

Christopher Tomlinson

The Lieutenant's Box

“It’s déjà vu, all over again,”
said Mike Cathoway.
“Enough, man,” came the
reply.

These men had been in this field before. The crops were growing, covered in shit—a rice paddy, cultivated with waste that smelled like death.

“I used to clean those fuckin Porta-Johnnies back home for Uncle Frank’s Waste-Away, but I ain’t never smelled shit this bad.” That came from Lou Gherdovich, known appropriately as Dirty. “I mean, I smelled some nasty shit before, but nothing like this.”

“Dirty, enough family stories,” said Dante Willoughby, who was about as tough as his name sounded and rich as he was weak.

“All right. Knock it off.” When the Lieutenant talked, his men listened. Lieutenant Scott McRae was the kind of man who made you want to do your job out of fear. Not fear of retribution, but fear of letting him down. He was genuine, with bright, blue eyes that pierced men’s minds, a kingly, nearly godly presence. But he wasn’t larger than life. He was a soldier, like the rest of them.

“LT, we’re back in the same shit hole,” whined Willow, as Willoughby was called.

“Willow, how long have you been around?”

“About 19 years, LT.”

“In Nam, shitbrick.”

“About 8 months.”

“Haven’t you realized this whole fucking country is miles and miles of shit holes like this, and if it isn’t a shit hole, it’s the jungle, and if it isn’t

the jungle, it isn't Vietnam. So stop your bitching. We're staying here till we find the damn box."

"What's in the box, LT?" asked Dirty, knowing he would get no answer.

"None of your business, soldier." That was their game.

"Just wondering..."

"Keep looking."

So the platoon kept looking. They fanned out across the wet field, like the spray from a shotgun blast, each individual pellet on its own search of the target, and none of them hitting.

"Fucking needle in a haystack, that's what it is," said Moose Richards, trudging his way through the mud. Moose, which was the only name they knew him by, had been a high school All-American at Kingsbury High somewhere in Tennessee. "Was gonna be a Nittany Lion," he bragged. But Moose's dad had been killed in a farming accident, and Moose had stayed home to take care of his mother and two little sisters. Then the draft letter had arrived, and now he was taking care of the 2nd platoon, 3rd company, 1st battalion. It never occurred to Moose to tell his draft board he was a single, surviving son.

"Needle in a what?" asked Chris Robinson, who paused to look down at his feet, or at least where his feet would have been, buried in the thick brown mud.

"Nothing, Klondike." Klondike was an albino. Actually, he wasn't, but he sure as hell looked like one. "Don't know what the LT's so worried about," Klondike said. "Who hasn't lost gear in this war? What's sacred here?"

"The box," said a voice behind Moose and Klondike. That fear had already grabbed the back of their necks before they turned around to see those eyes, but they could they feel them.

"Sorry, LT."

"Yeah, sorry, Lieutenant," said Moose.

"Just keep at it."

So they shuffled around in the muck, leaning here and there to feel what had stopped their stride. Sticks, logs, tins, dead animals, but never the box. It was hot that day, the thick air swirling like a fog rolling in. The mud felt a little cooler than the air, but it was mostly shit after all, so they couldn't take much comfort in that. The mountains behind them were majestic, a symphony of greens, but VC lived there, so they couldn't take much comfort in that either. The day was peaceful at the moment, but it

was a serenity that came from the never-ending thunder of artillery being far as opposed to near.

“Place sucks,” said the Field.

Don’t make jokes about Matt Fields, because he’s heard them all before. His nickname in high school had been Muddy, partly because everyone at his high school had a “y” affixed to their end of their names, and Matty sounds a lot like Muddy, and partly in ironic reference to his clean-cut lifestyle. Muddy Fields. He was destined for this war. He was also destined for greatness.

“I dunno, Field, it ain’t all bad,” said Dirty, who was not destined for greatness.

The men were searching in pairs through the field. There were just the seven of them, including Lieutenant Scott McRae, so they probably were searching for that needle in the haystack. They had been at this for three days straight, all of the men intently searching for something they had never seen. Only the Lieutenant knew any details about the box. Lieutenant McRae was a mystery, as was the box. But the men kept at it. They had to find the LT’s box. After all he would be disappointed in them if they didn’t, and that was worse than the VC.

Willow and Mike were the furthest away from the rest of the group. Willow was talking about his investments, and his cars, and his parents’ house, and his rich friends. Mike knew nothing about wealth. His father had been Navy enlisted all his life, and Mike was going to be in the Navy too. But the war was a ground war, so he’d joined the Marines.

“I got it! I got it!” came Willow’s shrill whine. The men pounced on the location, young lions on a kill, but the LT walked slowly towards them. He knew better. Willow hoisted up a small box that looked like a solid mass of the mud they had walked, slept, and eaten in for three days. Willow cracked open the case, looking around quickly for the LT and noting he was still a grenade’s throw away, which for Willow was shorter than for others, but the lieutenant was closing slowly. The men all peered in towards the box on the ground before them.

“It’s makeup,” said Klondike. “Great, Willow, you found the LT’s fucking makeup kit.”

“I don’t think it’s his,” said Field.

Dirty laughed. “Well, no shit.”

“LT!” yelled Mike. “Don’t worry no more, LT. Willow found your mascara.”

“It’s lipstick, eyeliner, blush, and cover-up actually,” said Willow.

“Great,” said Lieutenant McRae, walking up to the huddle. “I’ve got Mary-fucking-Kay in my platoon.” He turned towards Willow. “It’s not mine,” he added just to make sure. To the rest: “All right, let’s clean up and settle in.”

The night had come without their knowing. The sun was dropping below the green canvas to their west, and the heat was subsiding, like coffee cooling. The six men found what cover they could, swallowed another MRE, and settled down to sleep. The Lieutenant went off by himself, like always, but this time without his box.

“What does he keep in his box? What’s it for?” asked Moose.

“How big is it?” asked Field.

“Never seen it. None of my business anyhow.”

“Probably the best stroke book this side of the Pacific,” Dirty said. “One of those high class pornos.”

“Whatever, pervert,” said Willow. “I bet it’s something none of us would even know about if we saw it, and to be honest, I wouldn’t want to see it if I could.”

And then sleep came. And then the morning came. The soldiers could still smell themselves.

“We’re outta this shit hole,” said the Lieutenant.

“What about the box, LT?” asked Willow, as Mike hit him to shut him up.

“I found it walking around last night.”

“Did you tell *it* it shouldn’t be walking around alone at night?” asked Mike. He amused himself.

“Man, you are one not funny son-of-a-bitch,” said Dirty, pulling on his boots.

“We’re headed through the fields just west of here,” said Lieutenant McRae.

The troops finished dressing, ate, packed their shelters, cleaned their weapons. They were prepared for a new day. Well, not exactly a new day. It was the same day it always was. Same heat, same rain, same mud, same shit, same food, same bed, same soldiers. But they took some comfort in that familiarity. Familiarity breeds contempt? Not here. Not in Vietnam.

The platoon formed up and headed west through the wet fields towards the wet jungle. Lieutenant Scott McRae was out front, where he should be, with his box tied to his ruck. Dirty followed him, still trying to tell his story about his Uncle Frank. Willow stumbled behind him, just

stumbling. Klondike came next, complaining about no tan, even after all these months. Then Field, then Moose, and finally Mike, who brought up the rear. Mike checked their backs. Like a good soldier, he watched the trail behind his platoon.

“It’s déjà vu...” faded slowly as the platoon marched into the war.

Cowboys and Indians

It is now late afternoon, two days later, and closer to the mountains. The platoon had marched for a day and a half straight. The heat, the heat, the heat. Imagine what three full canteens, four clips of ammo, ponchos, MREs, pocket knives, rope, socks, laces, iodine, flak jackets, first-aid kits, Bug-Off, and foot powder feel like in the rucksack on top of the mud, on top of the fatigues, on top of the undershirts, on top of the shoulders, on top of the soul. It wears out the soul, not the body. The body replenishes itself. The mind carries the body beyond its bounds, applying relief like second, third, fourth, and fifth winds. The body grows tired, you rest. The body grows hungry, you eat. The body grows thirsty, you drink. The soul grows tired, hungry, or thirsty, and you do nothing. No respite for such weariness here. No comfort. If you are weary and lost, don’t try to find yourself, because you won’t.

“Sweet Lordy, I once was lost, but now I’m found!” shouted Dirty, sweat flowing. “There’s a beau-ti-ful river right up ahead. I’m swimming!” The men got their sixth wind and ran towards the river. Dirty just jumped right in. The others set their rucks and rifles down on the side of the muddy banks and removed their boots, socks, fatigues, and shirts. Willow kept his shirt on. Mike, Field, and Klondike climbed up on a bridge spanning the river and did cannonballs into the water, sending showers of relief onto the shore. Willow waded in, testing the mud beneath his feet.

“It feels like Jell-O,” said Willow.

Moose rolled down the bank, into the water, with a grin.

Lieutenant Scott McRae watched the river soak up his men. He felt like a lifeguard. “*Quit running on the side of the pool!*” His men were kids. This whole war was a doctored game of Cowboys and Indians.

He looked at his men. He looked at Klondike. That boy was one nice kid. There was an innocence about him that did not exist in this war, but somehow he had maintained it.

“I wanna be Buffalo Bill.”

Dirty, well, Dirty was just . . . Dirty. But he was the kind of dirty that made you laugh, the kind of dirty that everyone inside wanted to but never could be. Raised in the hills of Kentucky, a roughneck raised by roughnecks, and he'd raise a roughneck someday too.

"I'm Billy the Kid!"

Moose lifted his frame from the water, lowered his head, and hit Mike right at the waist, folding him up. Would've been a hell of a ballplayer.

"I'm Jesse James."

Field cleaned himself off. He scraped at the mud with his fingers, rolled around in the water, dunked and dunked his head, trying for clean.

"This town needs cleaning—I'm Wyatt Earp, here to do just that."

Mike treaded water, thinking of something funny to say, but nothing came to him.

"Boys and girls, Doc Hollywood has never felt happier."

Willow stood in ankle-deep water, still wearing his shirt, feeling Jell-O between his toes.

The green canopy above their heads filtered the sunlight on the river. The water flowed towards the men, around the men, and then past the men and under the bridge. The wind picked up, just slightly. The men stopped playing and started telling stories. They circled up. The sunlight reflected off the slow-flowing water.

Then the arrows. One caught Willow in the temple, pierced his head, matter dribbling to his shoulder before he broke the river's surface. Another pierced Moose's shoulder. Then another into his neck, his jaw. An arrow ricocheted off the water beside Mike. He smiled. One split the smile and the back of his head. Then the arrows stopped. The alive swam for the dead. The Lieutenant stood by the bridge. Though he had his rifle with him, he seemed paralyzed by the sight below. He bent to close his box, then strode to help pull the bodies ashore. The men's movements seemed solemn and paced. No one ran for their weapons.

Dirty was the first to talk. "Well, fuck, LT."

"Yeah."

"What the hell just happened?" asked Field, dragging himself out of the water.

"Where'd they come from?" said Klondike. He didn't look innocent anymore.

"What we gonna do, Lieutenant?" asked Dirty.

No reply.

“Well, shit.”

They pulled Willow up the shoreline and laid him under a large tree. The men headed back for Moose and Mike, but they were gone. They dug a grave in the soft sand big enough for Willow.

“Poor bastard,” said Dirty. “Shouldn’t have ever been here.”

They covered Willow with the sand they had removed, and Field placed three crosses made of small branches over the single grave, one for each man. They looked at each other. There were four of them. The Lieutenant counted aloud, “One, two, three,” then “four,” tapping himself last.

A New Lease on Life

They gathered what they could use from the remaining gear, threw the rest into the river, and crossed the bridge. They were now entering the thick of the jungle. There was no more day and night. There was just dark and darker. They moved at a quick pace, either running from Blood River, as Dirty now termed it, or running to a safer part of the war. But what exactly had happened? No one knew for sure. There hadn’t been the sound of fire—they were sure of that—but they weren’t sure now if what they’d seen were arrows. What they knew was that they were at war, and that war had happened. They seemed without destination or mission. The radio was gone, missing with Moose and Mike. Once across the bridge the Lieutenant had kept them moving with purpose, if only in gait. So his men still followed.

It was strange, losing three men and a radio so fast. But there was a strange absence of sadness or loss. There had been seven, and now they counted four. And that was that.

“Where we headed, LT?” asked Klondike.

“West.”

“All righty then,” said Dirty.

They humped all day through the jungle, without much progress. The jungle was heavy. There were trees. “Like bristles on a toothbrush,” Dirty said early. “Fuck.”

There was ground brush. Plants, ferns, branches, leaves, dirt. And vines. Vines rose from below, fell from above, and crossed from trunk to trunk like a living highway.

Darker soon came, and the platoon settled in. They stretched their ponchos, staked the low side with sharpened sticks. The poncho tents

were arranged in such a way that the men could all see each other. The Lieutenant did not go off on his own, and he did not take out his box.

“What’s up, LT?” asked Field.

“A story,” he said. He took a long drink from his canteen. “There was this guy. Had some problems in his life that he couldn’t deal with. Uncomfortable at home, uncomfortable at work. Had to escape. Rented a plane—had a license—from a local field. He loaded some boxes on the aircraft, then took off. His flight plan called for a departure from a small airport in Virginia to an airstrip on the north side of DC.” The Lieutenant paused to look at his men. It was like pre-school, each man cross-legged, face propped in his hands, eyes wide. “Now, we’re in a control tower at Washington National. One of the controllers has a small aircraft on radar, headed for Washington, D.C. It’s restricted airspace, with the White House and Congress and shit like that, so these controllers start to worry. Finally they contact the pilot on the radio, and he says he’s gonna land, right on the White House.”

“Fuckin looney,” said Dirty.

“Shut up, O.K.? Let him finish.”

“These controllers aren’t too big on the idea of having this plane land right on the President’s house, so they call their boss, who calls his boss, who calls his boss, and so on. Soon, this tower is fucking Grand Central Station. Air Force generals get involved. There’s a general on the horn now, talking with this nut, telling him he’s scrambled fighters to intercept him, that he’s gonna blow his ass out of the sky if he doesn’t turn off his present course, but the guy says he’s going out in style.” Then: “Maybe I better give you guys some rest.”

“No way, LT,” came the reply, in stereo.

Lieutenant Scott McRae smiled. “So they bring in this suicide specialist broad, one of these shrinks, and she starts talking with the guy. She finds out he has explosives on board, and his intent is to basically be a guided missile, right into the heart of American bureaucracy. So she applies all this shit she’s learned in school. She talks to the guy about his family, she talks to him about his life, she talks about his problems. She tells him to check his wings, where there are two loaded Air Force fighters bracketing. And the guy sees her point and says that he’ll turn off heading. The tower cheers. Some general is saying to the shrink that she’s gonna win a peace prize or something like that. She’s already writing the speech to the press in her head, thinking of the lecture to the behavioral scientists at Harvard, shit like that. Well, they obviously keep tracking this guy. He

deviates his heading like he said, turning east. The fighters follow him. It's getting to be night at this time, so they back off a little, still keeping him in sight. They're all headed to sea. Then the plane explodes in the night. Fucking Fourth of July for these fighter pilots. The crowd in the tower is still cheering, but the shrink is upset. She lost her man."

"So he killed himself?" asked Field.

Lieutenant Scott McRae grinned, a shady grin, a look these men had not seen before. "The guy opened a bottle of blood he'd collected, poured it over the dash, tied a rope to the yoke to hold the plane level, lit the five-minute fuse, then bailed. Opened his parachute under the canopy of darkness, drifted back towards shore, landed, stowed his rig, and got into his car. As he's driving off, he sees himself explode in the air, five thousand feet above. Problems solved. A new lease on life. I like that," the Lieutenant said, and so far as his three troops could tell, went to sleep.

The Arms in the Jungle

In the morning, when the men awoke, Klondike was dead. No screams in the night. No apparent struggle. He lay there, under the taut poncho, tucked under a blanket, with his legs outstretched. His boots had been cut up. Dirty did not ask questions this time. He just ran off into the jungle, not getting very far. But he ran. He screamed a cry of the jungle, a cry of war. Till now, Blood River was a freak occurrence, and Dirty had blamed himself for it, because he was the first to jump in. But this—no, this was something apart. This was death coming *to* them, passing over three of the men, and choosing the fourth. This was more purposeful than any ambush. Dirty came to trees in two parallel rows. Vines hung between them like gauze. Dirty looked down the hazy corridor. A cell that stretched into the distance. A cell with two walls, but forever. Dirty felt impelled to enter, then felt pulled in. Vines wrapped around his head and shoulders, around his chest, stomach, legs, ankles.

"Calm down," said the Lieutenant, "You have to calm down." He was approaching Dirty, machete drawn. "Dirty, can you hear me?"

"I want out, LT. I just want the fuck out," Dirty said. He let his body go limp. The vines unwrapped, once Dirty stopped fighting. The Lieutenant hacked anyway with the machete.

Field came up to the two men and helped Dirty to his feet. "You all right?"

“I dunno,” Dirty said. “I dunno.”

The Lieutenant looked at Field with those eyes.

“I need to be alone,” Dirty said. “Can I be alone just a minute?” He sat down.

The Lieutenant took a look at his man. He knew he should say something, but he said, “We’ll go pack up, then we’ll come back and get you.” Field followed him. “Calm down,” he had said to Dirty. “*Calm down?*” There was something about the LT’s calmness that scared Field. He *was* larger than life, bigger than war—at least this one. It was that mystery again, like the box. Whatever it was, Field felt it wasn’t going to be something he could understand.

The two men rolled up their ponchos, then rolled Klondike neatly into his, hacked out a hole, and then placed him. Klondike’s white face was pallid, but it was altered white, darker than before. Maybe it was just the darkness of the jungle. The Lieutenant ran his hand through the boy’s hair, then he and Field covered him. They didn’t take the time for a cross.

Lieutenant Scott McRae and PFC Matt Fields shouldered their rucks, then headed for Dirty.

“LT,” Field said. “Dirty’s stuff?”

Field couldn’t decipher the Lieutenant’s reply. Field asked again, but the Lieutenant was disappearing into trees, so Field grabbed Dirty’s rucksack and slung it through one arm. He ran for the spot in the trees he’d last seen his commander. For a moment, all Field’s senses seemed awakened, and he took in the full world of the jungle: silence, louder than sound, the smell of damp smell, the dark of green, sweat.

“Hey, Field,” said the tree. “Over here.”

Field looked at the tree in disbelief. Then he looked at the man beside the tree.

“Damn, LT, you scared me.” Then: “Where’s Dirty?”

Field slipped between some thick vines, back into the corridor of trees. Suspended seven feet above the ground by his neck hung Dirty. He swung slowly back and forth. In an odd way, Dirty looked safe.

“Ah. LT. Man,” said Field.

“Let’s press,” was the reply.

The Lieutenant started off down the long hallway before them. Field considered turning around, considered humping back through the jungle, across Blood River, through the endless shit holes, through base camp, back on the transport that had brought him here, back through high school and childhood, back through his birth. But then he felt that fear,

so he ran after the Lieutenant, down the corridor of trees, into the gauzy distance.

The Water's Words

Lieutenant McRae and Field walked for the rest of the day in silence. The Lieutenant still seemed to be going somewhere and Field followed. Now and then, out of habit, Field would step out to take point, but not knowing which way to head, he'd plant his feet. The Lieutenant would pass and he'd follow.

In time, they came upon another river, a smaller one. They sat on its bank to eat. Field opened an MRE. He ate the pork and noodles. He made ranger pudding, and ate that too. He drank water. The Lieutenant stared at his box. He took out an MRE, then re-rucked it. The Lieutenant finally looked up at his platoon.

"Field, what are you going to do when you get out of this war?"

"I don't know, LT. I'll do something"

"I know you will."

"What about you, LT?"

The Lieutenant just stared down at the stream, as though through it like glass or as though into it like an old wavy mirror.

The Lieutenant hopped up. He picked up his box, then set it beside Field. Field looked up at him.

They both picked up their gear, and headed downstream, hopping from rock to rock. The water flowed slowly, making no sound. Then it hummed softly. Then it talked. Then it roared. The two men peered over the edge of the waterfall.

"End of the road, LT," said Field.

"Guess so."

Field sat and untied his boots. He pulled them off, followed by his socks, and rolled up his fatigue trousers. "I'm Huck Finn," he could imagine Dirty or Mike shouting. Field plunged his feet into the stream, just relaxing. He looked up. The jungle canopy had opened, and Field could see clouds and the bright blue of sky. Then he saw the bright blue of the Lieutenant's eyes. The Lieutenant was balancing on the bank of the waterfall. Then the eyes stepped away. Field jumped to his feet. What was it he thought he could hear the water say? "A new lease, a new lease on life, a new lease."

My Eyes

What I remember about the war are blue eyes. Though it's no longer every night, I do still see them now and again as I drop off to sleep. I left the Lieutenant's box on the bank of that river and it's long fall. I didn't open it.

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