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from *The Light Where  
Shadows End*

**Fate**

**I** don't believe in fate.  
I don't believe what happens  
happens because it was meant that  
way, as though we were simply

filling in the pages of an already written story.

I don't believe the stray bullet or the winning lottery ticket or the one true love is out there on a street in the future somewhere waiting with our names.

No, if I believe in anything it's luck.

Good and bad. Hard luck and lucky runs. The yin and yang of happenstance. Random acts.

In June 1966, when I graduated from high school, I didn't see life that way, though I knew I was born during an unfortunate age.

The Vietnam War was prime time news by now, and though I didn't know much about it, and didn't care much for wars, I knew if it went on, one way or the other I would have to face it.

I was only seventeen at the time, but in six months I'd be eighteen, classified 2-A, and be eligible for the draft.

It wasn't fate. But it was very bad luck.

It was bad luck in the way that it's snake eyes to be poor, in the way that it's a broken mirror to grow up with a single, under-educated parent, in the way that it's aces and eights to have to work rather than going on to college.

It was bad luck in the way that money or power or a name could buy you a ticket out of the war.

It was also bad luck and not fate that over the next year and a half the war would escalate tenfold, that the North Vietnamese TET offensive of February, 1968 would change the course of the war, and that from March, 1968 on until the following year, the military would draft approximately 25,000 new recruits a month and I would be one of them.

Nor was it fate, but tough luck and bad timing that my appeal for a student deferment, (I was married and going full-time to a community college by now as well as working forty hours a week for Pacific Bell), would fall on the unsympathetic ears of my upper middle-class draft board, who drafted me three months early, then approved my appeal two months after I was already humping down a trail in Vietnam.

### **The Mystery**

I never heard the mortar that night.

But then, no one ever did. Not the ones that were close anyway.

Oh, maybe you heard the round shooting out of the tube a thousand meters away, the muffled poomf! and then your buddy yelling “Incoming!”, but once it was in the air spinning toward you, you never heard a sound.

If they were going to miss you, arc high over your head or to the left or right beyond you, then you might hear them spinning, a soft whistle like wind through bamboo as they spiraled past you through the air.

If they were close though, close enough to wound or kill you, so close they were going to hit the ground only a few feet or a few inches from where you stood, you didn't hear a thing, you only saw the orange and red burst of the explosion, and felt the burning shrapnel tearing through your flesh.

But on this night, on this February 23, 1969, at around 2:00 A.M., on this first morning of the '69 TET offensive, I would hear nothing at all—neither the firing, nor the explosion.

We had just returned from three weeks of “search and destroy” in the Ho Bo Woods the evening before, and Firebase Pershing, the battalion headquarters, had been a welcome sight, my home away from home for the seven months I'd been in Vietnam, the place where hot showers, clean socks, warm meals, and letters from The World were waiting, and where no L-shaped ambushes or hot LZs lie around a bend in the trail or just on the other side of a tree line.

No, with two rings of concertina wire around the perimeter, four batteries of artillery, and the battalion command post dug in under three layers of sandbags, the firebase was relatively safe.

Only the occasional sniper from nearby rubber trees gave us the rush of fear now and then.

Or the sound of incoming mortars.

Though I never heard it, (the mortar must have been fired while I was still sleeping), from the moment I stepped through the doorway of the bunker and into the naked sky, I knew something was wrong.

Call it a premonition, a sixth sense, combat hyper-awareness, but I felt like I had just walked into the firing zone of an ambush that was a trip-wire away from being sprung.

I couldn't pinpoint it exactly, but I felt it. It was too quiet maybe. Or it was the careless red glow of the cigarette from the new guy on guard duty that pinpointed our position. Or it was the ominous black of the moonless night.

Call it what you want, but for the few seconds while the mortar was spinning toward me through the dark sky, I could feel death breathing on my neck.

After that, all I remember is the flash, the heat, the red-hot metal, the jagged fragments piercing my arms, legs, chest, and head.

I remember being blown backwards through the night sky and crashing down onto the earth again, a heap of numb, bleeding flesh; and the burning, the warm liquid oozing over my body, the jungle fatigues soaking and sticking to my skin, the dull throbbing of pain; and terror flailing like a caged bird in the locked chambers of my heart.

And yet, I don't remember how I got there, whether I had walked out of the bunker half-asleep that night because someone had roused me to go on guard duty, or if I'd simply wandered outside because I'd heard someone call my name.

### **The Promise**

I would not die in Vietnam.

Others might, but not me.

It was something I said to myself over and over to keep me humping down the trail each day.

I said it under my breath during lulls in firefights. I said it as I walked out of the company's laager on eight-man night patrols deep into the terrifying jungle. I said it as I lay on my back a thousand meters from the company's barb-wired perimeter on two-man listening posts as Viet Cong guerillas moved in green shadows around us.

I would not die in Vietnam.

It was a promise I made, a vow to myself against the war, a pledge to my own allegiance.

I would not die here. Not here. Not in this wasted country a world away from my wife and family. Not here in this crazed excuse for a war. Not here where life meant so little. Not here. Not now.

And so, when the mortar exploded a few feet away and left me numb and bleeding, a crumpled heap against the bunker, I began mouthing it under my breath.

Maybe I screamed medic. Maybe the new guy who was hurt worse than I screamed it. It's impossible to know. But in a few seconds my buddies were picking me up and running me back into the bunker. In their faces I could see the white terror of my gaping wounds.

I repeated it over and over like a mantra as I waited for the medic to come.

I said it as I watched my buddies pull a blanket over the new guy's still, bloody face.

I said it as the medic cut a hole in my side so the blood filling my chest could drain and I could breathe better again.

I mouthed it silently to myself as I started to slip into shock from loss of blood as I waited for the medevac to arrive.

I said it out loud on the medevac when it rose and Firebase Pershing disappeared into the mist, and said it softly as if for the last time when all I wanted to do was sleep, close my eyes and sleep, sleep forever as the chopper droned on into the night.

I said it until I couldn't say it anymore and the medic grabbed my face and called me back, asking me over and over for my name.

"What's your name, soldier? What's your name? What? I can't hear you. Where you from? What's your mother's name? What? What company are you with? How old are you? How long have you been in country? Where's your home? Are you married? What's your name?"

I said it all the way to the hospital, a little whisper now, a short breath between questions I no longer tried to answer. I said it through the x-rays, through the doctor telling me they needed to take shrapnel out of

my brain, through the operating room where I slowly closed my eyes and slipped away. I said it as I watched the deep red bags of blood above me drain into my life.

### **The Burden of Miracles**

Thirty-one years had passed since I'd been wounded in Vietnam. Thirty-one years.

It was a miracle that I'd survived. The odds were a hundred to one that I should have died, or been paralyzed, or had brain damage.

Any one of several of my wounds could have killed me. I had had an artery severed in my arm, a vein cut at the jugular vein takeoff in my neck, a punctured lung, a fractured bone in my leg, mortar fragments peppered around my heart and spine, and two pieces of shrapnel in the frontal lobe of my brain.

The Army had held back the telegram informing my wife and family that I had been wounded for ten days because they weren't sure I would live. For three weeks, a nurse came twice a day to rip the dressings off of my thirteen open wounds to make them bleed and thus prevent infection. Nine and a half months later, I'd limped out of the Naval Hospital in San Diego, a walking miracle, to begin my new life.

I wish I could say I'd lived the life I'd wanted since that day, the life I'd imagined when I lay awake in the hospital bed in Long Binh thinking of home.

But the burden of miracles is often too much to carry.

I'd come back from Vietnam a knot of traumas and survivor's guilt. The fire support base I'd thought was so well protected had been overrun a week after I'd been wounded. Most of the guys who'd carried me into the bunker and saved my life were dead, killed in the battle to take back the perimeter. Two had died protecting the battalion command post and had been awarded posthumous silver medals. I left photos and poems for them when I rubbed their names off *The Wall*.

So what had I done with my life in those thirty-one years?

Not much. I'd lived it haphazardly, in fits and starts, committed to little and without much care.

The war and my wounds, psychological and physical, had been too much for either my wife or I to save our marriage, though it had taken us ten sporadic years of trying before we finally could divorce.

I'd finished college and then moved through a series of dead-end jobs—security guard, bus driver, telemarketer, retail clerk, assembly-line

worker. I'd written plays, stories, reviews, poems, and screenplays, but I never believed anything I did was worth much and so I never tried for much success.

I'd taught, directed, produced, and created, but for the most part I'd been on the move, committed only so long as the project would last, unable to stay in one place, or one job, or one relationship longer than a few years.

I drank too much, smoked too much, squandered money, friendships, loving relationships, and had lived my life as if there were no tomorrow, no future to care about, as if the life I'd been given wasn't worth living or being loved.

It wasn't until I'd gotten gravely ill with pneumonia and ended up in the hospital that I began to change my life.

I went into a program for addictions and psychological trauma. I stopped smoking and taking drugs. I went back to school to finish my master's degree. I began to see the future as more than another crossed-off day.

Yes, surviving had been a miracle, but living, being present to my life, was something I had to learn.

### **The Physical**

I'd come in for a routine physical, no different than any other physical I'd had each year for the past ten years.

Check my heart rate, my pulse, my prostate. Draw blood for the cholesterol and the other tests they normally ran.

Although I had felt a little run-down now and then over the past few months, I attributed that to overwork, stress, problems in my personal life, or simply lack of sleep. I still worked out for an hour or more every day and my blood pressure and heart rate were as strong as they'd been when I was in my twenties. As I'd moved since my last physical, this one would be with a new doctor, one I'd been assigned by my HMO.

Since it was only a physical, changing doctors didn't bother me. There would be very little for the new doctor to do, just read the lab results and advise me on preventive medicine.

Dr. Boteman however, was someone with a medical degree who pretended to be a doctor. He had all the medicinal traits I loathed: arrogance, emotional distance, a condescending attitude, a distracted, preoccupied demeanor as if he was already thinking about his next appointment, a quickness to hand out prescriptions for any ailment or complaint without regard to the underlying causes of the illness or to the side effects from the drugs he was prescribing.

In fact his whole office was a chaotic mess of confusion and defensive arrogance.

Although I'd had an appointment, I had to wait almost a hour before I got in to see him, and then, when I finally did see him, he couldn't figure out why I was there. When he finally realized it was for a routine physical, he had his nurse draw some vials of blood to do the lab tests, and set up a follow-up appointment in three weeks.

### **The Red Flag of the Body**

I was the last patient Dr. Boteman was to see that day. When I arrived in his office even his nurses and lab technicians were gone. Only the Napoleonic office manager was still there.

I was told to go into the examination room and wait. Although only a few weeks had passed, Dr. Boteman had completely forgotten who I was. I explained to him this was a follow-up to my previous physical, when we would have the results back from the lab tests he'd ordered.

He nodded and went off to look for my chart and the lab results. He came back five minutes later with a befuddled look on his face. For some inexplicable reason most of the lab tests had been cancelled. The few that were done told us very little. My cholesterol was fine, excellent, but that's about all he knew.

There was one disconcerting and confusing result however—my liver enzymes were high, four times the normal parameters.

As most of my lab results were cancelled however, we would have to order the tests again. I was angry, confused, nervous. I didn't know what it meant to have my liver enzymes so high, and I didn't trust that his office wouldn't lose my blood, or get the wrong lab results, or cancel them when they got to the lab again.

I had little faith in Boteman as a doctor and I didn't want to see him again. But I also wanted to find out what was going on as quickly as possible and figured it was best to let him finish and change doctors later.

He drew two more vials of blood and said his office would call me when the lab results were back in about a week.

His office never called.

I waited ten days and then I called myself to find out what was going on. The person who answered the phone was new and didn't have a clue how to find out what I wanted to know. She put me on hold.

I waited on hold like that for about ten minutes, then hung up. When I called back I refused to be put on hold again. I was incensed and ready to leap through the phone and strangle the careless clerk on the other line. All I wanted to know was whether they'd gotten my lab tests back. After being passed around from one mindless office person to the next someone finally tracked them down.

—Yes, they're here.

—Can you give me the results?

—No, you have to come in and see the doctor.

—Can you put the doctor on the phone?

More consultations.

—No, the doctor wants you to set up another appointment.

—Tell the doctor all I want is my medical records. I'll be in in twenty minutes to pick them up. Will you have them ready? I don't want to wait.

Hesitation. More consultations. Then finally—Yes. Yes, they'll be ready.

I went in, picked up my records that were in a manila envelope and walked out.

I didn't say a word.

When I got home I looked at the lab results. The liver enzymes had come back even higher this time. Although I felt fine, this worried me. I had no idea why they would keep going up or what it meant. I began looking through the assorted medical reference books I had but they really weren't much help. I could be suffering from cancer or a viral infection or a host of other internal diseases, some serious and life-threatening, others treatable with common antibiotics. I gave up and tried to sleep. I dreamt I was back in Vietnam, in the Ho Bo Woods, on night patrol.

I woke up sweating. I couldn't remember the last time I had had a dream like that. A long time. A long, long time.

That morning I called an urgent care clinic near my home and told them my situation. The nurse sounded concerned and told me to bring my medical records and come in as soon as I could. I said I would be there in an hour.

Dr. Shapiro was young but very meticulous and direct, a welcome change after my experience with Dr. Boteman. He looked at my lab tests trying to decipher them and wondered why Boteman hadn't run a hepatitis panel.

—That's the first thing with these high enzymes. We want to rule out hepatitis before we start looking for other things. We'll draw more blood and run them to the lab today. We should have some answers in a day or two.

I didn't know what hepatitis was, but it sounded a lot better than liver cancer. And I was thankful for Dr. Shapiro's quick response. I had already lost a month and a half in the chaos of Boteman and his office, so to know something in a few days was a gift.

Two days later Shapiro called me with the news. Hepatitis A and B had come back negative, but I had tested positive for Hepatitis C. He would refer me to a specialist in Internal Medicine at St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica. He couldn't tell me much about it other than it was a blood disease, a virus, and that it was a chronic illness.

No, it didn't go away without treatment. And yes it was serious, and could cause severe health problems. They'd only isolated the virus in the last few years and treatments were still in the developmental stage. He would have his nurse set up an appointment with Dr. Afshani for me.

I thanked him and then hung up feeling a heavy grief slip over me. With the exception of my wounds in Vietnam and my bout of pneumonia, I had rarely been sick. Even when I was sick I refused to be sick and went on as if I weren't. I'd only gone in to the emergency room with pneumonia when it had gotten so bad I couldn't breathe and thought I was having a heart attack. I couldn't imagine myself with a serious illness. That was something other people had, not me.

No, the idea of being sick, of having a chronic illness, was unacceptable. I simply refused to have it. Just as I refused to die in Vietnam, I refused to be sick now. I didn't have time in my life for a serious illness. I had too much to do.

Unfortunately, I was to discover the virus didn't care what I thought. It had lived in my body for some time and it wasn't going anywhere, no matter what I believed.

### **Where, When and How**

Since the test results came back with the diagnosis of HCV I had tortured my brain to remember where I might have gotten it.

I thought, like HIV, that it could only have been passed on by infected needles or sexual intercourse. (In fact, Dr. Boteman and Dr. Shapiro, General Practitioners, were both mistaken on this, which shows how much ignorance there is even within the medical profession on HCV.) But HCV, I learned, is acquired from blood not sperm, which means there are a host of common ways to get and trans-

mit it—at the dentist’s office through non-sterilized instruments, at the pedicurist’s boutique through old blood on nail clippers and such, from the needles used while getting an ear pierced or a tattoo, and through blood transfusions. Sex was the least prominent cause since it could only be transmitted if there were genital sores or during menstruation. And 20-25% were acquired by unknown causes.

I don’t know why it was so important for me to know how I’d contacted the virus, but it was. Maybe because with the exception of my pneumonia I’d never been seriously ill, never had a sexually transmitted disease, a chronic illness, a broken bone, nothing other than the wounds I’d received in Vietnam.

But that was in 1969 and it was hard to imagine carrying a virus inside me for over thirty years and not having any symptoms. And, when I’d asked Dr. Shapiro about this, he couldn’t imagine the disease lying dormant in my body for so long. Doctor Afshani, the specialist, knew better.

I liked him from the moment I met him. He was soft-spoken, friendly and especially tactful, informative, and direct with both his patients and his staff. He was a man who clearly knew his terrain and his place in it.

He informed me about the various aspects of Hepatitis C, that it was a chronic illness, often undetected because of its subtle “flu-like” symptoms, that an effective treatment had only been discovered in the past two years, and that even an accurate diagnosis was only possible since the hepatitis panel was developed in 1998. Since the disease evolved very slowly, often over twenty or thirty years, generally people who had contacted the virus lived full lives and died from other causes. Unless cured however, or its progress slowed, the disease would eventually lead to cirrhosis, liver failure, and even liver cancer. Our first priority would be to establish how long I’d had it and how fast it was progressing in my body, and if and what kind of damage it had caused. We also needed to find out what kind of genotype it was since certain genotypes responded better to treatment than others.

We discussed the possible ways I might have acquired the virus in depth. It was all hypothetical, but it was also extremely important.

If I’d contacted the virus at the dentist’s office I knew the disease would be only a few years old and I would still have twenty to thirty years before I would begin to have symptoms and the disease would cause any serious damage to my liver.

If, however, I’d contacted it through a blood transfusion in Vietnam, the virus could have already severely damaged my liver and could very rapidly lead to debilitating cirrhosis and liver failure, or cancer.

“How long” I heard myself say, breaking the silence that had uncomfortably filled his office.

—Five to ten years, perhaps. But this is the most extreme situation. And we have new treatments aggressively being developed so I wouldn’t worry about this right now. When we get the lab tests and the biopsy back, than we’ll have a better idea of what we’re dealing with.

I thought about my mother’s triple bypass surgery the previous year, how, at eighty-two, after suffering two heart attacks, she had come through the surgery, recovered, and now, fourteen months later, she was as strong and independent as ever. I was certain she would live on into her nineties.

But I was fifty-two, with a heart rate and a pulse of a teenager, physically fit and in the prime years of my life, and suddenly I was being told that in few short years I might be dead or battling to stay alive from a disease I could not feel or see, a disease I might have gotten thirty years ago from blood that had saved my life. It was inconceivable, and I wasn’t ready to accept it, hypothetical or not.

I thanked him and set up the appointments for the lab tests.

I walked into the elevator and stood there dazed, unable to push the button to go up or down. Waves of anger, resentment, regret, grief, and defiance swirled inside my chest.

For the first time the virus had become real, a killer with my name.

And, as I stared into the face of death and saw myself, I realized I’d been here before, and that maybe I’d never left.

### **Pinning the Tail on the Donkey**

When I was a boy, one of my favorite games was “Pinning the tail on the donkey.” There was something about being blindfolded and spun around until I was dizzy and then being pointed in the direction of a wall where a large, crayon drawing of a donkey waited for its tail.

Maybe I liked it because I was always good at imagining, visualizing the donkey in my mind and where it was, and so was able to gauge the location of its hind end and pin its tail where it belonged.

And that’s how I felt that morning as I drove to the hospital to take the tests that would give us a picture of my virus. The body of tests and x-rays would tell us which of the eight various genotypes my virus was, approximately how long I’d had it, and the severity of liver damage it had already caused; it would give us a picture of what we were looking at and thus help us to figure out how to treat it.

We were however, for all our sophisticated medical technology, simply pinning the tail on the donkey I thought. The donkey was the virus that was multiplying and getting stronger inside me, and the tests were our attempts at pinning a tail on it, of trying to figure out where the tail belonged.

But it was still hard for me to imagine it, this donkey without a tail.

It was hard to hold a picture of what it was, what it looked like, and what effect it would have on my life because I had had no symptoms as yet.

I had felt no pain to imagine the damage the virus was doing to my liver. There had been no blood in my stool or urine to give it a color. No fever to give it an expression. No aching muscles to give it a name.

Nothing.

Just a silent killer that was building up poisons inside me, drenching my liver in toxins that I couldn't see, or touch, or feel.

I still did my daily regimen of an hour to an hour-and-a-half walk up and down the mountain where I live. And I still worked twelve or fourteen hours a day and rarely slept more than six hours.

But I couldn't see this donkey I had inside me, let alone pin a tail on it. So when I got to the hospital and they began drawing vials of blood that would determine what genotype I had, and how fast or slow it would progress to liver failure or cancer, I still had a hard time believing it was real.

How could I have a life-threatening virus growing inside me when I felt so good, when I was in such great health?

Once the vials had been drawn from my veins, it was time to inject into my bloodstream the dye that would show up on the ultrasound.

It was strange to see my liver pulsing like a small embryo on the blue ultrasound screen. And even stranger to see the dots of pink dye appear in various clusters after a few seconds like a pointillist painting of my endangered life.

Here was my donkey now, alive, but not so well inside me. The pink clusters were where the damage was, where the tail belonged. And so I began to read my life in the dots, the severity of the infection in the splotches of flesh-colored dye. I began to imagine how my liver was being scarred by these red demons in my blood.

I lost count of how many ultrasound x-rays were taken. Eight or nine. Eleven or twelve. It didn't seem to matter. I had my virus pictured now, my donkey with a tail.

When it was over, I walked through the hospital doors and sat down on the wall of a fountain where nurses, technicians and doctors sometimes ate their lunches.

It was a beautiful spot, a small courtyard that seemed remote from all the suffering and anguish inside the hospital, and glittering from the bottom of the fountain were the copper and silver of thousands of coins.

I sat there for a while thinking about the pictures of my liver on the ultrasound, how it almost looked like a small embryo inside me, an unborn infant with red splotches where the disease was.

I sat there, and then I took out a penny, and tossed it in the fountain, and walked away.

It was a wish that didn't come true.

### **The Biopsy**

The idea of having a needle being pushed through my belly and into my liver was beyond my comprehension. I thought "Oh, okay, so they're going to stick a needle in my liver, how long can that take?" I figured I'd be in and out of the hospital in a few hours and planned my day accordingly.

After the procedure I would go over to UCLA to do some research for an essay I had been working on, and later take a walk along the beach, before finally driving back home on Pacific Coast Highway. My ignorance also made me inappropriately giddy, joking with everyone I met as I entered the hospital and asked for directions to the pre-op room.

When I arrived at pre-op however, everything changed.

First, I had to be admitted to the hospital which meant all of my clothes and valuables were to be taken from me and I had to put on a hospital gown. Then the charge nurse asked me who was going to pick me up after the procedure.

No, I couldn't drive. That was impossible. I had to be sedated with a powerful anesthetic for the procedure and driving was out of the question.

My jokes were met with blank faces. The nurses and technicians were all business, serious as morticians.

It wasn't that they didn't have a sense of humor. It was that my liver biopsy *was* serious business. The procedure had many risks. It could cause my liver to go into shock, or to not stop bleeding after the sample was extracted. I could suffer adverse effects afterwards to either the anesthesia, or the procedure itself.

As my finger was being pricked to test my coagulation rate, I was asked for the telephone number of the person who was going to pick me

up so the nurse could later call them and arrange for my discharge. I gave the nurse my girlfriend's work number as another nurse arrived to insert the I.V. which was to carry the anesthetic into my vein.

As I lay there waiting for the drug to take effect I thought back to the last time I remembered having an I.V. in my arm.

It was at Long Binh, the Army Hospital, and I had just awakened from brain surgery to remove two pieces of shrapnel from my frontal lobe. I had been "out" from the surgery for almost two days. My whole body was numb and yet throbbing with a dull ache from my multiple wounds. On the rack behind my head hung two plastic bags that fed into my bloodstream. In one was plasma and medications. In the other was blood.

Now, thirty years later, another I.V. was feeding anesthetic into my bloodstream for a biopsy that would find out whether that blood that had brought me back to life had at the same time infected me with hepatitis.

And then suddenly, lying there looking up at the florescent lights of the hospital waiting for the anesthesia to take effect it finally hit me that I might die—no, more than that, that I might die soon, sooner than I'd ever imagined, that since that night thirty years ago when I should have died, when I'd completely recovered despite all the odds against me, that I'd been living on borrowed time, the germ lying dormant inside me, each day getting stronger, more potent, invading more and more veins in my liver, that the war I'd spent all these years trying to leave behind, the war that I'd tried to forget, the scars I'd tried to hide, the grief I'd tried to bury, was here inside my body, inside my veins, pumping in and out of my heart, through my liver, my kidneys, my lungs, my brain, that the war had never left me and never would. It was as emblematic of me as this virus was of it.

I was ready now, anesthetized and prepped, and when the nurse came to take me upstairs for the biopsy I wasn't laughing or making jokes anymore.

Neither was she.

We rode up the elevator to the third floor in silence and then I was rolled next to the door of the procedure room where I would wait outside in the hallway until they were ready for me.

Inside the room I could hear the cries and moans of a young child. The sounds were terrible, excruciating to hear, especially lying out there waiting to go in.

If I hadn't been drugged, I would have ripped the I.V. out of my arm and run out of the hospital.

It is 3:00 A.M. now and I am lying awake on the “head” ward of the Air Force Hospital in Yokohama. The young, nineteen year-old soldier in the bed next to me is moaning loudly as he does every night at about this time. He is paralyzed from the neck down from a piece of shrapnel no larger than a fingernail that severed his spinal cord. His moans join a chorus of other moans and cries from other “head” wounds on the ward, a chorus I will hear long after I have left that ward and gone back to The World, a chorus that will haunt me whenever I feel happiness in my life.

It is 3:00 A.M. and I am lying awake listening to the cries of young boys whose lives would never be the same, wondering why I, instead of they, have been so lucky, why I, with all my wounds, am not paralyzed or brain-damaged or blind, why the shrapnel did not leave me like they without words to articulate my suffering, only gut-wrenching moans saturated with anguish and rage.

It is 3:00 A.M. and I am home now, in an apartment somewhere. It is eight or ten years later and I still hear the moans. But these are not the moans of wounded soldiers, these are children, Vietnamese, “suspected” Viet Cong, and this is a village called Trang Bang, and the moans are from napalm, from the licorice smelling flames that are eating their arms and legs, and above the moans are the high-pitched wails of mama-sans, howls like crippled dogs run over by cars, and I am awake or dreaming or dreaming awake and I can’t tell the difference, I can’t tell the difference and I won’t for years later, and now I know what happened to the thirty-one years and why this is the beginning of my life.

And now I am outside in the hallway again, lying on a gurney, twisting my head to see the small child being rolled out of the room, a little blond girl, maybe five or six, and all the stuffed grief of thirty years rises and floods over my eyes, and I just lie there silent as someone comes and rolls me into the room and shaves the area around my liver and swabs iodine on, and then the needle is being pushed deep inside me, and I don’t feel a thing, I don’t feel a thing even when the needle is slowly slid out, and then I’m rolled back into the hallway and onto the elevator to wait in post-op for my girlfriend to come and pick me up and take me home.

And now I begin to feel, now I begin to feel it all.

### **Day of Reckoning**

Doctor Afshani called and left a message when the results of the biopsy came back.

Short and succinct: “Your liver shows moderate damage and the early stages of cirrhosis.”

Moderate damage. Cirrhosis. I tried to imagine what that meant.

I remembered my father having cirrhosis at the end of his life, but he’d been an alcoholic. He’d drank heavily since he was a teenager and had become obese in his last years, eventually dying of a heart attack at seventy-five.

I remembered the way he looked the last time I’d seen him. Bloated. Jaundice-colored. Face smudged with red blotches.

“Cirrhosis.” I wondered if I would end up looking like my father.

“Moderate liver damage.” Moderate. Not mild or severe, but moderate, somewhere in between. But in between what?

I called him back.

He repeated the same thing on the phone, little more. He wanted me to come in that week and discuss our options. He thought we should start an aggressive interferon treatment as soon as possible.

Three days later I was in his office discussing the implications of the biopsy and the various options.

He started by explaining what he had told me on the phone. The biopsy had found moderate scarring of my liver which represented the early stages of cirrhosis. The good news was that my genotype was 2B, which responded favorably to the treatment of interferon / ribavirin in approximately 50% of the cases. The interferon / ribavirin was a new treatment, developed in the last year and the best we had at the moment, but that research was very promising and better treatments were on the horizon.

I would have to inject myself with the interferon three times a week and take the ribavirin daily. There would be side effects. I would have flu-like symptoms—nausea, fatigue, muscle aches, depression, and probably lose more of my already thinning hair.

The treatment was very expensive so it was very important to see whether or not my insurance company would pay for it. If my insurance didn’t cover it he could refer me to two doctors who were conducting studies on HCV. He was certain they would take me since I’d never had treatment before. And because I was in such good health, I would be a prime candidate for such studies.

I said I would check with my insurance, took the names of the doctors, thanked him, and said I would be in touch. He looked at me kindly and then went to see another patient.

As I walked through the doors of the clinic the light of the bright afternoon sun stunned me.

I had to sit down and find my bearings again.

Thirty-one years. Thirty-one years this virus had been inside me, growing, multiplying, getting stronger. I'd brought it back with me from Vietnam like I'd brought back the scars that zigzagged across my arms, legs, chest, and neck. I'd brought it back like the flashbacks and night terrors and survivor's guilt that I had fought through so many years, like the addictions and isolation and grief I'd thought I'd overcome.

It was the blue baby with pink splotches where battles were still raging, an infected embryo shaped like Vietnam.

It had hid secretly in the blood that had saved my life. It had slept in my body for nine months as I had recuperated in a hospital in Yokohama. It had stowed away in my liver as I had flown back to The World.

No, Vietnam had never left me. It was in my body, in my blood. And then it hit me: My genotype 2B was rare in the United States, but common in Asia. It was my blood mixed with transfused blood, with the blood of a Vietnamese boy perhaps, a boy eighteen or nineteen like me, a guerilla probably, whose life was cut short by an American bullet, or bomb, or grenade, a young soldier like me whose blood was saved and given to save another soldier's life, the enemy's, mine, and so it was fitting that through it all he went on battling, mounting small ambushes over the years until he was ready for a full offensive, for a long sustained attack on my liver and on my life.

No, Vietnam had never left me. It was alive and well in my bloodstream and if I didn't kill it, or somehow neutralize it, it would eventually kill me.

**R.G. Cantalupo** was awarded a Combat Bronze Star and three Purple Hearts during his tour in Vietnam. His work has appeared in over a hundred literary journals both nationally and internationally. He has published four books of poetry. The excerpt which appears here is from *The Light Where Shadows End*, a book-length memoir currently seeking a publisher.