Tactically, he'd say, it was indefensible ground from the start. Low and flat. No natural cover. And so late in the night, when they took mortar fire from across the river, all they could do was snake down under the slop and lie there and wait.

The field just exploded. Rain and slop and shrapnel, it all mixed together, and the field seemed to boil. He would explain this to Kiowa's father.

Carefully, not covering up his own guilt, he would tell how the mortar rounds made craters in the slush, spraying up great showers of filth, and how the craters then collapsed on themselves and filled up with mud and water, sucking things down, swallowing things, weapons and entrenching tools and belts of ammunition, and how in this way his son Kiowa had been combined with the waste and the war.

My own fault, he would say.

Straightening up, First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross rubbed his eyes and tried to get his thoughts together. The rain fell in a cold, sad drizzle.

Off toward the river he again noticed the young soldier standing alone at the center of the field. The boy's shoulders were shaking. Maybe it was something in the posture of the soldier, or the way he seemed to be reaching for some invisible object beneath the surface, but for several moments Jimmy Cross stood very still, afraid to move, yet knowing he had to, and then he murmured to himself, "My fault," and he nodded and waded out across the field toward the boy.

The young soldier was trying hard not to cry.

He, too, blamed himself. Bent forward at the waist, groping with both hands, he seemed to be chasing some creature just beyond reach, something elusive, a fish or a frog. His lips were moving. Like Jimmy Cross, the boy was explaining things to an absent judge. It wasn't to

defend himself. The boy recognized his own guilt and wanted only to lay out the full causes.

Wading sideways a few steps, he leaned down and felt along the soft bottom of the field.

He pictured Kiowa's face. They'd been close buddies, the tightest, and he remembered how last night they had huddled together under their ponchos, the rain cold and steady, the water rising to their knees, but how Kiowa had just laughed it off and said they should concentrate on better things. And so for a long while they'd talked about their families and hometowns. At one point, the boy remembered, he'd been showing Kiowa a picture of his girlfriend. He remembered switching on his flashlight. A stupid thing to do, but he did it anyway, and he remembered Kiowa leaning in for a look at the picture—"Hey, she's *cute*," he'd said— and then the field exploded all around them.

Like murder, the boy thought. The flashlight made it happen. Dumb and dangerous. And as a result his friend Kiowa was dead.

That simple, he thought.

He wished there were some other way to look at it, but there wasn't. Very simple and very final. He remembered two mortar rounds hitting close by. Then a third, even closer, and off to his left he'd heard somebody scream. The voice was ragged and clotted up, but he knew instantly that it was Kiowa.

He remembered trying to crawl toward the screaming. No sense of direction, though, and the field seemed to suck him under, and everything was black and wet and swirling, and he couldn't get his bearings, and then another round hit nearby, and for a few moments all he could do was hold his breath and duck down beneath the water.

Later, when he came up again, there were no more screams. There was an arm and a wristwatch and part of a boot. There were bubbles where Kiowa's head should've been.

He remembered grabbing the boot. He remembered pulling hard, but how the field seemed to pull back, like a tug-of-war he couldn't win, and how finally he had to whisper his friend's name and let go and watch the boot slide away. Then for a long time there were things he could not remember. Various sounds, various smells. Later he'd found himself lying on a little rise, face-up, tasting the field in his mouth, listening to the rain and explosions and bubbling sounds. He was alone. He'd lost everything. He'd lost Kiowa and his weapon and his flashlight and his

girlfriend's picture. He remembered this. He remembered wondering if he could lose himself.

Now, in the dull morning rain, the boy seemed frantic. He waded quickly from spot to spot, leaning down and plunging his hands into the water. He did not look up when Lieutenant Jimmy Cross approached.

"Right here," the boy was saying. "Got to be right here."

Jimmy Cross remembered the kid's face but not the name. That happened sometimes. He tried to treat his men as individuals but sometimes the names just escaped him.

He watched the young soldier shove his hands into the water. "Right

*here*," he kept saying. His movements seemed random and jerky.

Jimmy Cross waited a moment, then stepped closer. "Listen," he said quietly, "the guy could be anywhere."

The boy glanced up. "Who could?" "Kiowa. You can't expect—" "Kiowa's *dead*."

"Well, yes."

The young soldier nodded. "So what about Billie?" "Who?"

"My girl. What about her? This picture, it was the only one I had. Right here, I lost it."

Jimmy Cross shook his head. It bothered him that he could not come up with a name.

"Slow down," he said, "I don't—"

"Billie's *picture*. I had it all wrapped up, I had it in plastic, so it'll be okay if I can . . . Last night we were looking at it, me and Kiowa. Right here. I know for sure it's right here somewhere."

Jimmy Cross smiled at the boy. "You can ask her for another one. A better one."

"She won't *send* another one. She's not even my *girl* anymore, she won't. . . Man, I got to find it."

The boy yanked his arm free.

He shuffled sideways and stooped down again and dipped into the muck with both hands. His shoulders were shaking. Briefly, Lieutenant Cross wondered where the kid's weapon was, and his helmet, but it seemed better not to ask.

He felt some pity come on him. For a moment the day seemed to soften. So much hurt, he thought. He watched the young soldier wading through the water, bending down and then standing and then bending down again, as if something might finally be salvaged from all the waste.

Jimmy Cross silently wished the boy luck.

Then he closed his eyes and went back to working on the letter to Kiowa's father.

Across the field Azar and Norman Bowker and Mitchell Sanders were wading alongside a narrow dike at the edge of the field. It was near noon now.

Norman Bowker found Kiowa. He was under two feet of water.

Nothing showed except the heel of a boot. "That's him?" Azar said.

"Who else?"

"I don't know." Azar shook his head. "I don't know."

Norman Bowker touched the boot, covered his eyes for a moment, then stood up and looked at Azar.

"So where's the joke?" he said. "No joke."

"Eating shit. Let's hear that one." "Forget it."

Mitchell Sanders told them to knock it off. The three soldiers moved to the dike, put down their packs and weapons, then waded back to where the boot was showing. The body lay partly wedged under a layer of mud beneath the water. It was hard to get tractshon; with each movement the muck would grip their feet and hold tight. The rain had come back harder now. Mitchell Sanders reached down and found Kiowa's other boot, and they waited a moment, then Sanders sighed and said, "Okay," and they took hold of the two boots and pulled up hard. There was only a slight give. They tried again, but this time the body did not move at all.

After the third try they stopped and looked down for a while. "One more time," Norman Bowker said. He counted to three and they leaned back and pulled.

"Stuck," said Mitchell Sanders. "I see that. Christ."

They tried again, then called over Henry Dobbins and Rat Kiley, and all five of them put their arms and backs into it, but the body was jammed in tight.

Azar moved to the dike and sat holding his stomach. His face was pale.

The others stood in a circle, watching the water, then after a time somebody said, "We can't just leave him there," and the men nodded and got out their entrenching tools and began digging. It was hard, sloppy work. The mud seemed to flow back faster than they could dig, but Kiowa was their friend and they kept at it anyway.

Slowly, in little groups, the rest of the platoon drifted over to watch.

Only Lieutenant Jimmy Cross and the young soldier were still searching the field.

"What we should do, I guess," Norman Bowker said, "is tell the LT."

Mitchell Sanders shook his head. "Just mess things up. Besides, the man looks happy out there, real content. Let him be."

After ten minutes they uncovered most of Kiowa's lower body. The corpse was angled steeply into the muck, upside down, like a diver who had plunged headfirst off a high tower. The men stood quietly for a few seconds. There was a feeling of awe. Mitchell Sanders finally nodded and said, "Let's get it done," and they took hold of the legs and pulled up hard, then pulled again, and after a moment Kiowa came sliding to the surface. A piece of his shoulder was missing; the arms and chest and face were cut up with shrapnel. He was covered with bluish green mud. "Well," Henry Dobbins said, "it could be worse," and Dave Jensen said, "How, man? Tell me *how*." Carefully, trying not to look at the body, they carried Kiowa over to the dike and laid him down. They used towels to clean off the scum. Rat Kiley went through the kid's pockets, placed his personal effects in a plastic bag, taped the bag to Kiowa's wrist, then used the radio to call in a dustoff.

Moving away, the men found things to do with themselves, some smoking, some opening up cans of C rations, a few just standing in the rain.

For all of them it was a relief to have it finished. There was the promise now of finding a hootch somewhere, or an abandoned pagoda, where they could strip down and wring out their fatigues and maybe start a hot fire. They felt bad for Kiowa. But they also felt a kind of giddiness, a secret joy, because they were alive, and because even the rain was prefarable to being sucked under a shit field, and because it was all a matter of luck and happenstance.

Azar sat down on the dike next to Norman Bowker.

"Listen," he said. "Those dumb jokes—I didn't mean anything." "We all say things."

"Yeah, but when I saw the guy, it made me feel—I don't know—like he was listening."

"He wasn't."

"I guess not. But I felt sort of guilty almost, like if I'd kept my mouth shut none of it would've ever happened. Like it was my fault."

Norman Bowker looked out across the wet field. "Nobody's fault," he said. "Everybody's."

Near the center of the field First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross squatted in the muck, almost entirely submerged. In his head he was revising the letter to Kiowa's father. Impersonal this time. An officer expressing an officer's condolences. No apologies were necessary, because in fact it was one of those freak things, and the war was full of freaks, and nothing could ever change it anyway. Which was the truth, he thought. The exact truth.

Lieutenant Cross went deeper into the muck, the dark water at his throat, and tried to tell himself it was the truth.

Beside him, a few steps off to the left, the young soldier was still searching for his girlfriend's picture. Still remembering how he had killed Kiowa.

The boy wanted to confess. He wanted to tell the lieutenant how in the middle of the night he had pulled out Billie's picture and passed it over to Kiowa and then switched on the flashlight, and how Kiowa had whispered, "Hey, she's *cute*," and how for a second the flashlight had made Billie's face sparkle, and how right then the field had exploded all around them. The flashlight had done it. Like a target shining in the dark.

The boy looked up at the sky, then at Jimmy Cross. "Sir?" he said.

The rain and mist moved across the field in broad, sweeping sheets of gray. Close by, there was thunder.

"Sir," the boy said, "I got to explain something."

But Lieutenant Jimmy Cross wasn't listening. Eyes closed, he let himself go deeper into the waste, just letting the field take him. He lay back and floated.

When a man died, there had to be blame. Jimmy Cross understood this. You could blame the war. You could blame the idiots who made the war. You could blame Kiowa for going to it. You could blame the rain.

You could blame the river. You could blame the field, the mud, the climate. You could blame the enemy. You could blame the mortar rounds. You could blame people who were too lazy to read a newspaper, who were bored by the daily body counts, who switched channels at the mention of politics. You could blame whole nations. You could blame God. You could blame the munitions makers or Karl Marx or a trick of fate or an old man in Omaha who forgot to vote.

In the field, though, the causes were imediete. A moment of carelessness or bad judgment or plain stupidity carried consequences that lasted forever.

For a long while Jimmy Cross lay floating. In the clouds to the east there was the sound of a helicopter, but he did not take notice. With his eyes still closed, bobbing in the field, he let himself slip away. He was back home in New Jersey. A golden afternoon on the golf course, the fairways lush and green, and he was teeing it up on the first hole. It was a world without responsibility. When the war was over, he thought, maybe then he would write a letter to Kiowa's father. Or maybe not. Maybe he would just take a couple of practice swings and knock the ball down the middle and pick up his clubs and walk off into the afternoon.

# Good Form

It's time to be blunt.

I'm forty-three years old, true, and I'm a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier.

Almost everything else is invented.

But it's not a game. It's a form. Right here, now, as I invent myself, I'm thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is.

For instance, I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face,

which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present.

But listen. Even *that* story is made up.

I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.

Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.

Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.

What stories can do, I guess, is make things present.

I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again.

"Daddy, tell the truth," Kathleen can say, "did you ever kill anybody?" And I can say, honestly, "Of course not."

Or I can say, honestly, "Yes."

# Field Trip

A few months after completing "In the Field," I returned with my daughter to Vietnam, where we visited the site of Kiowa's death, and where I looked for signs of forgiveness or personal grace or whatever else the land might offer. The field was still there, though not as I remembered it. Much smaller, I thought, and not nearly so menacing, and in the bright sunlight it was hard to picture what had happened on this ground some twenty years ago. Except for a few marshy spots along the river, everything was bone dry. No ghosts—just a flat, grassy field. The place was at peace. There were yellow butterflies. There was a breeze and a wide blue sky. Along the river two old farmers stood in ankle-deep water, repairing the same narrow dike where we had layed out Kiowa's body after pulling him from the muck. Things were quiet. At one point, I remember, one of the farmers looked up and shaded his eyes, staring

across the field at us, then after a time he wiped his forehead and went back to work.

I stood with my arms folded, feeling the grip of sentiment and time.

Amazing, I thought. Twenty years.

Behind me, in the jeep, my daughter Kathleen sat waiting with a government interpreter, and now and then I could hear the two of them talking in soft voices. They were already fast friends. Neither of them, I think, understood what all this was about, why I'd insisted that we search out this spot. It had been a hard two-hour ride from Quang Ngai City, bumpy dirt roads and a hot August sun, ending up at an empty field on the edge of nowhere.

I took out my camera, snapped a couple of pictures, then stood gazing out at the field. After a time Kathleen got out of the jeep and stood beside me.

"You know what I think?" she said. "I think this place stinks. It smells like . . . God, I don't even *know* what. It smells rotten."

"It sure does. I know that." "So when can we go?" "Pretty soon," I said.

She started to say something but then hesitated. Frowning, she squinted out at the field for a second, then shrugged and walked back to the jeep.

Kathleen had just turned ten, and this trip was a kind of birthday present, showing her the world, offering a small piece of her father's history. For the most part she'd held up well—far better than I—and over the first two weeks she'd trooped along without complaint as we hit the obligatory tourist stops. Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum in Hanoi. A model farm outside Saigon. The tunnels at Cu Chi. The monuments and government offices and orphanages. Through most of this, Kathleen had seemed to enjoy the foreignness of it all, the exotic food and animals, and even during those periods of boredom and discomfort she'd kept up a good-humored tolerance. At the same time, however, she'd seemed a bit puzzled. The war was as remote to her as cavemen and dinosaurs.

One morning in Saigon she'd asked what it was all about. "This whole war," she said, "why was everybody so mad at everybody else?"

I shook my head. "They weren't mad, exactly. Some people wanted one thing, other people wanted another thing."

"What did *you* want?" "Nothing," I said. "To stay alive." "That's all?"

"Yes."

Kathleen sighed. "Well, I don't get it. I mean, how come you were even here in the first place?"

"I don't know," I said. "Because I had to be." "But *why*?"

I tried to find something to tell her, but finally I shrugged and said, "It's a mystery, I guess. I don't know."

For the rest of the day she was very quiet. That night, though, just before bedtime, Kathleen put her hand on my shoulder and said, "You know something? Sometimes you're pretty weird, aren't you?"

"Well, no," I said.

"You are *too*." She pulled her hand away and frowned at me. "Like coming over here. Some dumb thing happens a long time ago and you can't ever forget it."

"And that's bad?"

"No," she said quietly. "That's weird."

In the second week of August, near the end of our stay, I'd arranged for the side trip up to Quang Ngai. The tourist stuff was fine, but from the start I'd wanted to take my daughter to the places I'd seen as a soldier. I wanted to show her the Vietnam that kept me awake at night—a shady trail outside the village of My Khe, a filthy old pigsty on the Batangan Peninsula. Our time was short, however, and choices had to be made, and in the end I decided to take her to this piece of ground where my friend Kiowa had died. It seemed appropriate. And, besides, I had business here.

Now, looking out at the field, I wondered if it was all a mistake.

Everything was too ordinary. A quiet sunny day, and the field was not the field I remembered. I pictured Kiowa's face, the way he used to smile, but all I felt was the awkwardness of remembering.

Behind me, Kathleen let out a little giggle. The interpreter was showing her magic tricks.

There were birds and butterflies, the soft rustlings of rural-anywhere. Below, in the earth, the relics of our presence were no doubt still there,

the canteens and bandoliers and mess kits. This little field, I thought, had swallowed so much. My best friend. My pride. My belief in myself as a man of some small dignity and courage. Still, it was hard to find any real emotion. It simply wasn't there. After that long night in the rain, I'd seemed to grow cold inside, all the illusions gone, all the old ambitions and hopes for myself sucked away into the mud. Over the years, that coldness had never entirely disappeared. There were times in my life when I couldn't feel much, not sadness or pity or passion, and somehow I blamed this place for what I had become, and I blamed it for taking away the person I had once been. For twenty years this field had embodied all the waste that was Vietnam, all the vulgarity and horror.

Now, it was just what it was. Flat and dreary and unremarkable. I walked up toward the river, trying to pick out specific landmarks, but all I recognized was a small rise where Jimmy Cross had set up his command post that night. Nothing else. For a while I watched the two old farmers working under the hot sun. I took a few more photographs, waved at the farmers, then turned and moved back to the jeep.

Kathleen gave me a little nod.

"Well," she said, "I hope you're having fun." "Sure."

"Can we go now?"

"In a minute," I said. "Just relax."

At the back of the jeep I found the small cloth bundle I'd carried over from the States.

Kathleen's eyes narrowed. "What's *that*?" "Stuff," I told her.

She glanced at the bundle again, then hopped out of the jeep and followed me back to the field. We walked past Jimmy Cross's command post, past the spot where Kiowa had gone under, down to where the field dipped into the marshland along the river. I took off my shoes and socks.

"Okay," Kathleen said, "what's going on?" "A quick swim."

"Where?"

"Right here," I said. "Stay put."

She watched me unwrap the cloth bundle. Inside were Kiowa's old moccasins.

I stripped down to my underwear, took off my wrist-watch, and waded in. The water was warm against my feet. Instantly, I recognized the soft, fat feel of the bottom. The water here was eight inches deep.

Kathleen seemed nervous. She squinted at me, her hands fluttering. "Listen, this is stupid," she said, "you can't even hardly get *wet*. How can you swim out there?"

"I'll manage."

"But it's not ... I mean, God, it's not even *water*, it's like mush or something."

She pinched her nose and watched me wade out to where the water reached my knees. Roughly here, I decided, was where Mitchell Sanders had found Kiowa's rucksack. I eased myself down, squatting at first, then sitting. They’re was again that sense of recognition. The water rose to midchest, a deep greenish brown, almost hot. Small water bugs skipped along the surface. Right here, I thought. Leaning forward, I reached in with the moccasins and wedged them into the soft bottom, letting them slide away. Tiny bubbles broke along the surface. I tried to think of something decent to say, something meaningful and right, but nothing came to me.

I looked down into the field.

"Well," I finally managed. "There it is."

My voice surprised me. It had a rough, chalky sound, full of things I did not know were there. I wanted to tell Kiowa that he'd been a great friend, the very best, but all I could do was slap hands with the water.

The sun made me squint. Twenty years. A lot like yesterday, a lot like never. In a way, maybe, I'd gone under with Kiowa, and now after two decades I'd finally worked my way out. A hot afternoon, a bright August sun, and the war was over. For a few moments I could not bring myself to move. Like waking from a summer nap, feeling lazy and sluggish, the world collecting itself around me. Fifty meters up the field one of the old farmers stood watching from along the dike. The man's face was dark and solemn. As we stared at each other, neither of us moving, I felt something go shut in my heart while something else swung open. Briefly, I wondered if the old man might walk over to exchange a few war stories, but instead he picked up a shovel and raised it over his head and held it there for a time, grimly, like a flag, then he brought the shovel down and said something to his friend and began digging into the hard, dry ground.

I stood up and waded out of the water.

"What a mess," Kathleen said. "All that gunk on your skin, you look like . . . Wait'll I tell Mommy, she'll probably make you sleep in the garage."

"You're right," I said. "Don't tell her."

I pulled on my shoes, took my daughter's hand, and led her across the field toward the jeep. Soft heat waves shimmied up out of the earth.

When we reached the jeep, Kathleen turned and glanced out at the field.

"That old man," she said, "is he mad at you or something?" "I hope not."

"He *looks* mad."

"No," I said. "All that's finished."

# The Ghost Soldiers

I was shot twice. The first time, out by Tri Binh, it knocked me against the pagoda wall, and I bounced and spun around and ended up on Rat Kiley's lap. A lucky thing, because Rat was the medic. He tied on a compress and told me to ease back, then he ran off toward the fighting. For a long time I lay there all alone, listening to the battle, thinking *I've been shot, I've been shot*: all those Gene Autry movies I'd seen as a kid. In fact, I almost smiled, except then I started to think I might die. It was the fear, mostly, but I felt wobbly, and then I had a sinking sensation, ears all plugged up, as if I'd gone deep under water. Thank God for Rat Kiley. Every so often, maybe four times altogether, he trotted back to check me out. Which took courage. It was a wild fight, guys running and laying down fire and regrouping and running again, lots of noise, but Rat Kiley took the risks. "Easy does it," he told me, "just a side wound, no problem unless you're pregnant." He ripped off the compress, applied a fresh one, and told me to clamp it in place with my fingers. "Press hard," he said. "Don't worry about the baby." Then he took off. It was almost dark when the fighting ended and the chopper came to take me and two dead guys away. "Happy trails," Rat said. He helped me into the helicopter and stood there for a moment. Then he did an odd thing. He leaned in and put his head against my shoulder and almost hugged me. Coming from Rat Kiley, that was something new.

On the ride into Chu Lai, I kept waiting for the pain to hit, but in fact I didn't feel much. A throb, that's all. Even in the hospital it wasn't bad.

When I got back to Alpha Company twenty-six days later, in mid- December, Rat Kiley had been wounded and shipped off to Japan, and a new medic named Bobby Jorgenson had replaced him. Jorgenson was no Rat Kiley. He was green and incompetent and scared. So when I got shot the second time, in the butt, along the Song Tra Bong, it took the son of a bitch almost ten minutes to work up the nerve to crawl over to me. By then I was gone with the pain. Later I found out I'd almost died of shock. Bobby Jorgenson didn't know about shock, or if he did, the fear made him forget. To make it worse, he bungled the patch job, and a couple of weeks later my ass started to rot away. You could actually peel off chunks of skin with your fingernail.

It was borderline gangrene. I spent a month flat on my stomach; I couldn't walk or sit; I couldn't sleep. I kept seeing Bobby Jorgenson's scared-white face. Those buggy eyes and the way his lips twitched and that silly excuse he had for a mustache. After the rot cleared up, once I could think straight, I devoted a lot of time to figuring ways to get back at him.

Getting shot should be an experience from which you can draw some small pride. I don't mean the macho stuff. All I mean is that you should be able to *talk* about it: the stiff thump of the bullet, like a fist, the way it knocks the air out of you and makes you cough, how the sound of the gunshot arrives about ten years later, and the dizzy feeling, the smell of yourself, the things you think about and say and do right afterward, the way your eyes focus on a tiny white pebble or a blade of grass and how you start thinking, Oh man, that's the last thing I'll ever see, *that* pebble, *that* blade of grass, which makes you want to cry.

Pride isn't the right word. I don't know the right word. All I know is, you shouldn't feel embarrassed. Humiliation shouldn't be part of it.

Diaper rash, the nurses called it. An in-joke, I suppose. But it made me hate Bobby Jorgenson the way some guys hated the VC, gut hate, the kind of hate that stays with you even in your dreams.

I guess the higher-ups decided I'd been shot enough. At the end of December, when I was released from the 91st Evac Hospital, they transferred me over to Headquarters Company—S-4, the battalion supply section. Compared with the boonies it was cushy duty. We had regular hours. There was an EM club with beer and movies, sometimes even live floor shows, the whole blurry slow motion of the rear. For the first time in months I felt reasonably safe. The battalion firebase was built into a hill just off Highway 1, surrounded on all sides by flat paddy land, and between us and the paddies there were reinforced bunkers and observation towers and trip flares and rolls of razor-tipped barbed wire. You could still die, of course—once a month we'd get hit with mortar fire—but you could also die in the bleachers at Met Stadium in Minneapolis, bases loaded, Harmon Killebrew coming to the plate.

I didn't complain. In an odd way, though, there were times when I missed the adventure, even the danger, of the real war out in the boonies. It's a hard thing to explain to somebody who hasn't felt it, but the presence of death and danger has a way of bringing you fully awake. It makes things vivid. When you're afraid, really afraid, you see things you never saw before, you pay attention to the world. You make close friends. You become part of a tribe and you share the same blood—you give it together, you take it together. On the other hand, I'd already been hit with two bullets; I was superstitious; I believed in the odds with the same passion that my friend Kiowa had once believed in Jesus Christ, or the way Mitchell Sanders believed in the power of morals. I figured my war was over. If it hadn't been for the constant ache in my butt, I'm sure things would've worked out fine.

But it hurt.

At night I had to sleep on my belly. That doesn't sound so terrible until you consider that I'd been a back-sleeper all my life. I'd lie there all fidgety and tight, then after a while I'd feel a swell of anger come on. I'd squirm around, cussing, half nuts with pain, and pretty soon I'd start remembering how Bobby Jorgenson had almost killed me. Shock, I'd think—how could he forget to treat for shock?

I'd remember how long it took him to get to me, and how his fingers were all jerky and nervous, and the way his lips kept twitching under that ridiculous little mustache.

The nights were miserable. Sometimes I'd roam around the base. I'd head down to the wire and stare out at the darkness, out where the war was, and think up ways to make Bobby Jorgenson feel exactly what I felt. I wanted to hurt him.

In March, Alpha Company came in for stand-down. I was there at the helipad to meet the choppers. Mitchell Sanders and Azar and Henry

Dobbins and Dave Jensen and Norman Bowker slapped hands with me and we piled their gear in my jeep and drove down to the Alpha hootches. We partied until chow time. Afterward, we kept on partying. It was one of the rituals. Even if you weren't in the mood, you did it on principle.

By midnight it was story time.

"Morty Phillips used up his luck," Bowker said.

I smiled and waited. There was a tempo to how stories got told.

Bowker peeled open a finger blister and sucked on it. "Go on," Azar said. "Tell him everything."

"Well, that's about it. Poor Morty wasted his luck. Pissed it away." "On *nothing*," Azar said. "The dummy pisses it away on *nothing*."

Norman Bowker nodded, started to speak, but then stopped and got up and moved to the cooler and shoved his hands deep into the ice. He was naked except for his shorts and dog tags. In a way, I envied him—all of them. Their deep bush tans, the sores and blisters, the stories, the in- it-togetherness. I felt close to them, yes, but I also felt a new sense of separation. My fatigues were starched; I had a neat haircut and the clean, sterile smell of the rear. They were still my buddies, at least on one level, but once you leave the boonies, the whole comrade business gets turned around. You become a civilian. You forfeit membership in the family, the blood fraternity, and no matter how hard you try, you can't pretend to be part of it.

That's how I felt—like a civilian—and it made me sad. These guys had been my brothers. We'd loved one another.

Norman Bowker bent forward and scooped up some ice against his chest, pressing it there for a moment, then he fished out a beer and snapped it open.

"It was out by My Khe," he said quietly. "One of those killer hot days, hot-hot, and we're all popping salt tabs just to stay conscious. Can't barely breathe. Everybody's lying around, just grooving it, and after a while somebody says, 'Hey, where's Morty?' So the lieutenant does a head count, and guess what? No Morty."

"Gone," Ealasaid. "Poof. Novocain' Morty."

Norman Bowker nodded. "Anyhow, we send out two search patrols.

No dice. Not a trace." Pausing a second, Bowker poured a trickle of beer onto his blister and licked at it. "By then it's almost dark. Lieutenant

Cross, he's ready to have a fit—you know how he gets, right?—and then, guess what? Take a guess."

"Morty shows," I said.

"You got it, man. Morty shows. We almost chalk him up as MIA, and then, bingo, he shows."

"Soaking wet," said Azar. "Hey, listen—"

"Okay, but *tell* it."

Norman Bowker frowned. "Soaking wet," he said. "Turns out the moron went for a swim. You believe that? All alone, he just takes off, hikes a couple klicks, finds himself a river and strips down and hops in and starts doing the goddamn breast stroke or some such fine shit. No security, no nothing. I mean, the dude goes skinny dipping."

Azar giggled. "A hot day."

"Not that hot," said Dave Jensen. "Hot, though."

"Get the picture?" Bowker said. "This is My Khe we're talking about, dinks everywhere, and the guy goes for a *swim*."

"Crazy," I said.

I looked across the hootch. Twenty or thirty guys were there, some drinking, some passed out, but I couldn't find Morty Phillips among them.

Bowker smiled. He reached out and put his hand on my knee and squeezed.

"That's the kicker, man. No more Morty." "No?"

"Morty's luck gets all used up," Bowker said. His hand still rested on my knee, very lightly. "A few days later, maybe a week, he feels real dizzy. Pukes a lot, temperature zooms way up. I mean, the guy's *sick*. Jorgenson says he must've swallowed bad water on that swim. Swallowed a VC virus or something."

"Bobby Jorgenson," I said. "Where is he?" "Be cool."

"Where's my good buddy Bobby?"

Norman Bowker made a short clicking sound with his tongue. "You want to *hear* this? Yes or no?"

"Sure I do."

"So listen up, then. Morty gets sick. Like you never seen nobody so bad off. This is real kickass disease, he can't walk or talk, can't fart. Can't nothin'. Like he's paralyzed. Polio, maybe."

Henry Dobbins shook his head. "Not polio. You got it wrong." "*Maybe* polio."

"No way," said Dobbins. "Not polio."

"Well, hey," Bowker said, "I'm just saying what Jorgenson says. Maybe fuckin' polio. Or that weird elephant disease. Elephantiasshole or whatever."

"Yeah, but not polio."

Across the hootch, sitting off by himself, Azar grinned and snapped his fingers. "Either way," he said, "it goes to show you. Don't throw away luck on little stuff. Save it up."

"There it is," said Mitchell Sanders. "Morty was due," Dave Jensen said. "Overdue," Sanders said.

Norman Bowker nodded solemnly. "You don't mess around like that.

You just don't fritter away all your luck." "Amen," said Sanders.

"Fuckin' polio," said Henry Dobbins.

We sat quietly for a time. There was no need to talk, because we were thinking the same things: about Morty Phillips and the way luck worked and didn't work and how it was impossible to calculate the odds. There were a million ways to die. Getting shot was one way. Booby traps and land mines and gangrene and shock and polio from a VC virus.

"Where's Jorgenson?" I said.

Another thing. Three times a day, no matter what, I had to stop whatever I was doing. I had to go find a private place and drop my pants and smear on this antibacterial ointment. The stuff left stains on the seat of my trousers, big yellow splotches, and so naturally there were some jokes. There was one about rear guard duty. There was another one about hemorrhoids and how I had trouble putting the past behind me.

The others weren't quite so funny.

During the first full day of Alpha's stand-down, I didn't run into Bobby Jorgenson once. Not at chow, not at the EM club, not even during our

long booze sessions in the Alpha Company hootch. At one point I almost went looking for him, but my friend Mitchell Sanders told me to forget it.

"Let it ride," he said. "The kid messed up bad, for sure, but you have to take into account how green he was. Brand-new, remember? Thing is, he's doing a lot better now. I mean, listen, the guy knows his shit. Say what you want, but he kept Morty Phillips alive."

"And that makes it okay?"

Sanders shrugged. "People change. Situations change. I hate to say this, man, but you're out of touch. Jorgenson—he's *with* us now."

"And I'm not?"

Sanders looked at me for a moment. "No," he said. "I guess you're not."

Stiffly, like a stranger, Sanders moved across the hootch and lay down with a magazine and pretended to read.

I felt something shift inside me. It was anger, partly, but it was also a sense of pure and total loss: I didn't fit anymore. They were soldiers, I wasn't. In a few days they'd saddle up and head back into the bush, and I'd stand up on the helipad to watch them march away, and then after they were gone I'd spend the day loading resupply choppers until it was time to catch a movie or play cards or drink myself to sleep. A funny thing, but I felt betrayed.

For a long while I just stared at Mitchell Sanders. "Loyalty," I said. "Such a pal."

In the morning I ran into Bobby Jorgenson. I was loading Hueys up on the helipad, and when the last bird took off, while I was putting on my shirt, I looked over and saw him leaning against my jeep, waiting for me. It was a surprise. He seemed smaller than I remembered, a little squirrel of a guy, short and stumpy-looking.

He nodded nervously. "Well," he said.

At first I just looked down at his boots. Those boots: I remembered them from when I got shot. Out along the Song Tra Bong, a bullet inside me, all that pain, but for some reason what stuck to my memory was the smooth unblemished leather of his fine new boots. Factory black, no scuffs or dust or red clay. The boots were one of those vivid details you

can't forget. Like a pebble or a blade of grass, you just stare and think, Dear Christ, there's the last thing on earth I'll ever see.

Jorgenson blinked and tried to smile. Oddly, I almost felt some pity for him.

"Look," he said, "can we talk?"

I didn't move. I didn't say a word. Jorgenson's tongue flicked out, moving along the edge of his mustache, then slipped away.

"Listen, man, I fucked up," he said. "What else can I say? I'm sorry. When you got hit, I kept telling myself to move, move, but I couldn't *do* it, like I was full of drugs or something. You ever feel like that? Like you can't even move?"

"No," I said, "I never did." "But can't you at least—" "Excuses?"

Jorgenson's lip twitched. "No, I botched it. Period. Got all frozen up, I guess. The noise and shooting and everything—my first firefight—I just couldn't handle it ... When I heard about the shock, the gangrene, I felt like ... I felt miserable. Nightmares, too. I kept seeing you lying out there, heard you screaming, but it was like my legs were filled up with sand, they didn't *work*. I'd keep trying but I couldn't make my goddamn *legs* work."

He made a small sound in his throat, something low and feathery, and for a second I was afraid he might bawl. That would've ended it. I would've patted his shoulder and told him to forget it. But he kept control. He swallowed whatever the sound was and forced a smile and tried to shake my hand. It gave me an excuse to glare at him.

"It's not that easy," I said.

"Tim, I can't go back and do things over." "My ass."

Jorgenson kept pushing his hand out at me. He looked so earnest, so sad and hurt, that it almost made me feel guilty. Not quite, though. After a second I muttered something and got into my jeep and put it to the floor and left him standing there.

I hated him for making me stop hating him.

Something had gone wrong. I'd come to this war a quiet, thoughtful sort of person, a college grad, Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude, all

the credentials, but after seven months in the bush I realized that those high, civilized trappings had somehow been crushed under the weight of the simple daily realities. I'd turned mean inside. Even a little cruel at times. For all my education, all my fine liberal values, I now felt a deep coldness inside me, something dark and beyond reason. It's a hard thing to admit, even to myself, but I was capable of evil. I wanted to hurt Bobby Jorgenson the way he'd hurt me. For weeks it had been a vow—*I'll get him, I'll get him*—it was down inside me like a rock. Granted, I didn't hate him anymore, and I'd lost some of the outrage and passion, but the need for revenge kept eating at me. At night I sometimes drank too much. I'd remember getting shot and yelling out for a medic and then waiting and waiting and waiting, passing out once, then waking up and screaming some more, and how the screaming seemed to make new pain, the awful stink of myself, the sweat and fear, Bobby Jorgenson's clumsy fingers when he finally got around to working on me. I kept going over it all, every detail. I remembered the soft, fluid heat of my own blood. *Shock*, I thought, and I tried to tell him that, but my tongue wouldn't make the connection. I wanted to yell, "You jerk, it's shock—I'm *dying*" but all I could do was whinny and squeal. I remembered that, and the hospital, and the nurses. I even remembered the rage. But I couldn't feel it anymore. In the end, all I felt was that coldness down inside my chest. Number one: the guy had almost killed me. Number two: there had to be consequences.

That afternoon I asked Mitchell Sanders to give me a hand.

"No pain," I said. "Basic psychology, that's all. Mess with his head a little."

"Negative," Sanders said. "Spook the fucker."

Sanders shook his head. "Man, you're sick." "All I want is—"

"Sick."

Quietly, Sanders looked at me for a second and then walked away. I had to get Azar in on it.

He didn't have Mitchell Sanders's intelligence, but he had a keener sense of justice. After I explained the plan, Azar gave me a long white smile.

"Tonight?" he said.

"Just don't get carried away."

"Me?"

Still smiling, Azar flicked an eyebrow and started snapping his fingers.

It was a tic of his. Whenever things got tense, whenever there was a prospect for action, he'd do that snapping thing. Nobody cared for him, including myself.

"Understand?" I said.

Azar winked. "Roger-dodger. Only a game, right?"

We called the enemy ghosts. "Bad night," we'd say, "the ghosts are out." To get spooked, in the lingo, meant not only to get scared but to get killed. "Don't get spooked," we'd say. "Stay cool, stay alive." Or we'd say: "Careful, man, don't give up the ghost." The countryside itself seemed spooky—shadows and tunnels and incense burning in the dark. The land was haunted. We were fighting forces that did not obey the laws of twentieth-century science. Late at night, on guard, it seemed that all of Vietnam was alive and shimmering—odd shapes swaying in the paddies, boogiemen in sandals, spirits dancing in old pagodas. It was ghost country, and Charlie Cong was the main ghost. The way he came out at night. How you never really saw him, just thought you did. Almost magical—appearing, disappearing. He could blend with the land, changing form, becoming trees and grass. He could levitate. He could fly. He could pass through barbed wire and melt away like ice and creep up on you without sound or footsteps. He was scary. In the daylight, maybe, you didn't believe in this stuff. You laughed it off. You made jokes. But at night you turned into a believer: no skeptics in foxholes.

Azar was wound up tight. All afternoon, while we made the preparations, he kept chanting, "Halloween, Halloween." That, plus the finger snapping, almost made me cancel the whole operation. I went hot and cold. Mitchell Sanders wouldn't speak to me, which tended to cool it off, but then I'd start remembering things. The result was a kind of numbness. No ice, no heat. I just went through the motions, rigidly, by the numbers, without any heart or real emotion. I rigged up my special effects, checked out the terrain, measured distances, collected the ordnance and equipment we'd need. I was professional enough about it, I didn't make mistakes, but somehow it felt as if I were gearing up to fight somebody else's war. I didn't have that patriotic zeal.

If there had been a dignified way out, I might've taken it. During evening chow, in fact, I kept staring across the mess hall at Bobby Jorgenson, and when he finally looked up at me, almost nodding, I came

very close to calling it quits. Maybe I was fishing for something. One last apology—something public. But Jorgenson only gazed back at me. It was a strange gaze, too, straight on and unafraid, as if apologies were no longer required. He was sitting there with Dave Jensen and Mitchell Sanders and a few others, and he seemed to fit in very nicely, all smiles and group rapport.

That's probably what cinched it.

I went back to my hootch, showered, shaved, threw my helmet against the wall, lay down for a while, got up, prowled around, talked to myself, applied some fresh ointment, then headed off to find Azar.

Just before dusk, Alpha Company stood for roll call.

Afterward the men separated into two groups. Some went off to write letters or party or sleep; the others trooped down to the base perimeter, where, for the next eleven hours, they would pull night guard duty. It was SOP—one night on, one night off.

This was Jorgenson's night on. I knew that in advance, of course. And I knew his bunker assignment: Bunker Six, a pile of sandbags at the southwest corner of the perimeter. That morning I'd scouted out every inch of his position; I knew the blind spots and the little ripples of land and the places where he'd take cover in case of trouble. But still, just to guard against freak screw-ups, Azar and I tailed him down to the wire.

We watched him lay out his poncho and connect his Claymores to their firing devices. Softly, like a little boy, he was whistling to himself. He tested his radio, unwrapped a candy bar, then sat back with his rifle cradled to his chest like a teddy bear.

"A pigeon," Azar whispered. "Roast pigeon on a spit. I smell it sizzling."

"Except this isn't for real."

Azar shrugged. After a second he reached out and clapped me on the shoulder, not roughly but not gently either. "What's real?" he said. "Eight months in fantasyland, it tends to blur the line. Honest to God, I sometimes can't remember what real is."

Psychology—that was one thing I knew. You don't try to scare people in broad daylight. You wait. Because the darkness squeezes you inside yourself, you get cut off from the outside world, the imagination takes over. That's basic psychology. I'd pulled enough night guard to know how the fear factor gets multiplied as you sit there hour after hour, nobody to

talk to, nothing to do but stare into the big black hole at the center of your own sorry soul. The hours go by and you lose your gyroscope; your mind starts to roam. You think about dark closets, madmen, murderers under the bed, all those childhood fears. Gremlins and trolls and giants. You try to block it out but you can't. You see ghosts. You blink and shake your head. Bullshit, you tell yourself. But then you remember the guys who died: Curt Lemon, Kiowa, Ted Lavender, a half-dozen others whose faces you can't bring into focus anymore. And then pretty soon you start to ponder the stories you've heard about Charlie's magic. The time some guys cornered two VC in a dead-end tunnel, no way out, but how, when the tunnel was fragged and searched, nothing was found except a pile of dead rats. A hundred stories. Ghosts wiping out a whole Marine platoon in twenty seconds flat. Ghosts rising from the dead. Ghosts behind you and in front of you and inside you. After a while, as the night deepens, you feel a funny buzzing in your ears. Tiny sounds get heightened and distorted. The crickets talk in code; the night takes on a weird electronic tingle. You hold your breath. You coil up and tighten your muscles and listen, knuckles hard, the pulse ticking in your head. You hear the spooks laughing. No shit, *laughing*. You jerk up, you freeze, you squint at the dark. Nothing, though. You put your weapon on full automatic. You crouch lower and count your grenades and make sure the pins are bent for quick throwing and take a deep breath and listen and try not to freak. And then later, after enough time passes, things start to get bad.

"Come on," Azar said, "let's *do* it," but I told him to be patient. Waiting was the trick. So we went to the movies, *Barbarella* again, the eighth straight night. A lousy movie, I thought, but it kept Azar occupied. He was crazy about Jane Fonda. "Sweet Janie," he kept saying. "Sweet Janie boosts a man's morale." Then, with his hand, he showed me which part of his morale got boosted. It was an old joke. Everything was old. The movie, the heat, the booze, the war. I fell asleep during the second reel—a hot, angry sleep—and forty minutes later I woke up to a sore ass and a foul temper.

It wasn't yet midnight.

We hiked over to the EM club and worked our way through a six-pack. Mitchell Sanders was there, at another table, but he pretended not to see me.

Around closing time, I nodded at Azar. "Well, goody gumdrop," he said.

We went over to my hootch, picked up our gear, and then moved through the night down to the wire. I felt like a soldier again. Back in the bush, it seemed. We observed good field discipline, not talking, keeping to the shadows and joining in with the darkness. When we came up on Bunker Six, Azar lifted his thumb and peeled away from me and began circling to the south. Old times, I thought. A kind of thrill, a kind of dread.

Quietly, I shouldered my gear and crossed over to a heap of boulders that overlooked Jorgenson's position. I was directly behind him. Thirty- two meters away, exactly. Even in the heavy darkness, no moon yet, I could make out the kid's silhouette: a helmet, a pair of shoulders, a rifle barrel. His back was to me. He gazed out at the wire and at the paddies beyond, where the danger was.

I knelt down and took out ten flares and unscrewed the caps and lined them up in front of me and then checked my wristwatch. Still five minutes to go. Edging over to my left, I groped for the ropes I'd set up that afternoon. I found them, tested the tension, and checked the time again. Four minutes. There was a light feeling in my head, fluttery and taut at the same time. I remembered it from the boonies. Giddiness and doubt and awe, all those things and a million more. You wonder if you're dreaming. It's like you're in a movie. There's a camera on you, so you begin acting, you're somebody else. You think of all the films you've seen, Audie Murphy and Gary Cooper and the Cisco Kid, all those heroes, and you can't help falling back on them as models of proper comportment.

On ambush, curled in the dark, you fight for control. Not too much fidgeting. You rearrange your posture; you try for a grin; you measure out your breathing. Eyes open, be alert—old imperatives, old movies. It all swirls together, clichés mixing with your own emotions, and in the end you can't tell one from the other.

There was that coldness inside me. I wasn't myself. I felt hollow and dangerous.

I took a breath, fingered the first rope, and gave it a sharp little jerk. Instantly there was a clatter outside the wire. I expected the noise, I was even tensed for it, but still my heart took a hop.

Now, I thought. Now it starts.

Eight ropes altogether. I had four, Azar had four. Each rope was hooked up to a homemade noisemaker out in front of Jorgenson's bunker—eight ammo cans filled with rifle cartridges. Simple devices, but they worked. I waited a moment, and then, very gently, I gave all four of

my ropes a little tug. Delicate, nothing loud. If you weren't listening, listening hard, you might've missed it. But Jorgenson was listening. At the first low rattle, his silhouette seemed to freeze.

Another rattle: Azar this time. We kept at it for ten minutes, staggering the rhythm—noise, silence, noise—gradually building the tension.

Squinting down at Jorgenson's position, I felt a swell of immense power. It was a feeling the VC must have. Like a puppeteer. Yank on the ropes, watch the silly wooden soldier jump and twitch. It made me smile. One by one, in sequence, I tugged on each of the ropes, and the sounds came flowing back at me with a soft, indefinite formlessness: a rattlesnake, maybe, or the creak of a trap door, or footsteps in the attic— whatever you made of it.

In a way I wanted to stop myself. It was cruel, I knew that, but right and wrong were somewhere else. This was the spirit world.

I heard myself laugh.

And then presently I came unattached from the natural world. I felt the hinges go. Eyes closed, I seemed to rise up out of my own body and float through the dark down to Jorgenson's position. I was invisible; I had no shape, no substance; I weighed less than nothing. I just drifted. It was imagination, of course, but for a long while I hovered there over Bobby Jorgenson's bunker. As if through dark glass I could see him lying flat in his circle of sandbags, silent and scared, listening. Rubbing his eyes. Telling himself it was all a trick of the dark. Muscles tight, ears tight

—I could see it. Now, at this instant, he'd glance up at the sky, hoping for a moon or a few stars. But no moon, no stars. He'd start talking to himself. He'd try to bring the night into focus, willing coherence, but the effort would only cause distortions. Out beyond the wire, the paddies would seem to swirl and sway; the trees would take human form; clumps of grass would glide through the night like sappers. Funhouse country: trick mirrors and curvatures and pop-up monsters. "Take it easy," he'd murmur, "easy, easy, easy," but it wouldn't get any easier.

I could actually see it.

I was down there with him, inside him. I was part of the night. I was the land itself—everything, everywhere—the fireflies and paddies, the moon, the midnight rustlings, the cool phosphorescent shimmer of evil— I was atrocity—I was jungle fire, jungle drums—I was the blind stare in the eyes of all those poor, dead, dumbfuck ex-pals of mine—all the pale young corpses, Lee Strunk and Kiowa and Curt Lemon—I was the beast on their lips—I was Nam—the horror, the war.

"Creepy," Azar said. "Wet pants an' goose bumps." He held a beer out to me, but I shook my head.

We sat in the dim light of my hootch, boots off, listening to Mary Hopkin on my tape deck.

"What next?" "Wait," I said. "Sure, but I mean—"

"Shut up and *listen*."

That high elegant voice. Someday, when the war was over, I'd go to London and ask Mary Hopkin to marry me. That's another thing Nam does to you. It turns you sentimental; it makes you want to hook up with girls like Mary Hopkin. You learn, finally, that you'll die, and so you try to hang on to your own life, that gentle, naive kid you used to be, but then after a while the sentiment takes over, and the sadness, because you know for a fact that you can't ever bring any of it back again. You just can't. Those were the days, she sang.

Azar switched off the tape.

"Shit, man," he said. "Don't you got *music*?"

And now, finally, the moon was out. We slipped back to our positions and went to work again with the ropes. Louder now, more insistent. Starlight sparkled in the barbed wire, and there were curious reflections and layerings of shadow, and the big white moon added resonance. There was no wind. The night was absolute. Slowly, we dragged the ammo cans closer to Bobby Jorgenson's bunker, and this, plus the moon, gave a sense of approaching peril, the slow belly-down crawl of evil.

At 0300 hours Azar set off the first trip flare.

There was a light popping noise, then a sizzle out in front of Bunker Six. The night seemed to snap itself in half. The white flare burned ten paces from the bunker.

I fired off three more flares and it was instant daylight.

Then Jorgenson moved. He made a short, low cry—not even a cry, really, just a short lung-and-throat bark—and their was a blurred sequence as he lunged sideways and rolled toward a heap of sandbags and crouched there and hugged his rifle and waited.

"There," I whispered. "Now you know."

I could read his mind. I was there with him. Together we understood what terror was: you're not human anymore. You're a shadow. You slip out of your own skin, like molting, shedding your own history and your own future, leaving behind everything you ever were or wanted or believed in. You know you're about to die. And it's not a movie and you aren't a hero and all you can do is whimper and wait.

This, now, was something we shared.

I felt close to him. It wasn't compassion, just closeness. His silhouette was framed like a cardboard cutout against the burning flares.

In the dark outside my hootch, even though I bent toward him, almost nose to nose, all I could see were the glossy whites of Azar's eyes.

"Enough," I said. "Oh, sure." "Seriously."

Azar gave me a small, thin smile.

"Serious?" he said. "That's way too serious for me—I'm your basic fun lover."

When he smiled again, I knew it was hopeless, but I tried anyway. I told him the score was even. We'd made our point, I said, no need to rub it in.

Azar starred at me.

"Poor, poor boy," he said. The rest was inflection and white eyes.

An hour before dawn we moved in for the last phase. Azar was in command now. I tagged after him, thinking maybe I could keep a lid on.

"Don't take this personal," Azar said softly. "It's my own character flaw. I just like to finish things."

I didn't look at him. As we approached the wire, Azar put his hand on my shoulder, guiding me over toward the boulder pile. He knelt down and inspected the ropes and flares, nodded to himself, peered out at Jorgenson's bunker, nodded once more, then took off his helmet and sat on it.

He was smiling again.

"You know something?" he said. His voice was wistful. "Out here, at night, I almost feel like a kid again. The Vietnam experience. I mean, wow, I *love* this shit."

"Let's just—"

"Shhhh."

Azar put a finger to his lips. He was still smiling at me, almost kindly. "This here's what you wanted," he said. "This playing war, right? That's

all this *is*. A cute little backyard war game. Brings back memories, I bet—

those happy soldiering days. Except now you're a has-been. One of those American Legion types, guys who like to dress up in a nifty uniform and go out and play at it. Pitiful. It was me, I'd rather get my ass blown away for real."

My lips had a waxy feel, like soapstone. "Come on," I said. "Just quit."

"Pitiful."

"Azar, for Christ sake."

He patted my cheek. "Purely pitiful," he said.

We waited another ten minutes. It was cold now, and damp. Squatting down, I felt a sudden brittleness come over me, a hollow sensation, as if someone could reach out and crush me like a Christmas tree ornament. It was the same feeling I'd had out along the Song Tra Bong. Like I was losing myself, everything spilling out. I remembered how the bullet had made a soft puffing noise inside me. I remembered lying there for a long while, listening to the river, the gunfire and voices, how I kept calling out for a medic but how nobody came and how I finally reached back and touched the hole. The blood was warm like dishwater. I could feel my pants filling up with it. All this blood, I thought—I'll be *hollow*. Then the brittle sensation hit me. I passed out for a while, and when I woke up the battle had moved farther down the river. I was still leaking. I wondered where Rat Kiley was, but Rat Kiley was in Japan. There was rifle fire somewhere off to my right, and people yelling, except none of it seemed real anymore. I smelled myself dying. The round had entered at a steep angle, smashing down through the hip and colon. The stench made me jerk sideways. I turned and clamped a hand against the wound and tried to plug it up. Leaking to death, I thought. And then I felt it happen. Like a genie swirling out of a bottle—like a cloud of gas—I was drifting upward out of my own body. I was half in and half out. Part of me still lay there, the corpse part, but I was also that genie looking on and saying, "There, there," which made me start to scream. I couldn't help it. When Bobby Jorgenson got to me, I was almost gone with shock. All I could do was scream. I tightened up and squeezed, trying to stop the leak, but that

only made it worse, and Jorgenson punched me and told me to knock it off. Shock, I thought. I tried to tell him that. I tried to say, "Shock," but it wouldn't come out right. Jorgenson flipped me over and pressed a knee against my back, pinning me there, and I kept trying to say, "Shock, man, treat for shock." I was lucid—things were clear—but my tongue wouldn't fit around the words. Then I slipped under for a while. When I came back, Jorgenson was using a knife to cut off my pants. He shot in the morphine, which scared me, and I shouted something and tried to wiggle away, but he kept pushing down hard on my back. Except it wasn't Jorgenson now—it was that genie—he was smiling down at me, and winking, and I couldn't buck him off. Later on, things clicked into slow motion. The morphiene, maybe. I focused on Jorgenson's brand-new boots, then on a pebble, then on my own face floating high above me— the last things I'd ever see. I couldn't look away. It occurred to me that I was witness to something rare.

Even now, in the dark, there were indications of a spirit world. Azar said, "Hey, you awake?"

I nodded.

Down at Bunker Six, things were silent. The place looked abandoned.

Azar grinned and went to work on the ropes. It began like a breeze, a soft sighing sound. I hugged myself. I watched Azar bend forward and fire off the first illumination flare. "Please," I almost said, but the word snagged, and I looked up and tracked the flare over Jorgenson's bunker. It exploded almost without noise: a soft red flash.

There was a whimper in the dark. At first I thought it was Jorgenson. "Please?" I said.

I bit down and folded my hands and squeezed. I had the shivers.

Twice more, rapidly, Azar fired up red flares. At one point he turned toward me and lifted his eyebrows.

"Timmy, Timmy," he said. "Such a specimen." I agreed.

I wanted to do something, stop him somehow, but I crouched back and watched Azar pick up a tear-gas grenade and pull the pin and stand up and throw. The gas puffed up in a thin cloud that partly obscured Bunker Six. Even from thirty meters away I could smell it and taste it.

"Jesus, *please*," I said, but Azar lobbed over another one, waited for the hiss, then scrambled over to the rope we hadn't used yet.

It was my idea. I'd rigged it up myself: a sandbag painted white, a pulley system.

Azar gave the rope a quick tug, and out in front of Bunker Six, the white sandbag lifted itself up and hovered there in a misty swirl of gas.

Jorgenson began firing. Just one round at first, a single red tracer that thumped into the sandbag and burned.

"Oooo!" Azar murmured.

Quickly, talking to himself, Azar hurled the last gas grenade, shot up another flare, then snatched the rope again and made the white sandbag dance.

"Oooo!" he was chanting. "Starlight, star bright!"

Bobby Jorgenson did not go nuts. Quietly, almost with dignity, he stood up and took aim and fired once more at the sandbag. I could see his profile against the red flares. His face seemed relaxed, no twitching or screams. He stared out into the dark for several seconds, as if deciding something, then he shook his head and smiled. He stood up straight. He seemed to brace himself for a moment. Then, very slowly, he began marching out toward the wire; his posture was erect; he did not crouch or squirm or crawl. He walked upright. He moved with a kind of grace.

When he reached the sandbag, Jorgenson stopped and turned and shouted out my name, then he placed his rifle muzzle up against the white sandbag.

"O'Brien!" he yelled, and he fired. Azar dropped the rope.

"Well," he muttered, "show's over." He looked down at me with a mixture of contempt and pity. After a second he shook his head. "Man, I'll tell you something. You're a sorry, sorry case."

I was trembling. I kept hugging myself, rocking, but I couldn't make it go away.

"Disgusting," Azar said. "Sorriest fuckin' case I ever seen."

He looked out at Jorgenson, then at me. His eyes had the opaque, polished surface of stone. He moved forward as if to help me up. Then he stopped and smiled. Almost as an afterthought, he kicked me in the head.

"Sad," he murmured, then he turned and headed off to bed. "No big deal," I told Jorgenson. "Leave it alone."

But he led me down to the bunker and used a towel to wipe the gash at my forehead. It wasn't bad, really. I felt some dizziness, but I tried not to let it show.

It was almost dawn now, a hazy silver dawn. For a while we didn't speak.

"So," he finally said. "Right."

We shook hands. Neither of us put much emotion into it and we didn't look at each other's eyes.

Jorgenson pointed out at the shot-up sandbag.

"That was a nice touch," he said. "It almost had me—" He paused and squinted out at the eastern paddies, where the sky was beginning to color up. "Anyway, a nice dramatic touch. You've got a real flair for it.

Someday maybe you should go into the movies or something." I nodded and said, "That's an idea."

"Another Hitchcock. *The Birds*—you ever see it?" "Scary stuff," I said.

We sat for a while longer, then I started to get up, except I was still feeling the wobbles in my head. Jorgenson reached out and steaded me.

"We're even now?" he said. "Pretty much."

Again, I felt that human closeness. Almost war buddies. We nearly shook hands again but then decided against it. Jorgenson picked up his helmet, brushed it off, and looked back one more time at the white sandbag. His face was filthy.

Up at the medic's hootch, he cleaned and bandaged my forehead, then we went to chow. We didn't have much to say. I told him I was sorry; he told me the same thing.

Afterward, in an awkward moment, I said, "Let's kill Azar." Jorgenson smiled. "Scare him to death, right?"

"Right," I said. "What a movie!"

I shrugged. "Sure. Or just kill him."

# Night Life

A few words about Rat Kiley. I wasn't there when he got hurt, but Mitchell Sanders later told me the essential facts. Apparently he lost his cool.

The platoon had been working an AO out in the foothills west of Quang Ngai City, and for some time they'd been receiving intelligence about an NVA buildup in the area. The usual crazy rumors: massed artillery and Russian tanks and whole divisions of fresh troops. No one took it seriously, including Lieutenant Cross, but as a precausun the platoon moved only at night, staying off the main trails and observing strict field SOPs. For almost two weeks, Sanders said, they lived the night life. That was the phrase everyone used: the night life. A language trick.

It made things seem tolerable. How's the Nam treating you? one guy would ask, and some other guy would say, Hey, one big party, just living the night life.

It was a tense time for everybody, Sanders said, but for Rat Kiley it ended up in Japan. The strain was too much for him. He couldn't make the adjustment.

During those two weeks the basic routine was simple. They'd sleep away the daylight hours, or try to sleep, then at dusk they'd put on their gear and move out single file into the dark. Always a heavy cloud cover. No moon and no stars. It was the purest black you could imagine, Sanders said, the kind of clock-stopping black that God must've had in mind when he sat down to invent blackness. It made your eyeballs ache. You'd shake your head and blink, except you couldn't even tell you were blinking, the blackness didn't change. So pretty soon you'd get jumpy.

Your nerves would go. You'd start to worry about getting cut off from the rest of the unit—alone, you'd think—and then the real panic would bang in and you'd reach out and try to touch the guy in front of you, groping for his shirt, hoping to Christ he was still there. It made for some bad dreams. Dave Jensen popped special vitamins high in carotene.

Lieutenant Cross popped NoDoz. Henry Dobbins and Norman Bowker even rigged up a safety line between them, a long piece of string tied to their belts. The whole platoon felt the impact.

With Rat Kiley, though, it was different. Too many body bags, maybe.

Too much gore.

At first Rat just sank inside himself, not saying a word, but then later on, after five or six days, it flipped the other way. He couldn't stop talking. Weird talk, too. Talking about bugs, for instance: how the worst

thing in Nam was the goddamn bugs. Big giant killer bugs, he'd say, mutant bugs, bugs with fucked-up DNA, bugs that were chemically altered by napalm and defoliants and tear gas and DDT. He claimed the bugs were personally after his ass. He said he could hear the bastards homing in on him.

Swarms of mutant bugs, billions of them, they had him bracketed.

Whispering his name, he said—his actual name—all night long—it was driving him crazy.

Odd stuff, Sanders said, and it wasn't just talk. Rat developed some peculiar habits. Constantly scratching himself. Clawing at the bug bites. He couldn't quit digging at his skin, making big scabs and then ripping off the scabs and scratching the open sores.

It was a sad thing to watch. Definitely not the old Rat Kiley. His whole personality seemed out of kilter.

To an extent, though, everybody was feeling it. The long night marches turned their minds upside down; all the rhythms were wrong. Always a lost sensation. They'd blunder along through the dark, willy-nilly, no sense of place or direction, probing for an enemy that nobody could see. Like a snipe hunt, Sanders said. A bunch of dumb Cub Scouts chasing the phantoms. They'd march north for a time, then east, then north again, skirting the villages, no one talking except in whispers. And it was rugged country, too. Not quite mountains, but rising fast, full of gorges and deep brush and places you could die. Around midnight things always got wild. All around you, everywhere, the whole dark countryside came alive.

You'd hear a strange hum in your ears. Nothing specific; nothing you could put a name on. Tree frogs, maybe, or snakes or flying squirrels or who-knew-what. Like the night had its own voice—that hum in your ears

—and in the hours after midnight you'd swear you were walking through some kind of soft black protoplasm, Vietnam, the blood and the flesh.

It was no joke, Sanders said. The monkeys chattered death-chatter.

The nights got freaky.

Rat Kiley finally hit a wall.

He couldn't sleep during the hot daylight hours; he couldn't cope with the nights.

Late one afternoon, as the platoon prepared for another march, he broke down in front of Mitchell Sanders. Not crying, but up against it. He said he was scared. And it wasn't normal scared. He didn't know *what* it was: too long in-country, probably. Or else he wasn't cut out to be a medic. Always policing up the parts, he said. Always plugging up holes.

Sometimes he'd stare at guys who were still okay, the alive guys, and he'd start to picture how they'd look dead. Without arms or legs—that sort of thing. It was ghoulish, he knew that, but he couldn't shut off the pictures. He'd be sitting there talking with Bowker or Dobbins or somebody, just marking time, and then out of nowhere he'd find himself wondering how much the guy's head weighed, like how *heavy* it was, and what it would feel like to pick up the head and carry it over to a chopper and dump it in.

Rat scratched the skin at his elbow, digging in hard. His eyes were red and weary.

"It's not right," he said. "These pictures in my head, they won't quit. I'll see a guy's liver. The actual fucking *liver*. And the thing is, it doesn't scare me, it doesn't even give me the willies. More like curiosity. The way a doctor feels when he looks at a patient, sort of mechanical, not seeing the real person, just a ruptured appendix or a clogged-up artery."

His voice floated away for a second. He looked at Sanders and tried to smile.

He kept clawing at his elbow.

"Anyway," Rat said, "the days aren't so bad, but at night the pictures get to be a bitch. I start seeing my own body. Chunks of myself. My own heart, my own kidneys. It's like—I don't know—it's like staring into this huge black crystal ball. One of these nights I'll be lying dead out there in the dark and nobody'll find me except the bugs—I can see it—I can see the goddamn bugs chewing tunnels through me—I can see the mongooses munching on my bones. I swear, it's too much. I can't keep seeing myself dead."

Mitchell Sanders nodded. He didn't know what to say. For a time they sat watching the shadows come, then Rat shook his head.

He said he'd done his best. He'd tried to be a decent medic. Win some and lose some, he said, but he'd tried hard. Briefly then, rambling a little, he talked about a few of the guys who were gone now, Curt Lemon and Kiowa and Ted Lavender, and how crazy it was that people who were so incredibly alive could get so incredibly dead.

Then he almost laughed.

"This whole war," he said. "You know what it is? Just one big banquet.

Meat, man. You and me. Everybody. Meat for the bugs." The next morning he shot himself.

He took off his boots and socks, laid out his medical kit, doped himself up, and put a round through his foot.

Nobody blamed him, Sanders said.

Before the chopper came, there was time for goodbyes. Lieutenant Cross went over and said he'd vouch that it was an accident. Henry Dobbins and Azar gave him a stack of comic books for hospital reading. Everybody stood in a little circle, feeling bad about it, trying to cheer him up with bullshit about the great night life in Japan.

Journal Response

What about Vietnam seems different to you from other Wars that you have read about in school? How do those differences affect the characters in this book?

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