

Staring Into Darkness

The muzzle slams back and forth chambering a round. It's a 9-millimeter ready to fire. Standing in front of Leon's door, it all comes back. The shrill whine of the helicopter, the overripe smell of jungle after a rain. A weary numbness overcomes me.

Since morning, I'd listened to Leon rag on his wife RayAnne. "Bitch, house's a goddamn pigsty. Bounce your fat ass off that couch and pick this shit up."

Leon and RayAnne are neighbors at the Livemore Estate Apartments in Tacoma, Washington, near the Army base where both Leon and I are stationed. Across the street behind a six-foot wooden fence, Willard the Rat plays on a super-sized screen at the Dew Drop Drive-In. Rodents surge off the screen each night, like the rats scattering from a Vietcong body decaying face down in a jumble of vines and ferns.

By early afternoon, the yelling increased. "You dumb cunt!" There was a thud against the wall, thinly separating my living room from Leon's. After a pause, soft sobbing. It was Saturday, the kind of grey and dismal November day you hang around home doing the tasks you can't finish during the week. I started to fix the carburetor of my car in the drizzle, but was too distracted and gave up in disgust. I don't mess in other people's business, but beating on your wife ain't right.

I didn't know them well; neither did my girlfriend, who I met after rotating out of Nam to cool my heels at Fort Lewis for the last four months of my service. I'd gone to the Pacific Avenue Gill with some buddies for dinner. After Katie took our order, we followed her moving about the restaurant, hypnotized by her soft curves. During the meal, I chatted her up. "I'm Stanton," I introduced myself and asked her name.

That's one long, cool drink of water, I think, watching her walk, confident and strong, her ponytail bobbing behind her. I couldn't tell if she was interested or I was just another customer. Later, before washing out the door, I passed near her and whispered. "Hey, beautiful, I'd like to see you again, if you don't already have an old man?"

She didn't respond.

"What the hell; give it a try?" I opened my hands and shrugged. "Cut this poor GI, who's served his country and come home more or less in one piece, some slack." As she turned to face me, I rolled my eyes upward to show I knew I was talking shit.

She remained silent.

"I'm trying hard here," I blurted trying to fill the conversational void. "It's not easy to connect up with someone."

She stared into my face intensely.

"I'd like to call you," I said. "You can always pretend I've dialed a wrong number, if you decide you'd rather watch reruns on TV." My expectations had pretty much bottomed out.

Katie flashed a quick smile. "Give me a call." She jotted her number on a napkin and placed it in my hand with a quick squeeze.

After moving in, she told me she was between boyfriends that night.

"Something about your blue eyes," she confessed. "I wanted to hold you." I wondered what Katie thought she noticed in my eyes or, for that matter, what stared back at me from the mirror when I shaved.

While I waited for my discharge, life was uncomplicated. I smoked dope with my morning coffee, snorted coke whenever possible, and swallowed a pharmacy of downers and uppers with my buddies who had also made it back from Nam. We kept "short-timer" calendars and could tell you the days, minutes, and when we were stoned, the

seconds left until our release from the Army. "Not that I'm counting," we'd repeat to each other with a laugh. When Katie discovered my silver medal for heroism, I snorted, "It's all bullshit."

Leon, on the other hand, didn't seem to have any doubts about the program. A sergeant with a quarter-inch blonde crew cut, he was on his way to becoming a lifer. "RayAnne's the best thing ever happened to me," Leon bragged, proud her looks caused guys to rubberneck when she passed.

"Fucking hicks," I always said about both of them. For her part, Katie maintained RayAnne did have an IQ, if you talked to her about fried chicken or kids. I remained unconvinced.

A year older than me and recently returned from a second tour as a ground grunt in Nam, Leon was twenty-three, his body still muscled from high school football. "I was a fullback," he informed me at the earliest opportunity. "In the state finals against Central High School, I drove through the line three times to score. You can bet your sweet ass people back home in Tuscaloosa still remember that night."

Looking at him, I saw the fat that would soon take over. "Niggers get away with everything," Leon bitched one of the few times we talked, "and gooks ain't no better."

After listening to one of these rants, I told Katie, "Not only is he an asshole, but he drinks too much". This wasn't the first time we'd heard Leon thumping on RayAnne or seen her with bruises after a loud night. "He's got this lifer kind of hang up. Everything's

supposed to be in a specific order, or somehow the universe, as we know it, is going to collapse." There are two different types of GIs, I told Katie. Lifers or stoners. GIs gungho for the war like Leon or the rest like me, dick down sick of it all.

Late in the afternoon, RayAnne screamed. "Don't point that goddamn pistol at me." I didn't want to get involved, but a gun raised the situation to a whole new level.

There was no choice for me now. "I'm going over there," I whispered to Katie. "If I get RayAnne and the kid out, hustle them over here." I walked next door and spoke to the door. "Leon, what's happening there, my man."

That's when I hear the round ram home. I recall the 9-millimeter I had in Nam, at the start, when I still cared. An Italian semi-automatic pistol, 8.54 inches long and blue-black steel. Fifteen rounds in 5 seconds. The bullet punches a half-inch hole entering the body and one inch exiting. I'm on the other side of a thin door, imagining a loaded Beretta that's not mine. Wishing I were someplace else.

The silence after the round chambers squeezes in on me. This really ain't my problem. I'm thinking; shit, my time's too short for this crap. I want to be left alone. Smoke maryjane and pass the time quietly until my discharge comes through.

But I know the deal. In Nam, I was with the 101st Airborne stationed out of Pleiku, a machine gunner on a Huey Cobra. We ferried troops behind the line or swooped into combat. Whomp. Whomp. I could never get that sound of the blades entirely out of my mind. Softening up a VC position, we'd fly in low firing our 50-caliber. I didn't like hugging the trees, an easy target for any Vietcong kid tough enough not to shit while our machine gun and cannons tore up the jungle like God Almighty rendering judgment. But you do what you have to do. That's the deal.

Standing at the door, I feel detached, floating. My head hurts and my ears are full of noise. Whomp. I don't give much of a shit what happens to me. Still, the sweat pools on my back. I'm not rushing anything. Leon's quiet, the handgun's loaded, and there's a quarter inch of plywood between us.

"Whack." Sounds like he backhanded her. I decide to kick in the door, hoping I can grab the gun before Leon figures out exactly how he wants this to end. As I contemplate my move, a car pulls up and a brother from Leon's unit gets out. Ernie's boots are spit-shined with a sharp crease in his fatigue pants, but his bushy Afro bumps the limits of military regulation.

He's visited other times, and I know from Leon they'd been in a bloody firefight while on a search and destroy mission in the backcountry. I never asked Leon for details, but another guy in his unit described the storm of in-coming fire. "Three men were already down that day, one with half his head gone," he said. "Ernie took shrapnel through his left leg and stomach. Collapsed like a puppet with its string cut." He paused. "Leon roared like an animal as he scrambled to Ernie. Hugging him close, he charged back to our line. He pissed himself, but nobody said nothing." The GI exhaled a deep, long breath. "After that, Ernie and Leon were partners, different as could be, but inseparable."

I understood. Leon might be a racist lifer and Ernie undeniably black, but they'd both been in the Nam. And I know what they know Ernie saunters up, limping slightly on the left, and throws me a look. "So, what's happening here, brother?"

"Leon's locked and loaded," I whisper. "All day he's been hollering and beating on RayAnne. Something's bound to happen."

Ernie's low voice cuts through the door. "Leon, you dumb honkey motherfucker, quit dicking around, disengage your weapon and open this goddamn door." His words are hard, but he speaks calmly, like when you talk to a child who's acting up and knows it.

I suck air and keep quiet, relieved Ernie's stepping up so I can stand down.

After a long pause, Leon stammers. "Ernie, I'm fucked." He pants like a thirsty dog. "Pissed off at the world, RayAnne, the kid." A few seconds more. "Don't understand what the hell I'm doing." The door slowly opens. Ernie steps in while RayAnne darts out dragging her little boy behind her. I thumb in the direction of my apartment and she rushes toward Katie, peering over from our stoop. Backing up quick, I bump the three of them inside and lock the door.

RayAnne's still crying, but she doesn't have much to say.

"Drinking...he remembers things... things that happened in the war." Katie touches her arm and steers her into the kitchen nook where RayAnne squeezes into a chair beside the scavenged wooden cable spool we use as a table. After handing her a Bud, Katie moves to the stove to start a spaghetti sauce. "He won't talk to me."

RayAnne jerks, spilling a splash of beer on the yellow-dotted linoleum. Stepping out of the kitchen to escape their conversation, I cross the faded rag rug and drop into an old green sofa in the living room.

"Don't you understand what I'm trying to say?" I hear Leon's radio blasting the "Eve of Destruction" through the wall. "And can't you

feel the fear I'm feeling today." I wait until I'm sure Leon's calmed down. Then I drag myself upstairs to our bedroom, filled with a double bed from Goodwill and a dresser. My hand shakes as I fire up a joint. I need to be by myself, sit awhile without moving, to unravel the present, and the past.

In Viet Nam, the line was thin between who you killed and who you didn't. I drift back to a time when our Huey had finished clearing the area around a platoon of grunts. We were up and returning to the base, when the Chief Warrant Officer nosed the chopper down and took a long run over a village named Son Tho, reported to be Vietcong. Nothing much happened; no one was in sight. We ripped up the thatched roofs, like Godzilla stalking through Tokyo in a horror movie. I spotted a villager running toward the jungle. I had nothing against him, against any of them to tell the truth, but adrenalin was up. "Nuke 'em," the officer screamed. "Don't let the little bastard make the trees."

Without thinking, I unloaded a long burst, starting in front of the running man, working back patiently. In a frozen moment, the thin old man stopped and turned toward the Huey coming straight at him. Before he exploded, I saw, or imagined I saw, fear and disbelief. My dislike for the war turned to hatred. I saw that image at night when the whomp, whomp of the chopper pulsed in my head. A body jetting blood and disarticulated limbs floating in air.

Soon after, I started spending my mostly sleepless nights sneaking out to Qua Nai, the village near our base, where some of the guys would go to buy dope and women. Trang was a bar girl at the Sleepie Dick, bringing GIs beer, and under the table, any narcotic we wanted. I'd learned some Vietnamese and Trang knew English for the drinks and drugs she served, and how to refuse requests for every imaginable form of sex.

The third time I was there, a two-year old toddled unsteadily around the dirt floor. Playing the fool, I puckered into my best funny face. But it was only after I knocked beer all over myself that the kid broke into laughter. I felt a calm I couldn't describe. That night I didn't get completely wasted, drinking my beer without the usual chaser of whiskey and weed. As I goofed around, Trang came over. "Hey, Army Man, you likey m'baby? He good boy, no?"

Over the next few weeks, Trang and I continued to talk, in a fashion. Then one night, after the bar closed, I offered to carry her sleeping boy home. She nodded acceptance. When we reached her small hut, she turned to me. "You like come in, have some soup, no?" I accepted and ended spending the night there, falling asleep from the

beer and dinner on the floor with my head in her lap. The second night I stayed, the heat built between us as we talked, merging with the humidity hanging like a mist in the late night air. Reaching for another bottle of beer, I brushed against Trang. We fell into each other and lurched, undressing clumsily, onto her pallet in the corner. Nothing deep, but we both had our needs. After that, I slept with her every night I could.

While I was with her, I gave Trang some money, but failed to tell her when I received orders to another base. When I snuck out before dawn on my last day, I slipped a month's pay, all I'd saved, under her pillow with a note I'd struggled to compose. "Trang, I didn't know how to tell you. I've been transferred." I stalled out there, wanting to say more, but unable to find the words. Eventually, I added one final line. "You were my place of quiet in the madness." Unsure of how to sign my message, I simply scrawled "Stanton." An hour later, maybe less because I'm not tracking time too well, I shake out of my reverie and descend. RayAnne's preparing to go. "Thanks, it'll be okay now. Ernie's the only guy Leon trusts." She shifts her sleepy little boy, draped over one shoulder, to the other side. "He talks Leon down from that corner in his mind where he gets stuck when he drinks. They're probably watching the Steeler game. I better get home and cook them something to eat."

After they've left, Katie takes me by the hand and leads me upstairs without a word. She smiles and guides me to the bed. Swaying to the music from the radio, she removes her clothes and lies down next to me. I watch. Thinking. Why haven't I ever talked to her about Trang and her little boy?

"You did right to go for RayAnne."

Or the old man at Son Tho? My muscles tighten.

"I love you," Katie murmurs as she gently unbuttons my shirt.

When I'm undressed, I pull her toward me. I cling tightly, inhaling her sweet, subtle smell and the fragrance of the lilac soap she uses.

We drift in minutes of intensity and forgetfulness. As our tempo slows, Katie moans and I hear my voice begging to be loved.

In the following quietness, I push up on my elbows and gently lift myself off her. We rest side by side while our breathing gradually calms. Katie turns and looks directly into my eyes. "Are you happy?"

"Happy?" I respond and fall quiet.

Katie interrupts my silence. "Talk to me, Stanton."

"That whole scene with Leon," I mumble, turning away from her.

Katie presses her body against me, covering my shoulders with soft, exploratory kisses. Prickly with awareness of her touch, I close my eyes, but can't sleep.

I listen to her breathing as the rhythms flatten and the space grows between inhalations. Her body relaxes and the soft whistle of her sleep blows against me. My eyes steal open and I stare into the darkness.

Michael Royce