

THE BETTER PART OF VALOR • BY TAD TULEJA

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He had been cut this bad once before.

In the Central Highlands, a punji stick had jabbed him below the knee. It had gone in less than an inch, but the feces that the VC had smeared on it had done its job, and a hellfire infection set in. He had almost lost that leg in a field hospital.

That was eleven years ago. Now, leaning unsteadily against a bar stool as blood darkened his shirt, he grunted “Damn.” To have survived septicemia in the jungle and then lose it to some asshole with a box cutter...

Probing the shirt he found a four-inch gash. A decade of beer had provided him with a substantial spare tire, and it was this layer, not his gut, that was oozing red. A few stitches and he’d be fine. Meanwhile, the teenager who had cut him stood ten feet away, blade in hand, with slack amazement on his face and blood trickling from his mouth.

Their encounter had been brief. The bartender, passing the soldier a third double, had said, “Here you go, Sarge.” The teenager had slid off his stool.

“Army guy, huh? Big man, right?”

The soldier set his glass down. The kid started with the insults. The soldier took it for a bit. Then he sent a right cross to the kid’s face that knocked out a tooth. He staggered back. The soldier stood up.

As he waited for the kid’s next move, he remembered: Don’t watch his hands, watch his eyes. The advice had saved him before. But he was older now. His reflexes weren’t as sharp as they had been in Vietnam. The six fingers of Jack he had downed since noon weren’t making them any sharper.

When the kid blinked, he made the connection too late, and he felt the knife before he saw it coming. He backed up, leaned against the stool, more embarrassed than afraid.

With a Kabar he could have taken the kid down blind drunk. But he didn’t have a Kabar. Maybe that was a good thing. It made him hesitate for some situation awareness. He could probably deck the kid with a second punch. But the knife made that risky.

And he liked this bar. Billy was good to him, the customers were friendly to vets, and in the daytime, before the jukebox starting with Haggard and Jones, it was quiet — a good place for sipping bourbon and thinking too much. Why risk that for a punk on a whisky tear?

Discretion is the better part of valor. He’d read that somewhere and never believed it. But on this warm spring day in Billy’s bar, it sounded better than getting the cops involved. Pressing on his stomach with his left hand, he drained his glass with his right and set it down.

“Son,” he said evenly, “you just got your shot. Now you got a choice. You can turn around and walk out that door. Or you can get your throat slit with your own knife.”

He tried to say it with the authority of the Green Berets song: a man who meant just what he said. But it came out like a movie line. I sound like fucking Clint Eastwood, he thought.

But it worked. The kid’s eyes flicked with apprehension. He backed up, banged into a table, and made the door.

The soldier repositioned himself on the stool and tapped the glass.

The bartender poured another two fingers. "On me." He grabbed a clean towel from behind the bar and handed it to the soldier. The soldier folded the towel twice, undid two buttons of his shirt, pressed the towel against the wound, and redid the buttons.

"You need that stitched, man. I'll call the EMTs."

"My kit's at home. It's a slow bleed. I'm ten minutes away."

"Fucking Marines," the bartender said. "Nothing worry you?"

The soldier smiled. Yeah, that punji stick had worried him. The time Casey took one to the head, two feet away. That worried him. When he asked Patricia to marry him and she took a week to answer. He glanced at the clock over the bar. Two fourteen.

"I'm worried," he said. "We were supposed be at Wal-Mart an hour ago. Trisha's gonna kick my ass."