

J E F F R E Y L O E B

Measuring the Seasons

May 1969

My head must have jerked when we rounded the corner into the alley. As the bus hissed to a stop beside the dimly lit depot, I suddenly became aware that I'd been asleep. Still groggy, I automatically patted my front shirt pocket, looking for a cigarette. The other passengers were darkened figures humped up in various stages of uncomfortable half-sleep in the bus's unlit interior, some barely stirring, most still. My mouth tasted sour from sleep and the shots of straight whiskey I'd been drinking in Kansas City some five hours before. It was in the seediest of bus-station-district bars, I recalled, and there had been some unpleasantness when another patron and I both tried to pick up its single female customer. I'd been asked to leave and was compelled to spend the rest of my dead time waiting in the station, with its dusty, gray interior and old junkies asleep on the benches.

Here, a single cone of yellow street light partially illuminated the depot, but all I could see through the smudged window was an ancient electrical meter barely hanging from the cracked stucco. Then I realized with a sort of dull shock that this was home. There didn't seem to be anyone around. It must still be too early for anyone to be here, I thought.

Where had I fallen asleep? I remembered stopping in Kansas City, Kansas, and then Lawrence, both in the dead of night. A few people were camped in the

Lawrence station, apparitions seen through the dirty window, apparently students availing themselves of the only place in town to study at that time of night. And we seem to have done the same in Topeka as well. An image of Kansas Avenue appeared in my mind's eye, wide and well-lit without a single car anywhere. I definitely didn't remember anything after that. All those other dried-up towns, Silver Lake, St. Mary's, Wamego, Manhattan—I must have slept right through them. What was I doing back in Kansas? I wondered. I should have stayed in California. There was nothing here.

My green wool uniform—the only one I hadn't abandoned on my unmade bed at Treasure Island—was foul and rumpled from 24 hours' wear on various public accommodations, the rows of medals and ribbons askew. I didn't really care. It would soon join the rest in the trash. I've been gone close to two years, I thought, they could at least have met me—or picked me up at the airport for that matter; it was only two hours by car. But here I was, pulling into a deserted bus depot, alone, at 5 o'clock in the morning, and it looked like I'd have to walk home. None of the rundown cabs were around, meaning that all the sorry, beer-sodden GIs had long since been hauled back to Fort Riley. I was definitely on foot.

When the bus pulled out of the darkened alley, I was left standing alone in the chilly, diesel-fouled night, my only luggage, my seabag, next to me. Well, they knew what time I was getting in, I thought. No use calling them; they're obviously not up. Despite my fatigue, I reached down and grabbed the seabag by its handle, shouldering it in a single, much-practiced motion, its weight bending my knees slightly. It briefly occurred to me just to throw it back down; there really wasn't much in it I wanted. In the end, however, my nature wouldn't allow that, so, with the seabag still on my shoulder, I stepped out toward home in the same shortened gait I'd used from chopper to truck to plane to bus in getting here from half a world away.

As I passed the front of the station, I remembered that only three years before, I'd given Hawk a ride from here to Manhattan after the police had caught him running out of the decrepit restaurant without paying. He'd been on a binge. They hadn't actually arrested him, but it was his fourth such mildly antisocial act in as many months; he had joined the Marine Corps a month later. He should be out and home by now, I reflected. I knew that Doug was because I'd gotten his letters. I wondered what sort of shape they were in. The letters, of course, would have offered no clues. Maybe I'd call them later today—after I'd had a nap—and we could go get drunk, just like the old days.

I headed toward Jefferson Street rather than following Washington because—out of some sense of perversity—I didn't want anyone to come by and offer me a ride, unlikely as that possibility was at this time of morning. When I arrived home, less than a week from the war, I wanted my parents to bear a full measure of guilt for my walking the final two miles with a full seabag.

As I passed beside the Palace Tavern on 10th Street, the reek of stale beer and rotting garbage reached me from the trashbin behind it. Doy Warden's father had cooked there for years after retiring from the Army, I remembered—probably still did. Thirty years in the service, two wars, and when he retired as a first sergeant, the only job he could get was cooking hamburgers for drunken white boys in a greasy hole of a kitchen at the back of a low-rent beer joint. I wondered what Doy had thought of us all those years: living on the south side in new ranch-style homes while all of them were stuck in a ramshackle, two-story falldown on West Thirteenth.

I thought back to when I'd last seen him, just before I left for boot camp, as he lay on the crisp white bed at Irwin Army Hospital, one arm missing and the other useless. He appeared drawn—probably from the drugs—and much shrunk from his previous 220 pounds. It was his size, in fact, that earned him the machine-gunner MOS that probably, in turn, got him half blown-away, that and the fact that he was African American. The Corps, I was aware from experience, knew exactly where they wanted to put black, offensive-tackle-sized bodies: right where the NVA would find them first in an ambush. Lying there in that bed, Doy had told me in a weak voice that after the first rounds hit, he found himself facedown in a rice paddy, and he could actually see the green-clad figures advancing toward them, firing as they came. He had tried to pick up the M-60, he said, but his arms wouldn't seem to obey; and then he looked down to see why.

As I was leaving the hospital room, I remembered, Doy's father had arrived, and had just stood there by the bed looking down at his son. Doy was asleep by then—the nurse had administered some medication to him—and his father stared at the bed. If he was aware that I was in the room, he didn't show it. I slipped out quietly.

As I walked, I reviewed these events carefully in my mind, reworking each separate image until I was able to describe it to myself precisely as I remembered it. For some reason, it seemed important to get the details exactly right. The first traces of red were just appearing in the east when I stopped to rest at Third Street. I lit a Kool and pulled deeply, braced by the menthol. The Catholic convent was across the street. The nuns would probably be stirring soon, for morning prayers or self-flagellation, or whatever they did. Their personal lives had always been a source

of great mystery and, consequently, great amusement to us as we had observed them in class. Even now, the thought of semi-dressed nuns lying penitent—pre-matins whipstrokes falling on their own bared backs—lifted me briefly out of my fatigue. How far away that all was, I reflected, how changed. The people with whom I'd shared such humor, and all the rest we shared, were scattered who knows where. The war had taken some of them, all of them really; no one was untouched. I'd traveled 12,000 miles, fought in it for thirteen months, and now I was back home, but where was home? There was no one here to meet me. My old bedroom was now Elbie's, I was sure. He was about to graduate from high school and entitled to his own room. And all the rest were growing up—Kerry, Eric: they were what counted now; I'd had my chance.

There was no place for me here, I knew; I was Nonessential Personnel: superfluous. The fact that I was walking home proved that. Whatever had been here for me was gone. Whatever slim and artificial warmth might be generated by my homecoming would soon pass. Then the same old questions about going back to school and looking for a job would start all over again, just as if I hadn't been away. No, it wasn't what I wanted, and it wasn't what they wanted.

I flicked the spent butt into the gutter, involuntarily shivering from the cooling sweat under the wool uniform. There was no place for me here now. I prepared to pick up my gear and move on. The sky was streaked with red. I guessed I'd look up Doug and Hawk and probably get drunk that day, and maybe the next one too. After that, who knew? Maybe I'd go back to California. There didn't seem to be any better prospect as I contemplated the skein of empty days uncoiling before me in the reddening sky.

October 1980

Rice paddies stretched before me in a pleasant checkerboard pattern—all the way to the smooth, beige horizon: a grid of stunningly bright green squares bounded by white sand dikes. My cheek rested near the closer ones, making them appear inordinately large, though they receded rapidly with distance. Gradually, the absence of people grew puzzling for me; they should have been there this time of year—black-clad, wearing conical straw hats—knee-deep in the water, bent over, weeding and thinning the tender shoots. Where were they?

The single, jagged tooth of Marble Mountain jutted abruptly out of the farther fields, somehow resembling a wastebasket—only it was supposed to be brown. Why was it white? And where was Monkey Mountain? It should have been next to Marble Mountain, with the road to Da Nang between them.

Then the next rush hit—the worst yet, cramps forcing my knees to my chest. The bright shocks inside my head were horrifying. The squares quickly became bathroom tiles again. A sudden wave of nausea compelled me to push myself painfully up, trying for the toilet. It seemed far away, three clicks at least, and it occurred to me that I would probably crush all the water buffalo under my knees if I tried crawling there. I always hated it when the grunts lobbed M-79 rounds at them—their idea of fun; even if they missed, the explosions sent the terrified beasts loping comically away.

My stomach heaved. Nothing. Then, my throat contracted painfully from my up-thrusting gut, and I suddenly retched again. Gagging, I watched as a thin string of tear-refracted saliva dangled toward the floor. The pleasant coolness on my cheek seemed a distant memory. Another heave so weakened me that I sagged back down, my cheek resting in a pool of bile. It felt warm and slick—like the blood running down my leg after I pulled up the torn cloth of my utility pants on the operation at Hill 55. It really didn't hurt, not like it had there. It was my stomach now, from the cramps and vain heaving.

What would Jane think—and Kerry? They didn't know anything about this. I'd told them I was feeling sick when I left the restaurant. Where was it, the Castro? A good distance, anyway; a long cab ride to the hotel. How far from Union Square? Probably about 500 meters. A little too far for the small arms to be accurate, but those mortar rounds were dead-on. One man was screaming off to my left, and I'd seen two other Marines go down out in front of me. AK-47 rounds cracked above my head, shredding the palm leaves. Firing increased all around. I managed to roll toward where the radio operator had been when the ambush hit; my shin stung.

His head was half gone. I pried the handset from him and keyed it: "Texas Pete, this is Texas Pete Echo. Fire mission; do you copy, over?" Three quick double-pops came from the tree line about a second apart. I burrowed into the sand, hunching my shoulders—*make yourself small, SMALL*—waiting for the mortars to hit.

I shouldn't have drunk so much last night, only I hadn't seen Wooldridge in years. Beers all afternoon at the wharf, then scotch until whenever. Where we ended up, I can't remember—that bar next to City Lights? I know there was a fight. Wool hasn't lost his punch; that asshole is probably still on the deck.

Three muffled shocks came in close succession off to the left. The screaming was louder. A faint, crackly voice said, "Texas Pete Echo, this is Texas Pete. Go ahead, over."

I'd dropped the handset. That's why I couldn't hear the voice. I snatched it from the sand and pressed it to my ear. The firing around me suddenly increased again. I

couldn't see anything; smoke from the mortar rounds hung low over the elephant grass. "Texas Pete, this is Texas Pete Echo. I have a fire mission. Can you copy, over?" "Roger. Send it, over."

Then the cramps subsided, and the tiles gradually became soothing again, even with my cheek in the vomit. But the headshocks—I couldn't stop the images; they just came rushing in. Like that night in Lawrence when Dorothy and I got high after my MA orals. You knew it was just the drug, but it felt so real: like standing outside yourself. I hadn't had any acid this time though, only alcohol. Why was it happening? It had been years since the last episode.

I squinted at the laminated map, then peered through the thinning haze. The AK flashes were definitely coming from the treeline. The mortars, who knew? More screaming out in front of me. I saw our gunner lurch into a kneeling position and start raking everything, spent brass flying away from his shoulder. *That fucking leg hurts. What happened?* I looked back at the map and managed to locate the little puffy clouds that meant trees. Which were the right ones? The flat terrain made them all look the same. *Well, do something, asshole. Okay then, I will, keying the handset.*

The next cramp sent me back into a fetal position, gasping for air. It occurred to me that I was dying. Where was Jane? They were going to come back and find me dead on the bathroom floor. Is this real? What's happening, the cramps or Vietnam? I retched violently. Through the pain, it seemed as if I could see my body curled up on the cold green-and-white tile. Dead. It was real enough all right. The question was whether I could get through it.

"This is Texas Pete Echo. I've got gooks in a treeline. Grid, seven-oh-four, three-niner-seven. Direction, one-four-five. I need rounds ASAP. We're taking small arms and six-zero mike-mike. I've got men hit. Two rounds Willie Peter in adjust, battery-two for effect, request beehive and hotel-echo. Repeat, ASAP. We're taking heavy fire. Over."

So this was it. After all I'd been through, I was going to die alone on the bathroom floor of the Sheraton Palace Hotel. What a fucking joke. "He'd been senior class president and captain of the football team," they'd say. "He had a Master's degree, for Christ's sake, and he died of deep remorse and an acid flashback, not able to decide where he was." I retched again. The pain racked my insides.

God, that fucking leg stings. What is it? Jesus, that's blood all over my pants. *Sonofabitch, I'm hit; it's all laid open.* That's why it hurts. I thought it was from diving into the sand. "Jesus Christ! Corpsman up! Corpsman!"

Relax, asshole, you aren't gonna die.

But, I'm hit. I never thought the motherfuckers would get me. That's my blood all over.

Then I heard the door open and Jane's and Kerry's voices. I guessed I'd die some other time.

July 1983

I sat bolt upright at the loud cracks, instinctively groping for the nightstand drawer. The shots had come from just outside, on old Highway 40. I sprinted up the hallway, gripping the .38. Glaring headlights swung across the window shades as I struggled with the tight lock, then the whirl of tires spinning in soft ground before catching on the pavement. I flung the door open just in time to see one of our cats jump the low stone wall. This was their target, I suddenly realized.

The car came screaming back down the dark asphalt, accelerating rapidly as it passed the house. For a moment it formed a perfect silhouette against the lights of I-70, a quarter mile behind, a big target only 50 feet away, one I knew I could hit. And without thinking—just like I was trained—I put all five rounds into the side of it: *pop, pop, pop, pop, pop*. The car swerved slightly, then sped down the dark road toward town. The smell of cordite and burnt rubber filled the air.

Motherfuckers, I thought, watching the panicked animal scurry around the house. Soldiers from Fort Riley out to have a little fun with their new toys; I'd spotted their military sticker and out-of-state plates. The cat seemed all right, and I'd never find it in the dark anyway. I dropped my shoulders and turned to go back inside, unsteady from the scotches earlier in the evening.

Jane was standing by the bed with a horrified look on her face, like I was some kind of mutant slithering in. I could sense her anger and confusion. "It was one of the cats," I said. "They were trying to shoot it, sons of bitches."

"And you were trying to do what—scare them? By shooting?" Her voice quavered in disbelief.

"I shot the car. Five times," suddenly realizing what that meant, my sense of rectitude collapsing rapidly. "What have I just done? Jesus. I might've hit someone." The pistol slipped out of my hand onto the carpet.

Jane spun and hastened out of the room. "Might've just hit someone," I heard her repeat in bitterly mocking tones as she headed down the hall.

I didn't follow, just stood stunned, my mind racing through the possible scenarios: two or three people even now writhing on the floorboards blood everywhere, as the car raced toward the hospital. The hospital, I thought in a panic. I need to go and see if they're there.

I pulled on my clothes and ran past Jane toward the back door, the explanation “the hospital” trailing in my wake. I took the car rather than the truck, thinking it was more nondescript, and screeched out of the drive toward US-77, not even bothering to slow up for the stop sign. So much for discretion, I thought, glancing around for highway patrol cars.

I reached the turn in less than five minutes and, before pulling into the ER entrance, stopped to make myself calm down. I eyed the sign: Geary Community Hospital. I breathed in deeply and let it out. I did it again, and then three or four more times, before slowly proceeding. It was a Chevy, I thought, and bright—maybe red?—just like a fucking doggie would drive. A sense of self-righteousness was beginning to supplant my terror.

Nothing there: no cop cars; no red Chevrolet. I breathed out. Then the main parking lot occurred to me. Grimly, I drove around to check it. Several cars were scattered across its expanse, the halogen casting extended shadows. I slowly passed by all the cars, carefully scoping the right sides for signs of bullet damage or broken windows. Nothing again.

I pulled into an empty slot and just sat. Would they have driven all the way to Irwin, another five or so miles? Would they have even known Geary Community was here? Briefly I thought about heading out to the fort and checking, but quickly stanching that sudden hemorrhage in my otherwise growing confidence. No way was I going out there. If there *was* someone shot and I got picked up on a federal reservation, I’d never see the light of day. I might not anyway. I felt my thoughts running away with me again and decided to get home as quickly as possible—before I got pulled over in Junction City for something.

Driving carefully back down 77, mindful of the daunting centerline, all I could think of was getting into the house and fixing myself a tall scotch. The village was safe for now.

May 1989

That spring, though Andi was just a baby, Jane and I drove to D.C. to visit my old friend Charley Impaglia. The occasion wasn’t a happy one; he was sick with AIDS, tantamount to a death sentence at that point. I had no idea what to expect and was perhaps more upset than I knew. The first day there, his voice was bad on the phone, so I got off quickly, promising to call tomorrow.

In the morning, I summoned the fortitude to drop by instead, unannounced and by myself. Charley buzzed me in, and when he opened the door, I was shocked at the extent of his emaciation. A hospital bed dominated the front room, with

ominous-looking fluid-stands on each side. He told me he felt much better, however, so we decided to walk to Adams-Morgan for lunch. It was a splendid sunny day, and everything seemed fine. Part way through lunch, though, he suddenly slumped, and we had to leave and grab a cab to his apartment. I sat up front with the driver so Charlie could lie on the back seat, and both of us helped him upstairs into bed.

The next day, we all went to see him, but medical types were all over, and we had to wait outside until they'd completed their ministrations, a ghastly business judging from the smell of the colostomy bag. We were only able to spend a few minutes because the medication had left him groggy. After I gripped his hand and said goodbye for what we both knew was the last time, we quietly left. Fortunately, Andi had stayed asleep the whole time.

The unexpected rapidity of Charley's decline left us with time we hadn't planned for, so we decided to travel up to Gettysburg. It was Jane's idea, not mine; I'd told her I'd never had the slightest inclination to go there, but, seeing my preoccupied state, she must have thought it would help keep me from brooding over things.

In the course of our driving tour of the battlefield, we pulled over, map and brief historical synopsis in hand, at Little Round Top. It was a short walk up to the edge of the hill, and there were several other people around, like us looking out over a field to a grove beyond. The grass was just greening beneath the longer brown, though the leaves on the trees in the Peach Orchard—as the woods opposite were called—were still small, exposing wispy dead-looking branches beneath.

Little Round Top had been the site of some brutal fighting, a contingent of Union engineers only barely managing to turn back a major Confederate attempt to flank the entire Northern force, but what we were looking out over was the locus of hell itself: the Wheat Field. There, as Lee had sat his horse looking on from the Peach Orchard, in a space no larger than a football field, on a steamy July day so many years before, over 5,000 men, North and South, had died in one afternoon's fighting, most of it virtually hand-to-hand, and not one foot was gained either way.

As I looked, images of the soldiers in that bitter fight seemed to flood my inner eye: sweating from the heavy wool uniforms in the July heat, their faces black from the drifting powder smoke that hung low to the ground and clung to skin and beards, all about them lay the maimed and dying, crying and screaming, as I know they did, for help, for mothers, and even for merciful death to take them quickly. I felt them, as surely and strongly as if they were right in front of me, and it wasn't the objectifying history on the little pamphlets that delivered them to me but the ground itself: the sudden, close, and real presence of the violence that had been done there on that hot July day.

Before I could prevent it, tears were pouring from my eyes, and my legs nearly failed me. Jane had no idea what was occurring and, truth be told, neither did I, but she held me while I cried for myself and for all those dead at Gettysburg, just as if I were there with them—the difference in time was indistinguishable to me; it all flowed together.

At some point, I recovered, and the three of us returned to the car, Jane pushing Andi in the stroller with me trailing behind, trying both to recompose myself and to understand what had just happened to me. When we reached it, I gently unhooked Andi and carefully placed her in the car seat. I remember her reaching out and running her little fingers over my moistened cheeks, smiling at me, as she always did, her love instant and automatic.

I suddenly felt grateful that she would never feel the hot rush of war's brutal passage.

August 2004

I drove west, staring straight ahead, hands clenched tightly on the wheel—toward our house, where I'd decided I was going to park the car and calmly walk inside, get in bed, and read. Carolyn could do what she wanted. I didn't care, as long as I was safe from the interminable scolding, that unrelenting voice of hers.

It had started like all of our arguments, over virtually nothing. I'd passed a car on the right on State Line Road as it narrowed to one lane, pressing down on the gas pedal. No big thing. The driver proved to be a jerk, though, and sped up just enough to begin crowding me out. He was in a new Beemer and sporting a lawyer haircut. I immediately felt the sudden anger that came with being regarded as insignificant—at what I imagined to be the dominant-male asshole-ness common to professional types—and consequently floored it, swooping in front of him, cutting him off by inches, my left arm stuck out the window, middle finger aloft. Fucking self-entitled scumbag, I thought with satisfaction.

Carolyn's head snapped around and I could see her getting all worked up. "Why in . . ." she began, but right then, I whipped the wheel and took a quick left, leaving her mouth hanging open. Of course, the scumbag attorney just *had* to shout something as he roared past, making things even worse for me.

Carolyn started in again, crying now and yelling, "What's wrong with you? You said you wouldn't drive that way anymore. You think I like being yelled at from other cars?"

And she kept it up, and up, and up. We were only a few minutes from home, but getting there felt like I could've read *Moby-Dick* from start to finish on the

way. I pulled into the garage, slammed the car door getting out, and walked inside without saying a word.

No question she was right, no question I'd promised not to drive that way anymore, promised not to challenge people, promised not to do all sorts of things. But when it was there, right in front of me, all those solemn oaths seemed to melt away, and it was just me and my stupid reflexes, my need to be better than anyone around me, to show people that I was no one to be fucked with.

And that wasn't the only ignorant thing I did that week. Just two days later, right after we'd managed to make up, we headed out shopping. Naturally, we stopped at the liquor store first and then drove over to the HyVee for groceries. We pulled in and all was good so far—until we got our cart and went inside.

I spotted him right off, over by Customer Service. He was what we used to call a mope—a nobody, somebody so incredibly unhip, so disaffected, that you wouldn't even want to be seen talking to him. The fact that he was wearing filthy jungle-utility pants two sizes too big for him especially galled me. He was an insult to the world, a piece of shit in filthy clothes assuming the guise, or at least the garb, of a veteran. I noticed a woman in front of him in line, but one look told me she posed no danger, and I immediately let her melt into the background. He just stood there, though, nodding his head and staring out at the store aisles, unshaven, menacing.

Instead of following Carolyn into the vegetable section, I hung back and watched him. I started picturing how I was going to take him down when he made his move. I was careful not to meet his crazed stare but just lounged against a counter about 20 feet away where I could keep watch.

He was bigger and younger, so it would have to be a surprise—probably I'd grab the soiled T-shirt with my right hand somewhere up around the neck, snatching a firm handful of cloth and pulling him quickly toward me, at the same time swiveling slightly to pass my right leg behind his, then kicking back hard against his calf, riding him down onto his back, and when I felt the shock of the floor come up through his body, letting loose of the shirt and bringing down quick, hard chops to the thorax, solar plexus, and groin, in that order, just like the Corps had taught me.

I tensed up, waiting for his move, whatever it was going to be—a pistol, a knife, maybe just picking shit up and throwing it. I edged a little closer, enough so I could see the etched-in wrinkles around his eyes, squinting, darting looks back and forth at everything. I watched him flex his arms, the biceps stringy but hard. He had a

deep tan, which probably meant he was homeless. It figured. Crazy people didn't keep jobs.

I moved even closer, making like I was looking over the movies in the rental rack. I could see the woman in front of him getting her change back from the cashier. It was going down now, I knew. I slipped the DVD back into the slot and squared up. The woman snapped her purse closed, and I watched as the two of them turned and walked together, arm in arm, toward the exit.

Another disaster averted, thank God. People just didn't understand how fucking dangerous this world was.

September 2010

Jeremy and I sat across from each other at his grey government desk. The cinder-block walls were painted a soothing pastel blue, and family pictures adorned various crannies of the crowded office. Just outside the window, a gunmetal F-150 sported a large window decal: "ALUMNI, UNIVERSITY OF IRAQ / COMBAT VETERAN." The license plate featured a Purple Heart. It was parked in a restricted zone, I noticed, one where I'd gotten a ticket the previous week.

Beyond, in the sprawling VA parking lot, the sections were neatly demarcated by uniform, numbered signs on the chain-link fences, cars filling every available space. I could just see part of the hospital, the corner housing the emergency entrance.

I began to read what I'd written: "As soon as I'd entered the ville, I heard the woman screaming, '*Không! Không!*'—'No! No!' I'd understood the words, but it was their tone, the terror they conveyed—and the alarm that went through my body—that had struck me. There were other sounds too, wails of panicked children. And then the harsh voices of the Marines: 'Shut the fuck up, bitch, I waste your ass most rickey-tick.' The doors of the palm-thatched hooches faced the other way, but I could tell what was happening from the scuffling and the hard rattle-clank of matériel being shed."

Jeremy asked me to elaborate on what I'd just described—how it made me feel now. I looked back at him for a moment and then over at the small photographs of his children on the file cabinet. He was from Kenya; his brother had died in the shopping-center massacre just months prior. "Ashamed," I answered. "Useless." And then the memories began spinning in my head, while I heard myself telling him about my recent triggers.

It felt like she was calling out directly to me alone to save her. I fingered my M-16 and shifted the unfamiliar weight of the PRC-25 on my back. I could radio for help. Then, the reality: It wouldn't take anything for them to kill me too, either here or

later. I'd been behind them on the way out as they'd chopped and hacked our way through the dense vegetation—avoiding the booby-trapped trails—four of them, growing more and more furious behind the Vietnamese weed they smoked on breaks. The word was they'd raped other women; I just hadn't been there to hear it.

"So," Jeremy asked at length, "this guy in the store parking lot who took the place you wanted, you were really going to hit him?"

"I totally lost it. Grabbed my hammer from under the seat, jumped out and told him to back his ass up, now. Luckily he had the sense to do it. Carolyn wanted to kill *me*, she was so embarrassed."

Instead of confronting them or getting on the radio for help, I turned around and walked the other direction. Within 100 meters I passed a group of white Marines near the center of the village, counting heads among the villagers. The grunts knew too. "Fuckin' splies," I heard one say. The racial situation had become poisonous.

"All right," Jeremy replied, "that reaction's a perfect example of a stuck point. Why did you do that?"

"Because the son of a bitch had broken the rules. I was at the parking place first."

"Can you think of another way you could have acted?"

"Sure. Drove on and said nothing. But if I did that, then the asshole wouldn't've learned not to cut in front of people."

That night, after we set up our perimeter, I went over near the platoon commander, a first lieutenant. I had to coordinate watches with his radioman. He was on the infantry frequency; directing artillery was my job, if we got hit—a different frequency—and we needed to synchronize in order to communicate. We fiddled with the dials, and I wanted to tell the lieutenant, but this was my first time out with this platoon. I'd been sent to cover for the regular FO and his radio operator. Both had been blown away by a booby-trapped 105 round on the last patrol. I got up to move closer to the lieutenant but realized that there was no way he didn't already know. He'd ignored it too.

"And what would you get out of staying there and pushing things further?" Jeremy asked.

"I would have shown him how to act right." Jeremy waited. Finally, my shoulders sagged. "Nothing," I admitted. "Plus it would have avoided another argument with Carolyn."

By the time I got back to the battalion compound a day later, I was completely unnerved. I told another NCO, a corporal whom I'd become friends with, but he flat said not to stick my nose into it or I'd be going home quick—in a body bag.

"That's good," Jeremy said, "an important insight. So how can we turn that into a usable statement you can say to yourself next time it happens?"

“Well,” I said, considering for a moment, “how about, ‘Just drive on by, fool’. That one okay?”

He shrugged. “Fine, if it works for you. Anyway, good session. I think we made progress. Same time next week?”

I nodded and rose from the metal folding chair. “Thanks, Jeremy. I really appreciate it. See you then.” I slipped on my jacket and headed out down the hall.

All I could think was, the asshole in the pickup didn’t have a sticker for that zone.

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We hadn’t anticipated how subtly you came up on the place—very little marked it, only a standing metal placard, like the ones you’d see at an interstate rest stop. Even the title seemed purposely terse: “Kent State University May 4, 1970.” We read the brief summary of Nixon’s Cambodian invasion, the student protest, and the Ohio National Guard’s deadly response—these also curiously understated. Then, once our eyes had adjusted to the deep shade under the nearby trees, we saw the massive slabs, four altogether, grouped in parallel, overlooking the broad, green field.

Carolyn and I were driving back to New York. We’d gotten into Kent well after dark. No forethought had delivered us there; it was simply how far we’d made it that day. Certainly, though, we knew we were in the close presence of those events of 45 years before: the cracks of the 67 rounds, the shrieks of the students.

We’d gone out for drinks to come down from the drive, and thus awakened late. Since getting to the city during rush hour would be suicidal, we were in no hurry, so we went looking for the site. We asked a couple of students—books in hand, evidently walking to or from class—but neither seemed to know what we were talking about; we decided we’d hunt it down ourselves. It turned out to be close and had a convenient parking lot. Even as we spotted the placard across the way, we had no inkling we were already strolling on the killing ground.

At best, our knowledge of the particulars was scant, and the brief description we read didn’t add much. We talked in hushed tones—unconsciously reverential ones, as if we’d entered a church. Neither did the shaded marble slabs enhance things; they were totally without markings, standing about waist high, widths the same, the longest stretching perhaps ten feet. Looking at the field below, we saw a small, stone monument featuring a hanging bell. This had to be the place, we thought; surely it marked where the shootings happened. After we’d walked down the slope, though, we were surprised to find that the stone contained no mention

of the bloody event. It seemed as if the slabs above were all there was, the shootings themselves left to memory and imagination.

When we looked uphill the other way, though, we noticed other placards and dutifully labored up the steep incline. We didn't begin to divine that we were retracing the route of the panicked students as they fled the troops through the smoke of the tear-gas grenades.

These signs turned out to contain very specific information, including copies of the well-known pictures of the massacre. We then understood that the field below was only the opening point of the confrontation. The students had gathered there because the bell monument was a central icon on campus, while the Guard had assembled across the field near a maintenance shed, and began advancing toward them.

The pictures, however, showed Guard members firing their weapons from around an open structure with a pagoda-eaved roof, and this was nowhere to be seen. Had it been removed, we wondered. We walked around a nearby building and back toward the lot. I noticed another small, tree-covered hill off to the right, just a knoll really. I looked up into its shade. At the apex, what I'd already begun thinking of as the pagoda was silhouetted against the sky.

Carolyn had continued downhill. I called to her, but she didn't hear or was too caught up in her own thoughts. So I walked the other direction, up the knoll. The structure consisted of a square, thick central column supporting the roof—it looked like it might have been a picnic shelter at one time. On the column were chalked the inevitable peace symbols and a few indecipherable messages. Nothing else was immediately apparent, until I glanced toward Carolyn, who was reading another sign at the bottom of the knoll. The pictures we'd just seen suddenly snapped into a sequential focus for me: the guardsmen out in front of the pagoda—in full war regalia, bayonets fixed, perhaps half firing their M-1s, the platoon leader pointing his military .45. My mind's eye summoned the bodies of the dead students laying in the parking lot. I was standing where the guardsmen had done their killing, and in that same lot, the very one I'd parked in, perhaps 300 feet down the slope, was Carolyn.

I walked down; she was making her way haltingly toward a grave-sized rectangle rimmed by short, reddish granite blocks. I walked over. There was a marble marker sunk into the asphalt at the rectangle's corner. On it was written "Jeffrey Miller," and suddenly the iconic photograph came flooding in: him lying motionless, with the panic-stricken Mary Ann Vecchio kneeling behind his body, looking up, her

mouth held wide in horror, dark hair askew, pleading for help. It was the thing itself.

There were four such rectangles arranged haphazardly across the site—all identical except the names. We turned silently and went back to the car. I struggled to sort through my feelings. We were almost out of the city before either of us spoke. Carolyn said something interesting then, that this was the only memorial (as well as one at Jackson State, we later found out) placed on the actual spot where Americans had died in the war.

I realized instantly this insight was central to things: no less than those Marines I'd watched die in 1968 and '69 at places like Khe Sanh and Con Thien and Marble Mountain, these four young people were casualties of Vietnam. And so were the guardsmen ordered to fire upon them—other Americans their same age—as were those who witnessed the events and then survived, if that's what you call it. Many of them were still walking around haunted by those images of smoke and panicked comrades, along with the sounds, of course: the shrieking and popping and shouting.

And the fullness of Kent State overwhelmed me then. It was the first time in all those years I'd allowed myself to feel it—that those dead students were my colleagues, just as much casualties of the war as those 58,307 whose names were etched on The Wall. The buried grief flooded my senses as it had at Gettysburg all those many years before. I pulled the car over on the shoulder of the busy interstate and sobbed, Carolyn ministering to me, shocked at my never-seen tears—shed not just at what we'd seen at Kent State but what we'd felt over the last half-century, all the grief that Vietnam wrought within us, its survivors.

Finally, when I was myself again and able to pull back out into the busy Ohio traffic, it was, curiously, Malcolm X who came to my mind, and his remark about chickens for which he was so castigated. He was right though, I reflected; he just didn't take it far enough: When they finally do come home to roost, they never leave.

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