

*Robert E. Skinner*

## Labor Day 1973: An Episode of War

*Friday, 1130 hours*

### **Commissaryman Third Class Jake Wade, USCG**

You spend enough time in good ole Charley Golf and you see it all—charter boats losin’ their screws in mid-cruise, jerkoffs who go out in a gale in a freakin’ rowboat with an outboard, people fallin’ asleep on the beach while their two-year-old plays at the surf line—like I say, you see it **all**, man.

Long holidays are like the worst. You get like a hundred million people swarming down to Hatteras from Norfolk and Elizabeth City, and it’s like cockroaches when you turn on the galley light.

Anyways, Labor Day weekend’s just started, and already we’ve turned down six requests to pull somebody’s freakin’ pickup outa the sand, and now this chick with the longest, finest legs I ever seen comes runnin’ in havin’ hysterics.

### **Boatswain’s Mate Third Class Jimmie Doyle, USCG**

The minute the door flies open, I smell trouble. The other guys never slam in like that because nothing around here gets anybody that excited—’cept maybe a chick off the beach with her melons fallin’ outa the top of a teeny bikini.

She’s screamin’ something about her boyfriend and the rip tide, and I’m thinkin’ “holy shit—he’s already dead and she don’t even realize it.” I put my poker face on ‘cause I don’t want to upset her any worse.

I sit her down on the green plastic sofa in the rec area, and she’s cryin’ and pulling at her hair, which is wet and tangled. Gradually I get her to tell me the details.

### **Becky Pascarelli, Instructor of English Literature**

Jesus, this is so **awful**—God, one minutes he’s there in the surf and the next he’s gone. I ran up the beach—I don’t know—fifty yards? I called out to him, but he didn’t answer. I was just **frantic**. Nothing like this has **ever** happened to me before. I don’t know **what** I’m going to tell Doctor and Mrs. Craddock.

But he's *got* to still be out there. Richard was an All-American running back in college. Why, he's able to pick up a man under each arm and walk around the room with them. You've *got* to find him—you've just *got* to.

### Jake

Man, this chick must still watch "Sesame Street." We got a freakin' thirty-knot wind comin' outa the nor'east, and the ocean looks like freakin' corduroy. All-fuckin'-American Richard's prob'ly scrapin' along the bottom by now.

Tough luck—she's a cute chick, too. Every time I take a liberty in Norfolk, I hope to find a nice, cute chick with legs like hers, and you think I find one? Fat chance. It's dogs and sailors keep off the grass in that fuckin' town.

Man, this is really gonna suck. Bet we spend the whole weekend underway lookin' for this guy's corpse. It won't matter to the Old Man that it's a lost cause. He likes that Coast Guard slogan too much—you know, the one that goes "you got to go out, but you don't have to come back." You know what I say to that don'tcha? FTG man, FTG all the way.

### Jimmie

There's nothin' to do but go by the numbers in a case like this. I send a teletype message to Group Headquarters in Buxton, then I wake Junior Johnson up and we drive the GM Powerwagon to Hatteras Point to see if the body's washed up.

Junior bitches and gripes like always. He's got ninety-three days and a wake-up left on his hitch, and every day he pisses and moans when you give him something to do.

Some days I want to tell 'em to tack those three months onto my enlistment just to get him outa here sooner. He ain't but a seaman, but he's a better boat handler than some of the third class bos'n's mates we got in this shallow water navy. I'd rather have him than most of the other guys.

Down at the point, it's worse than I thought. Sea's are running three feet easy, with twenty or thirty-knot winds putting white caps on every wave. What the hell is this dick-head thinking, goin' out to swim in water like that? His girlfriend's never gonna get over this.

We return to the truck and radio the station to call Gunderson back in. I hate to be on a full-blown SAR (Search and Rescue) with that shaky sucker callin' the shots, but that's the way it is. Damn these holiday weekends anyhow.

*Friday, 1230 hours*

**Boatswain's Mate First Class Al Gunderson, USCG**

Okay, let's get this show on the road. That guy's probably dead already, but that ain't the important thing. The important thing is not to screw up. The skipper don't like this station 'cause it's full of college-boy draft dodgers and sea lawyers. All the more reason for us to make a good showin'.

Jimmie Doyle and Junior Johnson are both out in the 44 footer—I can trust them guys. They know the helm from a bowline. It's that red-headed smart-aleck, Vlammick and his pal, Delaney out in the 30 footer that I gotta watch. Them and that cook, Wade. Wade's put soap in my food twice, but I can't prove it—the lousy sonofabitch.

Can't worry about all that now. Gotta concentrate—coordinate this search. Gotta have things under control, in case the Old Man or the Exec walks in. The Exec ate my ass off once over a paperwork mistake. Nothin' but a lousy coupla numbers wrong, but still he ate my ass off. I can't let these clowns around here make me look bad.

Jesus, I hope they don't lose one of the boats in this rough sea. That'd be on my damn record forever.

*Friday, 1400 hours*

**Becky**

We're going to be married in two months. Richard and I have been going out since high school, you know. It's true. Richard asked me to marry him at the Junior Prom. 'Course, he insisted that we finish our educations before we got married. Richard had plans—for us, I mean. He wanted for us to be financially stable. He was always talking about how tight the job market would be if the war ended suddenly and all those guys came back home. It really concerned him. I used to joke with him that by the time we were stable enough to suit him, I'd be an old woman. No—I'm not as young as I look. I'll be 28 in October.

*Saturday, 1330 hours*

**Jimmie**

Man—two days of bouncin' up and down in this sea. My ass feels like it's got a blister on it. These 44 footers are like footballs in the water—hit 'em with a little wave and they heel all the way over. Junior's wedged himself into a corner and

gone to sleep, the sonofabitch. I could sail right past Richard Craddock and not see him for fightin' the helm of this boat.

What they expect us to find out here in this sea is beyond me. No way he could be alive without a life jacket.

Funny how life it, you know it? Here's this Craddock guy—he's got it made. His girl said a football injury made him draft exempt—he's from a wealthy family, he's almost finished an MBA at Duke, and he's engaged to that hot-bodied little blonde. He has everything—then he comes down here on a holiday and drowns. It's like God saved him from getting killed in 'Nam, but jerks the rug out from under him during a vacation—just when he's about to collect the payoff. Weird. Spooky as shit...

That Becky—she reminds me of my wife. Anne Marie was blonde and stacked like her. Ex-wife, is what I mean. We'd gone to school together too, up in Richmond. We got married just before I had to enlist. Thought when I got stationed down here instead of to a White One (Coast Guard cutter) that we'd lucked out. I didn't count on what living on this island would do to her—to us. She got so damn lonely and bored with me on port-and-starboard duty. And there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. One day I came home from the station and there was this note she'd left... it was like gettin' one of those telegrams from Washington—"Dear So-and-So. We regret to inform you, blah, blah, blah..."

### Jake

Here's ole Jakey, saving the world from Godless Communism waxing the mess deck. **Yeeee Haaaa!** This was Gunderson's idea, even though I just cut and waxed the damn deck last week. He just can't stand to see anybody standing still. Dumb-ass lifer.

Gotta say, though, I'm enjoyin' watchin' that jerk come unglued, the longer this SAR call goes on. He's scared shitless the Exec'll catch him in a screw-up.

You can always tell when Gunderson starts to split down the middle—he starts pacin' around the comm room, slappin' his hands together, sayin' stuff like "let's get this show on the road." By then, he's needin' a drink **real** bad, but he don't dare take one in case the Old Man or the Exec comes in. He takes a coupla belts and it starts to ooze outa his skin like sweat—you can smell him from here to the docks.

That Becky's kind of a sweet girl. I feel bad for her 'cause she's really beatin' herself up over this. I keep tellin' her it's not anybody's fault—it's just bad luck. It's like bein' in the wrong nightclub in Saigon when the

Viet Cong sets off a bomb. I tell her, a man's only got so much luck, and sometimes it just runs out at a bad time.

Life's a bitch, man.

*Saturday, 1500 hours*

**Becky**

I feel so *helpless* just sitting here. I called Dr. and Mrs. Craddock and they're on the way here from Chapel Hill, and there's been nothing to do ever since but wait.

This station is so deathly still—nothing but these disembodied voices and static from the radios. A helicopter's landed twice to refuel, but the rest of the time it's just nothing. The boy who's the station cook comes in here once in a while, brings me Cokes and coffee—even a sweatshirt to cover up. If it weren't for him, I think I'd go out of my mind.

*Oh God*, this waiting is so hard. I wish so much that— I mean if I hadn't said—

*Sunday, 0930 hours*

**Gunderson**

The Exec's here again, Goddamnit. He ain't much for talkin', but boy does he like to snoop around. I know what he's doin'—he knows I passed the exam for Chief Boatswain's Mate, and he's lookin' for any reason he can find to keep from approvin' the promotion. I can't screw up today. I can't.

Thank God I got all these shitbirds around here turnin' to. If he'd found a bunch'a them screwin' around or in the rack, sleepin', he'd of blamed me.

*Sunday, 1500 hours*

**Jimmie**

The wind's finally shifted and died down some. The seas have calmed down a lot, too. Finally I can stop fighting this helm for a while.

I don't believe it—Junior's come out of hibernation and he's actually on deck with some binoculars. He's yelling something about two points off the starboard bow. Wait—the helo's hovering over in that direction, too.

Aw, hell—I see it now, on that sandbar. We've finally found that stupid dick-head.

**Becky**

Something's happening—I can't understand it all, but there's something about not being able to get a boat close enough inshore. Does that mean they've found him?

I could tell him how sorry I am now. It was just the way he sprung it on me—that he'd been offered a job in Cleveland. I'd only just begun my teaching, and was really enjoying it. If he'd only been a little more considerate... I didn't mean all the things I said....

**Jake**

I hear Jimmie and the helo call in at the same time, so something's up. Yeah, now I get it. Jimmie can't get to the dead guy without runnin' aground, and the helo guys can't get him because there's only two of 'em aboard, and they can't shut the helo's engine down.

Fuckin' Gunderson's standin' there with the mike in his hand and his mouth open—he can't think of what to do, and the Exec's standin' there watchin' him while his brain turns to oatmeal.

Finally, the Exec takes the mike and orders the helo back to the station. He hands the mike back to Gunderson, and I'm about to laugh my ass off—but then the Exec looks at me and says, "Wade, get two pairs of gloves and meet me at the helo pad." Only then do I realize how bad I fucked up by hangin' around the comm center.

In no time, the helo's back and I crawl in after the Exec and hand him his gloves. When we're airborne, nobody says nothin'. I take a look at the helo crewman and see he's hung over somethin' awful, tryin' not to puke. The air in the cabin's hot, dry, and feels alive with static electricity.

We touch down on a sandbar no more than fifteen feet wide and maybe fifty long, and there's this thing lyin' on it. I follow the Exec over with the Stokes litter, and see the thing is a man. He's big—over six feet and maybe two hundred pounds. His arms are bent at the elbow, held upright, like he was reachin' for something he couldn't get to. For damn sure nobody was reachin' back.

I try not to look at his face—it looks like crabs have been at it. His skin must've burned and blistered, too, because the wind's torn sheets of it loose and it's flappin' all around his body.

The Exec yells at me to put the litter down beside him, then we wrestle the body into it. We pick up the litter and I feel like it's gonna pull my freakin' arms outa the sockets. As we carry it, I see the Exec's panting and red in the face. The helo crewman stands in the cabin door like a lump

until the Exec yells at him to get down and help us. Now the crewman really looks like he wants to puke.

We're airborne again, and the crewman throws a blanket over the body. The hot air in the cabin makes the blanket flutter, like Richard's under there and he ain't quite dead yet, and wants us to notice. I can't stop lookin' at it.

The Exec sees me lookin', and he puts a hand on my shoulder, gives me a funny smile—not happy or nothin', but like we just shared some weird joke. I can't think of nothin' to say.

### **Becky**

They won't let me see him. They say I ought not to look.

I know I upset him earlier. Whenever we'd have an argument, Richard would have to rush out and do something physical to blow off steam. We'd always make up afterward, but he'd be so angry it would scare me. This time I didn't get scared for some reason. I was so angry about having to give up my job I didn't think...

I didn't mean to say the things I said. I just wanted him to think about me for once. Why did he have to run off into the surf like that? What am I going to do now that he's gone?

*Sunday, 1730 hours*

### **Jimmie**

I get back to the station and find the Sheriff's ambulance hasn't arrived yet. For some reason, everybody's standing around the body, which is lyin' on the ground with a dark wool Navy-issue blanket on it.

I walk over to them. I see in Gunderson's eyes how strung out he is—as soon as the Exec leaves, he'll go home and get fucked up, probably. For the first time, I realize he spends every day scared.

Jake looks at me, but for once he's got no wisecrack. Behind them, sitting on the concrete steps to the garage, Craddock's girlfriend hugs herself into that ratty gray sweatshirt of Jake's and rocks back and forth like somebody with a stomach wound. Her tan face is waxy pale, and her cheekbones stick out sharply beneath her hollow eyes.

I look down at the blanket-covered form and see how the blanket is bunched out at the middle. I pull it back and take in the mutilated face, the torn, blistered skin, the arms reaching up.

What were you reaching for in those last minutes, Richard? For Becky? For God's strong right hand to pull you into heaven? For all the stuff you didn't get

while you were alive? They say that when a grunt gets a mortal wound on the battlefield, he calls out for his ma. Did you do that?

Nobody's talking, but I know some of them are thinkin' how we spent almost three days looking for a man named Richard Craddock, and all we got to show for it is a pile of dead meat. We fought, but we lost. Casualties were a hundred percent.

I drop the blanket and stand up as the Dare County Sheriff's ambulance arrives. As the deputies load the litter, Becky gets inside with it. She begins to take off the sweatshirt, but Wade says, "Forget it—it's yours." She looks at him dumbly as the ambulance door closes. As they drive off, I think about the wife I lost, and Richard, each defeated by something could neither see nor touch, something inside that weakened them at a crucial moment.

I look at my watch and see it's 1800 hours. The tide's in. The others split up and go in separate directions, not speaking. I watch the ambulance disappear into the village of Hatteras, thinking what a fine body that Becky's got.

In his 15<sup>th</sup> year as Librarian at Xavier University of Louisiana, **Robert E. Skinner** has published five novels, his latest being *Pale Shadow*. His second novel, *Cat-Eyed Trouble*, was recently released in France as part of Gallimard's Série Noire.