

EMANCIPATION



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by

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STORY FOUR

Beneath a weighted canopy of winter's early dusk

-- The Prophet

Evening was cold. School had been canceled the day before due to an anticipated snowstorm. Most of that winter afternoon I had spent participating in tackle football, amid icy snow and subzero temperatures. All able-bodied men in our neighborhood teamed together to create a simple network of wide paths leading from doorstep to sidewalk to the next doorstep throughout the entire block. For us, those passages were avenues of infinite excitement, adventure, mystery, and intrigue. Cowboys and Indians, American soldiers overwhelming a foreign enemy, secret agents thwarting communist spies, thieving pirates on the high seas, explorers seeking treasure in icy caverns harboring creatures unknown. Confrontations were acted out with snow-manufactured weapons: bullets, bombs, arrows, tomahawks, cannonballs, knives, bayonets, and grenades.

"You're dead."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am not. You only wounded me."

"That was a grenade. It blew up your whole body."

"Did not!"

"Did so!"

"It only took off one arm. I can still fight. I got another one."

"You'd probably bleed to death trying to fight with one arm."

"I would not!"

"You would so!"

On and on we created new scenarios of good versus evil. Worlds where justice always managed to eke out a triumph. Then the inevitable occurred. Our favorite winter pastime would joyfully emerge from the mere suggestion that we play: football. The word

breathed into us unanimous glee. Slipping, stumbling, tripping, sliding, belly flopping and pratfalls on slick, child-made, dull gray carpets where once lay thick pads of fresh white snow, we proceeded to horribly emulate those sports heroes we idolized. This mockery of sport and vaudeville continued until that fateful moment when the uncompromising voice of Grant's mother loudly ordered Grant inside. With Grant went the football.

We persevered by sculpting footballs out of snow. It didn't work of course. After whoever had, the snow-football was tackled -- if they didn't simply fall on it, drop, or crush it -- new imitation pigskins were constructed to replace its demolished predecessors. Intense arguments arose about how they should be designed. No one knew the actual dimensions of a real football (not that that would have mattered). No one had ever seen a real football, which I would later discover was twice as large as the one Grant owned. Size, shape, and weight became important issues needing accurate answers, matters to be hatched out and decided upon by a committee to maintain correctness and ensure the sanctity of our most beloved game. Once these points were hammered out to majority satisfaction, another instrument of play would be crafted. With each new ball sprang up novel considerations. To pass or not to pass, should the ball be hiked (particularly since it had a tendency to fracture or crumble during the exchange)? Should the person who had the football originally keep it for the entire play? What about lateraling -- or as we put it, throwing the ball backwards? How did we know when there was a fumble?

Each of us had our own preferences. Toby for instance was marshaled against passing, no surprise there. Toby couldn't catch Grant's football without it bouncing off his face. Curt wanted the ball rounder like a fat snowball. He was quickly vetoed. Had we been playing baseball or basketball, it would have been a valid suggestion. In football, it was definitely out of the question. Independently, each proposal was raised, voted on, then instituted or rejected. Former agreements were abolished after one play and reinstated later. No snow football lay wrecked without having existed under its unique set of conventions.

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After each play, something else occurred besides the structuring of a new football. Reggie brought it up first when he said he could not feel his toes. As if that statement touched us like an electric shock, we all suddenly realized, that along with our toes, parts of our own person could not be felt as well. Fingers, cheeks, noses, ears and the less believable eyelids, elbows, knees, and butts joined a list of numb parts. Eventually, Curt made the courageous suggestion that we quit. With mild reluctance, we all agreed. Parting with a few random snowballs bursting near their marks, we miniature-frozen athletes walked our separate ways home beneath a weighted canopy of winter's early dusk.

Mom immediately ushered me into my bedroom where she systematically stripped me of my wet hat, coat, pants, scarf, socks, sneakers, briefs, and thermal undershirt in exchange for a dry pair of loose-fitting cotton shorts, all the while chiding me on my critical foolishness at remaining outside in dangerously cold weather for so long. (Especially since I was supposed to be home by two that afternoon, a fact she had either dismissed or forgotten.) In all honesty, I did not know -- at that age -- winter weather such as that could turn a person's lungs to ice, freeze one's blood, or inflict a degree of frostbite so destructive it could result in the loss of fingers and toes. I was having fun with my equally foolish playmates. That was all I was aware of on that wintry day.

Cradled in her arms, bunched up against my mother's ample bosom, shivering and feeling safe, I was carried into the bathroom where she placed me standing inside the bathtub and ran lukewarm water over my hands and feet, fussing all the while. "What about my nose?" I asked. Mom flicked a few harmless drops of water at my face. They made me flinch. Mom laughed.

Mom continued to fuss and things went perfectly fine. "Gratey, sometimes I believe you're absent the plain good sense God gave most children. How could you not realize when you can't feel something -- things you were feeling before -- that something wasn't right?" Mom asked me this question in all earnest as if she expected a competent response. I said nothing. Her hands worked diligently, rubbing my hands under the water.

“Don’t you know better than to stay out in weather this cold?” When mom looked directly into my face that was my cue: “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” hesitating momentarily after she asked. Not really expecting me to say anything before continuing to fuss and rub.

It was not long before I started feeling what felt like thousands of tiny needles in my fingers and toes. “Mom, my fingers hurt my toes too. Feel like things are sticking them.”

“That’s good pain honey, means they’re coming back to life.” Then she went back to fussing. “Maybe next time you’ll come home ‘stead of staying out in the cold like you crazy.”

“Yes ma’am.” I listened, apologized, agreed, and then listened some more, all the time enjoying her brisk rubdown of my hands, feet, arms, legs, and occasional brush across my nose and cheeks. I savored the deep tones of concern and mellifluous melody of her voice: “Gratey, Gratey, Gratey. Baby what am I going to do with you?” Had I known how to express the feeling I had at that moment, I would have told her to love me, mom. “I don’t know mom,” is what I said.

“Can you feel your fingers, your toes? Is that better?” I nodded a deaf yes to each question. “They’re coming back to life.” I smiled at her. “What you grinning at?” She had caught my smile on her face. I surprised her with a hard hug around the neck. What motivated me to do it? I don’t know. Something leaped up inside me. Guess you could say it was love but it felt different, akin to love in its warmth and depth of closeness and feeling. All that stuff we harbor for those few choice people in our lives. Whatever it was, it bubbled up in me so fast and furious I had to let it out right then and there. Mom let me hug her for a while, her arms firm about my thin frame. She smelled great, like cocoa butter. Her skin was softer than my pillows. I closed my eyes and enjoyed her embrace.

With stark suddenness mom went back to fussing: “Boy if you don’t get your clammy hands off me, I’m going drown you!” But she was laughing, still hugging me back. I knew she didn’t really mean for me to let go. If she had, she would have tickled me under my armpits. When she finally did tickle me, some time after her

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affectionate threat, I let her resume bringing my deceased limbs back to life.

The needles stopped. I told mom so. She dried me from neck to toes and told me to stand in front of a heater after I ate.

Before I did as instructed, mom led me by the hand back to my room and handed me another pair of baggy white shorts and a short-sleeved green shirt. "Dinner is on the table," she said as she hurried off to her room to change out of her "wet things."

Two friends of my parents, Roz and Woodrow, sat in our living room on our puffy couch directly across from the living room gas heater. They were there when I got home. I knew I was not supposed to be in the living room when my parents had guests, but I would conveniently forget that rule -- selective amnesia that would later serve my purpose.

Mom and her friends were waiting on my father to come home from work so they could begin their all-night marathon of bid whist. Once dad arrived, first he would eat. (His dinner of meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and green peas were kept warm in the oven). Then he would set up the card table and chairs in the den (aided by Woodrow). After dad made certain everyone had what they wanted, he would mix himself a Canadian Club and Squirt on the rocks, marking the prelude to a night of drinking, joking, eating, laughing, card playing, and harmless badgering.

I quickly dressed; skipped into the dining room where I plopped down in my usual chair and preceded to wolf down hot, homemade chicken noodle soup that I assumed had been warmed for me by my mom. Had I known Roz did it as a favor to mom; I would not have eaten it. When I finished, I carefully carried the empty bowl and soup spoon to the kitchen, where on tiptoe and with some measure of concentrated effort, I managed to place them safely in the sink.

Had circumstances been different, mom would have dragged me by my ear if necessary, into my own room when I innocently positioned myself in front of the living room gas heater. After all, she never specified which heater. Her look told me she disapproved of my being there, but would allow me to stay, that time.

Mom was thin and had a lot less aches and pains then. (This was before the invasion of varicose veins, chronic back problems, and bad feet). But on that evening, it was her dark brown eyes suspended in a damp embrace, coupled with a smile that dissolved my few worldly doubts that dominate my recollection of her.

Waves of dry heat massaged the bare backs of my resuscitated legs as I stood before the gas heater, hands behind my back, thawing out the rest of the way. They laughed, talked, and sipped hot tea as I watched, a six-year-old observer with a grin. They seemed not to mind. Quiet me only speaking when spoken to.

Roz was much shorter than mom. I remember Roz as being round: round face, hands, butt, shoulders, and belly. Dad did not care much for Roz, although he tolerated her because she was mom's best friend. I did not like her either. Her smile was a lie her eyes never told. Eyes that were sharp and carnivorous. They made me uneasy when we were alone and Roz would stare at me calling me to her with her lying smile. I never came to her. I did not like Roz at all.

Woodrow was dad's best friend. He was wide and square and had large hands. His eyes constantly gleamed, like sunlight through clear glass. And he had a laugh that was heartier than any Santa Claus I had ever heard. He always wore tan leatherwork boots and had white whiskers and a pinch of snuff tucked inside his bottom lip. His bass voice made me smile, though there were times his breath would stink and I could not understand what he was saying.

When dad got home, the evening was set in motion. Sometime between the first hand of bid whist and my dad telling everyone this marvelous story about when he was eleven and first went hunting with his father, I fell asleep.

In the morning, my internal alarm clock woke me in time to enjoy Saturday morning cartoons. To get to the living room, where the solitary television in the house resided, I had to tiptoe past my parents' bedroom. I overheard sounds: grunting, groaning, moaning, bedsprings squeaking. I had heard these sounds emanate from my parents' bedroom before. Later in life, I would discover those noises to be the music of lovemaking. It is difficult to say for certain since that music was made frequently by my parents, but, I believe, in those

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early winter hours on one of the coldest days ever experienced in Pittsburgh, Camille was conceived.

STORY NINE

Fresh from the kill zone

-- The Prophet

The year was 1967. Don't remember what month, week, or day. We were on patrol in the DMZ. Discovered NVR occupation, met with two firefights and one ambush. It was raining, had been for the last seventeen wake-ups. Everything we had was waterlogged or rotted. We stank, we had little sleep, and most of our C-rations were spoiled. Cat-size rats were all over the place. All kinds of jungle creatures crawled inside our ponchos, fatigues, boots, helmets, anywhere they could fit, trying to keep dry and warm, a regular paradise.

After the ambush, we pulled back. As if we hadn't been through enough, LT force-marched our dead tired asses the last five miles back to Quang Tri, our home base.

Fresh from the kill zone, three wounded six dead. We survivors wondered if our number was next.

Aside from three hots and a cot, there was nothing else for line grunts to do at base, except clean themselves up and cool out, try to forget Charlie for a bit. Maybe you did for a minute . . . if you were lucky.

There was this dude in our unit we called Slick. Dude was a Boney Maroney type with a processed hairdo. The 'do is why we dubbed him Slick. He hailed from Louisiana, and every syllable out of his mouth tipped you to that fact.

I'd been in 'Nam a few months. Seen brothers like him come and go most of them in body bags; ready to kick gook ass for good old Uncle Sam, march home with a shit-eating grin on their face, waving Old Glory. Fresh grunt meat for the VC guerrillas, that's how I had him pegged.

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My personal belief about the Vietnamese people was the same as Muhammad Ali. They hadn't done nothing to me. I had nothing against them. Leave 'em the fuck alone.

Then I was drafted. I decided not to resist. Better to do my time in the army, than in the pen -- or on the run.

How bad could the service be? Sgt. Chip Saunders always came out of it all right, smiling and shit, why not me? Was I really that naïve, or simply stupid?

Then I got to 'Nam and reality kicked in. Pissed and shit my pants during my first firefight. Bullets and asses were flying everywhere. It wasn't well-organized military maneuvers but on-the-spot survival tactics.

That word, survival, became the key principle behind all combat. Survival became my prime objective, my supreme instinct. It's an ugly word, not to be spoken with pride. It accepts no race or religion and doesn't recognize gender or age. Its face is scratched and grimy and scared, with rabid teeth greedily snapping at the glimmering silk threads of life. What frightened me most was that one day, I woke up, and that face belonged to me.

I got off track again. I'm always doing that. I'm going to have to work on my concentration if I'm going to continue to serve the Lord.

Day after we got back to camp, me, Jay, Taylor, Daryl, Jazz, and Wilson were in our barracks, kicked back on our cots, doing a lot of nothing when Slick came over talking shit about his wife.

He showed off some pictures of her. (I think her name was Flora). Told us proudly she was pregnant. Slick didn't need to say a thing. The way her belly was swollen looked like she swallowed a whole watermelon, rind and all.

We got on his case. Jay told Slick she wasn't pregnant just fat. Taylor asked him who the father was. Daryl let him know of his deepest fear the kid would turn out butt-ugly like him, and Jazz swore he knew her intimately. Wilson congratulated him on having such a lovely wife, and then asked if she'd been blind since birth. By the time I got my two cents in all the good ones had been copped. All that was left to say was it looked like him with a wig and a basketball stuffed under his blouse.

Slick was cool. For every one rip the fellows laid on him, he came back with at least two of his own. That guaranteed acceptance in our squad, especially after the expert way he handled himself during that last VC ambush we encountered while on patrol. Fit in like he'd been in the bush for years, instead of the raw grunt we assumed he was. And that was definitely righteous.

There was something else about Slick makes me smile even now thinking back. You know, the kind of person can make you laugh during the worst of times? That was Slick. He shot lifeblood back into the battle-weary bodies of our jaded unit. Refreshed our memories, forced us to think about the good things back home, things that can keep a man focused and purposeful in his duties. In short, he gave us back our will to do more than survive. He reintroduced us to living.

Got so we believed in Slick, he became our indestructible warrior. No matter what Charlie threw our way, Slick found a way for us to throw it back in triplicate.

But the bush does strange things to the sanest of men. Had my own trip that it was the training ground for Satan when he was designing Hell. Brother Wilson said it best: "Two things that'll surely get you killed in 'Nam: caring too much or too little." The latter happened to Slick.

Three days after we got out of the bush, we were right back in it. Our unit teamed up with K Platoon. Both squads were under the command of LT Frier, an LT with good field experience, known for carrying out missions with minimal casualties. That damn sure wasn't the case with the gung-ho motherfucker we previously served under.

Reports had been received that VC were operating in our area. Our job was to recon a ridgeline where the suspected VC had dug in.

Night before we left there was a break in the rain. Ground was still soft. Bush was denser than week-old split pea soup. LT forced us to stick to the trail (even though it would have taken half the time through the jungle). But any attempt to hack our way through would only warn Charlie of our approach, perfect setup for a VC ambush.

There was not one confrontation during the whole twenty-mile hump. That was usually a good sign. Meant VC were concentrated somewhere else.

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We arrived at the ridge at about 1500 hours. Things were quiet. Jungle looked deserted.

Slick was our “Kit Carson” scout. He went in to verify a VC presence and their position. At LT’s command, we cooled our heels and waited for Slick to return.

1630. Slick came back and reported seeing seven bamboo structures that resembled crude bunkers along the eastern flank of the ridge about two clicks ahead. He determined there were fourteen VC, tops, with no more than AK-47’s in their arsenal. There were no signs of booby traps or other enemy troops.

LT ordered us to “lock and load.” Then he ordered me to position myself along the south rim of the ridge, keeping an eye out for any possible backdoor assaults or attempted VC escapes. The rest of the grunts moved in.

I nested myself on a bluff looking down into the small VC encampment and watched it go down.

Things looked smooth for a while. The LT had the men moving in low and slow. I got my sights on the third bunker from the left. Had a straight line down into it, kept one eye on the grunts.

Gunfire broke out from the bunker farthest from me. Guess one of the VC heard something.

Shit didn’t last but a minute. What wasn’t riddled with bullets got blown to hell by frags. They didn’t even have time for P & P -- prayers and promises. We didn’t lose a man, a real American success story.

Slick was right, there were only fourteen. Five of the dead were women, one a boy no older than twelve, the rest, Vietnamese men. We moved around checking out the bodies, looking inside the bunkers, our nerves still edgy, expecting something more to happen.

I never got used to killing only its necessity.

That was Slick’s first encounter with VC in the persons of a child and women. You can’t be sure who you take out during a battle. Just keep firing until the firing stops. Bunkers make it all the worse. Mostly all you see are heads and rifles popping up and down. How the fuck you going tell who you’re firing at? Even if you could, would it matter? I’m sure Slick knew that, probably questioned if he was the

one who did it. Knowing Slick, he'd say something like, "It shouldn't have gone down like that. Don't matter, VC, whoever, should've went down another way."

Anyway, LT ordered the area secured. Slick and I were buddied up, ready to move out, when I caught him looking down at the blown-out back of the head of one of the VC; kept staring at it like it was his mother.

He kicked it over. It made the death sigh. Body was fucked, what was left of it. Bullet had punched out a clean hole in the right side of her forehead. Her eyes were open, glassy, shock lacquered over them. She reminded me of Camille. I turned my head.

Slick couldn't stop staring at her. I tried to pull him away but he shoved me back. I forced myself to look at her again, a girl, about fifteen, well pregnant. That was all I could stand. I had to walk away. Left Slick standing there staring.

I told the platoon sergeant about him. Sarge finally got Slick to move.

We secured the area. We patrolled the perimeter bush for two days. We didn't find anything. Not even a whiff of Charlie. Then the rain came back.

Slick had gotten lockjaw. He didn't say anything to nobody about nothing. He functioned okay. Did his job, obeyed orders, no sweat. But not one word did the brother whisper in all that time. He didn't rip back if somebody said something about him or his family. Wouldn't even say yes sir to orders, just give up a deaf nod and go do whatever he was ordered to do.

A few of the dudes from K Platoon took to calling him Zombie. Caused more than a few fistfights when one of them said it around the wrong brother, especially when they tried saying he was working on a Section B. We knew Slick better than that.

On the fourth day, through the rain, we pulled back to base, no problems, no incidents. Slick still wasn't talking.

When we got to base, mail from the States was waiting for us. Slick had a couple of letters. He just pocketed them and went off somewhere.

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Everybody read their mail, passed around pictures, and shared goodies from home that managed to make it through, shit like that. In the middle of the whole thing it dawned on me, I hadn't seen Slick for a while. I went looking for him, couldn't find him nowhere. Kept it to myself and slipped back into the groove of the festivities with no one apparently having missed me.

Next day, word was out. Slick went AWOL. The Brothers didn't believe it but nobody knew where he was.

A couple of days go by, no Slick. Taylor and me rifled through his gear before the MPs came to claim it. We were hoping to find a clue where Slick might be, so we could bring him back and make up some cock-and-bull story about where he'd been.

We found a crumpled letter from his father stuffed in his duffel bag. When we opened it, first thing fell out was his dog tags, dried blood on the chain.

There had been an accident. His father was bringing Flora and his newborn son home from the hospital when they met with the Klan. They forced his father off the road and harassed them. In trying to protect the baby, Flora got hit in the head with a club. She fell. The baby slipped out of her arms. His son died before they could get him to a hospital that would accept coloreds.

The Brothers and me never found Slick. Far as we know, neither did the Army. Wished you would've talked to us, given us a chance. Maybe we could have injected into you some of that spirit you laid on us when we needed it most. I owe you my life, Slick. It's damn little right now but that's okay. Wherever you are good brother, I miss you.