

**COLLECTED SHORT STORIES**

**STEPHEN C. PORTER**

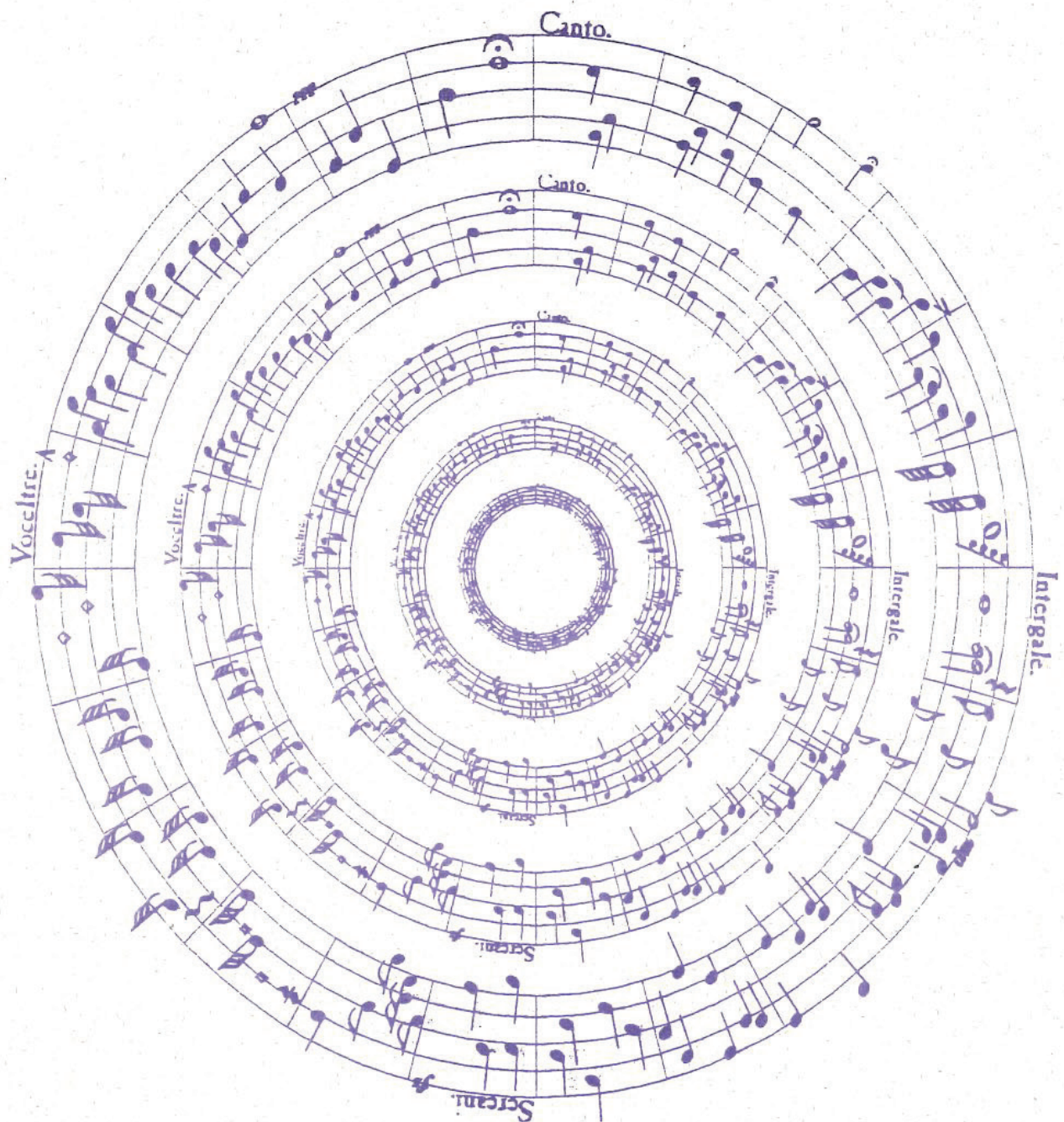


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## Stephen C. Porter

### *Mail Call*

I met Shipley standing in line at the Fort Polk Reception Station, waiting to trade our civvies for stacks of puke green fatigues. October of 1968 was just a swell time to be inducted into the United States Army.

Minutes earlier, Shipley and I had both been scalped by an Army barber who enjoyed his work. The clipper-wielding asshole had nicked a mole on the back of Shipley's head, but the big guy was oblivious to the trickle of blood coursing down his thick, sweaty neck until I offered him my only clean white handkerchief.

"We're not even out of the reception station, and you're already eligible for a friggin' Purple Heart," I told him, and he gave me this goofy smile like I was his long-lost brother or something.

In the predictable, brainless manner of the military, we were joined together alphabetically—Shipley and Simmons—and assigned to the same basic training company.

After our first mail call, I discovered that Shipley was illiterate.

Two newsy letters from my mother had arrived that day—the first installments in a steady stream of obligatory epistles I would receive during my tour of duty. I was hoping for a letter from Jennifer McNabb—she of the long, slender legs and tight, round ass. Promises had been made, and I had already written her three letters since being assigned to Alpha Company.

Shipley held an unopened powder blue envelope in his hand. He mumbled that it was from his wife, but when we got back to the barracks, he stashed it away in his footlocker, like a dog burying a bone.

That evening, Shipley sat on the top bunk in his swing-easies, his legs dangling off the side like hairy white torpedoes. I was trying to tune out the noise of grab-assing GIs so I could concentrate on the steamy paperback I had bought at the airport during my last precious hours of civilian life.

"What's the matter, Shipley? You haven't said shit since mess call."

"Nothin'," he said.

"What did your wife have to say? Everything okay back home?"

"I don't know."

I closed the paperback. "What do you mean you don't know?"

He dropped off the bunk like a bag of cement and sat down next to me on the thin mattress.

"Hey, not so close—guys will think you're a rump ranger," I said.

Shipley scooted away some.

"Simmons, can I tell you somethin' and you won't tell nobody else?"

"Sure. I'm your buddy."

His voice dropped into a whisper.

"I can't read nor write."

Now I had never taken Shipley for a genius, but as a college boy from the enlightened Midwest, I naively assumed that everyone in the country got at least a rudimentary education.

"How'd you get in the Army?"

"Oh, I passed them tests where you have to tell a square from a circle. The recruiter didn't seem much concerned about the rest."

"Don't they have schools in east Texas?" I asked.

"I quit when I was seven. My old man needed help around the place. Then I went to trade school to learn plumbing and I ain't never got around to goin' back. I can write my name's about all."

"Well, I'll be damned. What about your wife?"

"Logene, she went to school some and I reckon she writes fair enough."

He took a deep breath. "You won't tell nobody?"

I looked around the barracks. Our platoon had a few reservists, but was mostly draftees like me and Shipley. They were sitting around in olive drab clusters, smoking and joking and telling lies about all the poontang they got back home.

"I won't tell," I promised.

He slid his footlocker out from under my bunk.

"Would you read this letter to me?"

I told him I would take a crack at it.

The letter only filled one side of a single sheet of the blue stationery. It was written in a scrawl that was part printing, part cursive, and looked to have been done by a fourth grader.

*Dear Elgin,*

*How is Uncle Sam treating you?*

*I am fine, but it is not very fun without you here. Your mama came by to see me yesterday. She says hi and that you will get leave soon so I can see you. She said I should go ahead and write you. She said one of your new army friends can read it to you.*

*I miss you a lot and think about you all the time.*

While I was reading the letter aloud to Shipley I was seized with an idea—a little harmless mischief to bring some excitement to the dull routine.

Something about watching Shipley's face as I read—his bushy black eyebrows knitted together in total concentration like two copulating caterpillars—triggered my decision to embellish upon what was written on the stationery.

I read, "I miss you a lot. I miss your strong arms around me at night and I miss the way you touch my body under the covers. I wish I could reach out right now and run my fingers across your hairy chest and down between your legs..."

"She said that?" he asked.

"Sure she did. Right there," I lied, pointing at the page.

I watched for any sign of recognition as he studied the letter. I felt like the Kingfish putting another one over on ol' Andy Brown. To Shipley, the writing must have looked like Chinese.

He asked me to read the last part again and I noticed that perspiration was popping out on his forehead. I knew that I had done the right thing.

"If you want, I'll write a letter back to her for you," I offered, my mind already filled with the lascivious possibilities.

He said he'd like that.

And so the next night, in the brief and precious free time before lights out, I helped Shipley compose a letter to Logene.

The first part was just bullshit about Army life, and telling her about his good ol' bunkmate, Simmons, who was writing the letter for him. Just enough to establish a little trust so she wouldn't feel awkward writing to him.

"Now," I said, "We need to add some love talk. This has got to be a romantic letter."

Shipley didn't know about that, but I told him that Thanksgiving leave was coming soon and he needed to keep her interested.

So I added a paragraph about how he laid in bed at night thinking about her.

Well, what I actually wrote down was how he laid there thinking about kissing her warm, moist lips and caressing her soft breasts—which on second thought I changed to titties. And I mentioned how horny he was to make love to her. Horny seemed a good east Texas expression.

A few days passed. Our company endured the first physical training test of the cycle—low crawl, horizontal bars, all the usual crap. Shipley maxed the test; I think he made the highest score in the brigade.

A letter from Jennifer McNabb finally arrived on the same day that Shipley received another blue envelope from Logene.

Jennifer started off telling me how my old friend, draft dodger Farley, had been over to her new apartment to wire the stereo. How ol' Farley had taken her to the Peter, Paul & Mary concert at the bandshell and how they had thought of me when the group sang "Leaving on a Jet Plane."

After about the third mention of Farley, I got the message pretty strong. My buddy was screwing the girl of my wet dreams. Thinking about it gave me the drizzlies for two days.

At least things were going better for Shipley. Logene's second letter said:

*I just read your letter and it really made me feel hot. I miss you awful—I'm real glad you got someone to write for you.*

*Guess you can't keep no secrets from him can you? Do you really think about my soft tits? Because I think about you touching them and some other places. I wish you were here right now so you could touch my love lips and I could kiss you in a hard place I know...*

So I added that last line or two. What she really said was that she wanted to kiss him in all the right places. I just helped her express it a little more descriptively.

"She said that?" Shipley asked, beginning to sound like a broken record.

"Your wife is hot for you, Shipley. We've got to come up with a good letter so she'll be on fire for you when you go home on leave."



Shipley was beginning to smolder a little already. Shortly after the lights went out, I could feel the rack shaking as Shipley squirmed around. After a bit, he slid off the bunk and retreated to the latrine on ponderous tiptoes.

I was third-shift fire guard that same night. Instead of pacing back and forth like a dumb shit, I sat on the steps outside the lighted latrine, smoking Kools and composing a real classic for Shipley to send to Logene.

I told her the crap about how our company was kicking ass on all the test scores and how much basic training sucked.

Then I got to the good stuff. But how far should I go? I rejected references to a throbbing member and a graphic, in-and-out description of intercourse, on the unlikely chance that Logene might get wise. But while telling her some stuff about wanting to run my (that is, Shipley's) hand down between her smooth, creamy thighs, and reach inside her lace panties, I had my best brainstorm of the whole venture.

I told her to send some sexy pictures of herself.

The next morning I read most of the letter to Shipley. I didn't mention the last part about the photos. Everybody likes surprises.

Training continued on its monotonous course as the weather turned cold and wet. We were dreading the thought of spending the week before Thanksgiving on bivouac, living in pup tents in the remote regions of Ft. Polk. Out on the rifle range in the gray mornings, we huddled around fire barrels, raindrops and pine needles splashing into our metal canteen cups. Field jackets and ponchos became the standard uniform and soon we were standing in line in front of the supply building drawing our allotment of long underwear and gloves.

I had not gotten another letter from Jennifer and Thanksgiving leave was fast approaching. It would take some real persuasion to coax her away from Farley and to get into her panties while I was home. So on a Sunday afternoon when the rest of the platoon was at the PX slurping 3.2 suds, I stayed behind and composed the greatest letter I had ever written.

I started off describing how I had watched the full moon rise from the mists over the dark pine trees, as a lonely bugle played "Taps." I told her I would be coming home on leave soon before going off to that cruel war in Southeast Asia, and how I hoped it wouldn't be my last Thanksgiving ever.

I said I was damned proud to be serving my great country—America the Beautiful, from sea to shining sea. I swear you could smell the amber waves of grain.

As the strains of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" swelled in the background, I included a quote from Gen. Douglas MacArthur about duty, honor country. It was enough to bring tears to my eyes.

In short, the letter was a masterpiece. I read it to Shipley and several of the other guys in the platoon, who all agreed that this letter was at least good for one piece of ass from Jennifer. My squad leader even thought it might earn me a blow job in broad daylight.

The day before we were to leave on bivouac, a letter from Shipley's wife arrived—the one I had been waiting for.

The envelope was different—large and brown, with Big Tex Plumbing Service printed in the upper left-hand corner. I guided Shipley to the back side of the barracks where we could be out of the cold wind and have a little privacy to open the mail.

A white business envelope, tucked in there with the blue stationery, held the pictures, taken in the junky bedroom of their trailer house. They were Polaroid shots of a pretty girl with bleached blonde hair who looked about sixteen, although I knew she was three years older. She assumed various poses wearing nothing but a short white negligee and hot pink panties. The negligee didn't quite reach her navel and was sheer enough to reveal just about everything. Shipley hadn't lied about Logene having a great little body.

The accompanying letter didn't have the usual news from home bullshit—it was pure invitation.

*I borrowed Lucille's Polaroid camera but didn't tell what I was doing with it. Wouldn't she be surprised! I hope these pictures make you miss me even more. I got real horny just posing for them. Do they make you want to \*\*\*\* me?*

We were interrupted when some of the other guys came around behind the barracks looking for us. At first, Shipley didn't want to let anyone else see the pictures. But I started bragging about what a good-looking girl she was, and soon ol' Shipley was passing those photos around like a proud grandfather showing off his grandkids.

"Now don't you boys be pulling on your puds after looking at Shipley's bride," I warned.

The next day we boarded cattle trucks that took us out to the bivouac site. Our shelter halves made a pup tent we shared, and every night he had

those pictures out, shining his flashlight. I didn't even want to know what went on inside his sleeping bag.

Bivouac sucked a big green one. On the first day we were out in the field, the rain started at dawn. The steady drip didn't stop the whole time. It rained on the rifle range, rained on the chow line, and it rained on the night obstacle course. Our equipment was filthy and we had wet, red Louisiana sand lodged in every crevice and orifice of our bodies. The only bright spot was the knowledge that we would return to the company area Monday and head out on Thanksgiving leave on Wednesday. I was past being ready and I thought Shipley might explode.

But the Army wasn't through screwing with us. We piled out of the trucks and fell into formation in the company street, only to be told by the First Sergeant that the entire post was being placed under quarantine due to an outbreak of spinal meningitis. All leaves were canceled and we were confined to the company area until further notice.

I felt my pecker go limp when I heard that bit of news. And Shipley—well, when our drill sergeant put him on a detail to sweep the supply room floor, he put his big fist through the door of the shed where the mops and brooms were kept.

"It ain't fair," he kept saying as we choked down overcooked turkey and crusty dressing on Thanksgiving Day. "We're sittin' here in this damned mess hall when we ought to be home with our families. Who gives a shit about spinal-mighty-Jesus anyway?"

To combat the meningitis, the high command decreed that all barracks windows be cracked open around the clock to keep the germs moving. The dick-heads failed to notice it was cold as hell. By the end of the week, every man on the post was coughing and dripping snot out his nose. So the quarantine was lifted after about ten days. There weren't enough quack doctors in the State of Louisiana to treat all the upper respiratory infections.

When basic training ended, we would be shipping out immediately to Advanced Individual Training sites all around the country. Some poor bastards had to stay there at Polk; I considered myself lucky to be on orders for Ft. Leonard Wood in Missouri. Shipley was going to artillery school at Sill.

Before our last weekend of training, the company commander announced some good news.

"You men will be given passes on Saturday. If you have wives or family who can get here, you will be allowed to have them visit you. You may not leave the post, but they are welcome to come here to the company area or to join you at the PX. Any questions?"

As soon as we were dismissed, Shipley ran like a spotted-ass ape to the telephone outside the PX annex. He came back with this great shit-eatin' grin on his face.

"Logene's coming! That is, if she can get the transmission fixed on the truck. She says she can get off work after lunch on Saturday and just drive on over."

Noting my sour expression he said "Guess it's too far for Jennifer to come, ain't it?"

"Far's got nothing to do with it. I didn't tell you about the letter I got today. You remember my glorious pre-Thanksgiving epistle, don't you?"

Shipley looked puzzled.

"The letter I wrote, numbnuts. The one with all the patriotic horseshit in it."

"Oh yeah. Did she like it?"

"I guess she liked it fine, because she wrote to tell me how she volunteered to go down to the USO to serve turkey dinners to GIs since I didn't get to come home for the holiday.

"And how she met this captain in the National Guard who just happens to be stationed at an armory right there in Dayton. And how he reminded her of me. Can you believe that shit? And when she mentions him for that magic third time, that tells me he's porking her. Just like my old friend Farley was."

I pulled another envelope out of my shirt.

"Speaking of my good buddy Farley, I get this letter from him today, too. Telling me how he was gettin' it from Jennifer pretty regular until I messed it up for him by writing that God bless America letter. How's she's turned into Miss Liberty or something and won't even talk to him now because he's not serving his country."

Saturday arrived with lots of sunshine, but by 1730 hours, with no sign of Logene, both Shipley's hopes and the temperature had begun to drop.

"Damned old truck musta broke down."

A few families showed up and guys were down in the picnic area, eating fried chicken and mixing some hard stuff into their Cokes.

The rest of us were stuck with Army chow at supper. As the sun went down, Shipley stood on the porch of the barracks like a faithful hound, watching the street for a sign of Logene.

Most of the platoon had gone to the PX and I felt like getting as drunk as one could get on a ration of two cups of 3.2 beer.

"Come on," I said. "I'll buy you a brew."

Reluctantly, Shipley trudged up the hill with me. The annex was doing a brisk Saturday night business. Despite the cold we had to sit at one of the outside tables on a gravel patio.

We were starting on our second cup of beer when this blonde girl came walking around the side of the building, her eyes searching the crowd. She wore a plaid coat over a short flowered dress that revealed a pair of legs I recognized immediately.

"Shipley, isn't that Logene?"

He didn't answer me. He pushed away from the table and knocked several trainees aside as he rushed towards her.

I heard Logene cry "Elgin honey!" and then he had her in a bear hug.

What happened next was the damndest thing I have ever seen.

Shipley scooped her up just like John Wayne did Natalie Wood in "The Searchers" and carried her into the dark grove of pine trees behind the annex.

What went on in the shadows would not be characterized as making love. Although we couldn't see what was transpiring, the activity doubtless bore more resemblance to what you might see two dogs doing in your backyard.

Somebody unplugged the jukebox and the GIs inside the PX were outside in a matter of seconds. I've never seen that many soldiers get that quiet without a direct order.

We heard Logene giggling, then the unmistakable metallic click of Shipley's brass belt buckle. Then a stifled moan that rose in a crescendo, becoming a muffled scream.

The dam broke and Shipley was yelling, "Yeah, baby, yeah!" as the guys on the porch started whistling and clapping as though the Dallas-fucking-Cowboys had just scored a touchdown.

The applause finally died down and I said, "Come on, guys, go back to what you were doing. Give 'em a few tender moments."

The troops dispersed and the juke box came back on, playing "Hey Jude." In a few minutes, Shipley and his spouse emerged from the woods,

all smiles, walking hand-in-hand back to the annex. Shipley took his seat across the table from me and Logene snuggled next to him.

"You must be Simmons," she said, sticking out her hand. "I guess there ain't much you don't know about me."

Her hand was small, but her grip was strong. And looking into those sparkling blue eyes, I think I actually blushed.

Shipley humped her one more time in the cab of the pickup before she left that night. I stood on the back porch of the barracks—a shameless voyeur—watching the old truck shake on its bad shocks, the windows all fogged with their passion. Then Shipley's wife drove off into the cold night and Shipley climbed into the bunk above me and started snoring like a freight train.

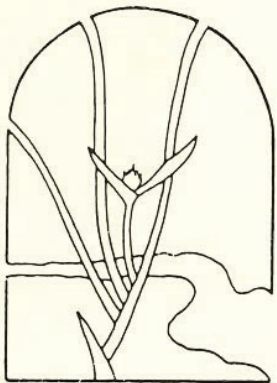
The next day we shipped out to our new duty stations and I never saw Shipley again. I suppose he went to 'Nam like me. Most of us did in those days.

Once when I was in Washington, D.C. years later, I checked for his name on the wall and was relieved not to find it. But then I figured Shipley to be a lucky son of a bitch.

I hope he and Logene are still married—and are as happy as that night when they walked out of the pine trees at Ft. Polk.

Sometimes I wonder if they kept all those old letters and I wonder if Shipley ever learned to read them. And if he did, I hope he has forgiven my trespasses.

RIVERS  
FEED  
GEE



# RIVERS EDGE

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Stephen C. Porter

## Dead Letter

I saw Crockett Tate for the last time when he came out of the Delta on a final supply run. With a sergeant named Bodiford from his mobile advisory team, he caught a chopper in My Tho for the trip north to Saigon, flying low over the slick, wet checkerboard of rice paddies interlaced by the muddy veins of the Mekong River.

Crockett called me from the MACV supply depot.

"Hey, short-timer. Can you steal a jeep and take me over to 3rd Field Hospital? I need some more ointment for my jungle rot. Then you get to buy me a steak."

"We REMF's are always happy to support our troops in the field," I said.

In that hopeful spring of 1971, we were both first lieutenants with about a month left on our tour of duty. If asked, we could have calculated the precise number of days, hours and minutes remaining until the date and time our orders said we were due to climb aboard the plane that would take us back to the world. Short-timers knew such things.

Crockett and I had been roommates during six months of OCS at Ft. Benning; two Texans with little in common other than being raised at opposite ends of a big state. Crockett was the only officer candidate in our class who wasn't a college graduate. He was also the only bull rider. Apparently the recruiting sergeant in Amarillo took one look at his size and his big silver rodeo belt buckle and decided Crockett was officer material.

After OCS, we stayed in touch during a year of stateside duty at different posts and arrived in-country just hours apart. Despite my infantry training, the luck of the draw landed me a cush desk job in the intelligence section at MACV headquarters outside Saigon. Crockett was assigned to lead an eight-man advisory team attached to a Vietnamese company in a remote section of the Delta.

I still have a creased snapshot taken of the two of us on one of his trips to Saigon. I'm wearing pressed fatigues, with an OD baseball cap perched on my neatly trimmed head. I even have polish on the leather toes of my jungle boots.

Then there's Crockett, a head taller than me, his sandy hair long and shaggy under a dirty jungle hat, his mustache drooping below his lips in defiance

of regulations. His boots are stained red with mud and I can still recall the rancid smell of paddy water that clung to his fatigues.

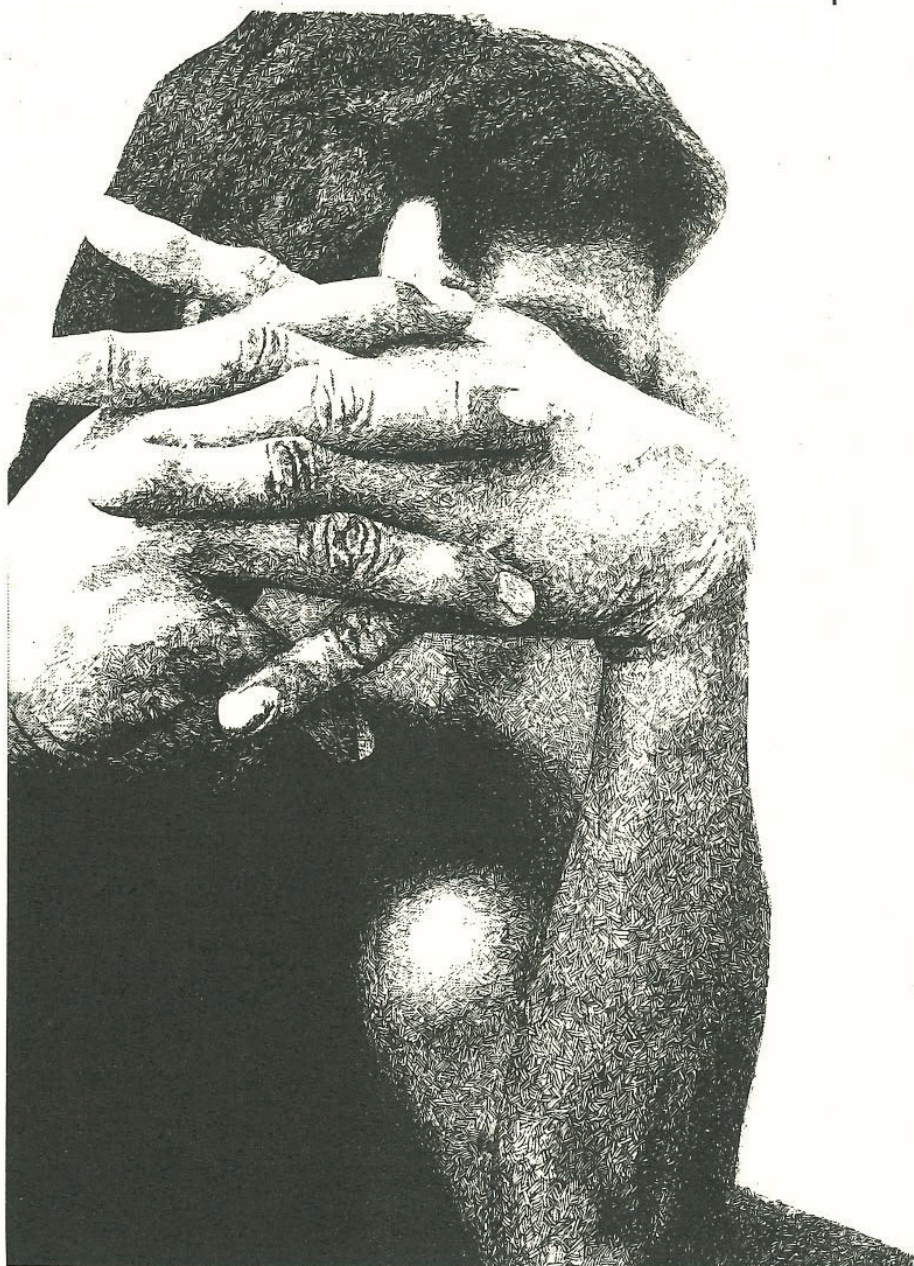
I watched Crockett inhale a thick sirloin steak at the Tan Son Nhut Officers Club, then drove him back to the Arizona BOQ where I shared quarters with a captain from Utah.

"This place is better than the Holiday Inn," Crockett always said, comparing my modest room, with its clean sheets and hot water, to his canvas cot in a modified Quonset hut.

"War is hell," I told him and we left unspoken any mention of the random injustice that had sent him to the boonies while I became a REMF - rear echelon mother-fucker - working an eight to five shift in an office full of high-ranking brass.

My roommate was away on temporary duty at Long Binh, so Crockett took his bed that night. We passed a bottle of Johnnie Walker back and forth, listening to a distant artillery barrage somewhere out in Gia Dinh Province.

Crockett didn't look so good. The skin on his face and arms was red and splotchy, and his eyes had receded into gloomy caverns. He told me he hadn't been sleeping. It wasn't just the war keeping him awake.



*Wil Martin*

"I haven't gotten a letter from Betty Ann in over two months," he confessed.

Betty Ann was his girl back home in the Texas panhandle. I had met her when she came to our OCS graduation. She was just as pretty as the pictures

Crockett carried in his wallet. Petite, but with a perfectly proportioned figure. Blondish hair with frosted highlights, care of the local beauty salon, and large, bright eyes more gold than brown, heavily lined with shadow and mascara. When Crockett talked of home, he talked of the windswept high plains of Texas and he talked of Betty Ann. He was crazy about her.

"I heard at HQ that one of the mail planes crashed off Guam," I offered. It was a common rumor, never verified.

Crockett smiled faintly at my lame attempt.

"I reckon I knew somethin' was wrong when I couldn't talk her into meeting me in Hawaii for R&R."

Betty Ann had blamed her strict Baptist parents. After all, she and Crockett weren't married yet.

He pulled a clear plastic bag out of his doppel kit. It contained an envelope on which he had carefully printed Betty Ann's address in Plainview, Texas.

"I was gonna mail this from MACV Headquarters, but decided I might beat the letter home. Besides, it's got a bunch of damn mushy bullshit in it. If I get home and everything's OK between us, I'll just tear it up."

He hesitated a moment, then handed the creased bag across to me.

"I'm afraid this'll get lost or I'll piss on it or something. Would you hang on to it 'til I come back up for out-processing? Besides, if something happens to me in the meantime..."

His voice trailed off and I said, "We've come too far for crap like that. But I'll keep the letter, if that'll make you feel better. Now have another drink, GI."

The next morning I dropped Crockett off at the helipad where he met SFC Bodiford and the crates of supplies. As I watched him head for the olive-drab Huey, I shouted, "See you in a month!"

He turned and gave me a grin and a thumbs-up gesture.

"We'll catch that freedom bird yet!" I heard him yell over the beating blades of the helicopter.

But Lt. Crockett Tate didn't catch that freedom bird with me. He flew home two weeks early in the cold belly of a transport plane, the shattered pieces of his body zipped inside a rubber bag.

His team and a squad of Vietnamese were returning from a routine reconnaissance sweep. With no VC contact in weeks, everyone was in high spirits. Crockett was trying to explain the Dallas Cowboys' flex defense to his interpreter when the Vietnamese captain walking beside them stepped on a mine buried in

the red mud of a paddy dike. Crockett and the captain were killed; the interpreter lost an arm.

Three days before I left Nam, SFC Bodiford came to see me at MACV headquarters. To tell me what had happened and to bring a few personal effects which hadn't been shipped home with the body.

"We found some more of his stuff. I figured Lt. Tate might want you to have it."

There wasn't much. An extra set of dog tags, three lines of ribbons from his dress uniform, a half dozen photographs and a worn, hardcover copy of J. Frank Dobie's *Tales of Old Time Texas*. I remembered him asking Betty Ann to send that book to him. On the cover page she had written "Love ya loads."

Sergeant Bodiford wiped tears from his shiny black cheeks. "It's a goddamn shame," he muttered. "The man should have died leading a cavalry charge."

And I was thinking, it could have been me. Should have been me.

I spent two months pacing around my parent's house in the Houston suburb of Spring Branch, readjusting to civilian life and trying to talk myself into returning to school for my MBA.

By late June, the only firm decision I had made was to deliver Crockett's last letter to Betty Ann.

Crockett had tried to teach me something about panhandle geography and I remembered that he came from a little town southeast of Amarillo called Quitaque. "Means 'horse shit' in Comanche," he was fond of saying. A road map confirmed that Betty Ann's hometown of Plainview was about forty miles away.

When I called her parents' number, her father told me, "She don't live here anymore."

I told him I was a friend of Crockett Tate. His voice softened and he said, "Best you leave her be, son."

But Crockett's letter haunted me, lying on my desk in its plastic body bag, awaiting a burial of its own. And I had one last mission to complete. So I packed the letter and the rest of Crockett's stuff in an overnight bag, borrowed my father's Buick, and drove north across the heart of the Texas that Crockett had loved and up onto the flat table of the Llano Estacado.

On a street lined with dusty live oak trees, I found the neat stone house that matched the address on the letter. A small woman with Betty Ann's eyes opened the door and I identified myself.

"Will you please tell me where Betty Ann is? I've got some of Crockett's things I need to give her."

The woman seemed to be looking past me, searching for something in the distance.

"She's married. She took up with that Randy Sims last fall. Her Daddy don't approve."

"Where do they live?"

"Mobile home park out on the Dimmitt Highway. Randy's in the oil business, I guess you could say. "

I thanked her and turned to leave.

"Crockett Tate was a fine boy," she called after me.

I found the trailer park, which consisted of a dozen pale white dwellings, clustered together in a defensive perimeter against the wind blowing across the caprock.

The screen door of the trailer was loose on its hinges and banged against the jam when I knocked. I could hear a game show on the television inside.

Then Betty Ann's face appeared - but not the face I remembered from Ft. Benning. This face was puffier, without makeup. And the bright eyes had paled, the way a diamond ring goes dull from being immersed in soapy dishwater too often.

"Do you remember me? Crockett's roommate from OCS."

"Yeah," she said, looking past my shoulder like her mother had done. Like maybe she expected to see ol' Crockett, leaning against the hood of my daddy's Buick.

"I brought some of Crockett's things."

She pushed open the screen door and I carried in my overnight bag. I knew then what had caused the change in her appearance. She was wearing a sleeveless cotton dress; the thin fabric was stretched by her swollen, pregnant belly.

She offered me a Dr. Pepper from the small refrigerator, then sat down across from me at the kitchen table and lit a cigarette.

"I just didn't have the guts to write Crockett and tell him about Randy and me. I was so lonely and I just knew somethin' would happen to Crockett. He always wanted to be a hero."

I wanted to tell her that I didn't see anything heroic about being blown apart by a land mine, but I let it pass.

"You and him was good friends?" she said, more of a statement than a question.

"Pretty good friends."

I opened my bag and placed the Dobie book, the ribbons and the dog tags

on the scarred formica.

“I think Crockett would have wanted you to have these.”

She picked up the book and rubbed a finger across the tattered dust jacket.

“I remember buyin’ this for him down in Lubbock. Said it was one of his favorites. He sure liked his Texas history.”

The wind slapped the cheap screen against the trailer. She stared out the door and tears came to her eyes.

“Seein’ me like this would have broken his heart.”

She was right. It broke my heart, too.

South of Plainview I pulled off the highway. An ugly storm was rolling in from the north, the kind Crockett used to talk about where the sky turned red and even though you shut the doors and windows, a fine dust blew right through, leaving little cones of sand on the sills.

I took Crockett’s letter to Betty Ann out of its bag. I hadn’t seen much reason to give it to her. She had made her choice and it was too late for Crockett’s words to change anything.

So I read the letter, scrawled in ball-point on Infantry School stationery Crockett had bought at Ft. Benning two years earlier. He was right about the letter being a lot of mushy bullshit. Like how he loved Betty Ann, but most of all how he wanted her to be happy. It was a farewell—as though he knew that if it was ever delivered it would be because he was dead or because she had stopped loving him.

There was a P. S. that read:

“Mom’s last letter says you just had a late snowstorm. I sure miss the snow and I miss the sight of you, all bundled up, looking cute as a button with your rosy cheeks and your pretty eyes shinin’ with love.”

I stepped out of the car and tore the letter into tiny pieces. I let the hot wind blow the fragments into the cotton field next to the highway, the pieces dancing over the rows like snowflakes. ❄️



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## THE DOUGHNUT DOLLY

In the summer of 1977, my first marriage had just flamed out like a cheap Roman candle when my cousin Randy called and asked me to be his best man.

A wedding? No thanks. I'd rather have an enema.

My own vows had resulted in three years that were not unlike my military service, both in length of time, level of tedium and fierceness of the firefights. I didn't get a Purple Heart for my service in Nam, but I damn sure earned one during that marriage.

But this was Randy. My shy, bachelor cousin. A man as likely to take a wife as the pope.

"Is this a trick to get me to drive all the way to West Texas?"

"No. I'm serious."

Of course, he was serious. You couldn't even tell him a joke without him over-analyzing it.

"A horse goes into a bar and the bartender says..."

"Wait a minute. Why would a horse go to a bar?"

I surveyed the neat stacks of reports on my desk. Under one of those stacks lay my calendar, but there was no reason to look. Since my divorce, the social commitments had evaporated like spilled beer on the hot concrete patio of my crappy appointment.

"Well, I would like to see what a rich relation looks like," I said.

It was hard for me to picture Randy as a wealthy man. He had been content teaching Walt Whitman and Nathaniel Hawthorne to pimply-faced teenagers and singing tenor in the church

choir. Then a pocket of natural gas was discovered on a tract of land my father's brother left him up in Moore County. Some pocket. More like a duffel bag – the biggest of its kind in that part of the country.

I was a bank officer – a vice president, by God. I was older than Randy. And I fancied myself smarter. I certainly had more business sense.

But he had the luck.

Even luckier because he was an only child. Crazy Aunt Alice had divorced his daddy during one of her lucid periods. Then his daddy died. Now my aunt was in the psychiatric hospital in Big Spring and Randy had millions all to himself.

But I'm the one he asked for advice on where to invest his money.

Anywhere but in one of those nickel-dick savings accounts I'm supposed to be selling my customers I told him.

I put him in touch with a CPA in Lubbock, and even recommended a couple of half-honest lawyers. I could have done without his compulsion to tell me about every profitable investment he made.

"I haven't changed," he was saying. "Other than buying a house out in the country. I'm still the same old me."

He wouldn't even give up his teaching job after the money started rolling in. Said teaching kids was his calling in life. I would have heard the call of the French Riviera.

"So, tell me about the bride-to-be. Not some geometry teacher, is she? I still hate geometry."

"No, no. She's a wonderful girl. She's in public affairs at Lubbock General Hospital."

He lowered his voice. He must have been calling me from the teachers' lounge.

“I get invited to a lot of fund-raising things these days.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

That would be a sight. Randy in a tuxedo. With his Acme boots on. Gene Autry dressed up like Fred Astaire.

“I usually decline. But I went to a reception for this hospital expansion, and there she was. Pretty as a picture.”

“As a picture?” I spoke. “Not much of a description, coming from an English teacher.”

“Okay. She’s as fair as a field of saffron daffodils on the first day of spring.”

“That’s better.”

I hadn’t heard my cousin talk about any female in years.

Some girl named Christy broke his heart when he was a freshman in college and Randy never spoke about her again.

My nosy sister decided maybe he was gay. I didn’t think so, but I did expect him to remain a bachelor all his life. A course of action I should have followed myself.

Randy was what might be called a gentle soul. Loved books, even when we were kids. One summer he spent a week with my family and carried around a copy of **Treasure Island**, wanting me to wear an eye patch and pretend I was Long John Silver. Later, he got into poetry. When I was in Nam, he sent me that “If” poem by Kipling and I damn near memorized the whole thing.

“I really want you here,” Randy said. “Just think. It will be like Mr. Chips marrying Scarlett O’Hara. Only this Scarlett has a heart.”

“Okay, I’ll come to your wedding if you’ll let me teach your fiancée our song about Randolph the Red-Nosed Cousin.”

I started singing. "*Randolph the red-nosed cousin. Had a very runny nose...*"

Silence on the line. He was reconsidering his choice of best man.

And so, on a hot July day, I made the lonely drive from the bayous of Houston, running the gauntlet of dried out towns that led up onto the high plains.

Sometimes a long road trip is good for clearing the mind. I was not in the mood for such a trip. But, as the radio stations faded out, I found myself contemplating the bitterness that had settled into my spirit.

Some was damn-well justified. I came home from three years in the army to find that my draft-dodging friends had gotten their masters' degrees while I was still wearing jungle fatigues and eating meals out of little green cans.

My haste to catch up with the rest of my life hadn't made me the easiest guy to live with. So maybe, just maybe, the blow-up of my marriage wasn't entirely the fault of my recently departed ex-wife.

She wanted season tickets to the symphony. I preferred going to a bar and watching Monday night football with my buddies.

She liked to snuggle on the couch and watch old Jimmy Stewart movies. I liked to take her into the bedroom and have sex and get through in time to catch Johnny Carson's monologue.

I suppose she just wanted romance. I didn't know what the hell I wanted.

Self-reflection was making my brain hurt and I was glad to see the town limits of Brownfield. With some directions from the pot-bellied proprietor of the Texaco station, I located the farm road that led out to the house Randy had built.

A pre-wedding party was planned for Friday night. The ceremony would take place the following evening in the more staid and liquor-free surroundings of Lubbock's First Baptist Church.

White balloons on the gate and along the gravel drive marked the way. Sitting on the highest point for miles, the house wasn't Tara. Just a rambling one-story stone building. But the view was spectacular in every direction.

A red prairie sun was setting itself on the horizon as I arrived, its rays glinting off the chrome and mirrors of the assembled collection of Cadillacs and pickup trucks.

I stretched my back, then headed into the house in search of a cold beer. I didn't know any of Randy's friends, old or new, so I pushed past them into the kitchen where my quest was rewarded with a big refrigerator stocked with Coors.

I was working on my second can when Randy came through the door. By his side was a pretty girl wearing a sleeveless flowered dress.

"Cousin Mark!" he shouted and flung his arms around me.

"Careful," I told him. "We're not that kind of cousins."

He spun me around to face the girl.

"I want you to meet my fiancée."

It only took an instant, but I could see the clear spark of recognition in her green eyes, even as she pretended we were total strangers.

Oh shit. I knew this girl.

Colonel Bullard's farewell party was hosted by a deputy ambassador who had lived in the Saigon area since the days before Diem was assassinated. The ambassador's stucco house was

built in the French style, hidden by a high wall. ARVN guards patrolled outside in listless tours, making a false show of protecting the jeeps and taxis that lined the narrow street.

By the time Lt. Mark Gibson arrived, the olive drab swell of officers had spilled out into the courtyard and the party was in full rock 'n roll swing. He had changed into a fresh pair of starched fatigues and had rubbed a quick spit shine on the toes of his jungle boots.

Linh met him at the iron gate. At province headquarters she always wore the traditional ao dai, with long sleeves and silk pants. On this night, her thick hair was pinned up and she had on a black dress, cut low in the back. Although more discreet than the miniskirts favored by the prostitutes down on Tu Do Street, the dress confirmed that she did have legs, and pretty good ones.

“Co dep lam.” Mark said, bowing at the waist as he had been taught by his third-grade piano teacher. His Vietnamese might be limited, but he had learned how to tell a woman that she was pretty. Anything to increase his chances of getting laid.

“Nice dress,” he added.

“You better like,” Linh said. “I wait for you long time. Afraid you not coming.”

“Had to clean up after that long drive from Vinh Loc. There’s still a war on in case you haven’t heard.”

“You smart ass.”

“No. Me thirsty. And I smell free beer.”

Mark led Linh into the crowded house where they mingled with the members of various advisory teams that had been summoned for this occasion from all the districts in the province.

The bottles of bourbon and vodka provided by their host went mostly untouched by the junior officers who instead fished cold cans of Budweiser and Schlitz from a galvanized tub.

The females in attendance were the Vietnamese office workers from headquarters. “Girlfriends” from the nearby bars were expressly prohibited.

The official going-away ceremony would take place three days later. Some general would come over from MACV HQ and present Colonel Bullard with a plaque and thank him for his year of service as Province Senior Advisor. Salutes and handshakes would be exchanged, then everyone would go back to the business of winning the hearts and minds.

Mark spotted Bullard across the room. Tall, imperious, every inch the soldier. He would rotate back to the world and undoubtedly pick up his general’s star at his next duty station.

There was one other woman present. An American girl in the powder blue dress of a Red Cross worker stood next to the guest of honor.

Her short, strawberry blond hair appeared to have been hacked at by a military barber, but the haircut didn’t detract from her looks. The modest dress couldn’t disguise the firm, round ass of a cheerleader. Even at a distance, something about the fair skin and full lips made Mark think of every girl back home that he had ever slept with. Or tried to.

But this “Doughnut Dolly” was off limits. She was Colonel Bullard’s girl. Their extended and indiscreet in-country affair was well known to the officers in the province.

Mark and Linh joined a group of lieutenants huddled around Mark’s roommate, a dim-bulb ROTC captain from Indiana. The captain was re-telling an animated and inebriated version of his tired story about being shot at with live ammo by some Georgia crackers during a field exercise back at Ft. Benning.

Mark leaned over and told Linh, “Don’t believe a word that asshole says.”

“You be nice.”

He breathed in the scent of the perfume he had bought her at the PX. Now he was calculating how he might lure her away from the party and slip his hands up under that tight black dress.

He felt a strong tap on his shoulder and was surprised to find himself face to face with Colonel Bullard.

“A word with you, Lieutenant,” he said. He turned to Linh. “Please excuse us.”

Bullard led Mark to an alcove away from the music and conversation.

Would this be a repeat of the happy horseshit lecture about why Mark should make the Army a career?

“You’ve done a good job here, Lt. Gibson, and I have a little going away present for you.”

Some crappy commendation, Mark thought.

“You’ve met Miss Carlisle? Jill Carlisle?” The colonel inclined his head toward the next room where the Red Cross girl leaned against the makeshift bar, smoking a cigarette and pretending to listen to Bullard’s adjutant.

“I haven’t exactly met her,” Mark said, “but I know who she is.”

And what she is, he was thinking.

“Attractive girl, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes, sir. Very.”

“As your commanding officer I would consider it a personal favor if you would take Miss Carlisle off my hands.”



Mark had trouble processing that pronouncement. The colonel shook a Winston out of its pack and lit it with a silver Zippo bearing the Infantry School logo.

“As you may know, Jill and I have been – ah, intimate over the past several months. You needn’t pretend to be surprised. I’m sure it’s common knowledge among your peers.

“I leave Viet Nam in four days. Back to the wife and children and the stateside duty. So, I want you to be Jill’s escort this evening and I want you to see that she gets back to her quarters safely. I guarantee that you won’t be sorry.”

Was Bullard putting him on? Not likely. The colonel wasn’t known for his sense of humor.

“I sort of have a date with Co Linh. One of the secretaries from headquarters.”

“Are you sleeping with her?”

“Not yet. I hoped to change that tonight.”

“Forget it. There will be other nights, Lieutenant. Tell her that you’ve received new orders. I’ve already advised Miss Carlisle.”

I’ll bet that was an interesting conversation, Mark thought.

As if on cue, the American girl stepped through the entrance, carrying a plastic cup. She held up a fresh cigarette and Colonel Bullard lit it. She touched the hand that held the lighter for a moment and Mark sensed the current that passed between them.

“This is Mark Gibson, the finest young officer in III Corps.”

“Oh really?” she said, turning to Mark. “Do you leap tall Quonset huts in your spare time?”

“Colonel Bullard makes sure I don’t have much spare time,” Mark said.

She stared at him, as though daring him to break contact with her remarkable pale green eyes. He stared back, determined not to waver, but was relieved when Bullard broke the awkward silence.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” he said, and shook Mark’s hand.

Without looking again at Jill, the colonel strode back into the crowd of officers.

Santana had replaced The Rolling Stones on the ambassador’s stereo. “Black Magic Woman.”

Jill Carlisle began giggling.

“What?”

“You should have seen the look on your face when Colonel Bullard was talking to you.”

Mark felt his ears getting warm.

“Tell me, Lieutenant, where does the Colonel’s best officer come from?”

“Houston. And you can call me Mark.”

“I like Texas,” she said. “My sister lives in Lubbock. Blue skies and clean air. At least between dust storms.”

She exhaled a cloud of smoke. “So, Mark, you know you’re going to get to sleep with me, don’t you?”

“Think so?”

“Oh, yes. The colonel has spoken and it’s his last big night for giving orders.”

Mark couldn’t tell if her tone was one of bitterness or just resignation.

She took a sip from the plastic cup and licked her lips.

“How did you get to be the colonel’s favorite?”

“Didn’t know I was. Maybe because I had a couple of successful missions out near Hau Nghia.” Mark glanced around, sensing that he and the girl were the focus of attention. Across the room, his numb-nuts roommate had cornered Linh.

Jill laughed again and wagged her finger at him. “Don’t be modest. There has to be another reason he chose you.”

“I don’t bullshit him for one thing. Plus, I’m infantry like him, even though I’m filling a military intelligence slot.”

“Military intelligence?” she giggled.

“I know. The classic oxymoron. Colonel Bullard likes to rag on the MI officers.”

She turned the cup around in her hand. “I’m going to miss the colonel. He’s been taking real good care of me.”

They could see Colonel Bullard making his way around the house now, shaking hands with various officers. The sooner he left, the rowdier the party could become.

Mark tossed his empty into a trash can. He wanted a chance to say something to Linh.

“I need a beer. Want another drink?”

“Actually, I’m ready to get out of here. Don’t you see that the colonel has accomplished his mission? He has publicly passed me off to you. Now he can go home to his fat wife and his career, like a good soldier. I never existed.”

Jill handed him her cup. “I’m going to find a bathroom. Fix me a screwdriver for the road and make it a strong one.”

The colonel was exiting through the courtyard and someone had already turned up the stereo a notch. Mark snaked through the crowded room to the bar. He scooped some ice out of

the beer tub and splashed a generous measure of vodka in the cup, along with a little orange juice.

He was reaching for the church key when his roommate slapped him on the back.

“You lucky shit. Bullard gave you his personal whore. All in the line of duty.”

“Grow up, Rex,” Mark said.

He pushed through the crowd and found Linh.

“Sorry. I got called away. Colonel Bullard asked me to escort Miss Carlisle back to her quarters.”

Linh’s face was flushed. “I thought you nice American boy. That girl number ten.”

“I’ll come see you at your office on Monday.”

“Don’t bother. You big shot now. Have round-eye girlfriend.”

“Never My Love” was on the stereo and several drunken officers were attempting to slow dance with the Vietnamese girls.

Jill had lit another cigarette and turned her back on the party.

She took a gulp of the screwdriver Mark brought her.

“If someone puts ‘Leaving on a Jet Plane’ on the stereo, I think I’ll puke,” she said.

“Let’s split.”

They left through the gate where two of the ARVN guards lounged against the wall. Jill climbed into the jeep while Mark performed a cursory inspection with a flashlight to check for any sign of sabotage.

He started the jeep and Jill said “BOOM!” and began giggling. She giggled a lot, he noticed.

Mark weaved through the narrow streets toward the bright lights that illuminated MACV Headquarters, Tan Son Nhut Airbase and the surrounding facilities. Jill finished her drink and tossed her cup at a cyclo driver who had stopped his conveyance to urinate in the gutter.

“Pissing in the streets,” she said. “God, I’m ready to get out of country.”

“That would make about two hundred thousand of us,” Mark said.

Jill’s room at the Massachusetts BOQ was not unlike his own quarters several blocks away. A little smaller, but then he had to share his space with Rex, the talking hemorrhoid.

The difference was the sound of female voices from the other rooms in this wing of the building, occupied by nurses, female officers and Doughnut Dollies.

He stepped to her open window. Music drifted down from the officers’ club several stories above. A Filipino band was playing a bad cover of “California Dreamin’”. He watched a helicopter, lights flashing like strobes, settling down onto the concrete pad in front of Third Field Hospital.

“I’ll be on one of those at noon tomorrow,” Jill said. “Been ordered up to Nha Trang with four other girls. We’ll be going to the forward units. Out in the boonies.”

“What will you be doing?”

“Usual shit. Playing stupid games, delivering decks of cards and short-timer calendars. Funny how this cush job in Saigon happened to end the same time Bullard leaves.”

Mark had heard stories about the action in II Corps. Hot LZs, suicide attacks on base perimeters, heavy casualties.

He turned from the window. Jill had stepped out of her blue dress and was standing unashamed in bra and panties.

“How long since you’ve had an American girl?”

“Too long.”

“That’s what Colonel Bullard used to say. I doubt he was getting any back home, either.”

She motioned to the bed. “Sit down.”

Mark sat on the edge of the mattress. She moved in front of him and unbuttoned his fatigue shirt and pulled it off his shoulders. The trace of perfume and the nearness of her body were like a tripwire that set off an explosion of sensations. But she fumbled with the buckle on his black cloth belt and her fingers were shaking as she began unfastening his fly.

He didn’t think her apprehension was from the prospect of sex.

“You nervous about going out in the field?”

She straightened up, her face and chest flushing.

“Hell, no.”

“It’s all right, you know. We all get a little jumpy.”

He was wishing he hadn’t said anything. He reached for one of her hands, but she jerked it away.

“What are you, my goddamned guidance counselor? Are we going to fuck or not?”

“That’s why I’m here,” he said. “Sorry I brought it up.”

His head was beginning to clear a little from the beers and he wondered if he knew exactly why he was there.

She unhooked her bra and held the cups against her breasts.

“I want to make something clear,” she said. “I was Colonel Bullard’s girl and you’re only a lieutenant. This is a one-night stand. We’ll never see each other again.”

This is bullshit, he thought, and a wave of revulsion washed over him. He didn't want the colonel's farewell present and the empty sentiment that accompanied it. Maybe he would just leave.

But as she stood up, the bra fell to the floor. He stared at her breasts. Not the small, brown breasts of the dark-haired Vietnamese girls he had slept with recently. Hers were full and creamy, with round, pink nipples. She stepped closer and pressed against him and he touched the smooth, warm flesh of her back and felt her softness.

He had his orders, and he decided to obey them.

I went out the back door of Randy's house. Jill Carlisle was standing beyond the lights, smoking a cigarette. Her red hair had grown to shoulder-length, but otherwise she had changed very little.

A lop-sided moon was rising, and the stars were a million pinpricks in the fabric of the black sky.

"No ashtrays inside," she said. "Randy doesn't approve."

She held out a leather cigarette case. "Want one?"

"Sure." I shook one out of the pack and lit it with her disposable lighter.

"I'm trying to quit," she said. "And you didn't smoke the last time I saw you."

"I wasn't a civilian the last time you saw me. The only time you saw me. And I wasn't your fiancé's cousin."

She nodded toward the house.

"Randy kept telling me about his cousin. Mark the hot-shot banker. Mark the Viet Nam veteran. He said you and I would have a lot in common. He didn't know how much."

“I believe I’ll spare him the details.”

I was thinking about that night in her room at the Mass BOQ, lying naked under the ceiling fan, the arc lights at 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Hospital washing our bodies with an amber stain. Neither of us could sleep and I had finally left before dawn.

There had been other women and a wife since then, but my mind had returned to that room many times over the years, sometimes in erotic fantasy, sometimes in bitter disgust. Seeing Jill Carlisle again, I wasn’t sure which image was stronger.

I stared at the sky, wishing I had another beer.

“Where I live, you can’t see the Milky Way like this,” I said.

“Maybe you ought to say what’s on your mind,” she said. “I know you didn’t come out here to recite ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star’.”

“Poetry is Randy’s department. And I see that you still like the direct approach.”

She laughed. More of a giggle, like I remembered.

“I guess that part of me hasn’t changed.”

I took a long drag on the cigarette.

“So, I’m wondering how you came to be engaged to my cousin. And I’m thinking that I have mixed memories of you.”

“I’m sure you do.”

I resumed my survey of the stars, debating how to say what I was thinking.

“Randy says you work at the hospital in Lubbock.”

“Been there for a year. I’ve worked in hospitals around the country ever since I left the Red Cross in ’73.”

“You were going to Nha Trang when I met you.”



“Yeah. Nha Trang. And Pleiku after that. I extended my tour and spent over two years, altogether.”

“I’ll be damned.”

Why would anyone re-up for another year in that place? The skeptic in me wondered if she had found another sugar-daddy.

“I surprised myself. Something about being the field changed everything for me. Spending time with guys who were scared they might not see another sunrise. Guys who’d lost their buddies. Then at 8<sup>th</sup> Field. That’s where they sent the boys who had their arms or legs, or part of their faces blown off or burned off. Helluva different experience than the eight months I spent in Saigon.”

She dropped her cigarette on the hard ground and lit a fresh one.

“So much for quitting.”

I shook my head when she offered me another.

When she lit the cigarette, I noticed her hands were trembling, as they had on the night some seven years earlier.

“So, things were pretty rough up in II Corps?”

Jill didn’t answer at first. She took a long drag on the cigarette and I knew that she had never told Randy anything about her past. About Viet Nam.

“It didn’t really sink in until the day this Green Beret – just a kid really, a kid from Wilmington Ohio – brought me a necklace he had made. It was supposed to be a gift. I thought he had strung together some dried apricots. They weren’t apricots. They were ears. After a while I got used to guys showing me their trophies from the fire fights. Scalps, fingers, dicks.

“And I got used to slogging around the fire bases in my little blue uniform, knee-deep in red mud. And huddling in bunkers during mortar attacks and hearing dying boys crying for God or their mothers.”

She had crossed her arms and was rubbing her shoulders. Evenings were cool up on the caprock.

“Didn’t take me long to forget about being Colonel Bullard’s mistress.”

She spoke the words into the darkness. And the words sounded like they had escaped from some deep and malignant place in her soul.

“I don’t suppose you ever heard from the colonel?”

“Ha. Like most GIs, he assumed that all Doughnut Dollies were really just hookers. That we would screw a guy for his combat pay. Guess I didn’t do anything to prove him wrong, except he got it for free. I’m the one who paid the price.”

Her voice trailed off. “Things were different out in the field.”

She turned around and looked at me straight on.

“I know it may be hard for you to believe me. And I guess I can’t expect you to. For what it’s worth, I’m ashamed of what I did in Saigon. Of what I almost became. I went through a lot of depression when I got home. Over that and over what I saw in II Corps.”

“It’s probably none of my business,” I said. “But the thing is, my cousin may be rich, but he hasn’t had much practice at romance. I’m the one with the practice, just no success. I’d hate to see him go down the same road I’ve been traveling. I’m not sure he’s ready for that journey.”

I could see a glistening of tears pooling in her eyes. With the back of her hand, she made an embarrassed swipe at her cheek. The green eyes were flashing now in the silver moonlight.

“I don’t think you’re giving Randy enough credit. I love him because he’s kind and decent. But he’s not a fool. And in case you’re wondering, I would have loved him even without his money.”

We stood there for several minutes without speaking, listening to the muffled sounds coming from the house. A prairie breeze stirred the grass and touched our faces.

I knew that war could change a person’s life. Viet Nam had made me a cynic. In some ways, I was still ducking the war’s shrapnel.

But could the war have made a better woman of Jill Carlisle?

“I guess you’ll have to tell Randy.” Her voice was little more than a whisper.

The storm door squeaked open. Randy came striding across the yard, carrying a white sweater.

“The swimming pool is going to be right where you’re standing,” he said. “Getting chilly out here.”

Jill slipped into the sweater as Randy pointed to the sky.

“The moon has a face like the clock in the hall; she shines on thieves on the garden wall...”

He caught my quizzical expression.

“Robert Louis Stevenson,” he explained.

“My poetic cousin. I had to drive clear across the State of Texas to find a little culture.”

“This is great,” Randy said. “Having my two favorite people together. Y’all been out here in the dark swapping Viet Nam stories?”

I glanced at Jill. She hadn’t said anything but was looking at my cousin in a way that she had never looked at me. Or at Colonel Bullard.

And Randy was looking at her, the way young Jim Hawkins must have gazed at the mountain of shining doubloons and gold guineas in that cave on Treasure Island.

From several thousand feet above us I heard the unmistakable throbbing of helicopter propellers. We craned our necks, and I could make out two Hueys tracking north in tandem across the night sky, lights flashing.

“Headed back to Randolph Air Base, I’ll bet,” Randy said. “This place seems to be on their flight path. Guess you two saw lots of those babies in Nam.”

The lights faded into the distance of time, consumed by the expanse of ageless stars.

“It turns out that Jill and I weren’t stationed anywhere near each other. So, instead of war stories, I’ve been teaching her the words to “Randolph the Red-Nosed Cousin” and telling her about the time you tried to set a trap to catch Santa Claus with a bunch of sticky-ass flypaper.”

Randy slugged me on the shoulder and Jill giggled and the three of us walked arm in arm back to Randy’s fine new house.