

# ROAD KILL

**By Michael C. Little  
With Marion G. Little**

Two oil paintings hang side-by-side on the wood-paneled wall in my parent's family room, each depicting a typical mountain scene. There are no people in the pictures. From a distance, the artwork looks almost professional; but on closer inspection, it's easy to detect the amateurish brush strokes and disjointed composition. Months before joining the Army, I had bought a kit at the craft store and painstakingly painted those lofty mountains, perfect pines, and amber lakes...by the numbers. Tiny jars held the twenty or so different colors, each one numbered. It took a month to apply those colors into prearranged locations on the canvas-like boards. To my lasting embarrassment, Mom proudly had them framed and displayed for all to see.

One afternoon, I was relaxing on the couch beneath the fraudulent artwork, staring blankly out the window into the backyard. My brother was out there, watering the flowers and vegetable garden, the family dog barking and chasing around after him. I should have joined them, but didn't. Affixed to the sofa, there was more between us than a sliding glass door. On my lap was a poetry anthology leftover from a college course. I turned to one of my favorites, reading the passage that unleashed memories like an explosion, "when I died, they washed me out of the turret with a hose."

## COURAGE

**We were a few clicks away when the explosions tipped us off. We tried to reach you, along with all the other drivers and gunners, but enemy fire was heavy, and it took us too long to get there. Smoke from the burning trucks made it almost impossible to see the ambush area. The VC planned your death with patient skill, remaining hidden by the road for most of the morning, while our patrol drove by on the way to breakfast. The bad guys weren't interested in a few heavily armed MP's on patrol...they had their eyes on bigger game.**

**Alone in the turret with those deadly Quad Fifty machine guns, your gun truck, nicknamed "Eve of Destruction," was positioned in the middle of a convoy hauling ammunition to Pleiku. Without warning your world erupted with explosions and rifle fire, as the enemy sealed off each end of the kill zone and stormed their prey. Within minutes many drivers lay dead or wounded, but you kept firing those huge, menacing guns. The only real mistake the VC made that day was to initiate their ambush before you and your gun truck had thundered by.**

**We fought our way in, truck by truck, until we reached you. Enemy bodies lay**

**twisted and scattered around you, torn apart by those .50 caliber slugs. You lay still, slumped dead on the turret, but you had expended every round and melted all four monster barrels before going silent. Tanks, APC's, and helicopter gunships joined the fight and when it was over, we stood trance-like in front of your burning "Alamo." Lifers, smelling death like vultures, showed up and began taking pictures, fabricating their courage and lies for the folks back home. Like hell's candles, the flaming tires created a blanket of black smoke that blocked the sky. Shell casings and blood dripped from the truckbed onto the red dirt. We stared at you in awe, privately chewing on the question "could I have been that brave?" All agreed, it was a bad day out on Highway 19, 1968.**

During my first year back, I lived alone in a small apartment in Oakland, trying to fit back into a former job. But the faces had changed and I felt little in common with my co-workers. Out of habit, I tried college again, but dropped out after a week because it felt too trivial. It was becoming difficult for my family to understand the son who had returned home. I spent the rest of that year criss-crossing the country, looking up old army buddies. Often, I felt like an intruder, learning that the camaraderie we shared in Vietnam didn't always transfer back into the "real world."

By the summer of 1970, sitting there in the family room, I'd been back from Vietnam for two years, but was still trying to re-enter and get back to "normal," whatever that was. At age 23, I was too fixated with my past to think about a future. Memories and images kept popping into my mind, like movies playing back. I still hadn't made sense of what I'd seen and done in Vietnam. At times, I wondered if it ever really happened at all, but when I thought of the dead, I knew it had. In most cases, their nameless bodies had lined the road we patrolled, and it felt terribly wrong to forget them.

Safely home, there was still no feeling of accomplishment because of unfinished business in Vietnam. I tried to detach myself from the ongoing war and stopped watching the nightly news. All the guys I'd served with were already home, so there was no one to worry about. None of my pre-war friends had gone into the military, creating an awkward distance between us. So, I stayed pretty much to myself, wrapped tightly in the secrets of Vietnam. The first time I died in a nightmare, I awoke in shock and terror. Dreams had always been safe, dangerous maybe, but never fatal. Something had changed. I had.

To pay the bills, I drifted through a number of jobs, finally becoming a security guard in a Sacramento high school. Struggling with racial tensions among the student body, the principal figured a veteran could handle himself, but all he gave me for defense was a hand-held radio. When the students found out I'd fought in Vietnam, they thought I was dangerous and gave me a lot of room. During the following months, they learned I was just a guy, not much older than them, trying to get by.

By the middle of June, the school was on summer break, and I had time on my hands. I decided to take a vacation. "Vacation" sounded normal, something that ordinary people did in summertime. Tired of forking out repair bills, Dad had sold me his 1967 Mercury

Cougar, so wheels weren't a problem. Nothing elaborate or planned, I just wanted to get in the Cougar and drive somewhere for a week or so. No girl, no kid, no pet, there was nothing to hold me back. I would go off alone. Although my heart wasn't totally in it, I was determined to do something. When asked about my plan, I answered, "Going north, I guess. Kick back, take it easy." I lied about the last part...I didn't believe it would be easy.

During the weeks before my scheduled departure, I studied an old map of Northern California, plotting a course, possible places to spend the nights. I didn't want to get lost out there, even without a clear-cut destination. Everything continued to come at me in military terms, and I divided the California freeways into checkpoints and estimated times of arrival. Being alone, there would be no one to watch my back. On that road in Vietnam, I had company...fellow soldiers and the power of American weaponry...to help keep me alive. A solitary road trip was risky.

## **DAY ONE**

I didn't pack much. Mom handed me an apple, a bag of cookies and a sandwich. I tossed an old .22 caliber pistol onto the back seat. I used to do a lot of shooting as a kid growing up in the country. Killed birds, varmints, and trash. The pistol was unloaded and the bullets locked away in the glove compartment because that was the law. Since one never knew who or what they might run into on the road, I couldn't have left without it.

Mom was also good at hiding concern and worry for her oldest son. She had counted every single day just as hard as I had during 1968, and now she was set to count again. She hugged me tight. Dad never did say much. I backed the Cougar out of the driveway, waved so long, and left the neighborhood. It was already hot and although the car had air conditioning, I kept the windows down, enjoying the heat and sting of wind on my arms. There was a familiar feel to it.

Northbound from Sacramento on the I-5, the map lay open next to me. A great road for fast driving, wide and straight, it was so different from the road that I was remembering. Squinting, I refused to wear sun glasses. Alone and lightly armed, I eyed people with suspicion when I stopped in Red Bluff for gas and food, feeling conspicuous. Vietnam had taught me to stay alert and move quickly. Skill was important but often dumb luck won the day. When your day comes, it comes...another lesson from 1968.

Driving in the far-left lane, it was easy to spot them scattered about...the unlucky, dead critters who'd wandered too close to the road. Larger animals...dogs and deer...were thrown off the roadside, while smaller ones...squirrels and cats...lay flattened, run over again and again, until only a hairy, boneless grease spot remained. On this impromptu freeway zoo, we observers could view possums, raccoons or skunks, all stretched out, hard and smelly, staring back at eternity as we sped by. Dogs bothered me the most, since I used to have one named Mac. God how I cried when gathering Mac's corpse into a blanket after a bus had crushed him. Rotting and stinking in the mid-day heat, road kill

became my driving companions.

I was breaking the speed limit now, pounded by the hot air blowing unchecked through the car. At times, the heat would carry the smell of fresh road kill and I'd turn up the volume on the radio. My white T-shirt stuck to the black leather seat, glued to it. I had a long way to go in one day, not knowing exactly where the end was. I glanced back to the small caliber gun on the back seat and wished it was bigger. I let the memories surface.

## **OUTGUNNED**

**Why'd you do it? Springing up from your jungle hiding place, you ran out with that little B-40 rocket, set up right in front of the tank, and took your best shot. Hell, that 90mm turret just swung slowly around and caught you in the open. A deadly beehive round thundered into you, actually cut you in half. I mean, in half. What's makes a guy face death like that, armed with a peashooter? What went through your mind, before you disintegrated?**

**I had a cheap camera with me, tucked away in an ammo box, and snapped a few shots for posterity. Odd, how you looked in the photo, though, without the gaseous smell of intestines and the trickling sound of your blood ebbing away. The pictures were too clean. I felt it more in person. My God, you were torn up bad! A dozer scooped out a trench and rolled your body parts into it. The tank won this time, your last day on Highway 19, 1968.**

I was still in the fast lane, passing sedans and station-wagons, trucks and campers, when I considered stopping in Redding for the day. I glanced at the map, deciding there was too much daylight left, so I bought some beer and headed further into the north. I decided to go to the top of the State and settle in at Mt. Shasta City. As the alcohol worked its way through my system, I relaxed and enjoyed the ride more. I even began to sing along with the radio until the mountains blocked out the reception, leaving me in silence. My other road had mountains too, and there had never been music.

## **THE ROAD**

**Originally built by the French, it was called Highway 19, but highway was a misnomer. It was merely a country road, and it was dirty, two lanes of mud during the Monsoons and two lanes of dust in the dry season. Our gun jeep patrols weren't exactly attached to the lumbering convoys, more like "freelancers," driving as fast as possible to outrun snipers and mines.**

**Huge bulldozers pushed back the jungle on each side of the road, but it wasn't enough to curtail the destruction. Death came from all directions. When it did, we bagged you, tagged you, and sent you to Graves Registration, or dug a shallow grave. I never got your blood on my hands, and didn't know your names. Seldom did I see you die...but you always got my attention.**

**If you died on my road, I remember you. As military policemen, our mission was to provide road security, but we weren't always successful. Most of you were soldiers, but there were bystanders as well. Even France's casualties from 1954 that lined the nearby mountainside were in our care. We did our best, then bid you farewell from Highway 19, 1968.**

Like the highway in Vietnam, Mt. Shasta City is mis-named. Hamlet would have been a more appropriate description of this small, one street town. It was perfect. The view of Mt. Shasta was breathtaking and except for pine trees and snowcaps, it reminded me of other mountains. I found a motel, checked in, and strapped the pistol over my shoulder as I approached the room for the night. I wanted to send a message to anyone who might be watching. I entered the cramped quarters without incident and finished the beer. I turned on the black and white TV, and tossed my ammunition onto the bed.

## **PROTECTION**

**Just before reaching our checkpoint, a VC sniper put an AK-47 round through the door of your 5,000 gallon tanker truck, killing you. Losing control, you rolled the truck down a dirt embankment, ending upside-down. Lucky for everyone else that your load of diesel fuel didn't explode. But you were dead anyway, either from the bullet wound or the broken neck. When I arrived, somebody motioned me to the cab. I gazed at your slumping body, young, blond, still. Your eyes were closed, as if in peaceful sleep, a bullet hole in your side, leaking very little blood. I looked away and wished we had a medic around to help.**

**You didn't a pulse, but we called for a medevac anyway. I held your hand until the chopper arrived, then cradled your head as we carried you to it. "Been shot in the side," I told the door gunner. I think he was pissed for risking his life to retrieve a dead guy. That was it, you were gone. I didn't get drunk that night because I couldn't stop thinking about your family, who would soon receive the saddest news of all. The Army installed armor plating in all the truck doors a few weeks later, but it was too late to save you, that day on Highway 19, 1968.**

Mt. Shasta was as far away from home as I could get, and still be in California. At the high point, over 14,000 feet, I wondered if it would be downhill from here. I felt the need to get some air, so I went for a walk in the evening stillness. Not far, just enough to size up the town and find the nearest liquor store. Noticing a burger stand, I made a mental note.

So far, life back in the World had been boring compared to 1968. I didn't want to admit it to myself, but I truly did miss the excitement of being in-country where everything was alien and mysterious and unpredictable. I never could have dreamed these thoughts were possible back in 1968, when I meticulously counted off each of those 365 days. Anyone

who wanted to stay longer was considered “dinky-dau,” absolutely crazy.

Like emergency lights flashing at the scene of an accident, neon signs in the window beckoned me and I walked into the local bar. Without realizing it, I wanted to hear voices, to stare at myself in the large mirror behind the bartender. Could these people sense my secrets? Alone and untouchable, I sat as far away from everyone as I could, content knowing I was among the living. The beer was cold and I tried to recognize the face in the mirror. No one paid any attention to me, and I left after the third beer. I retreated back to the burger joint.

## **CURVES**

**You were sprawled at the bottom of the gully, a green poncho covering your body. The flatbed truck with its load of lumber was resting on its side nearby. An hour ago, when you approached deadman’s curve, you lost control of the flatbed by taking it too fast, like so many others before. That’s how the curve got its name. We got the call over the radio, to secure the scene and watch over you. Understandably, the convoy had left you behind. With guns facing the carnivorous jungle, an APC and I stayed with you. The rest of my patrol went to bring back a truck, the one that would take you away.**

**Sitting exposed beside the road, alone with you and my rifle, I was afraid. I hadn’t seen your face and I was angry that my life was in jeopardy. Worn jungle boots stuck out from beneath the poncho that covered your body. I began to resent you as time ticked by and began to understand why Medevacs risked their lives on the living, not the dead.**

**Finally, I saw my patrol returning, followed by a dump truck. Three of us slid down to the bottom of the gully to retrieve you. It was a struggle bringing you up because of the loose dirt and rock. I had your hands and could now see your dark brown hair. The bed of the dump truck moved skyward, as we readied ourselves...at the count of three, we tossed you like a sack of rice into that hot, empty bed. As the driver lowered it, I could hear you, sliding into another position, resting comfortably for your final journey down Highway 19, 1968.**

## **DAY TWO**

The next morning, I stood for a long time under the small showerhead, letting the narrow stream of water wash away yesterday’s dust. Even in Vietnam, the cold water of a shower could cleanse the horror and loneliness, and for a brief moment, allow us to feel human. Then the sun would rise and we would begin to sweat all over again.

Clean, I felt refreshed, checked out of the motel and went to breakfast. It was early and the cafe was nearly empty. With the map spread out before me, I sipped my coffee slowly, deciding where to go next. Having never visited this part of the State before, it

was all new territory. Seeing something for the first time was exciting. This was my second day on the road, and mentally, I began to count the days, like we did over there. I made a few marks on the map and headed out.

Mt. Shasta dominated the landscape and I was drawn to it. A winding road took me halfway up the mountain, to an observation point. I sat on the Cougar's front bumper and recalled earlier adventures of hiking and climbing, things I used to do as a kid. A cool breeze promised to keep the temperature down, here on top of my world.

## **GRAVES**

**On a June day in 1954, a large French force (Groupe Mobile 100), was ambushed and wiped out in the Mang Yang Pass, the infamous high ground on Highway 19. We visited your graves, hundreds of them, whenever we could. Not that we cared that much about you, but it made for some interesting history. A narrow jungle trail afforded our jeeps just enough room to reach your resting place high above the Pass. The air was clean, void of all the diesel fumes and smoke, and it felt like we were above the war. Somehow, it couldn't touch us way up there.**

**The hills are dotted with natural markers, perfectly aligned in circular rows, bare patches of earth dotting the land where you died. We could see our road below, the lines of vehicles, east and west. Did you feel the heat when we accidentally set your hill on fire? The tracers from my gunner's M-60 ignited the dry grass, exposing the mountainside graveyard. We aptly referred to your home as "the French graves." It was our place for escape, even if we fooled ourselves into false security. Thank you for watching over us, out there above Highway 19, 1968.**

During breakfast, I overheard the waitress talking to the cook about local legends. Many believe that Mt. Shasta is inhabited by restless spirits, even a Big-Foot or two, so as I leaned against the car, I imagined such things. My "spirits" were with me as sure as if they were on the tourist bus parked a few spaces away. I might have been able to pass the war off as a bad dream, but for their deaths. Some kids started running around near me, breaking the spell, so I got in the car and coasted down the mountain.

Traveling in a southeasterly direction, I turned onto Highway 89, just two lanes cutting through a forest of pine. The road was clear except for the occasional road kill. Mt. Shasta grew smaller in the rear-view mirror, but I couldn't keep my eyes off it. In another time, I would have been camping with the family, exploring the wilderness with my brothers.

## **BREAKFAST**

**It was just after sun-up and my patrol was gradually approaching Pleiku. Up ahead, a distressed truck driver waved us over. He wasn't alone. A large group of Vietnamese women were milling about, agitated. The accident was unfortunate.**

**The driver was picking up your co-workers, as he did every morning, delivering them for work at the sprawling American base. But this morning, as you waited patiently for everyone to climb aboard his 2-ton truck, you shouldn't have squatted behind the rear wheels. He didn't see you in his rear view mirror, and backed up.**

**Your body was churned into a colorful liquid, spilling into the gutter. Your eyes drifted, separately, squeezed out from a crushed skull. As I stood before you, hands on hips, I felt nothing. I ordered someone to radio for a Town Patrol unit to take over the investigation. After all, we were in a hurry to get some breakfast before going out on the road. However, you became our topic for the day, the faceless woman who reminded us how conditioned we'd become to death along Highway 19, 1968.**

By now, I had decided to spend the night in the town of Alturas . I'd have to keep an eye on the map, but eventually Highway 299 would get me there. The road slowed to 25mph as it dissected small towns, and I thought about the civilians who died on that other road. It was inevitable, all that military traffic mixing with their buses, lambrettas, and motorbikes. There were more accidents than ambushes. I almost killed a couple non-combatants myself, speeding through hamlets. I drove carefully through these California towns, stopping long enough for some supplies and a Frosty at the A&W. It always felt good to stretch the legs.

That afternoon, I took a break in the small town of Bieber, and tried to mentally impose the war on these unsuspecting people. What would they be thinking if tanks and convoys were creating thick dust clouds, tearing up their streets all day, every day? Air filled with gunships and jets, the diesel exhaust and noise would engulf them. Would they allow their children to play freely? Would they look away in horror as a 10-ton flatbed truck, laden with pallets of beer, crushed a small bus filled with a dozen relatives and neighbors? I shook the thought away and got up from the park bench.

## **GARBAGE**

**As villagers reluctantly approached your mutilated bodies, did they cry out in anguish, or did they scrape you up and sort it out later? There was money to be made, a foreign government's guilt payment to be negotiated. Everything had a value, even the dead.**

**Curious, I asked the driver whose fault it was. He said, "the goddamn lambretta swerved right into my path." He was really pissed off because he'd have to catch up with his convoy alone. We offered to escort him, leaving someone else to fill out paperwork and deal with the politics.**

**I looked upon your lifeless bodies as someone else's mess to sort out. My patrol eventually headed out to Black Hawk firebase for a hot meal, something other than C-rations. You collided with the war along Highway 19, 1968.**



Safely back in the car, I left that memory behind, still wondering how these California civilians would handle it. The eyes reflected in my rearview mirror offered no answers. Happy to be leaving Bieber, and the impossibly slow speed limits, I took the Cougar up to 85mph before easing off the accelerator.

I opened another beer and pulled off the main road, looking for a secluded spot to fire my pistol. It didn't take long to find a hillside where I could line up some empty tin cans. It felt good to pour the bullets out of the box and into my hand. I liked the way they looked, spotless and shiny. Pulling the gun from its holster, I loaded the six chambers, cocked the hammer, and took aim at the stationary beer cans. For a moment, I pretended to be a sniper, drawing a bead on a distant target.

## **MEDALS**

**You were driving the lead jeep, commanding a 200-truck convoy, westbound. You were close to the Mang Yang Pass when VC dropped the mortar shell into the tube, a single round meant to harass the passing Americans. The pointed missile arched silently into the sky, well ahead of your slow-moving jeep. You never heard it. A lucky shot, the shell exploded beneath the jeep's gas tank. Unlucky for you sitting on top of it.**

**We got there in time to pull your passenger out, but the fire was too intense to allow anyone to reach you. I don't know if shrapnel from the mortar killed you, or if it was the fire. I hoped it was the shrapnel. You burned, along with the jeep, until there was very little left of either. Thick black smoke rose straight into the air, and thankfully, there was little wind. We left you that way, stuck to the steering wheel, too hot to handle. Eventually, the jeep was loaded onto a truck as it was, then taken away, first to graves registration, then the junkyard. A few medals were earned the hard way out on Highway 19, 1968.**

Satisfied with my marksmanship, I longed for a more powerful M-16 or M-60 to really do some damage. The .22 felt like a toy, but the holes they made were real enough. When I finally grew tired of shooting cans, I retrieved the cleaning tools and sat down on a rock to clean the gun. Holding the barrel to my nose, I breathed in the aroma of gunpowder like a drug addict. Of all the photographs of death I'd taken, only one remained in my care...the charred body of that convoy commander. Whenever I stared at it, I tried to recall the smell.

Sometimes, an incident like that reminded us how vulnerable we were. Each of us found ways to deal with our fears, privately and outwardly. The graffiti on my helmet had read, "I had no time to stop for Death, so He stopped for me." It was reality for so many, but I never believed it would stop for me.

Along with the haunting memories, the war had left another legacy...a sensitive stomach. Like I did each day in Vietnam, I packed toilet paper with me wherever I went. I carried the .22 with me to the bushes, recalling the times I could have been killed doing just this...taking a dump in the woods. The VC could have staked out my usual haunts, up and down that road, but I suppose it was too much even for them. The shit-roller beetles had been my only audience. I eventually returned to the car without incident.

Alturas wasn't far away now, and I was anxious to be among people again. I couldn't shake an odd feeling of uneasiness. There wasn't time for fear in Vietnam, nor was there time to analyze events. For the most part, we lived hour-to-hour, day-to-day. But now, as I played back and focused on memories, a significant realization struck me...I was damn lucky to be alive.

## **HOMEWARD**

**I was leading a patrol of two gun-jeeps, cresting the Mang Yang Pass. We had a passenger, on his way to Qui Nhon, the first step towards going home. We needed to drop him off at checkpoint 27, and turn him over to our sister Company, who would escort him to the coast. The westbound convoy had already passed, so the Mang Yang was deserted and quiet, free of the usual dust. Rounding a turn, we nearly collided with a pallet of cement bags that had fallen from one of the trucks bound for Pleiku. We pulled over, trying to decide what to do with it. Since the pallet was partially blocking the road, I left one jeep there, while I continued on with the passenger. The delay had been about fifteen minutes.**

**Approaching CP 27, we were abruptly stopped by what looked like outgoing tank or artillery fire. The dust was so thick we couldn't see who was firing or at what. Often, the tanks liked to fire into the nearby hillsides for practice, which was awesome to watch. As we crouched in the jeep, a sudden realization that this was an enemy mortar attack shocked us into action. Swiftly backing away, we could see the air bursts through the haze and knew this was serious. Not knowing what was coming next, I quickly radioed the other jeep to join us. The cement bags could wait.**

**When the incoming barrage finally stopped, and no ground attack followed, we hurried into CP 27, or at least what was left of it. The small bridge was guarded by South Vietnamese troops, and they had been the targets. Your wounded and dead lay scattered all over the area. Many were screaming in pain. Medics worked frantically to save you, and I asked how we could help. More bandages were needed, so we offered what we had. Medevacs were called in to chopper away the dead and dying. We handed off our passenger, who was quite shaken by the close call. Later, we tossed cement bags off the Mang Yang cliffs to clear Highway 19, 1968.**

Alturas is a remote, historic community, where Native Americans still live. I was drawn

to an old, brick building and parked in front of it. It was a museum full of old guns and knives, bows and arrows...and stories of the Indian Wars. As a child, I had been raised on "Cowboys & Indians," with a view that was a pretty one-sided story. My Dad's mother was a very dark woman, and family lore suggested Indian blood. He taught me to be proud of it, and I hoped it was true.

Early evening was beautiful here and the locals seemed nice enough. Strangers stopped here often, so one more made little difference. As was my habit, I decided to take a walk. It was still very warm so I tried keeping to the shady side of the street.

Entering a small gift shop, I was hoping to find souvenirs for my parents. I had brought them things from the war, but they weren't items one would use in the "World." I laughed to myself, recalling Dad's expression when he read the epigram on the silver Zippo: "Yay tho I walk through the Valley of shadow of Death, I shall fear no evil, cause I'm the meanest mutha fucka in the Valley." That's about the time mom and dad started to look differently at their oldest son.

The store was stocked with jewelry and other Indian items, but I decided not to purchase anything. Nothing looked right. Three silver bracelets already hung from my wrist and jingled when I moved. Adjusting them, the bracelets evoked strong emotions as these were my only souvenirs from Vietnam. Curious, people would ask what the bracelets meant and why I wore them. Tired of long explanations, my usual answer was, "got them overseas," and that was enough. No one really wanted the long story. For me, however, the bracelets were something very special. They were gifts of friendship that I wore with great pride.

## **YARDS**

**Before coming to Vietnam, I had never heard of you and even during our time together, I was unaware of your history and culture.**

**You are Vietnam's indigenous people. You have many tribal names, but have also been called savages by the Vietnamese, Montagnards by the French, and Yards by American soldiers. Dark-skinned like Polynesians, you live in bamboo and thatch houses, hunt with crossbows, and wear loin cloths. For centuries, your world consisted of hunting and fishing, farming and raising families. The remote, mountainous jungles were lush and provided everything you needed to prosper.**

**Your world changed forever with war. Because of the strategic value of the highlands and relatively sparse population, your ancestral lands became killing grounds for itinerant armies. Like a monsoonal downpour, modern technology rained down upon the Central Highlands, bringing chaos and destruction to your ancient traditions.**

**Quite unintentionally, I became friends with your children who hung out at the checkpoint near the Ayun River. Before long, my patrols became shorter and my**

time with your children grew longer. The war became an intrusive and disruptive nuisance. You taught me your language and placed silver bracelets on my wrists. We swam together in the river while tanks stood guard on the riverbanks. At night, our patrols took all of you up the hill to the village, handing out leftover C-rations.

I hadn't been very proud of the man I was becoming in Vietnam, but you changed that forever. You reminded me that everyone has the potential for both good and evil, and that it is our choice. In a sense, I withdrew from the war after finding your unexpected friendship, clung to it, and saved myself. You gave me a lot more than bracelets out there on Highway 19, 1968.

I continued to stroll down the streets of Alturas, feeling the emotion swell in my chest. Memories of Vietnam could be painful, not because of graphic death scenes, but because I missed the Montagnard children so much. Life without them seemed empty, and I found no way to fill the void. I sat on a bench under a large oak tree, watching cars drive by. I positioned myself in the middle of the bench, closed my eyes, and willed my children to sit next to me. A soft breeze washed over us and there was no sound of war.

## **GRIEF**

You lay in the middle of the road, blocking traffic at checkpoint 88. A truck driver was being interrogated by other MP's while I directed the convoy around the scene. Kneeling beside you, your husband wailed so violently that everyone within earshot mourned your death. He forced us to feel.

Your frail husband, a Yard dressed in his tattered loin cloth, looked as though his heart might give out from the grief. I thought, "He must have really loved you," but I felt uncomfortable watching this man's naked sorrow. By the time we resumed our patrol, you had been dragged off to the side of the road. Your husband gently stroked your long black hair, continuing to cry and wail. My ears heard his song for many hours that day on Highway 19, 1968.

Children were running and playing in the park where I daydreamed. It amazed me how a child's laughter sounded the same, whether here in Alturas or 10,000 miles away in a Yard village. How could it be, when the conditions for laughter were so different? Things didn't seem to add up. California children had bikes and toys, shoes and hot dogs, books and stores, TV's and schools, peace. Yard kids had nothing but life itself and that's all they really needed. Joy was a state of mind, yet another lesson I had to learn.

## **BASEBALL**

You flagged me down as I approached your village. The blood had already dried but your wound still needed medical attention. Yards didn't have doctors. Truck drivers often tossed c-ration cans to you and the other hungry kids lining the road,

**but sometimes they didn't just toss them. Sometimes, they hurled a can like a baseball, intent on hitting you. Each day, you lined the road, begging for food, and often received a gash in the head instead. You came to me for help because I was trusted by the other children.**

**I took you up to Black Hawk Firebase in a gun jeep, where I convinced a reluctant medic to stitch you up. You didn't cry. You stared intently into my eyes and placed your life in my hands. There were days when I felt good about myself, out on Highway 19, 1968.**

That night, I brought burgers and fries to the motel room. It was strange to hear my voice as I placed an order at the drive-through. The young girl at the window was cute and probably still in high school. I wished that we could have communicated, but I lived in a faraway world, one she could never understand. I thanked her for the food and drove off.

Studying the map spread out on the bed, I downed quite a few beers and began talking to myself. Mostly, I whispered the same old questions. "What happened Sarge? Why you? No one heard these quiet rantings or saw me pull the trigger on an empty pistol. I fell asleep with the light on, and began the next day of vacation with a lingering hangover. Skipping breakfast, I took to the road early.

## **DAY THREE**

There was something invigorating about traveling early in the morning, maybe the air's chill or the hope of new adventures. I planned on spending the next night in Susanville, and decided to take highway 395 south to get there. On the map, it looked like a pretty desolate stretch, not many towns to slow the Cougar down. It looked like I was the first one on the highway, and it immediately reminded me of my road in Vietnam.

You never wanted to be the first one on it. During the night, the VC liked to plant mines and other surprises. Our minesweepers checked out Highway 19 before convoys were allowed to depart, but it was still dangerous. As soon as they declared the road cleared and open, we sped off in our gun jeeps, hoping to cross off another day on the short-timer's calendar. "Drive fast as hell, the mine will blow behind you," we lied to ourselves.

Rounding a bend, I suddenly came up on three 18-wheelers and they waved me around. I barely missed hitting the dead skunk on the left shoulder, but smacked a pothole instead, that shook the car and jarred loose another memory.

## **SANDBAGS**

**Our patrol got the call over the radio, "Convoy jeep blew a mine," so we turned**

around. Sitting in front, I glanced down at the sandbags on the floorboards. They were supposed to save us in case we hit a mine, but this didn't provide much assurance. Some mines were big enough to blow a tank, and smaller vehicles wouldn't have a chance. Trucks were still going by when we approached your jeep, what was left of it.

The dust had cleared and some men from the convoy were covering your bodies, which were blown about twenty yards away. There was nothing I could do, so I strolled over to the mangled jeep. From where it was sitting, it looked like you had pulled off the road, a bad mistake. Rule number one is stay on the cleared path. There is no rule number two.

The front end was obliterated, even the wheels were missing. The force of the explosion had blown you and the driver through the canvas top, torn and shredded from the impact. Then, I took a closer look into the deserted jeep...legs, four of them, from the knee down, were resting on the sandbags. I commented to my gunner, "No wonder the bodies looked short." We hated mines...they could scare a man to death out on Highway 19, 1968.

Glancing down at the unfastened seat belt, I shrugged, "What was the use?" The sun was beginning to work its way into another cloudless sky and the bugs began to pepper the Cougar's windshield. More road kill. I got pissed when one splattered right in my direct line of vision. Vacation was beginning to feel redundant, so I decided to stop for a hitchhiker. Opening the door, I asked him where he was headed. "Reno," he replied.

"Well, I can get you as far as Susanville. Toss your suitcase on the back seat...don't worry about the handgun, it's not loaded."

The kid looked to be a teenager and we found it easy to talk. I learned that he was going to visit his brother who attended the university in Reno, and was hoping to land a summer job in one of the casinos.

"Yeah, I'm gonna be a Senior next year, can't wait to get out school and escape Alturus."

"What are you going to do after graduation?" I asked, "going to college like your brother?"

"I don't know, thinkin' about going into the Service," he looked out the window as he spoke this, like he was trying on the idea for size. "You ever been in?"

The haircut usually gave me away, since I still wore it short, even though long hair was the norm. "A couple years ago," I offered halfheartedly.

"Did you go to Vietnam?"

I knew if I told him that he'd ask all kinds of questions. I couldn't explain something I didn't understand myself. "Yeah, I was there."

For the next couple of hours, the hitchhiker picked my brain, provoked my memory, actually listening pretty well. Some of my responses surprised him. It's hard to admit that you wouldn't trade away the experience. When he got on the subject of politics, I said, "We never worried ourselves about the right or wrong of it...we counted off the days until it was over."

"Did you kill anyone?"

## **STUPIDITY**

**It was an average day during the dry season. I was resting the patrol at checkpoint 95 near the river. Mid-day, the road was free of convoys, so we took a break from patrolling. The small Vietnamese hamlet nearby could provide all kinds of distractions. From nowhere and to my utter disbelief, you pulled into the checkpoint, unarmed, unaware, and unknowing. I knew who you were...clerks from our headquarters' platoon...but couldn't understand what you were doing out on my road. A joy ride? Some recreation? An entertaining distraction? I was pissed, "Don't you fuckers know it's dangerous out here!? Turn that goddamned jeep around and get your asses back to Pleiku! Now!"**

**You didn't protest, nor did you make it back alive. About an hour later, I got a call from an APC, saying they had a couple of bodies, "They're two of yours." Evidently, our Company clerks had collided with a Vietnamese bus.**

**Your eyes were closed and dirt filled your mouths. I radioed headquarters, and nervously spoke into the handset, "They appear to be dead."**

**"What!" they heard me loud and clear, but were confused.**

**I corrected my statement, "They're dead."**

**I helped carry one of the bodies to the graves registration truck. I had your feet and as we lifted you, your legs bent at odd angles. It felt like every bone in your body was broken.**

**Our Company commander ventured out that day, and I waited for him to tell me it was my fault...but he didn't say a word. I closed my eyes and tried not to blame myself, but knew I should have escorted you back to camp. I was too tired or maybe I just didn't give a shit...either way, I let you drive off to your death out on Highway 19, 1968.**

I had drifted off into a private trance, so the boy queried me again, "Well, did you shoot

anyone?"

"I don't think so," I responded while keeping an eye on the road, "most the time you couldn't see what you were shooting at." He let that pass, probably disappointed, so we continued on in silence. I dropped him off at Litchfield so he could swing over to a back road that shortened his journey. My destination would have been too far out of his way. I never did get his name.

Approaching Susanville, it struck me that I had a habit of forgetting names. In Vietnam, everyone had nicknames, both earned or bestowed, based on a physical trait or character nuance. When the Indian in our unit intentionally blew off his fingers, someone asked, "Hey, did you hear Chief shot his fingers off?" No one could remember his name, and he never came back to tell us. So far, I'd been successful at keeping names out of my memories.

This was the largest town I'd been in since leaving home, a long main street lined on each side by motels, stores, gas stations, a movie theater and bowling alley. It was still early, so I decided to cruise awhile before finding a room. With the evening sun catching me at eye level, I had to squint to see through the bug-smearing windshield, so I pulled into a gas station to clean it up. As I was paying for gas, I thumbed through pictures in my wallet, pausing at the one of my grandfather. He had died just before I joined the Army, but I had felt his presence once in Vietnam.

## **POP**

**You didn't look sick when I came to the hospital to say goodbye. You smiled at me, and I leaned down to kiss your cheek. I missed the smell of pipe tobacco that had always swirled around you in the past. You died a few days later. When I saw you lying in the coffin, you looked so peaceful, like taking a nap in your rocker. That was my first experience with death, but it didn't prepare me for Vietnam.**

**One day on the road, when I felt sickened by the war, I sensed your spirit sitting down next to me. Alone in a guard bunker, I confessed my fears. "Pop, I'm not the little boy you knew, the one who sat on your lap and begged for puffs from your pipe. This place has changed me and I've seen things, done things you wouldn't like. Although you never fought in a war, I hope you can forgive me."**

**Luckily, no one noticed the tears or overheard the sobs. I had to re-group and put my soldier face back on, but first I thanked my grandfather for consoling me. Despite the heavy presence of fellow soldiers around me, it was easy to feel "alone" when it came to expressing intimate thoughts. "Thanks, Pop, for listening and for giving me that memory." It was the only time I cried on Highway 19, 1968.**

I closed my wallet. Now that the hangover was gone, I pulled into a parking space in front of the bowling alley that promised cold beer and sandwiches. I needed a diversion



from the constant driving, tossed a shirt over the gun on the back seat, and walked towards the sound of pins being struck.

There were only eight lanes. I rented shoes, picked out a ball, and sat down at the furthest lane from the league bowlers. Bowling had once been a passion, to the point of flunking out of college, preferring the lanes to the classroom. This was my first time to bowl since coming home, and while it all felt and sounded familiar, I wondered why it felt so different. Slowly, I jotted down my name on the score sheet.

I ordered a sandwich and a couple of beers and conjured up memories of times with my ex-girlfriend in the bowling alley. Those were good times from a disconnected past. As I approached the fault line, the ball felt heavy. The sound of it hitting the hardwood startled me, and I watched the ball approach the pins, spilling only half of them. For a moment, I struggled to remember how to record the score.

At the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> frame, I paused and stared blankly at the fallen pins. Betraying me again, my eyes filled and overflowed, as it suddenly occurred to me that I was not keeping score here, but back in Vietnam. No one in the alley noticed anything unusual. For me, though, vacation had become an instant replay...the recounting of fallen pins, once standing upright in formation and now bowled over by irresistible forces. Compiling this bloody scorecard felt like a holy obligation, something necessary. I had to get it right.

Losing interest, I turned in the rental shoes, an incomplete score card, and paid for the game. I'd lost track of time, and it was beginning to get dark. I didn't want to be caught by darkness in unfamiliar surroundings. At a liquor store, I picked up a six-pack and some candy. In the evening dusk, the motel sign was easy to spot...VACANCY.

## **GOODBYES**

**You were a generous mentor, the first guy to befriend me when I arrived in-country. You showed me how to survive, to do my job, and how to maintain a sense of humor. With you around, I felt accepted on the team. You were a sergeant, my patrol leader, until the time came for me to lead.**

**I had checkpoint duty and wasn't on the road that day. Late in the afternoon, a radio transmission jolted me awake, "Ambush!" Feeling helpless since I wasn't allowed to leave my post, I thought of you, wondering if you were caught in the action. Listening to the radio traffic, the calls for choppers and tank support, I knew the fighting was intense. I desperately wanted to be there.**

**After an eternity, one of the patrols radioed that a truckload of bodies was on its way. For some reason, I assumed they would be VC dead. Some of the convoy began to pass through the checkpoint, but I couldn't get a clear report from any of the drivers. A dump truck finally approached and I waved it over and jumped up to get a look. I shouldn't have. There were no VC in the gory bed, only GI's, and**

**you. Horrified, I couldn't take my eyes away from the bloody mess that had been my friend.**

**Your stare captured mine but it was distant and unseeing. I blinked, noticed the smell, and vaulted from the truck like it was on fire. Sarge, I acknowledged your death because there was no choice. However, nothing would ever be the same. In our hooch that evening, we talked about you, swapped our favorite stories, and tried to hide the guilt. What saddens me is we never got the chance to say good-bye, on Highway 19, 1968.**

I grabbed the gun, the beer and the overnight bag. I welcomed the seclusion of a musty motel room. The sandwich at the bowling alley had been enough, no need for dinner. After a couple beers, I opened the war album, allowing the images to float before my watery eyes. They were my indisputable proof of a year that was fading each day. Some were too painful to look upon, and I questioned my motive for keeping them. That night, I threw away the photos I had taken of the dead. The war album in my mind will not be as easily extirpated.

## **DAY FOUR**

I left early the next morning in good spirits. My destination was Sierra Valley, home of my Irish ancestors. The valley captured their pioneer spirit as far back as 1849, and the ground held many of them for eternity. At Beckwourth Pass, I turned east and entered the valley through Chilcoot. My great grandfather, one of the first white men to discover this haven, is buried here. There are many cemeteries in the area that harbor relatives I never knew.

I grabbed a burger at the only fast food diner and marveled at the beauty surrounding me. On all sides was the majesty of mountains. The valley floor reminded me of a giant lake, but without water. Because of the ranging cattle and varied wildlife, warning signs dotted the roadside. Road kill was evidence that the signs weren't enough.

Because it stood on a remote hillside, the Irish cemetery wasn't easy to find. However, I had a good idea where to look since I had brought my grandmother here for a visit after Pop died. She was born and raised in Satley, a small community on the western side of the valley. A barbed-wire gate blocked entrance to the primitive dirt road leading uphill to the cemetery, but it was unlocked. I eased the Cougar up its dusty trail.

From their final resting places, my ancestors had a perfect view of their old homesteads. They were buried here because non-Irish neighbors wouldn't allow their burials in other community cemeteries. I liked it here, feeling pride in my heritage. Grandma had shared her history with me, and I felt a duty to remember it.

I studied the dates on the tombstones. Winter burials must have been very difficult in the frozen ground. Cement had been poured over some plots for protection against the harsh elements. My great, great grandmother lived to be 96 and she had been dead forty years as I stood reading her marker. "To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die." Her husband had fought in the Civil War, a New York Volunteer etched into his stone. I sat down facing the valley floor, my back to the family plots.

## **TET**

**Tet was normally a time of celebration, but this year was a time to kill. Fighting in Pleiku had been going on for a couple of days, but our camp had been spared. Of course, the convoys hadn't, so we were pretty active out on the road. After the fierce fighting in town slowed down, we heard that the slain VC were on exhibition at the soccer field. I took my patrol there to take a quick look at the carnage.**

**From a distance, you looked like neat rows of soccer players, fifty or sixty, couldn't get an exact count. The fans were there too, out in big numbers, taking pictures, writing articles. As we got closer, the all too familiar smell overpowered us, and you didn't look so neat any more. I parked the jeep on the edge of the field to get a better look. There were so many bodies that you became one gigantic death blur. Your corpses were in really bad shape, burned and crushed, decapitated and dismembered, shot and sliced. Too much time in the sun hadn't helped matters.**

**I asked an officer what they were going to do with you, and learned that a bulldozer would dig a giant trench. If marble headstones had been placed atop all the dead from that TET celebration, Vietnam would have sunk into the South China Sea from its weight, and that thought amused me. Your families lived in distant hamlets and would never know where to find your graves. You had no names. Death grew in heaps everywhere that year along Highway 19 and everywhere, 1968.**

It was time to move on so I stood up and turned around to view the stones one last time. "Save me a spot," I whispered in farewell.

Coasting slowly down the dirt trail, I left the windows up to keep the dust out. In Vietnam, there was no escaping dust and rain. Our jeeps had no windshields or tops so the seasons took their toll on us. Passing by the house where Grandma was born, I wondered who lived there now, but fought the temptation to stop. Who lived there didn't matter any more than who was now patrolling my old route. These places would only lose their objectivity and acquire meaning if I could understand my place in them.

Climbing out of the valley, I found myself in the pine forest, and steadily gaining elevation. My grandfather had driven a stagecoach over this same trail seventy years earlier and his father had been a saloon owner. Raised on Westerns, I felt a strong romantic longing for adventure and it seemed strongest here in the pines.

Cresting Yuba Pass at 6,701 feet, I began the long, winding descent. Once again, I was

paying attention to road signs. One of my favorites, *Beware of Falling Rock*, elicited a smile. As a kid, I had pretended there was an Indian named Chief Falling Rock lurking about, planning surprise attacks. One sign made me pull over...*WATER*. A small parking area off the main road offered access to a natural spring, spilling ice-cold mountain water from a rock crevice for anyone needing a cool drink. I held out my hands, catching the purest water in the world. Something so simple, so pure, its taste was wonderful.

## **SUPERSTITION**

**At the Vietnamese hamlet outside of Pleiku, we stopped each morning for the water. Running adjacent to the road was a narrow stream, moving quickly enough that we trusted its purity to use as drinking water. We filled our canteens and the 5-gallon cans affixed to the back of the jeeps.**

**One night an APC guarding the area in its night position took a direct mortar hit, instantly killing you and wounding several of your buddies. The explosion blew you into the water and you bled into our stream. From that point, we never stopped for water, not because of your blood, but because we didn't want to press our luck out on Highway 19, 1968.**

Invigorated, I backed away from the "fountain," giving other travelers a chance. Back on the road, I noticed another sign, tucked away among the pines... *No Hunting Allowed*. We could have used that one back in-country.

Vacation was winding down and I was running out of ghosts. A sign in Sierra City...*ANTIQUES*... caught my attention, so I flicked up the right turn signal.

The elderly woman who owned the rundown antique shop was very friendly, and since I was her only customer, we talked freely. Somehow, we got on the subject of old cars and she mentioned that her father had been a professional driver at the turn of the century. She dug out an old photo album and proceeded to take me through her pictures. In 1919, her father had been driving for a wealthy San Francisco family, and that year, he drove them cross-country in their new Pierce Arrow. Decked out in his duster, cap and goggles, he proudly posed beside the beautiful automobile. The pictures chronicled the entire trip, no easy feat back then, which terminated in a Georgia cotton field.

Over an hour passed but no one else entered the shop. The lady treated me like a son, trusting a stranger because he liked old cars. After a Coke, I thanked her for sharing the hospitality and history. Sensing that I was truly fascinated by the story, she insisted I take a dozen or so of the extra pictures with me. I felt like I'd been adopted, but still forgot her name a few miles down the road.

## **TEA**

I didn't know you, we only met by accident. Literally, there was a vehicle accident involving an American on the outskirts of Pleiku. Never one for filling out reports, I radioed for a Town Patrol unit to come and take over. They agreed only if we'd stay for security, so we took the opportunity to relax at a fairly safe area. A young Vietnamese man approached us and, in broken English, asked if we would come to his house. Since we'd never seen the inside of a Vietnamese home, our curiosity was piqued.

With other patrolmen, I entered cautiously with weapon ready. An old man waved us through the door and it was obvious that we were in no danger. Motioning for us to sit, he and his son, the man who summoned us, disregarded our appearance and made us feel normal. Serving tea in tiny porcelain cups, he talked and gestured, while the son attempted to translate, but we still understood very little.

Your Army picture hung on the central wall, sharply attired in an ARVN uniform. Your father seemed to be so proud of you, smiling often when he looked at your serious face. From what I could tell, you were an officer.

We finished our tea, and thanked your father. On the way back to the jeep, your brother told us that you were dead, killed a month earlier by the VC a month earlier. Later, speeding westward, I wondered why your father didn't blame us for the loss of his son. There were lots of unanswered questions along Highway 19, 1968.

The Sierra Buttes bid me farewell. Snow still covered patches on its highest peaks and deepest crevices. Majestic is the only word that can describe their hold on the land. Downieville was less than an hour away, so I continued the easy downhill drive adjacent to the Yuba River. One more night and I'd be back in Sacramento. Distracted by a memory, I almost hit a squirrel that dashed across the road.

## **GOD**

You got in my way. Our jeep was fully loaded with the weight of war and your scrawny body was no match for it. Conscious of mines and snipers, I always drove as fast as possible, without endangering my men. Slowing down in a village wasn't an option. There was no concern for you, or any of the other children milling about. Despite the fact that your country was host to our military operations, this was our road, and we were always in a hurry...our hurry this time was to have breakfast.

In a split second, you made a blind dash to cross the road, responding to a mother's call. Didn't you see me? I hit the brakes and swerved left, convinced there was no chance to spare you. I saw your head about to disappear beneath the right wheel and screamed, "God! Please! NO!"

**Somehow, God reached down and pulled you away from death. Scared and angry, the last thing I wanted was your life on my hands. Without stopping, fearful of seeing nothing but a mess bleeding out in front of its family, I asked my gunner what he saw as he looked back, "Just some kid yelling and shaking a fist at us." That was the only act of God I witnessed on Highway 19, 1968.**

I missed that squirrel by inches, lucky that no other cars were near when I braked. I slowed the Cougar down, cognizant of the of hairpin curves zigzagging down the mountain. I didn't want to lose control and contribute to the road kill. Although no one was out to harm me, much of vacation reminded me of Vietnam. It was easy to shift between the two...today to yesterday...past to present.

Downieville is the county seat and more active than most other mountain towns. It had been a prosperous mining community, until the ore ran out, but a couple thousand people still called it home. The St. Charles Hotel is a survivor. Built in the 1880's, it stood alone and whitewashed at the end of Main Street. Its bar had served miners and robbers, whores and gamblers, politicians and lawmen. When you walked through the front doors, you felt as though you had journeyed back in time. I signed my name in the large registration book and was handed an antique key to a second-floor room.

I hung the gun belt over my shoulder and walked by the bar before climbing the stairs. No one looked up from their drinks. The stairs creaked as my weight fell on the aging boards. As expected, the room was small, just enough space for the bed and dresser and no private bathroom. Surprisingly, it was cool inside and the bed was soft. I closed my eyes.

## **DREAMS**

**I see myself in the jeep with a pistol grasped tightly in hand. No people are visible and the hamlet is plagued by an overpopulation of dogs. They scurry around like rats, rummaging for food. Another soldier drives so I can aim and fire the pistol, over and over again. The bullets ricochet off the ground before pounding into the dogs. The force knocks them backward. I hear their death screams. Hunting them down has become a game.**

**Did I really have a dog as a kid? Wasn't he my best friend? There was no time for pets on Highway 19, 1968.**

I had fallen asleep. The dream had a ring of familiarity about it, "Did I really do that?" I sat up, disgusted with myself. Vietnam had taken a toll on my self esteem, and shooting dogs wasn't just a bad dream. It was a bad memory.

I went down the hall to splash water on my face. Like most everything else at the St. Charles, the mirror was old and cracked. For the longest time, I gazed into it, searching

for understanding. It was becoming more difficult to remember the pre-war child. The mustache and traces of gray hair weren't there before Vietnam, but some changes couldn't be measured in a mirror.

My stomach ached for a real meal. The dining room was well lit with vintage chandeliers. Most of the dinner crowd had already finished, so I had no trouble getting a table. This was a welcome relief from fast food. An elderly waitress served the roast beef and didn't question my age when I ordered a beer. A slice of apple pie hit the spot and I was ready to call it a day, until I heard laughter coming from the bar.

As I pushed through the swinging doors into the smoke-filled saloon, instinct told me to get the gun. I suppressed the urge and teased myself for watching too many Westerns. Old men huddled around tables, talking, playing cards, drinking. The air was musty and thick with the past. Moving in deliberate steps, I tried to hide the effects of the beer.

Across the long antique bar, I ordered a drink and found an empty corner table. Carefully studying the room, I immediately became mesmerized by the painting hanging above the bar. She was beautiful. Captured naked on a red velvet couch, she wore a gentle smile that seemed to gaze in my direction. At least I'd have something to keep my mind occupied while sipping beer.

Large windows allowed the night's coolness to drift in, and despite the crowd, it was peaceful. My eyes had been fixed on the glass in front of me, so I didn't see him enter the bar. When I looked up, he was standing over me with a bottle of whiskey and two shot glasses. "All the tables are full, mind if I join you?" he asked in an ancient, high-pitched voice. I sized him up, short, very thin, full beard, baggy pants...but the eyes, crystal blue and piercing held no threat. I pointed to the empty chair across from me, and he set the brown bottle down with a thud.

For a long time, we just looked at each other, and oddly enough, I sensed recognition in the stranger's eyes. He had wrinkles deep enough to hide in and looked ninety, if a day. Whiffs of white hair protruded from his spotted scalp in awkward directions. I was about to order another beer, but he slid a shot glass in front of me, "Let me buy you a drink."

Sipping it slowly, I felt the slow burn through my body. He nodded, held up his glass in a silent toast, and drank it down in a single gulp. I wasn't used to drinking hard stuff, and as the bottle emptied, I lost touch with reality.

We leaned into each other to be heard over the low, continuous hum in the barroom. "Tell me about your war." He spoke the words gently but they took me by surprise. There was a quality about him that captured my trust, but I wasn't sure what to say or how much to divulge. I choked back another shot of whiskey and began to tell my stories.

"It was crazy, no one really knew why we were there. Lots of battles, none big enough to win or lose it, just went on and on. I had a pretty good job though and it kept me out of

the jungles. Our main objective was survival and returning in one piece after the year was over. What was strange, though, was that I've never been as happy or sad as I was in Vietnam. Does that make sense?"

Again, the old man nodded, like he understood. I continued to talk in a hushed tone, attempting to recall my feelings at the time. And, of course, I mentioned the road kill.

## **ROT**

**I didn't kill you. Someone else fired that bullet into your brain. We found your naked, decaying body, resting in a shallow ditch. There was no way to tell if you had been an ally or enemy. Bugs had already eaten out your eyes, and I could gaze through the vacant holes into your now empty skull. Blackened skin covered your body, but it looked ready to burst.**

**Out of a sick fascination, we visited you often. Sometimes, you were bloated with bugs, other times, skinny as a rail, bones protruding. In our ghoulish attendance, I hoped you wouldn't explode, unleashing a cloud of maggots upon us. You lay in state during the monsoons, eventually melting into the land. Except by our careless inspections, you were just another nameless road kill, unlamented and unburied, along Highway 19, 1968.**

"They bother me, you know...I feel a guilt so deep that I'm alive and they're not. They have a hold on me. So many wounded, I don't know who lived or who died. I have this sadness in me that won't go away."

My confessor leaned in closer to me, "Tell me about the one you shot." That got my attention. How could he know about that man? Even I had trouble believing that one had ever existed. I emptied the drink and peered into his eyes, silently begging for understanding.

"Sometimes, I don't know if it was a dream or if it really happened. I held the M-16 in my hands, felt its recoil when I pulled the trigger, saw his head explode from the bullet's impact. Training had prepared me for that moment. What training didn't prepare me for was the memory of it. I remember yelling that I'd got one. When the ambush was over, my gunner and I walked over to the body. Without a face it, it was no longer human. I didn't want to touch it, so my buddy searched him for souvenirs and intelligence. The picture in the wallet showed a young woman holding a baby."

The old man's frail, bony arm rested on my shoulder. The bottle of whiskey was now empty. "It was the same for me, son, in my war," his weary words pierced me. "Even though you'll never forget, we find ways to cope with the memories. Tell me, if all the dead could forgive you, could you forgive yourself?" I peered confusedly across the table, and finally managed a nod.



"Take look around," he motioned, "they're all here." At once, the crowd noise ceased, and through the smoky haze, I saw them, not faces of strangers, but the familiar images of men I had seen two years before. They were studying me with compassion, attempting smiles that didn't quite materialize. Some nodded, a few gestured with a wave...none showed anger. The old man raised himself up and broke the silence. "There's your friend, Sarge, over there, sitting next to the man you killed. His name is Nhung." The two clerks sat together and flashed a peace sign.

They were all here at the St. Charles as guests of honor. Unable to stand and engage them, I no longer controlled my movements. Lips tried to form words but remained closed. When my friend finished his solemn introductions, he sat back down, clasping his hands. I noticed he had brown fingernails. Our audience seemed content with the resulting silence, as if in prayer. As each face faded away, I forgave myself.

I turned back to the old man, as noise once again filled the barroom. He was straining to rise, and I noticed he had a bad leg, so I asked him about it. He winked at me and explained, "Took a ball at Gettysburg in '63. Thanks for lettin' me sit with ya."

With that, he put on his hat and drifted out of the bar before I could say anything else. When I finally managed to get up, there was nobody left in the room, except that beautiful young woman in the painting, smiling down at me.

## DAY FIVE

I checked out early, clean, a few cobwebs, but anxious to get moving again. Blending into morning traffic, I joined a line of trucks southbound on Highway 49. Another sunny day, I left the windows down, attempting to make sense out of the previous night. I wasn't successful and decided to leave it alone for now. The whiskey hangover was enough for the time being. A few hours down the road, I checked the back seat and realized I'd left the pistol at the St. Charles. It wasn't worth going back for. Maybe I'd left more than an old gun behind. No way to know.

Eventually, traffic slowed due to roadwork. This happens every summer on California's mountain roads, as crews repair the damage done by the previous winter. Vehicles merged until a single lane was formed, then waited for the "Go" sign. As I navigated through the snarl, it grew stuffy in the Cougar. The heat brought a final memory to the surface.

## **REDEPMTION**

**Approaching the hamlet, our patrols parked in the front yard of a rundown house. Appearing to be the average Vietnamese home, it was actually a whorehouse. Over time, we had gotten to know the girls. My gunner and I stayed by the jeep to**

monitor the radio and provide a semblance of security. When there were no convoys in our area of responsibility, we often stopped here to get laid or just enjoy a cold drink. Either way, we welcomed the break.

The radio crackled to life and I answered a call from Black Hawk, hoping it wasn't bad news. Evidently, the chaplains from the 4th Infantry Division had decided to visit the field on this sunny day to disburse religion to the troops. I thanked the guy from Black Hawk for the warning, but the news threw me into a panic. In fact, that holy entourage had noticed our jeeps and pulled into the yard before I could roust my men from their rented sacks.

Sending my gunner inside, I reported to the chaplains, nervous as hell around so many high-ranking officers. Scared, the girls stayed out of sight, while my patrol approached the chaplains with hesitation. No one knew what to expect. However, before it was over, everyone had received God's blessing. In a festive mood, the padres took home movies, thanked us profusely for embracing the Message, and went on their sanctified way. To our relief, they never suspected the unlikely house of God.

Somehow, we felt forgiven, absolved of our sins. Of the 365 days we tempted fate, this was the perfect day to test our luck. We drove off the cleared path for the rest of day, handing God the chance to bring us Home. He didn't claim any of us. In fact, nobody died that day on Highway 19, 1968.

Finally, the construction zones were behind me and driving became fun again. Approaching the lowlands, radio reception returned and I sang along with familiar songs. Anxious now to get back home, I wanted to see if anything had changed.

I stopped in Grass Valley long enough to get a burger and gas. The temperature was getting warmer the closer I got to the Sacramento valley. The clean mountain air and soothing majesty of the high country were well behind me now, temporarily stored away. I knew where to find them, if or when...

By the time I reached the neighborhood, windshield bugs were so thick I could barely see the traffic. I glanced over at the Trap, a local bar, and was tempted to stop for a cold beer. Denying the urge to postpone my homecoming, I continued on. Vacation was over.

Safely in the driveway, I began to unpack and noticed how dirty the car was. No one was home yet. I wished that I'd found gifts, but it was too late to fix that...just like it was too late to fix shattered dreams, to fix broken peace, or to fix road kill. As much as I wanted to deny it, there was no returning to a time when painting by the numbers worked. Vietnam had stretched life's canvas and added more numbers than I could manage. Those pictures on the family room wall were nothing more than mementos from a seemingly distant time of innocent order and naïve simplicity.

I thought of the old man and wondered if my 80-year old grandmother could tell me more about him. He must have been an ancestor. She would know. I was thinking about all this as I tossed a tennis ball to our dog in the backyard. He was really happy to see me. The silver bracelets jingled, a constant reminder that my family was much larger now.

**END**