

Ames, Iowa

By Scott Tinley

In the wine cellar the single swinging light bulb no longer interrogates my past. In those days, before my first tour, I was still a solitary figure more apt to bend a little than be swayed. Maybe I wasn't that curious about what war meant.

I know that I went there and people died and I didn't. The entire post-war decade might've been a hangover for some. But I was sleeping off something else.

My parents left me this place and everything in it. Lots of people in Ames have converted bomb shelters; concrete holes in the middle of the yard. How they've converted them nearly defines the man. Some groups have bible study groups on Revelations. Some guys have CB radios. Others have elaborate crack labs with video surveillance. Mine ended up storing wine because I used it as bait; an earthen lair requiring me to crawl back into a hole in the ground. The guy at the VA said I was trading one problem for another. I said I could live with the second problem but not the first. He wrote that down. I've managed to re-cork the empty bottles but never thought to make my own drink or embalm the remnants.

I'm still learning how to recycle organic materials.

In a war, soldiers are re-stocked with something younger and fresher. The aging is violent. You don't breathe in war, you gulp. No one pauses to watch legs drip down the glass. And then you go home and close the curtains.

Yeah, I don't mind it down here now. My visits are sometimes ponderous and sometimes like the relatives and vital ghosts - they visit but they don't stay long. I consider the slender bottles, their gracious necks flat against the old racks. Some days I imagine them as newborn infants in a hospital window. Other times, they appear as sleek, shrink-wrapped body bags on the tarmac; the both of them waiting for a ride home - one cooking, the other cooked. I talk to them.

On the nights like tonight when I'm having friends over and have to come down for reinforcements, I don't even turn on the light. Just reach for the high shelves where the good stuff is kept. I feel just a bit

closer to Jesus that way, knowing how in that one story the man of sorrows turned the water into the good shit.

I told the other guy at the VA about that. He didn't write it down.

One time he tried to speak in military tongues. Not Jesus but the guy at the VA. He has a beard too. He said don't go opening up a second front on yourself. You're safe in the World now. I said you mean the new war or the new world because the second front has always been when you walk back into your home--that two bedroom, two bath theater of ops with wall-to-wall memories of someone you don't know anymore. And he doesn't know you. You circle each other like sumo wrestlers, eyes fixed, mind fixed, neurons firing, unfriendly fire, a fire engine screams past but you don't live in the past. They won't let you be who you were but the guy at the VA encourages you to be the same as you once were.

The same as what? I asked. When I was six years old and slept with my kitten on the pillow or when I was fourteen and tied a bell to his tail that drove him crazy?

Billy and his wife are coming tonight. At least he said that they would. We don't hold each other responsible for social graces. I met Billy in the psych ward at Walter Reed in the summer of '71. He was diagnosed with neurotic paranoia. I had paranoid neuroses; both maladies indicting each other while all we wanted to do was make it go away. Oh god, we wanted it all to go away.

The war only ends on paper. In the soldier it's a forever rash that some people itch and others scratch. You're back after your (fill in the blank here) tour and you've been de-briefed after being de-loused, defrocked and you tell yourself that you ain't deranged. That's just the war talking. Trying to derail you from your long journey back to someplace that you won't recognize if you get there.

The war pundits used to say that evil should be written about the way it is or not at all. I don't know what that means. I read a lot of books when I came back. Could've taught a college course in Nam Lit. Some of it stuck to the brain like sand on a dropped piece of fruit. Other shit was pinged off or burnt up as it tried to entire my atmosphere. This I know for sure. I think. As the world turns, so spins war. Blink and you'll miss a mass grave or two. Go on vacation and an entire uprising runs its due course. The thing about wars is they end. And then they start over. The new wars are like little glass snow balls—shake up a few insurgents, watch the bullets reign and then set it in the closet until next season.

War is different now; a bit better, a bit worse. But it's still there, a bit better, a bit worse. Larry, my pal from Alpha Company, he was the one that got me the gig teaching high school history. He told me over a

bottle of port that we've come to dealing with our wars in consonant sounds, euphonic letters that resonate and creep into the spaces that help us define dereliction of duty if not death. Larry says that the myth of murder has been collateralized by the machine and killing is traded on the open market, mediated in back rooms and war rooms and rigid-minded reactionaries as well as compartmentalizing, pseudo-hippy co-ops.

War has been reduced to smooth sounding words, he says. I tried that line on my school principal one time. I think he wanted to understand. But he hadn't earned it.

Larry is a trip.

In this grand commodification of war we've lost site of the warrior. It can be confusing for those who stay at home. Who can blame them? In modern war--the urban-jungle, remote control guerilla type with manufactured enemies, divided supporters and IEDs made from children's shampoo-it gets pretty muddy. As wars get more obtuse, so goes the mind of the vet. Or so went a lot of ours. There was so much clarity in Old School annihilation.

I hope Billy comes tonight. He's read Homer's work like six times. Said he didn't get it until the fifth. He says the thing about parades is that everybody on the sidelines knows what is being celebrated and then somebody always cleans up after them. Billy says that the modern Odysseus might be in a firefight in the Sudan on Friday and sitting down for dinner at his parents in Des Moines by Sunday. Welcome home, son. Be sure to clean the dead skin under your fingernails before supper. Very messy indeed.

Billy was a recon guy. A full ghost for three tours. He goes back over there on vacation now. But he still just crawls around in the red dirt looking for pieces of himself. We laugh about it now. It's a start.

I'm hopping that Little Jackie stops by tonight. She went to Iraq 1 in '90 as a systems operator; a buxom button pusher who has been trying to figure out cause and effect ever since. Gratuitous technology, I told her one night in the cellar. She nodded and a kind of dark whimsy coated her eyes like a soapy film. I think we hugged and watched the light bulb pendulum. She's a good friend; solid as far as geeks go.

Yes sir, you'll have new friends when you come home. More than you remember. Yep. They come, they go, unannounced with needs and gifts you can't possibly fill or use. They're a nuisance, really. And I didn't like having to argue with them. When I used to tell the other guy at the VA about them, he'd always lean in a little closer to me, like he was trying to smell the truth or something. Then he'd write on his clipboard and I could hear the point of the pen make that scratchy sound that echoed through the particle board and came out into the room. Little sounds that told my story filtered by ink and textbook-

learning from another man who I would't die for or even kill for. Even if I knew his story. Which I doubt h's about to tell me anytime soon.

I knew my buddy's stories though. I knew their sister's bra size and their priest or rabbi's home town. I heard their confessions, their vows and their Bar Mitvah blessing. I knew the size of their carburetor throat and their blood type. I saw everything in their eyes, swallowed through their eyes, behind them and in front of them. And I let them see mine all the way past my core and into my past and my mother's past—the molten skeletons that hung and swayed outside our tents, aired by the fresh wind of all that is pure in war. Which is only the love among soldiers and not a damn thing else.

Yes sir, when you come home and know that you aren't going back you start falling and there's not a soul that can catch you 'cept yourself. The only sure way to know it's final in this mercantile army is to insure that you're damaged goods. The modern army does a cost/benefit analysis on you. And then you're depreciated like a John Deere. You're alive but something's missing on the outside maybe and the inside for sure. Yes sir, this is a different war with good turtle-armor to keep you alive but damn if it's hard sewing toes and fingers and arms and what not back on. But parts is parts and you end up just like that line from Springsteen's Jungle Land-- "wounded, not even dead."

You start to look for answers but you ain't gonna' ever find them on earth. The dirt contains dangerous levels of iron from the rust of dead fighting machinery and the blood of dead fighting men. You can't look down. The earth is Medusa and wants you to be sand to help dilute the minerals. So you look up and hope to find something, some...thing that can help. Lot of guys found it too. But lots of guys ended up like Lot's Wife.

Religion. Hell, it doesn't matter if it's Southern Baptist or the South Bronx, the religious right or Rastafarianism. John the Baptist or Jim Jones. It's better than living in Vacuum Ville. Hard to know if an outstretched hand holds a host or purple Kool Aid. But at least they pretended to care.

Larry thinks that what civilians don't know is that when they blow us off, they're fully Pogo'd, have met the enemy and it stares at them when they shave or put mascara on. Might as well burn the flag or spit on the Bible. Guys opted to re-up in 'Nam because at least over their, somebody cared. You had to respect the NVA for caring enough about a cause to want to kill you. Did I tell you that Larry was coming tonight? He's the one that introduced me to Gerald McReady, the orderly that worked at the VA in Denver. Gerald had hands like spatulas and could flip a bed-ridden soldier like a flapjack.

Did you know that the human hand is the most dexterous piece of machinery ever produced by man or God? Nothing has ever been created that can function in more angles and degrees and points of

articulation. Entire languages are spoken with the hand. And they only use a fraction of the shapes and forms imaginable and functional with the human hand. But if you take away just a piece, a little piece even, it changes the entire operation. Laws of physics, man. Think about an 18-wheel truck missing just one eighth of one tire. That thing won't even stay upright. Falls over like a child's top.

Yes sir, I was in tip-top tight shape over there. Things were measured in degrees of tension. My tight gut and tight unit set against a loose objective or none at all. My tight biceps and tight platoon carrying out loose ops. Some guys had a tightness all the way into piano wire. High octave, G sharp territory. Guys who tried to stay in tune the whole tour broke more than themselves trying to play any tune that wasn't discordant.

I don't ever remember anything snapping when I came back and it wasn't even a sense of unwinding the bands. It was more like you were just used to living with that degree of intermittent tension. You needed it, expected it, it held you, guided you.

The tension defined you.

And when it wasn't there the world felt soggy, marsh-like with no spring. Each step was accentuated and you had time to watch your foot enter the earth and it required more effort to pull it back out again. That was the hardest thing to get used to - walking back in the World. Yes sir, walking at home was too close to the home of where I'd lived. Well, not really lived but that's where I drank my meals and gulped my air. That's where I was a soldier. And to somebody-- mostly the guys I was trying to save and were saving me and the people we were trying to kill who didn't want us there trying to save them from themselves—that mattered.

We loved each other and hated with equal passion.

I had sex-with-meaning with a nurse that I met in my first VA. Los Angeles I think. I wish I could remember her name. She had the most exotic ankles. One afternoon when we were at the Food Basket buying green onions for tomorrow's omelet when she told me that vets have great capacities, great piles of love to give and holes that need filling. But their way of trying to make the equilibrium well, equal, is foreign to the World. In the checkout line she said that there is hidden tenderness in their rage and buried anger just below the surface of their kindness. In the parking lot she told me that the modern vet's two new enemies are himself and the world around him. I was quiet on the way home but when we pulled into the driveway I told her that the philosopher, William James predicted this over a century ago. "War and adventure," I quoted from his *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*, "assuredly keep all those who engage in them from treating themselves too tenderly."

Lynnette and I stayed in bed well past breakfast on Tuesday. Was that LA or San Francisco? I wish I could remember her name.

Larry thinks that soldiers now are different like wars are different. One guy at the VA--smart doc, he was - told me that war is a social construct. It's like a book club or a group of guys getting together to play hoops on Sunday morning. He said it means that people actively choose their interactions between others as opposed to having them imposed upon them. I asked him what about getting drafted. He said that was a thing of the past; that war will now become a profession, a high-tech robotic thing fought over basic material resources like trees and water. He said that blood-for-oil had become a cliché. I asked won't countries find replacements for those? He said sure. In the future. After a period I asked him if he'd seen the 1975 Norman Jewison film, Rollerball, the one with James Caan and John Houston. He smiled and recited the tagline, "The next war won't be fought...it will be played."

I thought for a second and asked him if in our lifetime we might see wars between corporations. He did a funny thing with his nose that moved down to the corners of his mouth and then back up to the edges of his eyes. I wanted to ask him what the difference was between mustard gas and Sarin. But I already knew. He put his hand on my shoulder even though I was older than he was and said, "Son, only the dead have seen..." but I interrupted him and said isn't it odd how MacArthur attributed the quote to Plato in 1962 when no one can find it in his Dialogues?

He seemed to like that, and left the room musing to himself, sounding like Homer Simpson, "Mmmm...end of war."

My nurse with the ankles thought that modern war is like a B-List Hollywood celeb—they require a bit of cosmetics to get in the door, a lot of PR to keep them noticed, and tend to fade from public view while they pine at their craft with great mediocrity. We were trading metaphors between body parts that day so I said you mean Iraq was like one of those Mexican standoffs with a wild javelina on an old desert road? Neither side wanted each other there. Neither knew quite how it got to that point and neither man nor beast is willing to move an inch. I wish I could remember Lynette's name.

Things have changed so much since this war started. We're out of soldiers. Out of breath. Out of a lot of things. But not the Middle East.

You don't ever really come back, do you? How can you get out of yourself? You check that box and then look for another to jump into.

The first month I was back wasn't so bad. It was sort of like a reverse honeymoon. But after I started sleeping in the closet I knew there was work to do. It wasn't just the war but every part of my life that I had written in ellipses wanted to be filled in. The kid I'd found hanging in his own closet, the years I'd spent on the road running down a dream, the missed dinners, the vomited mistakes, the people I'd hurt and the ones who'd cut me, the in-laws, bylaws, maydays, highways and bad days all jumped out of the bibliography of my life and demanded real foot notes. It was a good thing. The story took ten years and thousands of pages to tell. But among many things, telling it taught me that there are only two things worse than dying. One is only a part of you dying and the other I can't remember. But it was bad.

The closer I get to the basic form, the clearer it becomes that there is no real vocabulary for any war story except a straightforward telling. Some days I exist precisely nowhere, the compass of my pen looking for true north. I have but one toe in desire and the other in intuition. I hear voices emanating from thin dark eyes buried beneath thinner straw lids and rolls of light cloth wrapping round brown eyes. "There it is" they say.

There it is.

In my lighter moments I realized that this war, just like the Nam, will keep coming, year after year, decade after decade. Post-traumatic stress is both forever and eminently treatable. And in its epidemic form will indict a nation like nothing else.

Larry asked me if I thought that after every Nam vet was dead there wouldn't be anyone to tell of the countless dead in the counting years to come. I said always and already that nations and soldiers will die and come back to us in the stories of the survivors. The living though, they go on living.

He said von Clausewitz reminds us that, "The result of war is never absolute," and people will go on mislabeling the unnamable, retiring to such obtuse yet descriptive phrases as "retreat from meaning," a "continuum of wretched excess" and what Melling has called "a condition of 'reality wholly other' than any the soldiers had known." Larry is sometimes too smart for my own good.

If he wasn't working as a school counselor he would make a good shrink. I like Larry. We'll drink the top shelf stuff tonight. And then I'm going to show him the manuscript. He'll see that I left the Nam only to think far into the Middle East, traded one east for another, a Far for a Middle. He'll see that I know war.

He and I both know that old soldiers will always have to rise up through the cracks like weeds on a forgotten sidewalk, finding the one patch of nutrient dirt to sustain themselves in the sun while the world walks over them.

There may be a few of the oddly unvanquished, the dark greenies who'll grow roots big enough to split the deafening concrete casement around them. Or at least be sane enough to know that concrete is just fucking rocks and sand anyway. But most are left to the mercy of the wind and rain until they can find some womb of the world with a few friends around who speak the language. Yeah, under the earth, man-built to save himself from himself. Wine bomb cellars. Dust to dust.

And there they wait. Until the next one. That isn't right, I tell you.

It just isn't right to live under anybody's bad cloud. Especially your own.

I'll show Larry. We'll talk about the Middle East not because it's just another war but because it's another language. Another way. I'll show him my notes and interviews and stories from the VA.

He'll know.

That's the door bell. I gotta' go, Doc.

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