

Ditched Ditched ditched ditched

By Mark S. Rosati

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Amazing grace. Five stars.*

QUALITY QUOTABLES *(for the love of language)...*

Memories danced in his head: smoking with his brothers and buddies behind the convenience store; his first frenzied sexual encounter, with Tammy, in the backseat of her father's old Ford; getting beaten up by the Brennan brothers - now that he's a soldier, no one will ever mess with him again; his pride that time he got a B on a really hard chemistry test; the next night in the emergency room after his stepfather Rod came home drunk, lashing out in whiskey-fueled resentment over his stepson's palpable joy about his test score - if there was one thing Rod hated, it was an uppity boy - and his mother lying, telling the doctor and nurses that his injuries resulted from a fall down the stairs.

But if he had one attribute above all others, it was persistence, so move he did, slow but sure, up the dirt embankment, painting the soil as he crawled to the road, leaving a crimson trail of himself in the earth.

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The dirt was warm, comforting, embracing - a soft blanket fresh from the dryer. Until today, the soil of this alien place had been only another in a series of faceless enemies: haven to menacing vipers, spiders, and fire ants, refuge for landmines that could blow a hole in a tank, often so muddy from the relentless rain that the suction would pull the boot off his foot. Now the ground offered him peace, stability, a connection to the familiar.

The day was dark and overcast and the air felt heavy and oppressively close. Objects - his hands, the bushes, the sky itself - seemed near and far at the same time, like sunlight dancing on ripples of water, and he did not know exactly where he was. But that was of no concern.

Around him the dense vegetation, rich and verdant - except for the parts that were smoldering, snakes of black smoke slithering to the sky - sent his thoughts skipping to the color green: of the little park his grandmother used to take him and his brothers to as a child, with its trees and bushes and grass; of the Christmas trees they sometimes had when they were little boys, in the good years; and even of the uniform he was wearing, which still retained patches of its original color. Once so crisp and fresh, an emblem of earth-spanning might, his uniform was now filthy, ragged and sticky, like a woven rash.

He noticed he was wet below the waist. Had he peed himself? That had happened during his first firefight, never again. Like his first kill and the first time he saw the insides of a human body - he puked then, but never again. He had developed - what was the word, words floating in and out - immunity? ... roller coaster brain, what the f- was happening? No it wasn't pee, it was something else ... rain, had it rained? Hell, it never stopped raining here, unlike back home, where it

seemed every other year there was a drought. Even now, he could taste the dry August dust, feel it caking against the back of his throat, bending him over with coughing spells when he was outside doing chores and the suffocating summer winds kicked up.

The Army had been a way out of the place where he grew up, on the flat, dreary prairie of central Illinois. The desolate little town was a collection of small frame houses, drab apartment buildings and blighted trailer parks nestled near a highway service center. The travel center's convenience stores - along with the one movie theater and a few strip malls located nearby - were the premier sources of excitement, cigarettes, and alcohol for the young people who usually fled as soon as they could, taking with them memories of food pantries, liquor stores where no one questioned fake IDs, and hurried sex.

For him, the Army might mean college - a real college, not a technical one - and maybe a career, whatever that was. At a minimum, the Army offered a future of regular paychecks, respect, and escape.

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it was an uppity boy - and his mother lying, telling the doctor and nurses that his injuries resulted from a fall down the stairs.

And, transcending all other memories, the pinnacle of his young life, real sex with his first serious girlfriend, Lisa, in the grass near the lake, spring, summer, fall - why is it that so many memories, good and bad, are about girls? Lisa's eyes were so blue - at 17 his urgency had so consumed him, he hadn't paid enough attention to her eyes, to her scent, to her silken neck, to the warmth of her hand in his ... When her family moved away to Arizona, part of him turned to desert, too.

Dizzy ... like those games they played as children when you keep spinning and spinning around as fast as you can, until you fall down, your brain going in circles. Once - then, last week, yesterday, this morning - he could hear, smell, taste, feel. No longer. He ached to see another person, anyone, even an enemy. Alone, alone ...

The plants, the trees, the warm and humid air - Hawaii. That's what they reminded him of. He was there once on a stopover en route to here -- heaven to hell. There once on a stopover en route here, from heaven to hell. At the airport bar with his buddy from Iowa, both in their fresh, spotless uniforms, a nice man in a suit told the bartender to "buy these guys one of whatever they're having." After he left, I told my friend that's what I wanted to be able to do someday, to have enough money to buy a couple of strangers a round just because they were wearing the uniform. Imagine having that kind of spending cash, not even have to think about it ... what had they drunk? A Hawaiian beer maybe ... it had a surfboard on the label ... God, he was so thirsty ...

He could not figure out why he was unable to move faster. In the Army you never stopped moving, often at warp speed - marching, drilling, running, killing. Now, he was a turtle on its back, flailing and broiling in the tropical heat.

But if he had one attribute above all others, it was persistence, so move he did, slow but sure, up the dirt embankment, painting the soil as he crawled to the road, leaving a crimson trail of himself in the earth.

This ground. He hadn't noticed before how much it looked like the soil of the farms near his boyhood home, so many long miles away. He had traveled so far away to fight people in a country he could not have spelled or found on a map before he joined the Army, for reasons he didn't understand to this day. He ached to return to the place he couldn't wait to leave. Tammy, Lisa ... the first time, the last time. Smiles from his mother, his grandmother, all danced before him, butterflies against the clouds.

He contemplated the red and widening stain on his uniform, as white and blue lights flashed, their source unknown. A screech above, much too loud for a bird, then the ground started to shake, violently, then stopped. For a time, he trembled uncontrollably, arms and legs twitching pitifully, one last effort to keep moving, for in motion there is hope, there is control, there is life. Then, stillness.

He felt himself floating, his only sensation the taste of melting copper in his mouth. He saw that his left arm was moving again, though without any apparent purpose. The air become too hot,

too wet, too thick to breathe, his thoughts as shattered as a trailer park after a tornado. Still and numb, he began to drift, to lose the feel of the land against his body, and terror ensnared him like a net.

Suddenly one more memory surfaced, clear and vivid, and he was past the fear. It was of the little dog they had for a time when he was a child. He had found the dog wandering lost, cold, hungry, tired, dirty, with only a worn rope around its neck, so he brought it home.

The dog, a brown mutt he named Bandit, would yelp joyously every day when the bus pulled up at the corner to drop him off from school; the barking would grow louder as he approached, the dog could smell or sense him from blocks away. The tail whipping from side to side, pure undiluted joy - every reunion like the first, the last.

Bandit had not been housebroken and had a lot of accidents in the house, and paid the price of stinging “backhanders” from his stepfather and having its little nose rubbed in its own filth.

Afterward he would comfort and cradle Bandit and tell him that everything would be all right.

Sometimes he could hear his stepfather complaining to his mother about the cost of keeping a dog when times were so hard, as he popped open another can of beer.

And then one day he came home from school to learn that Bandit had had to go to a farm upstate because the dog was sick and they could take better care of it. He cried so much he couldn't eat dinner, even though his mother had made fried chicken, his favorite. He just lay face-down on a pillow sodden with his tears and hoping the morning would never come. Knowing Bandit must

be scared and sad and alone, and that a dog would never be able to understand what had happened or why, made it all the worse. Bandit would think he had been abandoned by the one he loved the most. The memory brought more tears - the first time he had cried since Lisa moved away. Tears and raindrops mingled as they dripped down his face onto his neck, his back ...

Now he was frigid, shivering uncontrollably, cold to the core for the first time since he had arrived in the jungle, so many months ago. Nothing moved and yet the entire world did. The skies opened and for a moment he thought he would drown where he lay. He shut his eyes and felt himself caught in the mud's embrace, as the earth reclaimed its own. ...

God, he had loved that dog. For a moment, he could feel its tongue licking his cheek, the breeze from its furiously wagging tail, its joyous barking, rolling on its back for belly-scratches, playing in the snow ...

After a while - a minute, an hour, no matter - the rain finally stopped. He found the strength to open his eyes. All he could see were - clouds? Snow? The ceiling of his old bedroom? Outside he could hear the prairie wind, and, faint but clear, Lisa's voice ...

Dusk came early that day, and the last conscious thoughts of his 19 years on this planet were of Lisa's face, and that he hoped Bandit had lived a long, happy life on that faraway farm.

THE END

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: *'Ditched' was inspired by seemingly endless wars, and the price the marginalized pay in every generation and every society. I have always loved the short story form, my favorite authors including Chekhov, Stuart Dybek, Lucia Berlin and Raymond Carver. I'm very grateful to 'Fleas on the Dog' for publishing 'Ditched' and for the wonderful and inspiring platform they offer to authors.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Mark Rosati, a Chicago-area playwright, is the author of 24 plays and numerous short stories, and a member of the Dramatists Guild and The Company Theatre Group in NJ. His plays have had productions and public readings in New York City, Chicago, New Jersey, Boston and Michigan. Recent productions include "Entrenched" on Audible Theatre of New York's podcast series in October 2020, "Exposed" in 2019 at Between Us Productions' Take Ten Festival in New York, "Duet" at Theatre East's 5x5 Drama Series in all five NYC boroughs, "Restoration" in Between Us Productions' Take Ten Festival, and "Extinct/Extant" at Manhattan Repertory Theatre's February Event. His one-page play "The Sound of One Hand, Etc." was published January 2021 by the online journal Barely Seen Poems of short plays and stories. His short story "Last Stand" and play "Restoration" were published in January 2020 in the Canadian literary journal FleasontheDog.com, and "Last Stand" was included in a public reading of new works on the theme of "sanctuary" by Cast Iron Theatre in Brighton, UK in June 2019. His one-act play "Our Daily Bread" received a public reading in Boston in the "Pinning Our Hopes" pre-inauguration Resistance event in January 2017.