

## Orderly

One of the cops said, “That there’ll be more of the shot niggers,” and it was like somebody pissed a scent in the air the way they clotted the entrance to the E.R. I scuffed the cement apron with my toe, squinting at the washed out blue sky as a police unit and ambulance crawled into the parking lot flashing lights but no sirens. Then I flicked my smoke and eased on over where the ambulance would be pulling in, my hands so shaky I shoved them in my pockets.

Word was, some Black Muslims from Chicago had rallied local blacks and blocked North Boulevard in a poor section of town not far from the river, then the blacks had beat a TV reporter and the cops came in shooting, although I hadn’t been able to get the full story yet. It was my second day as an E.R. orderly at The Baton Rouge General, and while we’d been gearing up triage in a stumble of panic, one of the nurses, who knew I wasn’t home long from thirteen months as a medic in Nam, recruited me to help set up stuff that orderlies weren’t even supposed to touch. Which I did until a doctor who I knew twice as much as sent me to fetch. If I’d been smart I’d have booked right then.

Before the ambulance had stopped backing in, one of the officers in the lead car hopped out all tugging at his gun belt and jumpy and announced, “Got another of the bastards in here,” then glared at me like I was in on something. The ambulance’s brake lights flashed red on my white pants and the exhaust stopped. Through the back window I could see the attendant next to an old-style stretcher, but he didn’t move to open the door and the uniforms and leather pressed in behind me grumbling. The driver inched around to where I was, looking on past me like he thought maybe the best thing to do would’ve been stay behind the wheel, then an officer with a shotgun stepped around from the passenger side of the ambulance and went stiff like a sentry. I reached and swung open the door, and me and the driver pulled the stretcher out and firmed our grip, my arms already soggy from the day’s lifting and toting. None of the cops made a move to help us clear a path like they’d done with the police casualties, but the cop with the shotgun stepped in real close and looked down on the black dude. “You still alive, son?” he asked.

I wanted to say something smartass to somebody, but none of this crew seemed like they knew enough to lighten up a shitty situation, so I kept shut. I’d already carried in seven cops, two dead, and a young gut-shot Muslim nappy-dressed in a white shirt and bowtie. We’d took the cops to the operating room,

but the Muslim, whose pale lips told me he was bleeding good inside and who called me a white devil when I told him I liked his tie, he got routed off into a little exam room where a group of suits and brass chased me and the attendant off and closed the door. I didn't argue.

Now I angled my head straight on and waded into the uniforms. There was a lot of talk about no hurry getting him in the hospital and nigger getting what he deserved, but I found myself talking the cops out of our way and sort of shielding the stretcher with my body from officers poking, slapping and spitting at the dude, some of them also slapping and poking me. Then another ambulance pulled in giving a diversion. "Hustle," I barked back at the driver and felt a jolt and heard an Oof as somebody stomach-punched the black dude before the glass doors opened and we were through. Inside there was nobody from the hospital to meet us, although I saw two black nurses' attendants off against a wall watching. An older cop with a big gold badge pointed us to an exam room next to the Muslim's and followed us in there with a younger cop. We lifted the stretcher onto the exam table and set it down harder than I meant, making the dude let go a "Mother fuck!"

"Keep it shut," the older cop told him, then the older cop had a pow wow with the young cop, who nodded way too much and said, "Yes, Sir," way too much. When they finished the older cop motioned the driver and me out with him, but I didn't move.

"I been spit on enough," I said, and wiped the sticky cotton from the edges of my mouth. "Think I'll stay here and keep this one company."

The older cop gave me a look like he was going to jump on my ass, which I wouldn't have minded for a change of pace, then finally he smirked. "Just don't talk to him, you got me?" I half-saluted and the older cop and the driver shut the door behind them.

The dude on the table let out a groan and said, "Shit." I looked at him really for the first time, a big afro and skinny muscular body and sunk-in cheeks and a scraggly goatee, somebody I would've thought of as a black radical cause he looked like the meanass sons-a-bitch Panthers we had on base in Chu Lai. His hands were cuffed to the stretcher and he didn't have a shirt, the only thing on his upper body a bloody bandage that wrapped over his shoulder. His lower lip was split, but he wasn't busted up like the Muslim earlier. On his arm was a fancy "Semper Fi" tatoo.

"He tell you to keep it zipped?" the black dude said to the young cop.

"Shut your damn mouth," the young cop said, his face about the white of the gauze on the shelves.

"You surprised when he shot me?" the black dude asked him. "You ain't never seen nobody get shot, huh?"

The young cop was belching and breathing through rubber lips and I told

him to make sure he puked in the sink, which he stepped over and did right off. Me and the black dude laughed, then off the brother went into a fit of coughing. I peeled back his bandage and saw powder burns but a clean wound that I figured exited on the other side.

"They popped you up close, huh, stud?" I said.

"Fuckin A they did, jack," he said, catching his breath. "I done dropped my piece and that one there's partner zapped the fuck out of me."

"Bullshit," the cop said, "you had a goddamn gun."

"I *know* I had a gun, but I *bad* it on the ground. I wasn't shooting, I was trying to keep from getting shot."

"Then why the hell were you there?" the cop asked.

"Protesting. I was with the Muslims on the protest. I didn't know they's gonna start a shoot out with the whole Po-lice Department."

"You ain't a Muslim?" I asked.

"Do I look like a Muslim?"

"He's an asshole," said the cop. "You were shooting before we got you. You telling me you weren't there to shoot?"

"I ain't fool enough to show down with the pigs in the street, if that's what you axin."

"Damn nigger." The cop looked at me. "They beat the brains out of that TV guy, Don Stimpson, and shot a whole slew of officers. Chip Thibeaux's dead. His face was blown off." The cop dry heaved, and, weird enough, that made me see he was probably a few years older than me.

"Yeah," the dude said, "and how many brothers dead? How many y'all greased unarmed like me?"

The cop stepped toward him but stopped himself a couple of feet away. His face was bright red and his eyes all puffed from tears. He wiped his mouth a few times, then slunk off and sat in a chair by the wall.

"He upset cause he didn't get to shoot me," the dude said to me, not belligerent, but just matter of fact.

"You shouldn't have had your ass down there," I said. "You oughta know better."

"What you know about it?"

I snorted. "When were you in country?"

He glanced at his tattoo. "Sixty-eight, sixty-nine."

"Tet?"

"Right there. Hue, mother fucker."

"Yikes. I was seventy, seventy-one. Chu Lai. Tricky Dick gave us Cambodia so we wouldn't feel left out."

"You a grunt?"

"Kind of. Medic."

“You having a big day then.”

He nodded and raised his eyebrows and I stretched my neck to both sides, electricity itching in my shoulders and scalp. I thumped a butt out and bent down to take it with my lips cause my hand still wasn't cooperating. “You got a extra?” the dude asked. I hesitated a second, then thumped another one and aimed the pack at his mouth, but he had to kind of strike at it like a fish. “Glad you ain't the surgeon,” he said. The cop had lurked up on the other side of the table, scowling and still peekid and close enough where I could read his name plate.

“You want one, Scavona?” I asked him.

“Why you giving him one?” Scavona said.

“That yes or no?” I asked. He smacked his mouth with the vomit taste, then reached over and got the pack. I lit mine holding the lighter with both hands, then Scavona took the lighter, fired himself up and then made me light the black dude. I knew if somebody caught me giving out cigarettes in an exam room they'd probably can my ass, but I knew I was probably gonna be canned anyway for hiding or something else and that wasn't nothing to me by then. I'd already knocked down a row of jobs, from clerking at a ghetto Pak-A-Sak to dressing like Pluto the dog at a department store. I lost that one cause some little prick kept razzing me for having a wet tail that I'd slopped in the toilet and then stabbed me with a straight pin, so I tossed him head first in a shopping cart. He didn't think Pluto was so fucking funny then.

The dude dragged the cigarette, shifted it to the side of his mouth and blew out through his nose, showing he knew how to smoke without his hands like we all did over there. From next door I heard some commotion that I couldn't really tell what was and my gut locked tight with pictures of people bleeding all in the hall and brass telling everybody this and that.

“So what went down?” I asked.

Scavona took a puff and squinted and poked the lit end toward the dude. “They scattered after they started shooting. We were going through the Lincoln Hotel looking for 'em when we found this one with his piece. We shot him.”

The dude levelled on Scavona. “If I'd a been shootin', some of y'all be dead in that room y'all bumbled in,” he said and I believed him. I'd known a bunch of Marines who'd been in Hue flushing NVA regulars house to house and they knew how to greet people.

Scavona scowled at the dude. “Why don't you tell how y'all beat that reporter till his frickin brains run out the crack in his skull. How y'all started shooting us as soon as we came in to help.”

“Coming in to help,” the dude said out the side of his mouth. “We blocked the street, people was agitated. That dumbass reporter waded up in there where he didn't belong.”

“That’s his job,” Scavona said.

“Hey, man, brothers know the way shit come out on TV. Like when them white students is killed at Kent State it’s something, but when students is murdered out at Southern the only attention get paid is the police never done nothing except keep the peace from some savage niggas.”

Scavona squinted and flicked at the tip of his nose. “You were probably there at Southern,” he said.

“Fuckin’ A I was. Heading to class when them brothers got cut down. Dude from math got killed.”

What he was talking about had happened when I was still over there. I’d heard students were raising hell about the war out at the black university and some deputies shotgun-killed two of them, the deputies excusing themselves by saying they thought they were putting tear gas shells in their weapons but accidentally loaded buck shot. I’d laughed.

Scavona leaned over the table. “That don’t make it right to beat a man and shoot us when we coming in to save him. That’s murder, you son-of-a-bitch.”

“Boy, don’t talk to me about murder, standing there in that fucking Confederate uniform.”

I checked Scavona out there in his gray uni with red epaulets and red piping and I grinned cause I’d never noticed it *was* a rebel uniform and a damn fine rebel uniform at that. Then yells from the Muslim’s room next door cut through the wall and we listened, the black dude’s face tight as latex, till the noise fell away to murmuring and whimpering. Scavona pressed his palm to his forehead and tossed his cigarette in the sink and slumped back over to his chair. He raked his hand through his dark hair and kept on raking it. Some loud talking came through the wall again and the dude went wide-eyed and took to breathing hard, and a part of my brain that had been sunk low brought up a memory of a day when me and a buddy took a long time getting a VC into the hospital and his stretcher managed to get lifted and dropped a few times. He died. Then a lot more dead were visiting me—Ug and Larry and Reno—friends that didn’t come home and I felt the rage I sometimes still feel, like when a boss looks at me wrong or I drop something and it rolls where I have to stoop to get it, like the rage I got when my old man acted like I was still the boy from before the war and not the man who’d bagged bodies and saved lives. But way underneath I felt real calm too, like I understood what I was supposed to do.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Pigs working on a brother in there, ain’t they?” he said, and he looked a little concerned for the first time.

“I said what’s your name?”

“What you need to know for?”

“You ain’t got to say.”

He glanced at Scavona, then looked at me sideways. "Eric Banks."

I smacked my lips to work up some talking saliva. "So, Eric, you didn't shoot nobody?"

"I didn't do nothing but go down there, man."

"And get shot for being a dumb shit."

"Fuck you." He squinted at me and swallowed so his pointed adam's apple bobbed. "What's your name?"

"Owen."

"So, Owen, you calling me dumbshit and you here wiping ass all day?"

I thought that was funny, I really did, but my fingers didn't, all hot and flexing. "Still better than getting shot."

"You know I ain't did nothing."

"You went down there. I'd trade your stupid black ass for a bunch of my buddies didn't come home."

"And I'd trade you for a bunch of brothers spread out on North Boulevard."

"Fucking whining," I said and wiped my mouth. "You a Black Panther?"

"I don't wear no uniform no more. Not like you."

I smiled and turned to Scavona. "Y'all shoulda shot him in his black mouth."

More yelling came through the wall, worse, a mix of somebody saying, You like that, and somebody calling for Allah like he was getting castrated and I wanted that noise to stop. Eric went to breathing real fast and trying to hold his burnt-down smoke in his lips, then he spit the cigarette flipping to the floor. He jerked and shifted the stretcher, straining against the cuffs, breathing through his nose real loud. The pain shrugged through him and up into his face and he dropped into it for a second, his eyes glossed and his mad shine gone. I'd thought he was okay, but I had that quick feeling from knowing that sometimes you can't tell, especially if somebody starts giving in or a piece of bullet's fragged off bone and nicked an artery. He started going pale, always weirder on somebody black, and I grabbed an extra pillow and put it under his feet to keep him from going shocky on me, I'm not sure why. My fingers went all stiff and a familiar rush buzzed in my chest until he steadied his breath and his skin colored again and his brown eyes spit back the shape of the fluorescent tube on the ceiling. I ground his cigarette on the tile, then went over, got me a sip from the faucet and sat in the chair where Scavona had been. My cheeks were tingling like novacain was wearing off and my eyes felt scratchy and all of a sudden I was tired, too tired, a body of grits. I covered my face.

"They torturing a brother in there," Eric said, his voice a lot weaker than before. "They coming in here next, ain't they?"

"You deserve what you get," Scavona said, but he didn't sound like he had a whole lot of conviction.

"You know I ain't did nothing," Eric said. "Your partner shot me cause that's

what he supposed to do. That don't mean y'all got to let 'em do what they gone do. *Medic*, you gone let 'em do me that way?"

I remembered the Muslim next door looking like he wanted to slit my throat and the goddamn gold-badged captain hustling me out so they could get to torturing the other shot-up fool, thought of the mountains of bled-on sheets and bandages I'd be picking up and the bodies I'd be wheeling down to the morgue and part of me wanted to walk out right then. But it would just be another shitty job waiting and shitty as this one was it was pretty familiar. I uncovered my face. "I'm just the ass wipe, bro."

"Jail and shit's one thing, man, even doing me out on the street, but this ain't right, you know it ain't."

Eric was sort of pray-cursing and I did want to do *something*. The chair started brewing like a rocket under me and you know how it is when your brain gets out ahead of you and it ain't firing right but it's firing so much that you can sense words about to come at you. Not the actual words and not what they mean, but what they'll do. Well, that's where I was, right then, waiting for the words. And they came.

"You sure you ain't getting your rocks off?" he said, and I knew what he was trying.

"Be quiet," Scavona said.

"This all make you feel at home?" he went on to me, his voice husky. "I know you done for somebody in the field needed it. Me and you was there. I'd do for you if need be. Don't let 'em come in here and start poking cigarettes in this hole."

I gripped my thighs. "You brothers bring out the guns, what you expect?"

"That what you went over there for? Let 'em torture somebody would of saved your ass in the bush?"

The whole puke green room pulsed around Eric's dark face and glinting eyes, pushing the tired in me all the way back. I saw him in that room when Scavona and his partner busted in, raising his arms up but still grinning a big Fuck You, Pig. I went over to him, but I'd be lying if I said I remembered standing and going. The chair might as well have tilted me out on a moving floor. Eric's eyes glowed clear and intense and the pain sweat on his brow exploded with the bright light. "Yeah," he said to me, and I saw in my head my hands just reaching out and squeezing until everything stopped. Then something touched my elbow and I flinched like snake bit.

"Hey," Scavona said to me.

"Do something," Eric said.

"Shut up, nigger," Scavona said and took my arm.

"Leave him be!" Eric said and he tried to spit but there wasn't any spit. He strained at Scavona yelling like crazy and Scavona yelled back until I edged him away from the table, Eric still cussing until he took to gagging. A second or two

went by with me and Scavona watching, then laughing busted out from the next room. "Don't y'all have all the fun before we get there," a voice said through the wall.

Eric collapsed in then, not looking at me or Scavona, and I turned and went over to the sink. I splashed some water on my face and neck, drank some, then towelled off with my shirt. My insides were crawly and my skull was lined with dull noise but there wasn't any comfort in it.

"You shoulda did something," Eric muttered.

"What?" I said.

"There it is," he said.

The door swung open and in marched the uniforms and suits from the Muslim's room, the Captain smiling, but a couple not looking too good. "Thank you, gentlemen," the Captain said, and two big uniforms took up spots to urge me out, while three suits sauntered over to Eric. I didn't move right away, keeping my look on the Captain.

"I got to make sure his bandage don't slip," I said, stupid shit, gesturing at Eric.

"We'll call you back in if he needs some blood," the Captain said and a couple of them chuckled.

I thought about looking at Eric, but I didn't. Me and Scavona stepped into the hall and I turned the other direction from the emergency entrance. "Where you going?" Scavona asked.

"Out," I said.

I tromped down a short flight of stairs and pushed through an exit to a stoop hidden behind some bushes where another orderly had took me for a cigarette the day before. The sunshine air opened and I took out my smokes and thumped the pack, lipped one out, then couldn't hit it with my lighter. Scavona got the lighter from me and went to help, but he was even worse, making us laugh until I held his wrist and we both finally got lit. Then I pushed my finger and thumb into my sockets till my knuckles must've disappeared.

"What a day," Scavona said, startling me. He was staring into the bushes like somebody was up in there hiding. "Didn't know who I was supposed to shoot. People were screaming everywhere and blood all over. We went in that room and..." He rubbed his hand all over his face. "Probably wouldn't have been nothing to you."

I took a long drag good as a kiss, then let go a long exhale. "Any friends get popped?" I asked.

He flicked at his cigarette hard like he could see something evil on the cinder, then rattled his head. "Not partners. I rode with Thibeaux a few times. Cool dude. I liked him a lot. Another one I rode with a couple weeks ago got hit in the leg, but I should've shot him."

“And y’all zapped old Eric after he dropped his piece.”

Scavona did a slow lizard take on me. “Wouldn’t you?”

I put my face toward the air. I wished I was drunk, and I don’t mean four fishbowls drunk, but barrel drunk, tank truck drunk, fucking bowling alley drunk. Still, I knew I wouldn’t call any of my old high school buddies. I took another deep drag and blew it out slow. Scavona stood there all decked out in gray with his shiny bullets and gleaming thirty-eight and slick blackjack and polished boots. He pulled on his cigarette like it was hurting him, then went to scraping his shoe sole on the edge of one of the steps.

“You like it?” I asked him. “Being a cop?”

“Not today. You like doing this?”

“Not today.” We smiled. “Just started. Had about a hundred pissant jobs since I been home.”

He stared at me, nodding slow. “You thought about joining the force?”

I shrugged. “Thought about everything.”

“You oughta. There’s lots of vets. And the women love you.”

“The brass don’t hassle you?”

“You’re off in your unit. You have to screw up big time to bring a lieutenant in on your ass and the sergeants are mostly cool.” Scavona sat on the cement step and stretched his legs, then rubbed his thighs like they’d gone to sleep. “Most of what we do is drive around. Weekends and paydays get busy, but mostly you hang out. Full moons are crazy.”

I took a spot next to him, noticed sirens still howling in. I’d never been fully keen on cops, but I thought how that day they’d been like a big old family, ready to take care of their own without asking questions, knowing what side they were on. Thought about riding around in a car and being out among it.

“Glad I ain’t still downtown,” Scavona said.

“Really?” I asked.

He worried his thumb like he had a splinter, nibbled at it, then swallowed. He hmphed. “Shit, I don’t know,” he said.

I ground my cigarette on the steps, struggled a couple more out the pack and lit them.

I wished I’d given Eric one more, then without wanting to my head was conjuring images from stuff I’d heard American and ARVN investigators goof about, stuff everybody’s heard about, like hooking electrical wires to prisoners’ nuts and turning a crank, or hanging them upside down to pour toilet water in their mouth and nose. I remembered one time after a particularly bad day a buddy of mine taking a knife point to a VC’s wound right in triage. Then I pushed it all down in me like a land mine with my foot.

**Tim Parrish** is the author of *Red Stick Men*, a collection of stories set in his home town of Baton Rouge. His most recent work appears in *The Missouri Review*, *Sou'wester*, and in the anthologies *French Quarter Fiction* and *Place Mats*. "Orderly" was nominated by Erin McGraw and Tim O'Brien for *Best New American Voices*, and Parrish gives "big thanks to them for their help and encouragement." Parrish teaches in and coordinates the Creative Writing Program at Southern Connecticut State University. He is the recipient of a 2002 Gerald A. Freund Grant-in-Aid from the Whiting Foundation.