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Night Vision

John Emory stood on the asphalt with the other soldiers and shivered in the cold. Someone had stolen his field jacket while he slept on a bench at Cam Rahn Bay. He stayed out of the shade of the big spruces, but the bright late afternoon sunlight, shooting down out of a cloudless blue sky, offered little warmth. Off to the west snow-covered Mt. Rainier towered above Fort Lewis. The men milled about, smoked, complained of the wait. A medic stepped out onto the porch of the hospital. The soldiers had just completed their separation physicals.

"You men will be brought back here tomorrow," he said. Then he grinned. "Your blood tests are all fucked up."

The men groaned. Everyone was thinking of syphilis. The men talked nervously about it. The story of the island in the Pacific where they sent you, never to return, when you contracted an incurable Eastern strain of the disease, was brought out again and discussed. Emory thought of the girls in Pleiku, the girls in Singapore.

"It's the black syph," a soldier said.

Emory recalled that the man's chest was covered with shrapnel scars, a crisscrossed pattern of welts. The doctor had asked him if they itched. The man's skin was very white, and the welts were still an angry reddish color. Emory had come out of the war without a scratch; he hadn't killed anyone. Once he had thought not having killed would bother him, a missed rite of initiation. In training a drill sergeant often repeated as a kind of litany to the assembled men: "I have killed. I have killed," the words spoken in a flat emotionless voice. But instead of regret, Emory felt a great sense of relief, even of joy. The war hadn't touched him. He would go home to Mobile; everything would be exactly as it was before he left.

The medic lingered on the porch and answered their questions.

"I ain't fucking with you," he finally said. "That sorry ass machine broke again. Happens all the time. Why, all your cocks are probably just as clean as mine."

He laughed and disappeared into the hospital.

The buses arrived. Emory settled into his seat, grateful for the warmth, as his bus drove about the post. By this time tomorrow he might be in Mobile. He imagined calling up girls he had known in high school, now in college, and asking them for a date. Around dusk he'd stroll up to one of those houses set amid magnolias and live oaks and pines, a brick sidewalk under the soles of his cordovans. After speaking with a girl's parents, he'd walk his date out to the car in that warm April or May air. They'd go to a movie; they'd have dinner. In the fall he was going off to college himself.

The driver stopped in front of one barracks after another and called the men's names off a list. They departed the bus in twos and threes. Finally only Emory, who had already fallen asleep twice, was left. It was getting late, the sun dropping down behind the spruces, but the snow fields on the volcano still shone in the light.

Emory picked up his duffel bag and went off the bus. The driver motioned with his head towards the barracks.

"They got the dishonorable discharges in there," he said. "Waiting for their paperwork. Then they'll get a free ride to the front gate."

The driver laughed.

"I wouldn't want to sleep there," he said. "Those guys do whatever they want."

"I don't care where I sleep," Emory said.

"Yeah, you infantry guys just don't give a shit," the driver said.

Neither of them laughed.

Emory got off the bus. It pulled away. The driver waved to him, but Emory didn't wave back. He'd listened to enough jokes about his trade from clerks and drivers to last him a long time.

He stood in the cold and looked at the barracks, no different from any of the others on the post. He went up the walk, the bag over his shoulder. He anticipated the pleasure of stretching out on a bunk and dropping off to sleep.

When he pushed open the door, the music washed over him. Someone was playing a radio turned up very high. Men dressed in civilian clothes lay about on the bunks; the odor of marijuana was in the air. There were plenty of empty bunks, and Emory wondered why they hadn't sent everyone to this barracks. He took a bunk in a corner, although he had given up on the idea of going to sleep.

On the bunk beside him a little man dressed in a fringed leather jacket sat playing cards with a big man who wore a pair of bell bottomed jeans and a paisley shirt with pearl buttons. Both wore cowboy boots. A pile of bills was beside the little man, but the big man was down to a

few bills and some change. They concentrated on their game and ignored Emory.

"Will you watch my stuff?" Emory asked. "I've got to go to the orderly room."

"What you going over there for?" the big man asked.

"To get some sheets and a blanket," Emory said.

"Listen at that, Arnold," the little man said to the big man.

Arnold laughed.

"I'd like to have some sheets myself," he said.

"And a pillow," the little man said.

"Prince has been down there every day to complain," Arnold said. "They won't do nothing for us."

"We've got our rights," Prince said. "They're gonna be sorry. I'm writing my congressman."

"Go do it then," Arnold said. Then he turned back to Emory. "Where'd you come from?"

"Vietnam," Emory said.

"What'd you do," Prince asked.

"Infantry," Emory said.

"I was infantry," Arnold said.

"I kept my ass out of Vietnam," Prince said.

Arnold told Emory he was going back to Texas and work on his father's ranch. The ranch was in the hill country. Arnold talked about the beauty of the hills and how he planned to take a packhorse and camp in a grove of oaks beside a river to get the smell of the army off him.

"He's gonna catch trout," Prince said.

"Ain't no trout in Texas," Arnold said.

"Catfish then," Prince said. "Arnold says I can come down there sometime. He'll teach me to ride."

"Maybe," Arnold said.

Arnold was going to raise and train cutting horses. On his father's ranch it wouldn't matter he had been court martialled for hitting a sergeant.

"I been to Vietnam," Arnold said. "I got back here and they started fucking with me."

"Wish I had me someplace to go like that," Prince said.

Prince wanted to get a job driving cars across the country from New York. He was from New Jersey. Prince hadn't made it through basic training.

"I wouldn't do shit for them," he said. "I told 'em my balls hurt. They ain't got a test for that. Drill sergeant cussed and threw rocks at me, but I wouldn't move. They say I'm an undesirable."

Prince grinned.

Emory managed a smile. He was almost free of the army. Soon he would no longer have to live with people like Prince and Arnold.

"I'm going to get some sheets," Emory said.

They laughed.

"They won't give you nothing," Arnold said. "But if they do you get us some too."

Emory walked into the orderly room. It had turned colder, and he buttoned his jungle fatigues at the collar. A staff sergeant sat behind a desk. He asked for sheets and a blanket. The sergeant requested his barracks number.

"No sheets in that barracks," the sergeant said. "What're you doing there?"

Emory explained about the blood test.

"Sorry," the sergeant said. "I can give you a blanket but no sheets. They're bad on sheets."

"You can give them to me," Emory said.

The sergeant shook his head.

"Give out a set to one and all of 'em be in here wanting some," he said.

Emory asked to be put in another barracks. The sergeant made some calls.

"There's nothing," he said. "I'd watch myself over there. That's a rough bunch."

Emory took his blanket and wrapping it about him walked back to the barracks.

Arnold and Prince were gone when he returned, but no one had stolen his duffel bag. Emory thought of returning to the orderly room and volunteering for guard duty, but he was so sleepy he didn't think he would stay awake. He could end up getting court martialed himself for falling asleep.

So he took off his shoes, stuffed his billfold between his underwear and his skin, and putting one arm through the duffel bag's strap, lay down to sleep.

He slept and dreamed of the outpost, located high on a mountaintop outside of Pleiku where he had spent twelve months. It was just two

squads up there. At night he watched the ridge below through a starlight scope and listened to the geckos bark. Sometimes the nights were cold, especially during the dry season. When the monsoon came, the wind blew constantly, driving a cold rain to rattle against his poncho.

In his dream he kept seeing movement in the dark. As he stared hard into the darkness, bushes and rocks began to move. The army taught you a trick to keep that from happening. You looked to the side of things and not directly at them. Then they'd stop moving. No matter what he did the bushes and rocks started walking. He'd get scared and fire off a burst at what he thought was an enemy soldier. Finally the squad leader made him stand watch with only a forty-five. That way something would have to be very close before he'd be tempted to open fire.

"The night is always walking for Emory," the squad leader liked to say.

Yet in all that time he hadn't killed anyone. In the morning the targets he'd fired at during the night turned out to be rocks and trees. It was as if the North Vietnamese Army had chosen to ignore the outpost as not worth the trouble of harassing.

During bad weather he worried because they were cut off from gunship support. When that happened and the mountain top was hidden in the clouds, he'd be too scared to sleep, and he'd stay up all night, staring off into the clouds, which rolled through the concertina wire, grey pieces of cloud seeming to be caught up on the barbs and torn apart. At those times he knew a platoon of NVA could have overrun them in an hour.

Lost in one of these night vision dreams, his body prickly with fear, Emory woke with a start. Two men were fighting on the floor. A light black man was beating a dark one with a stick, the club making a solid sound on the other man's head.

Arnold and Prince had returned. They both sat on the top bunk, and like the rest of the men in the barracks were silent as the fight went on. Finally the darker man lay still on the floor, the man with the stick standing over him. He was dressed in a suit; the man on the floor wore a warmup.

"You stay out of my locker, motherfucker," the man said.

The loser said nothing in reply. He groaned, twisting his body into a fetal position.

The winner walked off, and two men helped the defeated man into the latrine. Emory had seen fights before, but somehow this one made him nervous. He supposed it was because everyone had been so quiet, and there was no sergeant or lieutenant on hand to break it up. He

suspected that the light-skinned man could still be beating the barracks thief and no one would've made a move to stop him.

"Fucking Hardin is always in everone's shit," Prince said.

"Hey, Emory," Arnold said. "We got some speed. Nobody sleeps at night in this barracks. You come fly with us."

Emory told them no. He was going to sleep anyway.

"I was in the Delta," Arnold said. "I could shoot a fifty caliber from the hip. Everyone was safe when I was around. You ever seen a slope that's been greased with a fifty?"

Emory said he hadn't.

Arnold went on and on about his exploits in the Delta. Emory imagined the big man with the heavy machine gun, meant to be mounted on a jeep or fired from a tripod, in his hands.

"You are full of shit," a voice said.

Emory looked up. The man in the suit was standing at the end of the bunk. He still had his long delicate fingers wrapped around the club, which was the butt end of a pool cue.

"Arnold wasn't in no Vietnam," the man said. "Shit, he didn't even finish basic."

"Fieldspar, how come you know everything?" Prince said.

"One of these days being a little man ain't gonna save you," Fieldspar said. Then he turned to Emory. "What you doing here?"

"Trying to get some sleep," Emory said.

"That's cool," Fieldspar said. "That's fine with me."

He rapped the club a couple of times against his open hand and wandered off.

"I'm gonna knock his damn head off," Prince said.

Arnold laughed.

"You come on down to Texas with me," he said. "We'll go to a bar and find you a little shit kicker with no arms for you to fight. That'd be just right for you."

"I could knock your teeth out," Prince said. "Every one of 'em."

"Aw, Mitch, I didn't mean nothing by it," Arnold said.

"Could I come to Texas with you?" Prince asked.

"No, you can't come down there," Arnold said. "Besides, some clerk at personnel told me they're cutting orders on me tomorrow. Get my free ride to the front gate. You'll be here another week at least."

"You don't want me to come," Prince said.

"Not right away," Arnold said. "I'll write you. Let you know."

"I could help you train horses," Prince said.

"Maybe," Arnold said.

Prince slid off the bunk and began looking through his suitcase. When he climbed back up on the bunk he had a K-bar fighting knife in his hand.

"He comes back and I'll cut his balls off," Prince said.

Arnold laughed.

"Fieldspar will slap you right through that wall," he said.

Emory thought of retreating to the orderly room. Maybe the sergeant would just let him sit there the rest of the night. But if he did that he might end up on KP. They liked to grab transient troops who wandered in. Emory had been in the army long enough to know to stay out of orderly rooms.

"You watch my stuff," Emory told the pair.

He went out of the barracks into the cold night air. The barracks had flower beds bordered with bricks set on edge. Emory pulled up a brick and returned. He showed the brick, which felt cold and heavy in his hand, to Arnold and Prince.

"I'm going to sleep," Emory told them. "Anybody fucks with me and I'll kill 'em."

"Man, I believe you," Prince said.

Arnold nodded in agreement.

Emory lay down and nestled the brick in his right hand. He closed his eyes and went to sleep, the strident voice of Prince in his ears.

Emory dreamed of the outpost. He was on watch and there was movement below. He popped a flare. As the parachute carried it out over the rocks below, he saw an ape scurrying across them and into the trees.

Then he felt himself falling, the bunk bed overturning with a crash. The barracks were dark. Someone yelled out Arnold's name. A voice close to his ear cursed. The other men were shouting. He pushed himself away from the bunk, still holding the brick tightly in his hand.

The overhead lights came on and in that instant of illumination, as if caught by a strobe, he saw Prince astride Arnold. Prince had the heavy-bladed knife raised in his hand. Arnold lay stunned and offering no resistance, his arms lowered.

"Stop!" Emory screamed.

The knife, seeming to move in slow motion, came down into Arnold's chest. Prince stabbed once, then twice. The third time the knife got stuck in Arnold's chest. Prince cursed and tugged at it with both hands. A kind of bubbling sound was coming from Arnold.

Emory lurched forward, his feet tangled in the blanket. Then he was free and reaching out for Prince, who had put his foot on Arnold's chest

to gain leverage. Suddenly the knife came free. Prince lunged at him with it. Emory brought the brick up into Prince's face, the little man falling backward without a sound.

Then Emory had the knife and was on Arnold, who had risen to his knees. Someone caught Emory's arm. He turned and looked into the face of Fieldspar.

"Just stop," Fieldspar said. "You want to end up like us?"

Fieldspar took the knife out of Emory's hand.

"That little bastard is fucked up on speed," Fieldspar said. "Thinks he's ten feet tall."

They stood around over the still body of Arnold, waiting for the MPs to arrive. Emory heard Prince screaming from the latrine, his voice echoing off the tile.

Emory thought of Arnold camped beside the river, blue smoke from his mesquite fire rising through the branches of the oaks, and of Prince, dressed in a double-breasted suit and wearing dark glasses, driving a big car fast on a perfectly straight highway across a desert vista. He looked at the rest of the men, all dressed in civilian clothes, and thought how each had made a wrong turn, their dishonorable discharges placing a mark on them that never could be erased. And he realized he hadn't escaped the war. It wasn't just that he might have killed Prince if Fieldspar hadn't intervened. Somehow up on that Pleiku mountaintop he'd lost clarity.

It was growing light outside the barrack windows. Off in the distance he heard the sound of sirens. Whether it was the medics or the MPs was impossible to tell. But he wished they could all, Prince included, climb to the top of the big volcano and there on the summit, amid that clean white landscape, the dry snow squeaking under their boots, stand and be bathed in the light from the rising sun.