

Two Stories by Joseph Hullett

A Comedy Of Manners

Boot camp hootches were green canvas tents anchored to a permanent 2x4 frame that kept the canvas from flapping loose. Hootches housed sixteen bunks—eight along either side of a center aisle. In my hootch, the *dramatis personae* included Wonder-bread whites, a Canadian, a couple of Mexicans, a Hopi Indian, and one black guy—a kid from Oakland named Post.

Post had drawn the lead bunk just to the left of the front hatchway. My own rack was last on the right. First night—while the sixteen of us sorted gear and stowed it in green, wooden footlockers—Post said offhandedly, “Listen, fellas, I know what’s what. I know you’re all wondering about me ... how to act, what to say. Isn’t like we can go off to ourselves, we’re stuck here together. So just know, I know what’s what. People together, they got to talk. Can’t be watching every word. So if you was to say something on accident, just know, I’m okay.”

The hootch fell silent until a tall, goofy-looking kid volunteered a cautious, “You mean we could like... *slip* or something?”

I forget the goofy kid’s name, but come to recall, he was the Canadian. Drafted as a resident alien or some such, he kept bellyaching that he didn’t *have* to stay, as if staying were a favor to the rest of us. He washed out about 4th week—asthma, I think. Sucks to his ass-mar!

Bare-chested, Post was squatting beside his bunk breaking in his boots. “You mean if you slip and say nigger?” he said without looking up.

A few titters egged the goofy kid on. He grinned big and said, “Yeah. Like that.”

A dangling overhead light illuminated the hatchway like a stage. Post’s hard, black back and chest glistened with fine sweat. The goofy kid—standing heaven knows why in white boxer shorts atop his footlocker—was a gangly, scarecrow form spotlighted directly opposite Post, stage right.

“Slips are slips, man,” Post said affably, raising his head. “I know what’s what. Go ahead. Call me a chocolate nigger.”

The audience could see Post’s eyes and *immediately* became absorbed with belts and socks and brass. Myself, I was mesmerized by the play. The goofy kid—probably a little taken with his star turn—missed the cue. Laughing, he said, “Okay. You’re a chocolate nigger!”

Post’s fist made a dark, blurred arc that impacted against the goofy kid’s

grinning jaw with a vivid smack. The kid tumbled across his bunk, crashed onto the plywood deck, banged his head on a hootch support, and started to cry.

“That weren’t no slip,” said Post, examining his boots.

Next morning, critics panned the performance as over the top. I can’t recall a one, however, who failed to find it compelling.

A Fore-Edge Painting

1. *The Art of Forensic Science*

When I began to sob too much, a half-drunk Graves Registration Major spluttered a god-country-corps lecture, then transferred me from incoming body bags to Forensics—a windowless lab at the back of our Da Nang complex where I couldn’t see the trucks and forklifts unless I closed my eyes.

Assigned to unidentified remains, I invoiced boxed bits of bone and teeth, shards of skull, moldering corpses stumbled upon when some teeter-tottering map quadrant tipped again. Human and inhuman debris were often commingled, however, since hasty soldiers confused pieces of men with bits of monkey, sticks and stones, animal bones, or what-have-you. Procedure specified that human bits be gleaned, inventoried, and, where possible, matched to correct service numbers. It was a mad preoccupation, mad like the Nazi compulsion to tattoo and issue death certificates to interchangeable Jews, madly bureaucratic in the way bureaucracies become insane at their compressed and rotted cores, not with the madness of storm, but of doldrums.

Nevertheless, I stopped sobbing. Forensics became an anodyne, as madness often does. Numbed with the transcendental remove of submersion in detail, I winnowed my boxes, noting each piece, where the parts were found, nearby forces, and how the weather was.

When I had completed my invoice and displayed the human pieces in good light, a Forensic Specialist gathered those useful bits—shreds of clothing, hair, tattoos, dental work—then chose certain pieces from which to strip distracting flesh, exposing hidden lines where sinew gripped bone. Measuring such lines, the Specialist could make a man! Height, weight, sex, health, race, age, on and on! It astounded me what secrets fragments could reveal.

Why, sometimes—the rules governing this process are exact—the Specialists might sculpt faces from broken skulls. Mostly the faces were indifferent as I imagine the dead to be, but occasionally—rules followed religiously—the sculpted face would smile or frown or scowl or question.

It was a magical art, this conjuring of a man, so infinite in faculty, from a piece of bone. I wondered how bones remembered feeling, but they did, or so the Forensic Specialists seemed to believe. And in the end, what did it matter, since all the feelings were true.

2. *A Minor Cord*

Body bags were always slipping off the forklift since men are floppy and do not stack as well as, say, wood. This one bag—1st MarDiv by the tattoo, funny how you remember them—he flopped off the pallet and his green bag split at the zipper. Bloated and ripe, he burst a little when he hit, soiling my scrubbed and scrubbed and re-scrubbed deck with his greasy putrefaction. His face was all screwed up like it hurt or something, but that's *crap*. Believe me, dead men don't hurt. *At all!* And they don't clean their fucking mess. They sure don't fucking scream. Not even when they fall off the fucking forklift. That's never fucking *them* you hear screaming!

Using wide shovels, a trio of us hefted the fucker into a new bag and moved him along. But switching bags, I saw just how messed up he was! Loose parts. Missing parts. Just too jumbled, you know.

The mortuary Pfc.'s fixed him anyway and sent him home. A job is a job, maybe, but Christ! Some of those guys were so fucked up, they should have gone home as ashes.

If at all.

3. *Friendly Fire*

Third or fourth week back, still hidey-holed in my room, and finally I figure, a movie's the ticket, right? So I'm off to the movies, and I'm sitting there with my box of buttered popcorn and my soda when I start to laugh at a joke I can't remember now, just the feeling, the funny feeling so funny I thought I would pop.

In nearby rows, people didn't seem to get the joke despite its crystal, crystal clarity. Words were exchanged, although to tell the truth, soda was spraying out my nose and all I could do was laugh. One beefy guy in a letter jacket shrugged off his yammering girlfriend and started punching my face. Then a few more joined in, all hitting me, kicking me, jinking around like Keystone Cops. It was funny! And with my eyes closed, I could almost see it from above, like God watching from his perch with a big Cheshire grin while down below at the movies this one goof tries to crawl under the seats so a half-dozen others can't kick him as hard, but — surprise! Folding seats, right? Haha!

I laughed and laughed, even after the police came, so they escorted me

to an emergency room where I spent the night with my wrists strapped to a gurney and my ass pumped full of some dolorous drug to make me stop laughing. Mainly it made me squirm and cramp like a severed worm. That part hurt, so I *did* stop laughing, and for a long, long, *long* time afterward, I judged it politic to keep the joke to myself.

4. *Magic Slate*

Remember magic slates? A clear plastic sheet over a milky film atop a black, waxy backboard. You drew on the slate using a red pointed stick that slipped into a loop at the top of the thing, and when you lost the stick you just used your fingernail to make lopsided houses, lollipop trees, stick men, and faces.

Do they sell those anymore? I'd buy one if they did. It felt good, that magic slate—the way your thumbnail slip-slid over the clear plastic cover-sheet trailing a magic black line on the milky film. And the feel and especially the *sound* of lifting the sheets to erase a picture not to your liking. The way the milky film stuck to the waxy backboard, resisting erasure with the persistence of memory!

Sometimes you lifted ever so slowly, one tiny tug at a time, savoring the ripping dehiscence of the film splitting free bit by bit. And other times, a cavalier flick of the wrist, a crackly whisk, and *mirabile dictu!* ...

A clean slate.

Joseph Hullett is an award-winning playwright. His short stories (many collected in *Men With Women*, Aventine Press) have appeared in *Gallery*, *Aethlon*, *Potpourri*, and elsewhere. "A Comedy of Manners" is part of a work-in-progress *In Another Time*. Also a psychiatrist, he lives in southern California, still within earshot of the cannon-fire from Camp Pendleton.