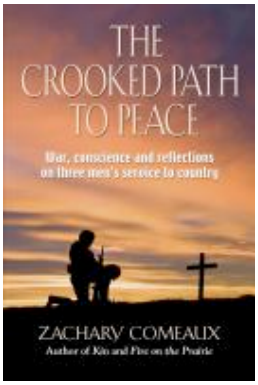
THE CROOKED PATH TO PEACE

War, conscience and reflections on three men's service to country

ZACHARY COMEAUX

Author of *Kin* and *Fire on the Prairie*



War is part of our human heritage. Each generation asks, "What are the costs and options?" The Crooked Path pursues this reflection through three lives. Jean-Pierre, a veteran of WWII, lives with the consequence of his service. Son Jean, a seminarian, develops a pacifist stance. Jean's confident, Paul, is a combat tested Vietnam veteran. Their experience with war tempers their adult lives in construction, medicine, FBI, and counter terrorist activity. The theme never goes stale.

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War, Conscience and Reflections on three men's service to country

Zachary Comeaux

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This work is fiction and, although it is based on actual events, the details and identities of all characters have been altered so as to make them unrecognizable. Any inference of a personal nature is neither intended by the author and none can be drawn by the reader as the work is intended as fiction with a moral.

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Author's Preface

This book serves several purposes for me. Yes, writers have needs. The characters were created to express events I have observed, mine and those of close friends and relatives, which have had a significant impact on me, my values, my thoughts and life choices. So it is a reflection. In wanting to understand myself and my life I find that, as I write, I have more insight about a sometimes perplexing flow of events, the human experience. Also, for a long time I have felt that my thoughts, experiences and beliefs had an element of universality and could be of use to others. In the end, this is an offering to kindred spirits looking for liberation from the conventional, especially when it comes to managing social conflict, and the ultimate, war. For some who have served in the military, and struggle with the psychological aftermath, it might serve to unburden them from a feeling of inadequacy. To those young men and women still facing a choice, it may awaken the need for conscientious reflection. So, I write.

Man is made for meaning. Now as I age and see so many of my mentors and friends pass on, I begin to see that for life to be meaningful one must look more deeply at the relationship between death and life…and love. How do I conserve my own self-worth, possessions, beliefs, and safety and allow room for others to do the same?

Today is a sunny autumn day and I sit on a deck in the woods. Linda is painting. We are alive. Yet, across several ridges, this very afternoon, loved ones are celebrating the recent death of Miles, a friend from along ago. Miles was a poet and innkeeper who offered the peace of the woods to

so many in need of it by running a retreat center before passing on of leukemia. Some years ago I sat on Miles' hilltop looking at cows grazing in the distance hillside. "That's Charlie Bray's place," Miles assured me. "They are his cows." Miles' neighbor, a farmer, at his ninetieth birthday party a few years later, was reported to have said knowingly, "A man ought not to live past ninety!" As the story goes, he retired from the partying troop in the living room, went into his bedroom to lie down, faced the wall, and died. He must have known something eluding the rest of the company. I feel more in touch with Miles in the inner dimension than at a memorial, so I sit and reflect.

I hold a running correspondence with another friend, Richard, who is dying just now of liver cancer after so many years of holding AIDS at bay with protease inhibitors. Friend Rob, probably of the first wave of AIDS deaths, is gone; William is gone; Bob is gone. This last year Mom died, the last of our parents. All the elders, Chester and Ruth, Lavinia and Clint, Benand Virginia, who settled us into this forest valley when we were in our thirties, are all gone. As a physician, I have been with many, many people as they have havened toward death. And I could recite a long list of friends and loved ones.

One could look at death as the tragedy, as that to be feared and avoided. But when we do so, we ignore our part in the natural and supernatural world. Life and death are part of the same cloth.

War is a special case in which one's attitudes toward life and death get very mixed; there, not here; "take him, not me" and "all for the honor of God and country". War is a struggle between my will to survive, and the elimination of a life which may threaten some aspect of mine, through socially arranged death by selective elimination. What more can be said? This association has fascinated me since I was a young

man. The role of war in human experience is intense but perplexing. In one sense, war is a strong force for life for some, at the same time it brings death to others, sometimes oneself. Yet we do it, as we say, to defend those we love, from…? We want to serve, to save them from death by perpetuating death, it seems to me. So, life, death, and love are connected in strange combinations. But is war the only way to resolve conflict, celebrate our existence, and let life proceed?

To complement my own life's response to these questions, I have intertwined the experiences of service and conscientious objection of two generations of fictitious warriors. While I personally have approached the issue of service to country from a peacemaker's point of view, they chose to address the same need and urge by enlisting to serve in uniform. Similarities and contrasts should make for a more broad based understanding of the issues. So I write in the spirit of these lives, embellished as fiction, to stimulate thought.

In a sense the issues and events are dated. Yet the cycle of visions, motives and events repeats, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Iran most probably, or perhaps Syria or Korea. Existentially, each generation reacts to the instincts and impulses anew. Currently our nation seems infatuated with the glory of things military. Even entertainment celebrities are being treated to the thrill of firing weapons and getting bravely muddy as part of reality TV. But what of those who see war from a different perspective, the children, the refugees?

The novel is intended to develop the themes and identify the sources of our attitudes toward violent righteousness. In regard to ideas and values, each generation, in youth, feels as if it is the first to discover and grasp the world, its truth, and the need to assert its vision. We are invincible in

perpetrating this vision. With age we realize that we too have been fooled regarding the irrefutability and exclusivity of their cause and even expecting conclusive answers to their questions. In your reading, perhaps you can find something here that fits you and your journey. And, if in reading, one life is spared – your own, a friend, a son or daughter, or a stranger in a strange land – the years of writing will be well served.

Part 1:
Youth and Invincibility

"There is a season for everything…a time for giving birth
…a time for dying
…a time for war
…a time for peace."

Ecclesiastes: Chapter 3

Chapter 1

Like a boudoir version of American Gothic, Jack and Cheryl lay in tandem as a couple, propped up on the pillows against the headboard, arms akimbo, looking at an imaginary seascape.

Sex had been nice, tender but not explosive. It is a different experience now that they are in their sixties; the fire of passion is now tempered by a feeling of comfortable familiarity and deep bonding. And it requires some forethought and work but the couple find time for intimacy. It was worth it. Now they enjoyed the warm calm after the storm.

"So, Jack, what are you thinking about?" asks Cheryl, realizing her partner ha begun to drift away.

Jack mused, trying to find a way back from the mire of mind to linear thought and words. For the man, sex often provoked "big picture" thought.

"Oh, Paul's death…I was just thinking about the memorial service."

The actual thought is difficult to put in words. Just a few weeks ago his friend and martial arts sparring partner had finally succumbed, after a nine month fight, to pancreatic cancer. Agent Orange? The government said no connection. As a physician, Jack had had occasion to provide comfort and medical help to complement the efforts of the oncologic team in Huntington. Initially he was asked to try to figure

out the cause of the back pain, the initial symptoms. It soon became apparent it was not due to simple strain or arthritis. So as events unfolded, he had been caught up in the flow of events, the specialty care and treatments, the pain, and the shortness of breath from respiratory complications including pulmonary edema. In this context he and Paul had been able to talk about death, and about life, in a context different from everyday chat or theoretical intellectual debate. Both of them had had a rich life, forcing them to be serious beyond their years.

In a lighter vane Paul and Ing, his wife, had previously shared many common interests with Paul and Cheryl. On occasion they enjoyed Ing's culinary flair. She also, as a woman of true Deutsche disposition, had her self-image entwined with garden and flowers. Jack had also become her consultant and rabbit deterrent specialist. Cheryl, in turn, had been part of encouraging Paul to work on his memoires. So, though not everyday companions, it was right to be with them through this fight. And Paul, although he had been aware that at some point he must acquiesce, a warrior by vocation and at heart, did not know surrender. They discussed hospice. But even to the last days it remained an abstraction. Paul would fight. He and Jack shared books which dealt, in a non-parochial or dogmatic way, with the reality of the spiritual dimension and the experience of death in an expanded view of life. It had been meditative and helpful for each of them in their own way

Finally friends from back east and down in the coalfields had collected on the West Virginia hilltop cemetery to pay their respects to a great warrior, a lion of a man. A gentle breeze rustles the edges of the canopy over the family as silence stirred their souls. Now Paul was the man in their hearts, and in the urn, not on the other end of the phone or a handshake.

In bed, eventually for Jack a thought pressed out. "The military exercises at the burial moved me, you know, the taps and flag presentation…It reconnected me with the same feelings I had during the similar ritual at Dad's burial. A sort of transcendental acceptance of all the old tensions in their lives, between intellectual ideals and actions of peace and war, mixed with the challenge of trying to make sense of the killing and the glory, the different means to peace in different men's lives. I was mostly struck by the depth and the need for sensitivity in respecting the way in which each of them had wrested with the issues."

Jean-Pierre Robichaud, his namesake, had died nine years earlier after a long succession of complications of old age. He, too, had had a military burial along with posthumous diplomatic recognition of his participation in the liberation of France. In contrast, Jack or Jean Junior, his eldest son, had been active a generation later in the anti-war and build-a-new-world movement of the nineteen-sixties and seventies. There was evident contrast in their life choices and expression of values.

Shifting on the pillow, Cheryl knows not to have an answer. She gives Jack's hand a squeeze as they continue to look out at the imaginary surf.

After a while his mind drifts on, following an elusive thread of feeling. "I would like to be able to express these lives each trying to find a way to….be. To be protectors, to be providers, to serve, but to come to grips with the death, the suffering, the killing involved and at the same time to recognize the other way, to peace through peacekeeping, not just security of the threatening sword. The issues are perennial; these men live on in the experience of others."

The couple lay in the silence. Both know, from a lifetime of trials and thought, that there are no simple answers. With age, Jack had come to know in his heart that the warrior

and the peacemaker often have the same end, just different means. And in a world which represents a mix of goodwill and ill will toward all, there are no easy solutions. For him, with age, arrogance had given way to respect and tolerance for divergent opinions and life choices.

This had become a clear issue when Paul and Jack had rolled around on a mat in dojo, learning or relearning martial arts for fitness and relaxation. Jack had wanted this opportunity for years, since he had risked danger, occasionally being punched out as a case worker for Children's' Protective Services years before. Paul, in turn had become competent during Army basic, Ranger, and Special Forces training.

"You'll figure it out," Cheryl remarks, leaning over to give him a kiss. "Let's get some sleep."

As he reaches for the switch, Jack's mind does not go off with the click of the lamp.

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Dreaming. The reconciliation of old conflicts, the healing of old wounds.

"What's that? What's going on?" little Todd inquires with a start; Jack sees his face next to him in the glow of their Roy Rogers nightlight.

"It's just Dad; he's having as bad dream."

Jack pulls back under the covers. He, at age 8, has been aware of this pattern for a while. He is the expert observer. His little brother is just tuning in to it.

"Is he hurt?" Todd asks apprehensively.

"No, he's dreaming about the war. Something bad," Jack replies with juvenile wisdom.

"Oh," replies Todd, as he settles back down and drifts back to sleep.

At six and eight, in the nineteen-fifties, they know the issues. Anything with the American star emblem is the good; the swastika or rising sun marks the bad. Those darned Germans; they deserved everything they got. And the Japs, they were no better. Ironically, the struggling reconstruction industries in Japan began by manufacturing a plethora of cheap plastic items, including all the cowboys and toy soldiers that populated their version of virtual reality and the endless shooting at the bad guys.

The boys, sometimes almost daily, made miniature bunkers and foxholes in the cool dirt of a fallow garden patch. They chose their figures from the box like choosing up sides on a baseball team. Then they made the rules of engagements as they crouched in the silky dust.

"We will take turns. You get three shots, and then I get three. A flamethrower and the tank count as three shots each time you use them. OK, you go first."

Occasionally they would pretend bombing campaigns by setting up opposed tiny towns of wooden scrap cut-offs at a distance from each other, arranging their troops. Then they would take turns tossing "dirt bombs", compacted pieces of earth extracted either from an excavation pile or a furrow. They would toss them high in the air at their targets; the burst of the chunk and the resultant stirring of dirt simulated an explosion. Their hope was to knock into disarray the structures and figures, the towns and troops, arranged by their competition. The dust smoke would fly on impact and scattering earth fragments created collateral damage, like actual shrapnel or bomb fragments. Toy jeeps, bazooka men and marching figures would be knocked about, only to be re-collected and packed away for another day. The games went on incessantly. The Germans must be

stopped. Through play, they were indoctrinating themselves, embracing a view of politics, ethics, and battle tactics and a way of looking at the world. Victory was attained without experiencing the suffering and death of real combat. Everything was tidy; they were entertained and proud to be learning to be manly.

Occasionally it was Jack's chore to burn the household trash in the back yard. Though a boring chore on the surface, this occasion too could be converted to war-play. Cereal boxes and other paper containers could be arranged as a city, and a burning piece of household plastic, as it melted, made an excellent strafing airplane with its flaming droplets. Cities would burn in simulated realism with smoke curling from the end of a paper towel tube chimney and flames encroaching then engulfing a series of stacked boxes until they collapsed into ash.

On life-sized scale their neighborhood gang – Billy, Bobby, Jimmy, Chickie - would assume roles and charge through the local woodlands and cemetery property, imagining virtual adversaries. Again sometimes they would choose sides and, in a pre-paintball era, vocally exchange imaginary bullets. Occasionally they would transcend centuries and their teams would be cowboys against Indians, knights of two kings exchanging force, Robin Hood's merry men against Gisborne. In every instance, the goal was the same – supremacy of the good through killing in the name of all that was right. This was their ethic. They were thoroughly indoctrinated in the reality of war and the virtue of aggressive bravery.

"There's a pheasant feather; it's a keeper." Jack lunged and snatched the long, fringed golden chestnut molted tail plume from amid the tall rust-colored grass. They continued walking the grassland. Just now they were making their way to some business in the woods, perhaps to a distant pond or

fort site. Always it felt like an imaginary safari. Finding the feather was incidental. But on occasion they would go on intentional foraging expeditions, particularly among the trees and mowed lawns of the nearby cemetery property. The feathers had evolved over millennia to allow the birds to climb, to soar, to dive. They came in such a nice array of lengths and widths and colors. Bright blue jay or yellow-shaft flicker molting might make hackle for a fishing fly to tease the blue gills in the pond. But pheasant, crow and duck wing and tail feathers were prized to tie or glue to a boxwood or viburnum shaft to fletch an arrow. The finished item would spiral through the sky seeking a target. Combined with a green-stick bow, the arrows helped them bridge the distance between fantasy and reality, transported them across time, making them Indians, outlaws, or hunters.

"Be careful, or you'll put somebody's eye out", was the conventional warning from mothers and they pledged safety. And they took reasonable care, but they were infatuated with their weaponry. Simple pointed tips, sharpened by rubbing on the cement of the street curbing, gave way to more advanced technology. They lacked the stone, skill, and strength to knap stone points. Once Jack discovered the effect of placing a discharged brass rifle shell, scavenged from the memorial grounds on which the American Legion commemorated their war dead with an actual rifle salute. The brass cylinder slipped neatly over Jack's arrow's tip. Though inside his bedroom, his imagination prompted him to draw back the string, just a little. But just the little bit of tension, when accidentally released, sent the clad projectile through the plasterboard wall into the attic space beyond. Jack was mortified and guilt-filled but later transferred the technologyto their rabbit hunting.

But such rifle casings came but once a year and were few. He looked for alternatives. With the profound naïveté of youth he lashed on a blade from a broken pocket knife. What would mother say? Obviously, her concern would reach beyond eyes and the weapon would be confiscated. Jack liked the idea and sacrificed a second blade and went out for field testing. He could not even wait to get to the woods. The blades somehow seemed to make the shafts fly truer, perhaps due to the weight advantage over a sharpened wood tip. Before he knew it, one arrow was lodged high in the Thompson's roof, the other very high up on a utility pole. Somehow God had saved the boys from themselves, but the fascination with weaponry persisted.

Much of the boys' experimentation in life occurred in the woods and fields. Judged a safe zone, parents did not object to their being unsupervised for hours on end. Blending observation of the natural world, projecting their fantasies on it, or just exploring their own interior or exterior talents – the fields and woods were as large a classroom as their formal school room.

But there were connections. In school Catholic children were programmed by religious sisters, the nuns. They described to them a supra-sensible reality of relationships and beings, of God, saints and angels, a world accessible through prayer. This world was as equally real and consequential as their parents, the smooth fender of the family Chevy, the rough texture of their red brick house. Formal worship was associated with the school and the church. Some of the accoutrements included candles and flowers as signs of filial piety. The lush green fields in May gave them the resource to collect flowers for altar use. Collecting with this thought in mind, in a cloud of intention to please and to gain indulgence, time afield among the violets came to be blended with meditative prayer. Appreciation of nature, when Jack was alone, had come for him to have the same

multilayered spiritual dimensionality. The fields of daisies, the wonder of watching fairy shrimp ripple their bodies in a vernal pond, or the crystalline ecstasy of acres of ice glazed red-twigged dogwood shrubs catching the sun after an ice storm transported one into a mindset bridging the biologically concrete into a transcendental landscape. And so, the woods created the psychic framework for Jack to value activity and patriotism, as may be expressed in many ways including defense of country and, at the same time, participation in a spiritual reality of a higher order.

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"Give him one! Don't let him get away with that!" nine year old Billie shouted, pushing Jack toward older Jimmy. Jimmy in his striped shirt and freckles did not look intimidating. Jack's arms looked like sticks poking out of his white tee shirt. Both boys at nine or so were lean string beans by physique and quiet by nature.

"Yeah, you heard what he said; he called you a *sissy*. You show him, give it to him!" someone else chanted as the crowd of eight or so began to form a circle around them as Billy, too, was pushed forward. The two were to be the sacrifice to rescue the gang from this afternoon's boredom.

Often in the course of adventure-play the gang rolled, wrestled and tussled in the grass, but typically in the spirit of enacting an imaginary role. Now they were capturing an outlaw, jumping from an imaginary train, or recreating a cowboy movie fight scene, or subduing a dragon. That was rough but fun. Then on occasion the mood changed. An injury or an insult somehow became personal. Someone's ego became involved and there was a need for retribution. Sometime it was a vicarious rather than individual insult. This was one of those moments and the ritual was beginning.

The choreography of the fight was always the same. Here it goes again. Were they doing this for their own psyches, or were they satisfying the instinctual blood-lust of the crowd? Perhaps it was both.

So, they circled, frantic and with passion but still conflicted, with half a heart. Neither Billy nor Jack seemed to share the same intense instinct for blood sport which drove some of the others. They were both lean and light like their fathers, prone to easy injury, and without a mean streak. "We don't want to do this," they thought. But the crowd would not have their reticence. They feared more the rejection of their peers than their current opponent.

They circled, bobbed, and weaved, fists raised, sweating in anticipation, each thinking about how to end the encounter without jeers. In the heat of the moment it was difficult to think. Yes, there was reputation to consider, but also the prospect of pain. And still, what would they tell their Moms about the torn clothes and bloodstains. And how would they answer their Daddies when they asked, "Did you stand up for yourself? Did you show him?" If the boys came home whining, Dads would not hear of it; sometimes the old man would come out to the fray and coach their son, like at a little league baseball game. But this was male blood sport, for honor.

So the two circled, their feet scuffling in the dust, with much on their minds with the other boys cheering as one and then the other threw a jab.

Each was reasonably inept at fighting and soon it would turn into a wresting grip but they were separated and circled again. Here and there they'd throw a punch, take the sting of a hit on the nose, reacquaint themselves with the smell of blood.

Usually it would end with one or the other of them breaking down and crying, bolting from the circle no matter what anyone thought. Each would have some show of blood, a cracked lip, a trickle from the nose and maybe a puffy ear and bruised knuckles. More poignant was the soul pain. Why did it have to be like this? This did not seem to be of his nature, thought Jack. It didn't fit, this fighting. There was an adventure rush that came with the encounter, but the way it destabilized his heart, and felt in the pit of his stomach, he rebelled and said, "No more." Giving or taking hurt was no fun and had no meaning.

But these encounters seemed to be part of the deal in running with the other boys. Although Jack enjoyed their comradeship, the games and things they did, he preferred the freedom and peace of exploring the world and the woods by himself.

He shared this preference for solo exploration with Richie who became his mentor here. Richie was older, probably seventeen, and had had polio. It weakened his arm already on a tall, lean frame. He wasn't fit for the sports of his peers. Rather, he learned everything he could about nature, about the woods. He interested Jack in naming things, the birds, the plants, the trees. It would become for him a lifetime interest.

And so, once away from the gang, nature was enthralling. There was the peace of a sunny summer morning as the light and shadow played through the honeysuckle canopy of the path to the pond. Or in winter, there was the wonder and adventure of taking census of the previous night, reading the record of the animal tracks in the freshly fallen snow, then following a rabbit as he browsed among the blackberry thicket for any green bark to nibble.

Peace came through being part of this natural, harmonious world.

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While Todd and Jack fall back to sleep, in the front bedroom the tussle goes on. In restless agitation, Dad swears and fights with the bedcovers.

"It's OK, Honey. Jean, Jean! Wake up. It's alright. Wake up, it's only a dream."

Mom is upset and gently but cautiously approaches her husband. As she touches his shoulder, Jean-Pierre rolls and draws his arm into striking posture but awakens before he can execute the punch.

"Are the men OK? How are the men; are they accounted for…where am I?"

J-P comes out of his daze of restless sleep.

"You were dreaming again, you were fighting the war again …everything is OK. You are safe in bed," Lorraine assures him.

Jean-Pierre Robichaud, sergeant long retired, rolls back and pulls up the sweat drenched sheet. He knows. Pain, fear, humiliation and relief blend and he tries to drift off into a peaceful sleep. But try as he may, he can diffuse the panic but not the uneasiness of the memories.

The men…yes, the men. Like himself, so young, so fit, so zealous to perform for their country, but so tired, so hungry, so desperate from fear, and so at risk.

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Hurtgen Forest, near Aachen, Germany, 1944. The weeks before had been grueling, pushing from field and forest, and mud, lots of mud. The march of war, the boots, the jeep tires, the clank of tank treads, artillery fire disturbed the very integrity of the land. As the troops advance the raw

earth smells as it bleeds. The dense fir forest bows in sadness, much of it shredded by shell fire. A low fog hovers over the snow mixed with the haze of gun smoke. The Twelfth Infantry presses on, partly by plan but partly erratically in pursuit of the German forces, however they can be pushed back. Enemy fire is heavy and often the men are driven to the ground under a low canopy of machinegun fire from friendly as well as enemy fire.

The land holds no territory marks. The forests appear continuous. Only the slight architectural changes, the style of the roof tiles and the type of timber-framed walls of the farmhouses, indicate when they are in France versus Belgium or Germany.

Snow is falling. The weather is cold. The rapid advance has led to confusion. Units would penetrate beyond their line of support, often then being cut off behind enemy lines. Some will be rescued, many not, either falling victim to enemy fire or being captured to be disappeared to no one knows where. Morale is low since the failure of Operation Market Garden which had succeeded in cutting through the Siegfried Line initially. But the Germans had regrouped and now were vigilantly aware of Allied tactics, partly by intercepting radio code.

Sergeant Robichaud directs his men as carefully as possible, balancing orders to engage with concern for the safety of the squad. But they are tired, exhausted. It is November, beginning the fifth month since their landing at Utah Beach. Some have had little rest. Robichaud has had two breaks due to injury and medical evacuation, chances to think about the honor and the horror of it all before returning to the front. Rest does not roll back the clock, replace fallen friends or remove from memory the images of twisted and torn bodies.

Company F is encouraged by their successes. The participation in the liberation of Paris, in August, had been both a tactical and a psychological victory. The population gave them a spectacularly emotional welcome, reinforcing their efforts. Robichaud was surrounded by children and others as they discovered his ability to speak and understand their language. He had somehow become driver for Father Dolan, the unit chaplain. As a consequence he experienced a further personal highlight when asked to assist at the Catholic Mass in the Cathedral of Notre Dame, far more solemn and triumphant than at his tiny parish church in Grand Couteau, Louisiana.

But what was the cost of their successes? The battle of Mortain took many lives but was followed by a period of rest. Through it all, each soldier recognized the continual dwindling of their unit as they took casualties. Some were wounded and would return. Robichaud had been one of those. Some did not return, either dead, captured, or permanently disabled. Indeed Paris and Mortain were now far behind. Shortly after, they had sprinted toward Germany, finally approaching and penetrating the heavily fortified and notorious Siegfried Line, assisted by armor and air support. The country was rough and thickly wooded. This was the frontier between Germany, France, Belgium and Luxembourg. The Hurtgen Forest was thinly populated and made an excellent location for this German's Westwall, a defensive fortification of gun-turreted bunkers interspersed with egg crate shaped concrete tank obstacles. After a month's reprieve from engagement, the Twelfth Infantry had reentered the action to help the Twenty-eighth Infantry take the bridge on the Kall Trail to secure the tiny but strategic village of Schmidt. The Ninth Infantry were there and already expended; the Hundred and Ninth and Hundred and Twelfth were still in the fight. Now in Germany, they were engaging the full resource of both the German offense and defense at its strongest.

"On the right, on the right. Thompson, Jones, cover the right!" Sergeant Robichaud barked orders and tried to position his own men and gunnery pieces to advantage. As staff sergeant machine-gunner he had multiple responsibilities.

He took in the scene in front of him with the intent to act – where was the movement, who was it, where to move next, what were the obstacles? No time for thought. No time to absorb the human significance of the carnage, the total and immediate destruction of a civilization. War required the depersonalization of the enemy, and detachment from one's own loss, except from a purely tactical point of view. In the end, the thrill and pride of survival along with the socialized imperative to defend democracy carried one into the next day. Ironically, in the interim, combatants on either side were reciprocally imposing the terror of death, simply trying to stay alive in the process.

Set up and shoot. Tony Barcetti fed the belt. The clink of emptied brass casings mixed with the staccato blast of the weapon as Robichaud aimed and worked the trigger. On the far side of the bridge the flash of fire from a high window in the cluster of buildings. Robichaud redirected his fire and the flashes ceased as smoke poured from the targeted window.

"Hold your ground; stay down but advance when you can!" Robichaud screamed, conscious of the safety of his own men while taking the offensive.

Both sets of combatants were pinning each other down with frequent firing, wondering whose effort, accompanied by mortar fire from the rear, would open a break in the enemy line. Robichaud was all too aware that his own activity would draw attention. A mortar round landed thirty feet ahead and left, throwing dust and debris their way.

What would otherwise have been a quiet forest hamlet was being torn apart by the machinery of war, the politics of domination versus containment. A jeep burned on the bridge, blocking easy advance.

"Now?" shouted Barcetti, "move now?"

"No, let's give them one more round." Robichaud searched for a strategic target, intermittently sending out a volley, searching for and engaging response in the mayhem in front of him.

The next impact was very near and knocked them all to the ground, disheveling their machine gun nest.

"Jean, Jean, are you alright?" Thompson rushed over to assess.

Robichaud was dazed, but responded. "Here, take the gun. Tell the lieutenant I'm hit. It's my right foot." He poked his assistant. "Barcetti, hey buddy, are you there?" No response. Jean-Pierre rolled him over. Blood oozed from a crack in his helmet. Tony's eyes were lifeless.

"Shrapnel, damned shrapnel!" the sergeant muttered to himself.

"Medic! Medic!" Thompson called for help.

Robichaud was his inspiration; what would he do without him?

Sergeant Robichaud struggled to stay present. "Listen, Thompson. You're in charge until the lieutenant decides otherwise. Look out for the men, get them through."

"Sure, Sarge; right now we need to take care of *you*."

"Well, take care of the men, take a head count…" Robichaud lapsed into unconsciousness from shock and loss of blood.

Little did he realize at the time that he, Jean-Pierre, was one of the luckier ones. Few would survive the Forest.

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"That's your Grandmom Finley, your great grandma, Grandpop's mommy; say hello," Jack's mother and Aunt Winnie nudged him on.

Jack must have been four or so. He entered the room. This was Aunt Winnie's room; his aunties' rooms all had a certain feel, pale wallpaper, dressers with ruffles, the smell of powder, a closet full of shoes. But now it looked different; the curtains were the same but the furniture had been rearranged. And in the large bed lay a very old, old woman, pale, delicate, and limp but propped up on pillows, someone he did not know but who seemed to know him. She had a kindly face and short white hair, and before he could find a way out of his confusion, she smiled and beckoned authoritatively.

Her frail fingers reached from the fringed sleeve of her white nightgown and stroked Jack's sandy hair. She smiled a calm but wrinkled smile. She looked *so old*.

The feeling in the room was quiet and solemn, as if they were in church. The old woman looked so tired but young Jack knew they were doing something special. He knew it was a significant time but could not make the sense everyone else had. He had no understanding of what it meant to be beginning a new generation.

May Finley had been born a Clark, in County Mayo in Ireland and life's adventure with husband Michael had been a rich one. America had paid off for them. But richness was judged by relations and by blood. Now her son Will's Lorraine was

presenting to her a young great grandson. He had a pleasant smile and bright eyes. He deserved a blessing, all she had to give.

In an odd sense, Jack recognized even in his child mind that she was passing him something, inscrutable though it was at the time. He felt her frail hand on his head, lightly but definitively, then he withdrew a step, looking toward his mother. He sensed they had completed the ritual.

He did not see the old woman again. She was moved for a time to a convalescent home. But soon, everyone spoke of her death. This was the first time Jack had heard the word. Its meaning eluded him.

What did it mean? Where did she go? "Heaven" gave closure to the conversation but conveyed no real understanding to a boy so young.

The elders - the aunts, uncles, grandparents - created a framework for the siblings and cousins to begin their lives. Old folks seemed always to be there, to be full of smiles, love … and treats. Grandpop was always hiding candy somewhere, the tangible token of his love. Their reciprocal responsibility was to become enthusiastic, follow the clues, hunt it out, then be appreciative with gasps, giggles and hugs.

There were other adults. Uncle Chuck and Aunt Barb…how did they fit in? The couple was fondly welcomed and treated the children well but they were not there very often. The concept of a great aunt and great uncle was beyond Jack's reasoning. But when he spent several weeks with them at their home at the New Jersey seashore, they were a treasure trove of treats. They owned a combination gas station, soda fountain, and grocery at the foot of the toll bridge in Wildwood, New Jersey. The old folk ran their generation's version of a convenience store plus. Compared

to the parsimony of Jack's family household, this place was kid heaven.

Their seaside world was also vastly different from his home neighborhood on an oak wooded hillside street in Massachusetts. The "shore" was flat and scrubby with a salt tang in the air and often the sound of distant breakers on the beach. Jack would arise early and lean out the second floor bedroom window as the tank truck sprayed a thick fog of DDT over the bay bushes to make the neighborhood safe for them by killing the mosquitoes. By day, Chuck pumped gas; Barb ran the store. Sitting on the linoleum floor Jack could read all the comic books in the racks and then eat lunch at the soda fountain counter. Sometimes Chuck would drive them in his Golden Hawk, the sporty last generation of the Studebakers. It was fast, sleek and low. Since they were childless, they lived a slightly sportier lifestyle than the other adults Jack knew. And so, they loved those kids, a resource of love the old couple normally lacked.

In the evening they would go fishing on the pier across the street, beside the Duvall Inn, catching flounder or small sea bass. Jack later remembered the smell of the place, the aroma of the salt marsh, the fishy odor of the bait tank just off the board walkway. Occasionally his party would share the pier with the mysterious blind man who could tell the species and weight of the fish on his line before they reeled him in. Jack was amazed.

Afterward, the adults would sit on high stools in the dark of the bar and have a beer; they would buy Jack a Coke when he was not running in and out looking at the boxes of swimming bait fish. Everything was very special. Little Jack was included in grown up business.

A couple years or so later Barb and Chuck visited Jack and Todd's grandparents. Jack thought Aunt Barb looked great; she had lost a lot of weight, her flowery dress a lot looser.

Three months later the family gathered for her funeral. He learned about cancer. Dieting was not the only way to reduce but it was better than cancer.

But Barb had left many warm smiles and hugs with her flabby loving arms and would be remembered. But now she was gone, dead, and that remained a mystery.

Jack was probably about twelve years old and more sensitive to the family grieving.

Interspersed with these family deaths were the casual socialization with death through their religion. Catholic school had them praying to saints of old as if they were receiving their thoughts and intentions. They prayed for the recently deceased, the "faithful departed" that they might rest in eternity. Eternity, it's a big concept for a youngster. But the seed was sown, and in the construction of Jack's world, eternity was one of its dimensions.

***

"Are you ready for another beer, J-P?" Sherm offered as it was his turn at tending bar this Saturday at the American Legion post.

"Sure. Thanks. And get the boys a Seven-Up."

Jean-Pierre diverted from his conversation with Mike to sip the foam off the top of the glass as it was passed. Then planning resumed. Memorial Day was coming up. It was a big deal in the town, complete with parade. Jack's Dad was Commander of the post and so it was his responsibility to make sure the men looked sharp. As they talked man talk, Todd and Jack played shuffleboard at the far end of the room.

In a subtle way, the military order and sociology of the American Legion created a cosmology for them in which

honor, personal value, military service, rank and weaponry were the guiding elements.

Jean-Pierre continued, "I think we are set. We can use the same program for the color guard and firing squad as last years, except with the new members we can now better represent the four branches of the service."

Mike nodded, "Sounds good to me. I'll tell the men and we can drill next Saturday to make sure things go smooth."

They talked for a bit. J-P nursed his beer. Finally he came over to see how the boys were getting along. The crisp click of the metal rimmed pucks cruising the long boards then knocking off the competition confirmed they were having fun.

"There, beat that one!"

Jack had spun a piece down the long table to land out front, blocked from a direct shot by two other pucks, Todd's. He had just one last shot. In his enthusiasm, with a forceful ricochet shot he knocked off both his two, the final puck landing still short. That point made the game.

The "Legion" provided a leisure diversion and ample companionship for generations of Jack's Dad's friends, even those known from other contexts. It was a small town, the one in which his Mom had grown up. Everyone seemed to know one another. It represented a complete universe, at least to the kids.

For the men, the "Legion" was special. Membership in the American Legion confirmed a man as a patriot. And this satisfied the real need for meaning in their lives. Young men had seen and participated in unimaginable things once away from the perspective of this quiet town. World War II had left perhaps seventy million dead worldwide, 25 million of

military and double that in deaths of civilians. Although the tally of four hundred thousand military dead was a miserable loss, this represented but a third of one percent of the American population. But what the men witnessed in conquering the German nation was much worse. Death was inflicted from both fronts in a ten-fold proportion on the soldiers of the Reich; this and then half again as many civilian casualties represented up to ten percent of the population of this smaller country. So, the GI's experience of personal injury and loss of comrades was complemented by the memory and emotional damage caused by anticipation of harm, physical stress of the situation of war, as well as the awareness of the harm they rendered regardless of cause. Few ever spoke of this darker side of war, recollecting only the bravery. The psychological casualties added to the physical ones. Later they would come to call this constellation by the name of post-traumatic stress syndrome. There was no word for this in 1954.

Additionally, many of these men had emerged from humble and obscure circumstances only to disappear into the shadows again after the war as tradesmen doing menial jobs. The role they played as heroes in these larger events would remain for many their shining hour. It would remain the defining moment of their lives. And so, the Legion membership and the full dress parades became an ego revalidating ritual and part of emotional survival.

Young boys would not realize the more complex issues. They would simply cheer and wave their flags with the enthusiastic crowd on the curbside. They also were gripped by the size of the spectacle, the waving flags, and the vibration of the brass band which rattled their bones. They would clap then cover their ears for the honor guard salute to the war dead. They would scramble to recover the hot brass bullet casings as trophies. The enthusiasm of mothers and grandmothers was contagious as was their pride in their

men. All of it gripped everyone, mothers, sisters, wives, and children.

Only years after, as Jack visited Germany as an adult, noticing the large number of amputees among men of his father's age and recognizing the correlation between homelessness and prior military service, did he get a real sense of this deeper dimension which held the band of veterans together. There was another side to the pomp.

"Are you boys about ready?"

"OK, Dad; come on, Todd."

The waves from those at the bar reinforced J-P's importance, and that of the boy's.

***

Paul cozied up to Betsy as the band bus rumbled through the West Virginia autumn night. The Pirates had played a game in Gallipolis across the river in Ohio. The Barboursville High band was returning from supporting their state football champs. Of course they had won. Spirits were high.

Charlie Schmidt cut the corner sharply, hitting a worn hole just off the edge of the hardtop on the inside of the turn. As if responding to a surprise on an amusement park ride, the kids cheered as they bounced.

"Get back in your seats and try to quiet down a little!" Charlie shrieked over the crowd, but it was mayhem.

As the routine bus driver during the week, he more or less looked forward to these extra trips. It gave him a diversion, a free ticket to the game, and a little extra income. But sometimes it was hard to concentrate. At least this trip he did not detect any beer. Beer made crowd control and clean up much more complicated. And he hated involving parents

but he was responsible for the safe arrival of the kids and the condition of the vehicle. He looked in the mirror at the scene behind him, at the jumble of heads, arms and legs, white plumes and red pleated jackets. It appeared as if everyone had their clothes on. So far so good.

"Aw, come on; just a little one?" Paul pleaded.

"Oh Pauly, no! Behave," Betsy protested. She liked this boy but… things were complicated. She had agreed to let him drive her home this time to their farm out near Salt Rock. Now she was not sure it was such a good idea.

Paul had joined the band expressly to have this opportunity. Although an athlete, he knew he could not stand up to football amid the burly farm boys and coal crackers who comprised the team. He saved himself for wrestling and track where agility gave him an edge and he had lettered. But he thought Betsy was sharp, a very pretty girl and had dated her a couple times, then toted a clarinet for just such occasions as this. Now in the dark of the bus Paul was not sure how far to press. He knew his friends, some of them, had gone all the way. But between Grandpa Hamrick's sense of religious values, and his mother's sense of propriety, Paul felt shackled when his hormones prodded him toward intimacy. For the moment he let off, looking out the steam fogged window at the shadow world of night.

Grandpa Hamrick was the patriarch and held additional significance since Paul's dad Harry's work for the Chessie System had kept him away the majority of the time. Dad had started as a dispatcher in Richmond, then Hinton, then in Indiana, following promotions. Eventually he had become the Superintendent of Motive Power, in charge of all the locomotives in the railroad system and fifteen thousand employees. Sometimes the family moved but mostly Dad lived in boarding homes, coming home occasionally for special occasions, such as the birth of Sister Annie. As

youths, both Mom and Dad had felt the sting of the Depression and the worried talk of their elders. So opportunity was not to be disregarded even if it involved sacrifice.

Granddad Hamrick's lessons were mostly a mix of morality and common sense. On one occasion, when they lived in Bellepoint, Paul had thought himself a hero to go into the riverbed below the newly constructed Bluestone Dam on the New River. In a pool he had been able to retrieve by hand a rather large stranded bass. He was surprised when he presented his trophy at home. More knowledgeable about the operation of dams and the danger of sudden releases of water, Granddad gave young Paul an unexpectedly sharp scolding.

Mother, for her part, was proud of what she considered to be her husband's professional position and also her own lineage. Her family were largely teachers, more educated than her farm and coalfield peers. For mother these factors shaped her family's identity. Yet Harry's achievement superseded her brothers. And although neither their finances nor connections boosted them significantly to a higher socioeconomic level, she felt superior and her expectations were higher yet for her children. Paul felt the strongest burden of this.

As the bus had crossed the river at Huntington, back into West Virginia, they would turn to continue down route 60.

"What'ya thinking about?" Betsy asked as the bus rocked.

"Oh, down 5th Street there is Marshall College."

"Are you going to go there?"

For the moment Paul shook his head, evading the question.

"Are you going to college?" Paul asked, grasping his companion's hand.

"No," Betsy looked down. "My folks can't afford that sort of thing. I expect I will pursue a MRS degree."

Paul was initially confused and then got her meaning, an *Mrs.* Degree; she expected to marry.

"And you?" Betsy continued.

"Well, I guess. Seems like a lot of the fellas I'm running with have good plans and have already been accepted to some of the better schools back east. I have put in a couple of applications, one to Marshall here, but my folks and I , we really don't know how to go about all this, really don't have any connections, so we'll see."

Paul paused, wondering if it was premature to share. "I do, however, have an appointment coming up to test at Annapolis, the U.S. Naval Academy."

"Wow," was all Betsy could muster. She reciprocated the hand grasp. They settled back into the rock and roll of the school bus.

As they left the lights of Huntington, out on the final leg of route 60, Paul's mind drifted.

Annapolis. Somehow it was wrapped up in the uniform and pleasing Mom. Partly it was the scholarship angle and the only way to afford a fine school. Then again it reached deeply into the roots of his psyche - valor, service, defense against the bad guys, now the Communists.

In the mid-forties the Lemasters had lived in Huntington. The amenities of the town included a nearby movie theatre. Mothers were very grateful for the regular Saturday afternoon break from the demands of raucous young boys.

So young Paul and his friends regularly found the requisite quarter offered them. They greedily accepted, and headed off for the Cinema on 4th Street.

The newsreels and features reenacting World War II, just completed, were rerun regularly and the boys never really got enough of them.

Again they entered the dark theatre. The poster, John Wayne in his spotless Army uniform, told them *Sands of Iwo Jima* was still held over. They had seen it twice already but cringed each time the Sarge and his men were pinned down by enemy fire. They felt the potential sting of every bullet, waiting for their favorite line.

"Come on Sarge, do something about it; get them out of it!"

"If you're nervous, count your toes; I'll do the masterminding around here." Wayne took another drag of his cigarette and returned fire.

Richard Widmark in *Halls of Montezuma* was another favorite.

"Come on men! Give 'em Hell!" It roused the passion of every young man within range of the flickering lights of the projector.

All the services were presented in this heroic manner, fighting for what was right, neat, efficient, and always winning. The honor associated with serving and the pride of organization and presentation in uniform certainly matched his mother's expectations of Paul and he bonded to the idea of serving.

Soon the bus rolled into Barboursville; Charlie was tired and an air of quiet fatigue also enveloped the crowd of students; by now Betsy had settled in, asleep on Paul's shoulder. The bus stopped.

"Come on, get your things."

They sorted through the confusion coming up with baton, instrument, and hats. They fumbled their way up the aisle and down the steps.

"Good night, Mr. Schmidt. Thanks." Paul remembered his manners.

"You're welcome," the driver gave them a nod.

The cool November night air was a shock. But it returned enough alertness to Paul's tired brain to allow him to make the long drive out to Salt Rock then back to Timber Ridge.

"Over here," he pointed. He opened the door and Betsy climbed in.

Paul got in on the driver's side and before starting the engine risked sliding an arm around his friend's shoulders.

This time she only smiled, "Come on; it's late." Fatigue had removed any interest. Paul understood and cranked the engine.

Into the night mist they drove, heading into the headlands away from the river.

The road was long.

Once it left town the road followed Booten Creek. It went on and on into the dark.

"Turn here," Betsy reminded him. He had only been out to the house once.

The hard top changed eventually to gravel. There was scarcely a light. Yard lights were a rarity on the farms, considered an expensive extravagance. A kitchen light in the back of a house was the sole sign of life.

Then the road became narrower. Now it was bare dirt, crowded now by a row of fence posts.

"Now, oh yes, turn here, but…be careful… be carefullllll."

Betsy's warnings had come too late. Paul had overshot the final turn and gotten the left front wheel hung over a roadside drainage ditch. With the car tipped, the right rear wheel only spun when Paul gunned in reverse so he could not drag it out. Neither could Paul's stout shoulder with any pushing or pulling as Betsy coaxed the gas pedal.

"Come on, silly, we're almost there." Betsy laughed and gave him a hand. They walked toward a distant light.

Arriving, they found the door locked; Betsy had to knock.

"Well, there you are! Mother and I thought maybe you had run off and got married, or something. Now, get in here," Betsy's disheveled dad grunted as he opened the door.

"Daddy, you've met Paul…" Betsy mustered but father tugged her in by the arm and placed himself in the doorway and in between them.

"Now, Mr. Dobbins, I can explain…" Paul made an attempt. He suspected the man had been drinking. Behind, he could see a worried spouse in the half light of a small kerosene lamp. The house was rough, the floor actually of earth. Real country.

"Notin' to explain. I was young once; you think you're clever, young man?"

"No, Sir, it's just that I overshot the last turn and put the car in a ditch."

"In a ditch," the man reflected, then began to laugh. "The ditch…yes, I've done the same once or twice. I'll have

Betsy's brother John give you a ride back to town. You can fuss with the car in the morning. Brice up the road is good with his tractor."

In the morrow the landscape looked different, the distance shorter. The hardest part was coping with the early rising.

Dad Lemaster drove.

"So, you like this girl?" Dad asked, trying not to seem too judgmental. It was obvious to Paul that Dad did not approve. Paul could see his point. There was no need to argue. In the light of day, Paul could see the illusion created by emotion and testosterone.

They rode in silence.

"Here?" Dad questioned.

Paul nodded and they made the turn and continued along the road along Booten Creek.

Dad tried to lighten things up. "So, next month you have the appointment in Annapolis? Do you mind if I go with you? I'm curious to see the school."

"No, that would be great." The impending occasion actually had Paul intimidated. His Dad knew his way around. He would be good company, good for confidence building. Paul was worried mostly about the testing. He had not really tried his best in high school and found test-taking uncomfortable and difficult.

"OK," remarked Dad, "We can take the train. I can get us passes."

The landscape was changing but looked different in daylight.

"Slow down, I think we are getting close to their turn," Paul cautioned.

Paul had not noticed the abandoned house, back from the road, the night before. He did recognize the fence line and the old maple tree.

"Yeah, take a right here."

Within minutes they found the distressed car. Across the road a man worked with an old PTO driven corn picker, its belt rattling to compete with the snort of the old tractor. The man shut down the machine, detached the implement and roared the tractor toward a gate and across the road.

"Dobbins told me I might expect you. Are you Mr. Lemaster?"

Paul's dad spoke for them, "Yes, Harry Lemaster, glad to meet you. We were hoping you…"

"Yeah, no problem; neighbors always help each other around here. Here, hook this chain onto the frame, not the bumper, the frame; now, be careful about it."

Harry took the wheel. Steering slightly askew of the direction of pull, aiming for the road surface.

Brice deftly left out his clutch as Harry accelerated and left out his. Within seconds the car was out of its predicament.

Harry wiped his brow, "Thanks, neighbor. That went easily. Do I owe you anything?"

"Thanks is enough," responded the farmer, "just in a day's work. I know you'll pass it on sometime."

"Well, thanks." Father then turned to son, in more a tone of camaraderie rather than scolding. "Next time, keep both of your hands on the wheel."

Paul realized the intimation of blame and rascality but had no will to argue. Dad was OK. He was relieved the ordeal was over.

"Right!" was his only word.

Dad slapped him on the shoulder and they both reentered their vehicles as they heard Brice resume chopping corn. Paul rode nearly thoughtless, glad to have a genuinely fine Dad.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday…the rhythm of school caused the romance and adventure of the weekend to disappear into the remote past.

Paul ended the day, as every day, at his locker.

"You Paul Lemaster?" he heard from behind.

Paul turned. The fellow looked familiar but he was a tall country boy and Paul did not know his name. The next thing he knew Paul saw a swing coming.

"Now you leave my woman alone!"

The punch caught Paul in the nose, hard. The two got into a scuffle on the floor. Friends nearby broke it up before any teachers could spot them and assign discipline.

Paul blotted the blood. The message was not obscure. He could understand; this guy and Betsy were probably friends from grade school. Later, as it turned out, they would marry.

***

J-P sat on the side of the bed.

Son Jack asked Father with anticipation, "What do you say, Dad, did you get hold of Mr. McDermott?"

Jack knew Dad had tried to get his friend and family insurance agent, Tom, on the phone. Jack had come of legal age to drive and own his own car, if he could afford to buy and maintain it.

But, Jean-Pierre shook his head to indicate he had not.

So Friday came and Friday went.

It is early July just after Jack's high school graduation. Life and new horizons are opening up. He is ready for adventure. Having entered the adult world with high school graduation, Jack wants to continue progressing. He has received a combination work/scholarship job in an engineering section of a naval development facility. A slot in an engineering program at Drexel Institute awaits him in the fall to complement it. Life is good.

Up until now dependent on a friend for the ride to work, at last Jack is buying his first car, a white 1960 Volvo sedan with a blue patched and primed right fender. Dad had good-naturedly negotiated a new paint job from his body work friend, Tony Grasso, as a graduation present. Although Jack has been in possession of the car for a week now, the transaction has been a bit peculiar. There has been difficulty in getting the title transferred from the friend from whom he is buying it. Until now Dad has been firm about Jack's not driving it without insurance, an absolute, and the insurance in turn required title in hand. Jack cannot, at the time, understand. Driving is a privilege but insurance is an option, not a public requirement. He has the car, the license, and now today he has the title. They will get the insurance soon.

But upcoming is the Fourth of July holiday. His friend, Terry, and he intend going to the Jersey shore, to the beach, cruising and chasing women. The white Volvo sedan seems the perfect vehicle. Adrenalin is pumping and precluding rational thought on Jack's part.

"You didn't get him; well, can I go anyway?"

"You can go, son, but no insurance, no driving the Volvo."

Without intention, Jack's mind and mouth roll into child/parent verbal sparring mode.

"But, Dad, I have the title…"

J-P sits on the bed, having gotten up from a nap. The Army sergeant knows how to stand firm with decisions and orders. He does not see a need to respond. There is no cogent argument although the son is sure he empathizes.

"But, Dad…" Although eighteen, Jack slips into a tantrum, drifting out of control, trying to evoke the empathy he knows is there.

"But Dad…didn't you ever really *want* something!?" As the words blurt out, Jack realizes he has dropped a bomb, totally out of line.

J-P Robichaud looks down at the stump of his amputated right leg.

Three years before, J-P's journey had taken a decisive turn. The active, 43-year-old construction worker, handsome, good humored and strong, stepped on a stone while at a swim party and felt pain on the bottom of his foot. There was an odd and ugly lump, previously out of sight and undetected. His general practitioner immediately cut a chunk out of the foot without hesitation. He used the word melanoma and referred him on to a surgeon. Before anyone

knew it, Jack's Dad had his foot amputated at the ankle. Although shocked, the family took it for granted that the horrible experience had been concluded and they would all adjust.

Over the next several years all realized the folly of their assumption. As teenagers, Jack's brother and he were never given the full details. Their younger brother and sister got no information really. They all were told that Dad had blood clots appear on his stump and needed further amputation. In actuality, as they learned only as adults, these were metastatic melanomas. Jean-Pierre Robichaud was monthly surfing the edge of life and death and the outcome was not to be foreseen.

Nothing went easily. J-P was unemployed and had massive medical bills. Somehow insurance did not cover much. There was a check from the union. Christmases were managed with handouts from considerate friends, family and neighbors and the sparest of family spending. An anonymously placed turkey would turn up on the doorstep. J-P became dependent on the poorly coordinated care of the Veteran's Administration Hospital in Bedford, far away. The hospital was stark and not very clean. Care was somewhat impersonal and often, once a critical decision was made, he might lay for two weeks before decisive action could be scheduled. Before the ordeal was over, he went through the amputation crisis two more times, first above the knee and then at the hip joint.

Much of the time in the months following surgery he was drugged and either stuporous or going through withdrawal. Mom Robichaud lived in hell, although she would not let the children see. She leaned heavily on her younger brother, Stanley. Her youngest sister, Jeanne, and Jeanne's husband Joe, became surrogate parents for the Robichaud children when their folks were falling apart under the stress.

Did he ever want anything? Jack's words hit his Dad more solidly than a bullet. He looked at his stump; he looked at Jack. Instantly both burst into tears and found ourselves in an embrace.

"I'm sorry, Dad, I'm sorry," Jack cried as they both nearly drowned in tears.

"I know, Son. You didn't mean it. It will be alright," J-P replied, his hand patting him on the back.

Their soggy embrace lasted a long time.

Needless to say, Terry drove his old tiny red tin-can two-seater Fiat 500 to the ocean. It got them to the beach but they could not likely pick up any women, unless they could fit in the glove compartment.

On the way out of town the two young men had stopped at a church. They had been raised Catholic, had graduated from a Catholic high school, and had been profoundly programmed to live with guilt and the need to become unburdened for their sins through reciting them periodically to the priest. And they contemplated committing a few more over the weekend if given the opportunity so they needed to clear the slate before adding more to tell. So, the two stopped for confession, the ritual of "telling all" in exchange for a blessing and promise of eternal salvation – until next time they did something "really bad".

It was afternoon, still early. The church was quiet. The priest was in his box. Jack went first. He recounted his insult to his father and the provoking of tears, his passionate attachment to his own new property which had precipitated his Dad's rage and the catharsis.

The priest listened as was typical but soon interjected an unexpected question.

"Have you ever thought of becoming a priest?" he said with some intensity.

Jack was surprised and mumbled something. Certainly, all the brighter students had been repetitively invited to consider this option. But with his facility in mathematics and sciences, he was going to be an engineer.

Eventually the priest resumed the ritual and they were done. He assigned Jack his penance, slid the door across the screened opening with a thump and disappeared.

As Jack waited for Terry in the pew, he reflected. He had been a bit shocked. The timing made this more than the standard pitch. Was this question based on a divinely inspired insight? Was the priest on a recruitment campaign and asking everyone the same question? In either case, just as he had drilled deep into his Dad's flesh with his question, he now felt a similar wound in his own soul. It festered and did not heal quickly.

The short vacation went OK. The boys never did have a close encounter with any girls. Without the forced proximity of school, they really did not know how to go about it. They explored Ocean City, cruising the streets, prospecting for an affordable room in a converted house. The Chatter Box ice cream parlor on Ninth Street gave them a chance to mix with other teens. Without the women of their fantasy, they expressed their machismo in other ways. They lay in the sun, like seals in a colony, flexing their muscles anonymously in the crowd like seals on a beach. A run of many miles along the strand, barefoot on the pressed sand at the water's edge, blew out Terry's arches leaving him permanently flatfooted. They ate what they wanted and felt mature spending their own money.

The summer had Jack involved as a trainee in a Navy submarine detection engineering project. He showed

promise as an engineer and this was partly a preliminary round of Drexel's work-study program. He had passed up a full Naval ROTC scholarship for this practical alternative. While he hung over a drafting table, Matt, a high school classmate also bound for Drexel, was engaged in a project actually testing and preparing astronauts for weightless travel. Their futures seemed married to the military industrial complex somehow.

Summer led to fall; Jack evolved smoothly into a freshman engineering student.

Calculus class done, Matt and Jack walked down the marble staircase into the noontime grand court crowd in the old main building.

Marble floors, pillars, brass accent sculptures on the stairs pilasters, it was grand and inspiring, intimating grand things for ourselves. Fraternities and sororities had their claimed gathering and recruiting areas to add some organization to the mayhem as voices echoed off the vaulted ceiling and tiled walls. To be connected was important.

"What do you think? Are you going to pledge?" asked Matt, who had also started in Mechanical Engineering at Drexel.

"Yeah, I think I'm going to go with TEKE," Jack responded, "How about you?"

"I think I'm going to pledge Sigma Pi."

"Aren't they, kind of, trouble makers?" Jack asked.

Matt only gave him a wink.

The course work at Drexel went hard. A full quarter of the freshman starting class was expected to fail out. Pledging was an almost intolerable load. Additionally all freshmen

were required to take one quarter of the Reserved Officers' Training Course.

"You got that piece cleaned and reassembled yet, Mister," barked a senior classman, in his ROTC lieutenant's uniform. The cadets worked in the chilled dusks of the cavernous Armory on Lancaster Avenue.

"Almost, Sir!" Jack barked.

"Almost isn't good enough, Soldier. Hop to it."

As he left Steve and Jack only wagged their heads, only half engaged in the intended purpose of this required military training class. They were more intent on the lacrosse training they were doing through the winter in the gym, both intending in the spring season to find a place as midfielders on the junior squad.

For Jack's part, he felt like he was on a special track having already considered and passed up the Navy engineering scholarship.

Inside something else was happening. The priest's words in the confessional of last June were bearing their fruit and changing Jack's course. He had accepted a seminary interview followed by acceptance and shopped with his Dad for the black suit of a student cleric.

Chapter 2

"Hey, Paul, I'm glad to see you could come," Jack hailed, as they were both getting out of the cars at the same time.

Some weeks before Jack had started taking an evening class in martial arts training, partly for exercise but more for self-defense. As a greying senior lecturer in his field of medicine, he had started traveling to teach in such places as Brazil and Russia and felt he should know something more about how to handle himself. Recently he had asked Paul if he wanted to come along. Paul was a bit stiff getting out of the car; both now in their sixties, they needed some conditioning.

"Yeah, we'll see how it goes," Paul responded.

They started to walk into the dojo in a small strip mall on the edge of town. The tutus from the little girls' dance class were cleared away and as they helped Steve, their sensei or teacher, roll out the mats. They cussed the idea of working out on a floor littered with glitter. Somehow Bruce Lee and Tinkerbelle seemed incompatible.

"Steve, this is Paul; he's coming as my guest to see if he likes it."

Paul's wife, Ing, had started to worry about Paul, her warrior, and his declining level of physical activity; she maneuvered to get him walking and working with a personal

trainer. Once Jack suggested it, the aiki-jutsu seemed a compatible escape.

"Sure, welcome…So, have you had any martial arts experience?" Steve queried.

Paul started a bit sheepishly, not knowing how exactly to convert his previous experience from his time in the military and law enforcement service into this type of venue. His reply was clearly an understatement.

"Yes, quite a bit. We had some in Ranger training before Vietnam then I had used it in police work sometime after."

"Oh, I see. Well, you are certainly welcome. As several other students have come, let's get started."

Steve's dojo routine was a mix of conserving tradition out of respect for his teachers, warm up stretches followed by demonstrations, then drills. On occasion they would have actual sparring or testing. But tonight, still with a new class for the year, they were doing basic drills.

Jack was glad for Paul's company. Up until now, except for one transient member, Jack had been by far the oldest. Now sixty, there was quite a gap between himself and his capabilities and those of the rest of the class, largely medical students in their twenties. Steve was their professor of Anatomy at the school where Jack taught. There were several centrally located martial arts venues in town and Steve's main visibility was through faculty and students at the medical school. Paul was Jack's partner in partial decrepitude.

A bow to the plaque on the wall, their contact with the larger practice community, then stretching of quads, lats…all got a workout.

"Ok, line up. Ukemi rolls. Bruce, I'll demonstrate then you go first."

Steve demoed, performing several smooth forward rolls, right shoulder leading.

"OK, now follow. Do a series, two along each side of the mat and end up over there. Ok, come on, come on." Steve clapped his hands in urgency.

Everyone struggled to make the rolls smoothly and for a while the sound of heels hitting the mat as they turned upright after each roll predominated.

"Very good, very good!" sensei-Steve called out encouragingly, although many of them were not really getting it yet.

Jack was glad Paul was there. Besides feeling nauseous from repeatedly rolling upside down, Jack was aware of his lack of grace. His weak left knee made balance and push-off difficult. Paul and Jack were into competitive stiffness. But they did their best.

As the weeks passed, Paul and Jack caught up with the group. And each of them had sufficient will and body strength so as to demand some respect from the junior members. Once he overheard a student in the school hallway tell another, "Dr. Robichaud whooped my ass last night!" It helped his ego and compensated for the pain and effort to keep at it.

"I have the hardest time working this out," Paul shared. "Before when we would do this, the aim might be to kill. I have to keep reminding myself to put on the brakes." Their teacher nodded appreciatively.

It was comic. Here was an international, major league warrior, facing off against a tiny woman just trying to work up some self-esteem. For Jack's part, it took some time for students to get used to taking a swing at a senior faculty member. But they all had good fun and the exercise was great.

Afterwards they walked back to their cars. The late autumn evening was cool. Paul had a scarf under his jacket collar. He was a handsome man, a Cary Grant jaw and the lion's mane of a long crew cut, yet with an impish grin revealing his inner self. Jack had let his hair grow and it was now well past his shoulders when down, though tied up during these activities.

So, together, the old warrior and the old pacifist, now beyond ideology and ego, shared a common bond.

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The night was warm, late June, 1968, in Firebase Bastogne between Hue and the A Shau Valley, I Corps, deep within the North Vietnamese Army's operational area. Sleep was impossible. Having taken command of newly formed Company C, 3rd Battalion, 402 Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, twenty-six year old Captain Paul Lemaster peered at the dense carpet of stars spanning the vault of the sky, interrupted only by occasional radio crackle. Although within a relatively secure base, by habit Lemaster lay on his back, head to head with one of his RTO's, radio transmission officers, both ready to respond. Chuck kept the artillery frequency open 24/7. Should mortars start to drop, there was no time for finding switches and knobs. With the first whistle, one reflexively sent up a streamer, a flare, and screamed into the radio for air support.

But the night was quiet. Tomorrow would be their day, their most difficult day. Tonight the action was in the Captain's mind. Paul worried about the men. Come morning, before the light, the company would be airlifted by helicopter to a landing zone at the front, at the edge of A Shau. He prayed to be able to get them through the next twenty-four hours alive. Intelligence projected that they would lose thirty percent of the helicopters to anti-aircraft fire before reaching the landing zone, or LZ. The First Cavalry, their support, had hadover a hundred helicopters shot down near the valley during the current operation. Weeks before, they had tried to clear the area by sending in low flying aircraft as decoys to draw fire to detect enemy gun emplacements. Then, high flying aircraft would detect and attack to destroy the installations. Quickly the VNA, the Vietnamese National Army, detected the tactic and their guns went silent.

Lemaster was concerned. As a newly formed Company, half were volunteer Airborne combat veterans, half new draftees, green, very green. Before being flown to their forward firebase, they had had only three hours of training together as a new unit. Captain Lemaster was still trying to learn the names of his officers.

He had been immediately impressed by Lieutenant Rogers, a mature black man, who had served as a member of the Old Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in DC. Rogers showed character and was steady. Lemaster chose him as his Chief Officer. Second Lieutenant Chambers, a rural boy like himself, was aggressive, loved to kill. Chambers had artillery experience. Lemaster chose him as his Forward Officer. But the men, so many, so young. And tomorrow they attacked the heart of the enemy's defense, strongly entrenched.

Their orders were to retake the A Shau Valley, a critical link with the North Vietnamese chain of supply as a major spur

off the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It lay just a few miles from the Laotian border and the Vietcong used this proximity, and Laotian neutrality, to bring munitions and equipment far south into Thua Thien and Quang Nam Provinces. A forward firebase had been established in the valley two years earlier by the Special Forces and Vietnamese Civilian Defense Forces. However, they had been overrun. Major Dickens, of Battalion command, now comfortably out of harm's way in the rear, was anxious to regain this strategic prize and tallying a high body count – from the VNA. He was demanding that Company C, along with elements of the B Company, 126th Engineering Battalion, to engage and destroy the enemy. Once in the valley, they were directed to take Ap Bia Mountain. This low peak, rising fourteen hundred feet above sea level, gave a commanding view of the entire valley. It was heavily fortified from its cave riddled slopes by the enemy.

Lemaster's outer attention floated on the sounds of the night, attentive to any suspicious variation. His inner attention lay in deep thought. In his mind, this war had two kinds of officers, those who kept as much distance as possible from the front, and those who engaged as needed to optimize the success of the mission and the safety of the men. Lemaster had recently pressed the Division Personnel Officer to get more NCO's, the noncommissioned or intermediate level officers, out of rear support positions in Saigon and into the field to help get the job done.

This was a bad war, fighting an almost invisible enemy, invisible due to the dense jungle foliage. No one wanted to be here. One often waited in tension as you heard the enemy slide a mortar round into the firing tube, knowing you had to wait to know how close it hit, after the fact. Any rounding of a trail could result in a tiny armed man popping out of a spider hole and filling you full of lead from an AK47 before popping down again. The Vietnamese were so small,

and their tunnel network so narrow that even if an entry were found, they could not be traced or followed. Americans were just too large to negotiate the passages.

Tomorrow would be decisive.

The starry sky gave Paul a feeling of eternity, a touch with God amid the mayhem. He thought of Ing, who he had married just three months prior after delaying because of their impossible circumstances and the uncertain future. Would he see her again? His men, they would be in a lead position. Could he achieve their objective, methodically working the enemy, and have the majority survive? Or would they all die, wiped out by an overpowering enemy? How many, in the tight confines of jungle camouflage, would die of friendly fire?

The stars, the night, could not answer him.

He had not asked to be in Vietnam. Since his boyhood, patriotism meant fighting Communism. But Communism meant Soviet Communism, and the nuclear threat to the homeland, and the possible incursion into Europe. He had enlisted thinking of an Army career, then had gone through Ranger school, Special Forces training, parachute training, tank training and many other harrowing training exercises with this goal and world view. Southeast Asia had not been on his globe.

As he lay there, he thought about his mother. Yes she was proud, but so far removed, she would find this night incredible. He recalled all those years together, as a boy, with Dad working away. He remembered the day he was sent to the town carnival and came back to find he had a baby sister, Annie. He remembered the discipline of Grandfather Hamrick’s razor strap and now wondered if the stoicism it engendered had saved his life, in the infatigable

resolve required for rappelling, for underwater infiltration, in running the obstacle course, all done deftly, ignoring the pain and fatigue, simply to do it well, to complete the task.

He remembered his old gang and the skinny dipping in the swimming hole, especially the time the girls spied on them and stole their clothes. Hadn't life been simpler? High school sports followed, then ROTC; now Vietnam.

Vietnam presented more danger than from enemy armament. He remembered the time he unwisely decided to reconnoiter the far bank of the stream beside their encampment, to check for enemy close in. Doing so meant going outside the Company's cleared perimeter. It should have been a squad's task. Often the enemy would be that close. Thoughtlessly, he did it solo.

He had walked the small streambed, staring into the vegetation beyond attentive and looking for any movement. Surprisingly, the rocky bottom of the stream took an abrupt drop, creating a fourteen foot deep pool. Laden with M-16, web ammunition belt with attached hand grenades – together weighing thirty pounds - Lemaster sank like a rock. Ranger school had taught him not to panic so he methodically began struggling free from the web-gear. However, somehow the web vest snagged onto his fatigues, keeping him pinned. With heroic effort he struggled to the surface for a gulp of air but the attached weight kept it brief.

From the bottom of the pool he looked up at the sun shining brightly overhead through the depth of clear water. He realized he may not have the strength to again get to the surface. Then he had the impression of leaving his body and observing his activity. Some part of his consciousness rejected the idea of dying here, in this way. Somehow he managed, realizing he could no longer fight the weight in going to the surface, to shred the webbing and free himself.

In animal action he broke free, and made it to the surface, then the bank, gasping for air. At that point his consciousness returned to his body, stunned, digesting the rapid course of dramatic events in the silence of the verdant forest.

The night vigil continued. Again, Lemaster recalled more recently laying backward on his rucksack under the shade of the trees. Then it came in focus. Just two feet over his head was a "hydra head", a clustered nest of bamboo kraits, the deadliest snakes in Vietnam. Knowing the potentially fatal consequences, without thought, Lemaster had slowly slid away from the imminent danger.

His mind floated longer on the silence, yesterday, today, tomorrow blended. He had lived so close to death that it had become familiar. He felt at peace. He gave himself over to God.

It was Rogers, giving him a nudge. "Cap'n, it's time to stand to."

The rim of light had not touched the eastern horizon. This was a favorite time for enemy attack. Better to preempt them, account for the men, eat a light ration, and begin to move.

"Right; put the men on alert," Lemaster agreed.

***

Jean-Pierre was startled at the sound of a Cajun accent in the hospital hallway. He sat up in the military infirmary bed.

"Voici, c'est toi ici. There you are; they told me I would find you here. How are you, Brother? I've got the news and was worried about you." The deep sonorous tones of Homer's voice were soothing to his younger brother.

The two men had joined the Army just months apart. The decision was difficult. Mother had been feeble; Daddy had all he could handle with the sugar cane crop. Somehow the urgency of the national call to arms, to erase tyranny, stirred something in their blood, an instinct perhaps. Something was happening that was bigger than themselves, their farm, bigger than anything they could imagine. They were drawn in.

Additionally, the thought of seeing the world outside the bayou country seemed appealing. Older brother Alec had spent some time away when he joined the good fathers of the Oblates, attending their seminary in New Jersey. Returning after two years, partly from homesickness, and also from a change in convictions, he had "seen the world". Homer and Jean-Pierre caught the fever.

Their Papa, Remi, was a farmer, not a soldier. When World War I had arrived, he was already a daddy several times over and in his early forties. So he farmed and raised sons instead of going to war. J-P was just about ready to be born. Their community was insular. It was geographically and economically remote in Louisiana bayou country, an extension of the Mississippi Delta. Though well provided for from the cow, the chickens and the fields, they were cash poor. The pinch of the Depression years did not touch bayou country since rice and sugar were staples, never bringing in a high market price but always needed. The crops were labor intensive and Daddy cheered each time a newborn appeared with male genitals, another field laborer in the making. Sisters Dula and Anne were the only two among ten siblings assigned to house chores.

Language was another barrier between Cajuns and the larger community. Before grade school a child did not hear English spoken. Then they learned it for the pledge of allegiance and to read the text books. And after school, the

aunts and uncles, as well as the Tibaudeaux, Broussard, Comeaux families they all reverted to their French patoir.

So in growing up, Homer and Jean-Pierre's community was cohesive and self-sufficient. They had a sense of contributing in a responsible way to family survival and enjoyed the freedom of the swamp and forest. But now coming of age, they were ready to explore a larger world and to prove themselves as soldiers in a way their Papa had not been able to.

After induction and a brief stay at Ft. Livingston, the brothers had shipped out. But training was long as America built an army, waiting for the correct political decisions to be made. Jean-Pierre was moved from camp to camp. While on this circuit, before going overseas, mother did die. But this was long past. He had seen action. So much had happened.

"So, how bad is it?" Homer asked continuing to their Cajun patois. It was music to Jean-Pierre's ears after weeks of British English and American slang.

"Oh, I'll survive. The doctor said I had a concussion but I've come around. I took a hit on the side of my head that nearly sliced off my ear. "

"Montrez-le-moi. Show me," his brother probed amid the bandages.

J-P began to cry.

"Am I hurting you?" Homer recoiled.

After a hesitation, Jean-Pierre responded. "No, it's not that…it was a woman; I shot a woman! Jesus. Homer, I shot a woman!" he sobbed holding his head in his hands.

Homer took Jean-Pierre on his chest as his little brother leaned forward, able at last to step outside the soldier role.

Jean-Pierre's experience had been part of the bigger picture. As soon as the Americans had stepped off the boat at Utah Beach, it became apparent that France was not so simple a place as had been portrayed at home in the newspapers, waiting to be liberated. With the impending occupation of France, the Prime Minister Philippe Petain attempted to make a compromise with Hitler. All of Europe was enmeshed in one way or another with the choice between republican versus authoritarian government. Spain, Italy, France – Hitler had stepped into a hot bed.

Petain's ambitions were startlingly similar to Hitler's; to return the country to authoritarian rule, to clean the county of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals and prostitutes. His goal, to replace the Third Republic's motto of Liberté, Fraternité, et Egalité with Travail, Famille, Patrie –work, family and fatherland, was startlingly reminiscent of the Reich of his invading northern neighbor. Hitler and Petain divided France, for the time, with the latter establishing a capital in Vichy in south central France. Occupied on other fronts, Germany lived in an uncomfortable collaboration with Vichy France, appreciating advantage without the cost of conquest. The vestige of the previous French government, including Charles De Gaulle, fled to exile in England, retaining their identity as Free France, the Republic.

So, at the time of the Allied invasion, northern France was in chaos. Landing on the Beach, allied troops met German resistance but also the French population who were a mix of Republicans and the Resistance (to the Nazis), neutral and dazed peasants, as well as Petain's Parti Populaire Française, many of whom had taken up arms as the Legion Française des Combattants, assisting the Germans in resisting the allies. Jean-Pierre's assailant apparently was one of the latter.

Before the invasion, communities were divided but often in a clandestine sense. Once combat ensued, the same communities were in overt chaos. For the first several days, no territory was secured; there was no clear front, and opposing factions swirled and swept back over previously fought over ground before the Allies began to preside over the coast, driving the German's inland. First the Allies drove north toward Cherbourg, the major port on the English Channel, a critical resource. Then they were to drive south toward Paris, liberating territory. But in the interim, the Normandy countryside was a patchwork of pandemonium.

The brothers disengaged and J-P's sobs weakened; Homer tried to instill a sense of normalcy. He pulled up a chair. "Well, tell me about it."

Jean-Pierre began, slowly at first, to explain what had happened. "The men said the shelling had been heavy at the beach and allied bombers had been working over the German pill boxes as their troops landed on Utah Beach. Offshore artillery from the Nevada continued busily hitting and knocking out strategic bunkers. I rejoined the Company after recuperation in England from personal injuries just after the landing. We were expected to join up with the 26th from Omaha Beach, first to take Cherbourg then work our way toward St. Lo, to take a hill which overlooked an important roadway junction. From there, penetrating central France would be easier. But in the meantime, going was hell."

"We did not meet the Panzers, the tanks, as we expected but the Jerries were reinforced by their own paratrooper units. They were clever. The country was gently hilly, much more so than Louisiana, mostly farmland, with sunken lanes between the fields. The old stone villages with their church spires were mostly deserted since the Germans occupied them, had slain the cattle and confiscated other crops. But

unlike Lou'siana, the fields were divided along the roads by high hedgerows. The moist maritime climate favored the wild growth of native trees and shrubs between the tended fields, creating these dense barriers. You could not see through them. The Jerries used these as cover, watching for us on the road or crossing a field. Snipers made nests in the hedges, sometimes through slits in the foliage, sometimes from perches higher up. Often they'd cut you down by hitting your legs then finishing you off as you lay helpless. Every open space was a deathtrap."

"But we were cleverer. Playing hide and seek, we would also use the hedgerows as a cover. If you went slow and listened close, sometimes you could hear the Germans whispering. Rifles were useless with so little sighting, but grenades were our friends. Time after time we would estimate the location of the chatter source and lob some grenades over the hedges. You had to move fast because they would lob some in return. This went on for hours, yard by yard we gained ground. But that wasn't all there was to occupy us. The artillery support fire would get intense, whizzing shells barely over their heads. The enemy returned the same. Occasionally the fire would be so heavy we would have to hit the ground."

"Three weeks after I rejoined the unit we were in the village of Meautis, just west of Carentan, approaching St. Lo. Advancing through the fields, crawling as we went, I directed the men to follow me through a small break in the hedge. As I rose in the field on the other side a shot rang out. I felt a sting on my ear. I turned and returned fire. A body fell from a treetop in the hedgerow. When we got close we saw it was a woman. She was plainly dressed, not in German uniform. I felt so bad."

J-P began again to sob. Homer rose and embraced him.

"Remember, Brother. This is war. We did not make the rules. She was not offering you a cup of tea. She was intent on killing you, or your men. You did what you could. War is hell."

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"You have three minutes to clear the room. This brief case contains a bomb!"

Two men in sport coats placed the small suitcase on the card table in front of the group, having suddenly interrupted the cadence and mood of their peace meeting in the basement of the Trinitarian Sisters' convent. The times made anything possible.

Competitive thoughts flooded Jack's startled mind. First was the issue of safety, for him and everyone. The second was the fear of being discovered. He was AWOL from a semi-monastic, cloistered seminary for the training of Catholic men for the priesthood, a life of obedience and conformity. And here he was miles away at a nocturnal anti-war rally-planning meeting in a clandestine basement, just next to the diocesan cathedral. The issue of dying for their beliefs also crowded the edge of his consciousness as an ever-present shadow.

Before Jack could make closure on his thoughts and move, the two men divulged that this was a drill to test their reactions to threat in a calm, sensible, and non-violent way. Indeed, in going to rallies in downtown Boston the peace community was starting to note the busses of helmeted police preparing for the rallies. What was coming next? What would be the police's tactics? How would they all react? So, they prepared.

At actual rallies and events, Jack and his companions pledged their minds and bodies to resist the war and

promote peaceful community. They also made sport of identifying the plain-clothes police and FBI agents who circulated in a predictable way through the crowd. Then there was always a tension between using one's voice and presence, putting one's life and reputation on the line, and dealing with the rules of engagement with the prevailing culture which favored the war. The majority would have them conform, even if by force. Mass rallies relieved dissenters from the isolation they often felt in their daily routines.

Soon after the beginning of the Vietnam War the previously organized Civil Rights movement, those associated with the Poor Peoples' March, and other groups in favor of social change, converged to make a coalition. Things were dicey since the Civil Rights' movement included both violent and non-violent arms. Religiously motivated groups joined under the Biblical themes of "Thou shall not kill," and Jesus' admonishment to meet your enemy "turning the other cheek." The Black Power faction had long since accommodated itself to the use of force and taking up arms against racial injustice. So the coalition was fragile, the message and motivation sometimes fragmented.

At rallies numbers counted but represented a compromise since the crowds came with mixed attitudes. Protest, for some, was just a chance for juvenile rebellion, a criticism by the disenfranchised of the post-war convenience, if not affluence, into which they were born or at least directed. To others it was an entertainment. The times, including the music and social freedom, certainly stirred one's soul. Yet, for others in the movement, with intellectual or spiritual commitment to the ideals, there was the deeper motivation. They were ready to die, to go to prison, to expatriate, or to do whatever was necessary to witness to the need to create a world where killing in the name of ideology, security or political will would be eliminated. The intent was not just to

impose their will but to precipitate a new society with new priorities. In this context, they tried to walk as disciples in the footsteps of Jesus, also following the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi in his successful non-violent political campaign of unifying India under a program of social justice. "The War? We will not participate!"

The Catholic community was divided. The majority were indoctrinated into the divine right of civil authority to command one's loyalty and life. That was the common sense approach to patriotism. On the philosophical side, "just war" theory was the intellectual underpinning for defensive aggression, used somewhat broadly. "Just" implied a sense of righteousness and or justification. Jack never bought it; neither did many others. If this were truly "one nation, under God" then the full scope of theological debate and moral values was relevant. A few priests and a core of nuns and seminarians as well as lay folk voiced their conviction of either the unjust nature of this war, or the unethical nature of all war. Dorothy Day, a lay activist and social worker with Communist leanings, distributed The Catholic Worker thus providing a tabloid to reinforce their convictions. Many read it with interest. The National Catholic Reporter, which became a somewhat liberal newspaper, also supported their liberal positions.

The doubts and tensions experienced when reading or praying alone were swamped into nothingness when they attended a rally. Demonstrations in Boston were superseded by those in the nation's capital. Arriving at the National Mall and walking along the avenues lined by mounted police with shiny blue helmets and glistening night sticks only galvanized one's commitment. Joining an ocean of people flowing around the reflecting pool before the Lincoln Memorial washed away all hesitation, confirmed one's choices on an emotional level. Solidarity ratified conscience. The Memorial had become a focus of assembly, under the

shadow of the great emancipator, as the Civil Rights movement had gained momentum.

Jack's Dad, J-P Robichaud, certainly had mixed opinions of his son's activity and the marches. They discussed things civilly. Jack respected his father's generation's perception and history, but "times, they were a changing". For Jack's part, he had put together a synthesis of dozens of authors besides his interpretation of biblical intent. Social justice, a society based on a balance of self-interest and altruism, the elevation of love above loyalty if the two conflicted. The same was true of individual conscience over authority. Jack was reflective, glib and articulate, an intellectual athlete in peak form. His Dad had quit school in sixth grade to work the family farm. He respected education and was proud of the opportunities and achievements of his son, who would be a priest, at the top of his social pyramid. So, Jack realized that J-P was conflicted internally. Perhaps his journey was casting a shadow in his father's. But J-P never admitted to the dissonance if there was any. He lived with his dreams, values and memories and Jack with his as they maintained mutual respect.

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"Now, suppose you were driving at night across a desolate Kansas prairie and came across a stop sign. There is no one around for miles. Since there is no danger, could you run the stop sign? Or would there be the implications pertinent to Natural Law?"

Father Nolan was baiting the students as their seminary ethics course professor. Everyone knew his point. Jack respected the concept of natural law but not how it was being used in this context. Nolan was absolutizing beyond the context to make his point. Jack would not participate in the discussion. Natural law was proposed as the bedrock for Church law and the subservient civil law. The bias of the

human and politically motivated interpretation was not factored in. It was all absurd. Jack gave him his intimidating stare. Jack had a different interpretation of natural law. But Nolan engaged instead of retreating.

"So, Mr. Robichaud, what would be your course of action?"

"Father, I understand your point. Personally, I would consider action based on the anticipated consequences. If no harm were to come of it, as is the intent of such a law, I would consider the law to be a consideration but not an obligation in this case."

"I see," came the chagrinned reply. "Certainly the issues are complex."

The priest was perplexed when engaging a student not intent on just memorizing and regurgitating principles or accepting things on authority. Jack in turn was used to hours of debate and discussion as friends walked on the back road after supper. They turned an argument to see it from every angle.

Nolan was pushing the traditional argument for the legitimacy of civil authority based on Aristotle and the Scholastics. It had been used for centuries to justify conformity both to church and to state law and the divine imperative to obey both. For Jack's part, he had his own opinion about the basis for values. Certainly Jack read their assignments and much more of the classics, but extensive reading - Aldous Huxley, Bonhoffer, Rahner, Kierkegaard, Marcel, Unamuno – had led him to believe in the primacy of the individual's own existential convictions in guiding action. Certainly traditional teaching was an important factor, but authority was not absolute in guiding right action. The classics were like the roots and trunk of a tree. They

supported many branches and twigs. Each in his own way answered to a personal but higher authority.

Moreover, without another dimension of accountability, the Church had used the divine right of its authority to generate the Crusades, the Inquisition to exterminate Jews, and a host of other atrocities. Often such arrangements were intended to accrue capital to church coffers besides saving souls. Entangled with politics the same arguments justified many a war. The same authoritarian stance seemed to be making a mess of contemporary lives.

The pertinence to Jack? To begin with, he resented being told what to think. Much of his life's activity was controlled by others but not his mind. He saw the inconsistencies of their archbishop and was horrified at the future prospect of pledging obedience to him. What's more, students were preparing for community leadership roles as pastors. The Program would have them induce lay church members to submit, to comply with any directive of the Church regardless of merit. The largest issue of the time was the progressive occurrence of divorce and remarriage. Rather than being sensitive to individual circumstance and the complexity of human relationships, the Church refused divorcees full participation in worship. Church law was clear and there was no room for conscience or individual circumstance. But what would a group of celibate men know of the intimacies of love gone right or gone wrong?

A somewhat more complex set of rules covered the issue of war. The traditional Church approach was to categorize war as just or unjust. Aggression was not approved, but response to aggression in self-defense was. But there were many situations in which there was lot of grey between just and unjust especially as one began to factor in profit and loss, alliances and "national interest". Vietnam was one of those situations. Communism, viewed from an American

perspective, was intrinsically a threat to America even in a distant culture. The Church had a series of four standard questions to weigh the situation. In some way, recapturing Hanoi was a defensive move. Jack would have no part of it. If love were the primary mandate of the gospels, how could killing be rationalized? And, how could social pressure or political authority preempt one's interpretation of the gospel mandate?

"Well, let's look at some more examples…" Nolan deflected, not wanting the embarrassment of a heated display on what should have been his controlled turf. Was he afraid of this dissenting student? In any case, Jack felt affirmed.

Jack's attitude was not unique. The convening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962 had begun an intense debate in the Church with a spectrum of theological opinion expressed on many of these very topics. Authority was not to be taken as absolute in many cases. The Council was polarizing. Liberal priests, nuns and theologians, especially the Dutch, pressed all the limits against authority and conformity. There was a backlash by the hierarchy and concerted effort to control and contain reform. But it was futile. Freethinking priests and reflective but dissatisfied lay people formed maverick congregation and performed the full worship service outside of official rubrics. Nuns shed their habits, traditional distinctive antiquated garb, and assimilated into mainstream culture. Unable to live with the polarity, or induced by the prospect of sexual freedom, many priests, nuns, and seminarians left their previous roles. It was a time of great change and Jack's mind in formation was swimming.

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The outer room was stark. The sign on the door read "Selective Service Induction Center". The sign on the inner door, the target of Jack's nervous gaze, read, "Selective Service Board". As several of them waited, Jack held his

hearing notice to appear in hand along with some scratch notes.

"Robichaud, Jean Robichaud!?"

Jack nodded, rose from the bench and was ushered into the examination room, facing the panel of three men representing his local draft board across the table. At twenty-four and somewhat shy, Jack was feeling intimidated. On graduation from high school, as most young men of the time, he had registered with the Selective Service and undergone a pre-induction physical and given a draft card. However, that was peacetime. On August 7 of the current year, 1964, Congress had passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution which was intended to support defense of American advisory troops in the region. Things had escalated and President Johnson sent in more men. Without a formal declaration by Congress, the Vietnam War had begun. Now it was October. A lottery for calling men to active duty was anticipated in January, the reinstitution of the draft. The Board was preparing for that eventuality.

America had been engaged in covert operations or direct financial support in Vietnam for twenty years, either supporting the French then the Diem regime until it was overthrown in a military coup in 1963. The stated intent of American action was to limit the incursion of Chinese Communists into the region as part of the Cold War. The ideological conflict saw any expansion of the other side as a threat to their position in the world as the dominant force. "National security" was tied to national identity and sphere of influence, not only security of the homeland. The coup made assurance of this goal less definite. So now, Lyndon Johnson who had become president by default after the Kennedy assassination, by deploying troops in progressively

advanced positions, was able to wage war without formally resorting to the War Powers' Act.

With an extended and more widespread conflict inevitable, the draft was reinitiated and a lottery to call up men would soon begin. Before it did, Jack wanted to declare where he stood to avoid a more abrupt catastrophe later. He had no intention of proactively expatriating to Canada with the hundred thousand who had begun to do so. Prison would have been the alternative. That was not very attractive.

It was Jack's turn. The room was bureaucratically decorated and stark, chairs, men, and a small table between us. These men were of Jack's father's generation and they had his respect. They had been his elders at church, his Boy Scout leaders. For their part, Jack was one of them, a peer to their own sons and daughters. They had a difficult time empathizing with the stream of young men beginning to appeal for exemption to the draft. Where was their honor, their sense of duty? They also knew that others had not been appealing, simple burning their cards in public ceremonies of protest. Why were so many of them not able to see the value in what *they* had done in *their* youth as a natural course in citizenship, to sacrifice and serve?

One man served as chair. "So, we see you are applying for a draft exemption under religious grounds claiming conscientious objection to the war. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir," Jack stammered nervously.

"But you are Catholic. The Catholic Church has not come out against this war, rather recognizes the valor of fighting for freedom."

Jack had waited anxiously for this opportunity to explain his convictions. As a ministerial student, he was exempt already, classified 2-D. But he wanted to make a statement,

go through the legitimate channels to express his convictions individually. He sought 1-O classification, that of conscientious objector. So the parties had this face off.

"Are you against all war or just this one?"

"All war, sir, on the grounds of the New Testament reinterpretation of the commandments 'do not kill' and 'love your neighbor as yourself'."

The grilling went on for some time as they took turns probing, looking for an inconsistency, some sign of disingenuousness or simply a strategy for winning a debate. Jack tried to keep his arguments tight. Finally in frustration the board representative asked "the question".

"So, what would you do if someone was attacking your mother, to rape her?"

The panel of three sat awaiting his answer to their sly and decisive question. Jack's arguments had been intellectual but sincere up to this point. This question was expected to unnerve him, but he had been advised to expect it. He thought for a moment, not wanting simply to acquiesce to their logic nor to sound foolish.

"Honestly, I would be sincerely conflicted, Sir. If I could deter the perpetrator by some means without harming him, I would do so…I am not sure how to answer you in principle otherwise."

Some of his classmates did not share his position. Frank, a classmate, left the seminary and enrolled in the Army. Some months later his body was shipped home. Still others echoed Jack's feelings; they had formed the STP, Students of Theology for Peace.

Dan was one of them. A hybrid between a jock and an intellectual, Dan, as Jack, had contact on his weekly

'apostolate' assignments to the community of nuns involved in social justice issues. Development of a community of compassion and understanding, sharing and promoting opportunities for others including the poor became a concrete reality and a lifestyle. Both of them also shared the use of the bicycle to get to their pastoral assignments in various social service agencies across the city. There was a bond. Together with others the two would hold meetings, deliver news and precipitate discussions, encouraging others to develop a conscientious response to the issues and if necessary join in social action and protest.

So, here Jack was before his community draft board seeking classification as a conscious objector to this war, to any war. The classification was intended for those, usually Quakers and Mennonites, whose religious convictions prohibited their participation. The men had listened and probed.

The rape question was their trump card. They had no more to play. The three exchanged somber looks and the session was over.

They made no comments and Jack did not know what went into their deliberations. In the end, he received in the mail a classification, 1-Y, undetermined, a new category developed to meet the current circumstances. Jack's feelings were mixed but it took off some of the heat.

The experience however galvanized his commitment and was a ticket into a community of peace advocates; it testified to his sincerity and set him on a course which would define his values and activities well beyond seminary years.

***

Company C flew low over the treetops on the way to Allui Airfield, a small strip cleared by Special Forces on the west

side of A Shau. As they crested the small ridge defining the valley, Lemaster hopped out on the strut of the helicopter. As the lead Company they were already drawing enemy fire and would need to disembark and deploy quickly as they made their run into the LZ.

As the sixteen Huey slicks approached, the lead gunship, immediately to their left was hit, crashed to the ground upside down and burst into flames. The other choppers hovered low and the men assembled but just for a moment. Hand commands from Chambers directed them to the cover of the scrub to the west of the clearing. Then, the choppers were gone.

Platoons were spread slightly apart to avoid concentrated damage from an enemy hit. The company moved up the finger of a ridge to engage the enemy on the higher ground. The companion company, Company A, worked up a similar finger to right; now they each had advanced half way up the hill.

"Cover, take cover men," Lemaster screamed as they came under heavy fire from a bunker near the hilltop. "Chuck, call for support."

The radio officer complied, with the open frequency to the Forward Air Command. Command could read their position from the frequency coordinates.

"Let me talk," Lemaster grabbed the unit. "Take out the top of the hill, in the V between the ridges. Don't drop near either ridge or you'll take them out. Hit the V!"

"Copy," came the reply and in short order the F-4 fighter approached and deployed the 500 pound high drag bomb.

To Lemaster, from his position under a fallen tree, the craft seemed so near. He could observe the bomb disengage,

deploy its fins and glide to the target. The fins allowed the bomb to descend more slowly, allowing time for the aircraft to bank, climb, and evade the impact to the blast. Then, no more enemy fire.

Killing had become a strange business. Such a sequence, though giving one a surge of feeling of supreme power, was executed in a cool deliberate mindset. There was a tactical problem to solve; find and employ the right tool and the job was done. Hand to hand, face to face combat was another matter. Lemaster never got used to it, and on occasion, had given an enemy the benefit of the doubt, and the benefit of escape, not from cowardice, but from reconsideration of the bigger picture. If in an advanced and insecure position himself, he wondered if the enemy soldier encountered was the point man of a larger unit, he would not fire. Wisdom said, be sure; conserve their own secrecy of position. Save the men.

As they advanced further up the hill they were more clearly in enemy territory. The firefight got more intense. Suddenly the point man, the soldier in the lead, took a hit. A RPG, a rocket propelled grenade, hit him in the groin, blowing off both legs and an arm.

"Shoot me! Shoot me!" he pleaded.

"Chuck, call for a medic on the Company frequency and get in a dust-off when you can," Lemaster was conflicted but replied by asking for a medivac helicopter.

They pressed on, under heavy fire, at the head of the Company. Suddenly they were close upon the enemy, taking fire from many directions as the NVA split and fled. The battle became a series of smaller firefights around the perimeter, each group pursuing a pocket of enemy.

Lemaster was suddenly aware that his command unit, he and his three RTO's, were being surrounded by enemy elements. They were pinned down under heavy fire. If something were not done, they would be quickly overrun and captured or killed. Bullets were cracking the branches and whistling past his head as he tried to hide behind a radio. Nervous laughter enveloped him as he looked overhead, recognizing a helicopter gunship whose call sign he recognized.

To break off the fire from the enemy, the men returned fire, then jumped forward into a deserted enemy trench.

Incidentally Paul noticed his finger. "God damn!" His wedding ring had slipped off, lost in the jungle. More importantly, he thought, would he live to see his wife again? He hoped this was not an omen. But his attention returned to the task at hand.

"Killer 22, Killer 22, we are surrounded and taking heavy fire and need back up."

"Roger, Company C. Send up smoke."

"Copy," replied Lemaster who sent up a smoke flair. "Rocket fire in advance of our position, clear our way."

The ship hovered, but to Lemaster's surprise, rockets exploded behind his position. Where were his men? Were they being blown away? Was the pilot 'jinkin', flying erratically in evasive maneuvers, too anxious to come in close? Had the smoke drifted?

"Break off, Break off! You are taking them out, our own men!" he screamed into the radio. The attack from his own abated.

Grabbing the Battalion radio he explained to the Commander the situation, who in turn ordered concentrated

cover fire from the rest of the company before they could be cut off. Thankfully, none of the rest of the company were taken out by the rocket fire.

Risking exposure to lead the four men, under cover-fire, Lemaster bolted from the trench, motioning the others to follow, and sprinted for the rear. Miraculously, somehow they made it.

The remainder of the morning consisted of intermittent enemy fire and a slow advance. By afternoon the enemy broke contact.

"Chambers, account for the men, call in that dust-off, and we'll advance to the enemy complex on my order, is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

Relief is a relative term. Lemaster waited for the CO's report, looking at his ring-naked finger. As he sat, he noticed the Chaplain who had requested to accompany the men that day.

"You alright?" Lemaster inquired.

"Yes, I think so, that was intense; is that what you do every day?" the chaplain replied.

Lemaster recognized the subtle humor and only nodded. The Chaplain risked another comment.

"I think you, Captain, are on a closer relationship with God than I ever imagined to be," he smiled.

"How's that?" inquired a curious Lemaster.

"Well, you used his name in intimate terms more times today than I do in a month of sermons."

Lemaster was initially embarrassed then replied, "Well, Chaplain, I believed today we were all about to die at any moment. I think God would understand and forgive me."

The Chaplain patted him on the shoulder, "You did good today, putting the safety of the men first. Casualties look light, given the circumstances."

***

The sun started to set over the Laotian border. There was only distant sporadic fire. Company C had reached the top of the hill. Lemaster sat on the crumbled wall of a pillbox bunker from which the VNA had tried to repel them. It was the remnant of defenses from the Indochinese War between communist insurgents and the French colonial government in the early nineteen fifties. The structure witnessed the perceived prowess of the hill as a strategic military prize. The concrete structure would be their security for this evening.

"Captain, this might be yours," a soldier remarked, reaching out his hand and with a guarded smile.

Captain Lemaster was amazed, "You found..!"

"Yes, Sir," replied the boy sheepishly, "We knew it was important to you."

"Well, God bless you," Lemaster stepped forward and gave him a hug; "You went back and looked…and found it. Incredible."

Lemaster was very pleased as he took back the ring and slid it on his finger.

"I guess that is a good omen; there is hope. Now, at ease soldier; try to get some rest…and thank you very much."

"Thank you, Captain; you pulled them through the day."

Eye contact reciprocated an unspeakable level of meaning.

Lemaster surveyed the surroundings. The hill below now lay in shadow but the vegetation was in shambles. What may have been a tropical paradise some weeks ago was now devastation, from machetes, from bombs, from the scars of trenches, first dug and then destroyed. Yet there was an inner peace, initially the satisfaction of having survived. However, it was a heavy satisfaction, melancholic. He thought of the widows of the men in the gunship that crashed. He thought of his point man, his name yet unknown, who would spend a life in a wheelchair, wondering if that extra bullet which he requested was unreasonably denied. He thought of the enemy, also human brothers, fighting for an opposing regime. The business of war was not clean business. And he thought of the West Pointers further up the chain of command, on the other end of their radios, who would claim credit for what his men had accomplished today with their sweat and blood, all for the glory of the medal quest and race for rank. Yet, they were safe in the rear, miles from the shelling.

He looked again at the ring, his touch with Ing. He thought of their wedding, preceded by the long reflective struggle. He recalled wrestling with the issues, to what level should he inflict the uncertainties of his life on a woman? Finally, after his love had bonded with his family, visiting over a number of her breaks in her nurses training in America, he had thought it to be the right thing. Then the technicalities; how could he make it work? He needed to talk it over with someone. He trusted Major Paxton and made an excuse to have contact. He recalled how the Major has assisted him, at least by assuring him he was not crazy.

***

Lemaster recollected:

"So, that was a good briefing you gave the FAC's. You've got a good head on you Lemaster," commented Major Paxton, sipping his beer.

"Well, thanks. I wish my CO saw it that way. I try to do the right thing but I always seem to be stepping on toes when I am trying to save lives," Lemaster responded, shrugging his shoulders. "Too many prima donnas in this war."

Captain Lemaster had returned briefly, under the guise of briefing the Forward Air Commanders on details of the war on the ground. His alternative purpose was to prepare for his attempt at marriage.

The two warriors sat with their brew, unaccustomed to the secure silence, soaking it in.

"Major, let me ask you something," Lemaster initiated with a quizzical tone.

Paxton became intense as he redirected his attention from the waving leaves outside the window. Lemaster continued.

"I know you are not in my chain of command but do you know anything about how a guy might…might get out of here to get married."

The question appeared comical to the Major and he was a bit speechless so Lemaster continued.

"I mean, me and my woman are thinking of getting married. I had this hare brained idea of meeting her in Thailand and seeing if we could get married there. I probably can finagle the leave but don't know if it is legally possible, I mean…"

Paxton held back a laugh. Hell of a tactical problem for a war zone. He tried to take his friend seriously.

"Sounds possible; you're serious though?"

"Yep, dead…I mean *very* serious. I thought to wait until after the war, but, if I do get shot, I would like her to have the benefits. And…you never know; I have been lucky so far. I just might live through this thing."

Paxton reflected. "I seem to recall someone else doing something like that. But I can't recall the details of how he made it work. But I am sure you can figure it out." The major raised the bottle for a toast. "Here's to your future!"

Lemaster inserted, "Here to our future, all of us." It felt good, just to put the thoughts into words.

Lemaster spent the rest of his leave time at brigade headquarters getting a passport before flying to Song Be, on the Cambodian border. A plan was developing in which American troops would be flown behind the Cambodian border for a surprise attack on the Viet Cong. Lemaster's company would be parachuted in behind enemy lines in advance of the main force. He expected they would all die. Ironically, that same day he received Ing's letter accepting his proposal to marry as soon as possible. Lemaster contemplated the wildly conflicting plans as he wrote operational orders in preparation for the jump. Then somehow, for reasons unknown, the Cambodian jump was cancelled, allegedly due to a security breech caused by the loss by a General in Saigon of a briefcase full of mission plans. For the moment, he would stay among the living.

Finally, after a number of other operations, on March 3 he was able to approach Colonel Parker with his marriage plan and was given temporary duty orders as military liaison to

Thailand. The deal was sealed and in exchange for a bottle of Jack Daniels, he hopped a Navy plane to Thailand.

***

"Mein Gott, was ist…" Ing gave a start, entering her hotel room. Paul had gotten there before her, bribed the desk clerk, and was napping. Seeing someone in the bed, the woman turned to run.

"Ing!..It's me, Paul!"

"Paul?" She was startled. The voice was the same, but the man, so lean. Despite his initial tight physique, Lemaster had lost twenty-five pounds in the jungle heat, combat work, and worry.

The two embraced.

***

Now on the hilltop overlooking the A Shau valley Lemaster sat remembering the bliss of ten days of peace, serenity and beauty, their train ride to Chiang Mai and the visiting of Buddhist shrines in a peaceful part of Southeast Asia; the monks in curry colored robes, the food, real food. He recalled the contrast in putting on a clean dress uniform for their civil ceremony, then the religious ceremony by the Methodist minister. Dinner at the Hilton Rama and the kind Navy Captain and his wife who noticed their occasion, their well wishes and the bottle of wine.

He recalled the days of leisure, and love, followed by the hardship of letting go, of kissing Ing goodbye to return to Germany. He pledged to find a way to meet her there. The promises of a meaningful life in the Army had evaporated. Seven months to go in Vietnam; the war was escalating as were the casualties; would he ever see her? He described his survivor benefits; she would not listen to any of it.

He recalled their last night, dinner in the Italian restaurant; so much normalcy, then, back to the war and the insanity of destruction.

Now Lemaster looked at the nearly defoliated hilltop, not from chemical defoliant, but from steady shell fire. Dinner was C rations.

"Captain," the RCA interrupted, "Intelligence informs us that there is a large column, two miles long, of the NVA just passing one hundred meters in that direction, heading toward Laos."

Lemaster took the radio, on battalion frequency. "Eagle 2 here, Cougar Base, can you read me…Column north; should we encounter, or direct airborne fire?"

The radio crackled, "Desist from attack; maintain your perimeter; if necessary, call in defensive airpower, repeat, defensive airpower, do you read, over?"

The men had fought all day to wipe the enemy from the area. Now the NVA were making for safe haven in Laos.

"But artillery could destroy and disperse the column. Do you read? Can we call for firepower? Do you read me, Cougar Base?" Lemaster persisted, anxious to complete the mission.

"Repeat; call for defensive cover; do not, repeat, do not initiate engagement. Await further orders. Do you copy?"

Lemaster was frustrated; what was this war about? He incredulously muttered, "Copy, Cougar Base. Eagle 2 out."

As directed, Lemaster switched to the FAC channel calling for and getting support from an Air Force C-130, a Spooky, to lay down cannon fire between their position and the column, as assurance against surprise attack by the VNA.

Finally, the battalion orders came; tomorrow they would continue to Ap Bia Mountain.

***

At first light they were on the move, beginning to feel like a real fighting force. Moving west they first encountered a vast five mile square area which had been a depot for redistribution of supplies coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Bunkers, all hand dug, log paved roads under a heavy jungle canopy to make detection from the air almost impossible, all perfectly engineered. Sleeping bunkers, supplies, trucks, all belied the fact that they had penetrated and decommissioned an important enemy resource.

Before pressing on there was the business of either commandeering or blowing up lots of enemy equipment to prevent future use.

Then they pressed on, taking sporadic artillery fire from the enemy from within Laos. Lemaster was concerned since his men were relatively lightly armed to fight ground troops. Word was that the Special Forces units just north at Long Vei were encountering tanks. Lemasters men were not equipped to resist that type attack.

But their objective was to take AP Bia mountain. As they got closer, they realized why the local people, the Thuong, mountain people, or Montaniards as referred to by the French, called this the mountain of the crouching beast. The form was intimidating and the jungle foliage particularly dense. It was late in the day and the actual assault would have to wait for tomorrow. In the meantime, as they dug in, gunships worked the enemy over with rockets and machine guns. It was all the business of war.

The Captain suddenly had that feeling. It is a subtle sense that projectiles are headed toward you. Then bullets started

hitting the leaves around them. The company perimeter was rimmed by exploding shells. From the rotor noise Lemaster realized they were under fire, very efficiently, by one of their own. Some misinterpreted cue had initiated the barrage of 7000 rounds a minute, followed by a rocket pass. He jumped for cover in the foxhole he had begun, as one of the radio officers, just five feet away, dropped his transmitter, writhing in pain. He had taken a bullet in the stomach.

The radio lay on the ground just eight feet away, their only hope. Lemaster, realizing the urgency and the risk, left the protection of the hole and scrambled for the instrument. But he quickly realized, using the Battalion frequency, they had switched to another that he could not determine. He switched to the Brigade frequency and screamed in desperation, "Someone stop the fire at Ap Bia base."

"Chambers! Report!"

Chambers took a count. Surprisingly, Murphy, the RTO, was the only casualty.

"Chuck, can we get a dust off in here? This man is hurting."

The RTO tried to get acknowledgement, but was told that with the impending night, this would have to wait until morning.

It was a long night. Lemaster stood the vigil with Sergeant Murphy.

"Where you from, Son?"

"Small place, Tarleton, near Chillicothe, Ohio. And you?" Murphy appreciated the help passing the time. He was hurting bad.

"Other side of the river, near Huntington," Lemaster replied, trying to create some degree of normalcy in this hell on earth. "So what did you do there?"

"I was in heating and air conditioning, duct work and the like. I worked with my father; it is a family business."

"So, did you enlist or were you drafted?" Lemaster continued.

"Actually I was in the reserves, thought I might duck being called up, you know, weekends and a few extra bucks. It sounded good at the time, then came Vietnam."

Lemaster had heard the story before, a country boy just trying to be sensible. The two drifted into a silence, looking into the night sky.

"Awww!" winced Murphy.

"Medic! You got some more morphine? Soldier's hurting," Lemaster responded.

"Sure Captain, be right there." The attendant medic, a conscientious objector, stood by. CO's were often placed in this role and were appreciated. With their visible arm band, often they would be selectively targeted by enemy who knew, because of the appreciation of their essential role, if wounded, other soldiers would come to their aid, making themselves in turn visible targets.

"Here you are; this should do you for a while. Let me know when you need more."

Stillness enveloped them as the medication began to act and Murphy became near stuporous.

"Captain, tell me straight; am I going to live?" he slurred.

Lemaster patted him on the shoulder gently for reassurance. "Of course you're going to live; in the morning you'll be out of here, in some sweet hospital bed, with real sheets. We'll still be working our way through this bloody, muddy jungle."

"I mean, my wounds? Am I going to live?"

Lemaster looked for the words. "Well, I'd say from your color, you're doing pretty good. Medic here thinks your blood pressure is holding. We can't tell the damage inside but the worst case would be if it had hit a big blood vessel. If that happened, I think you'd have bled out by now." He stroked the man's hair. "Yes, I think you're going to make it."

Lemaster was not certain. He had seen a lot of good men die, but keeping up the hope was an important part of this internal battle to survive. He needed to give this man that advantage.

"You married? Got kids?" Lemaster went on.

"Yeah, two kids, boys; one three and one I haven't seen yet," Murphy mused. "And you?"

"Just got married in March, a German girl, a nurse, I met in Aschaffenberg."

"So, you're a career man?" Murphy queried.

"Yep," was the terse reply. At this point Lemaster had had enough but the soldier did not need to hear the conflict. The honor of being an officer had passed him by. Besides being passed over, he started to see so many officers in it for the wrong reason. The fight for democracy, serving the men, making sensible choices based on real objectives was clouded by the quest for power, for rank for its own sake.

Talking, they drifted their way through the night, keeping Sergeant Murphy from drifting into coma or despair. With the first light came the chopper. Then, on to the major objective of the day, Ap Bia.

***

Through the morning they worked the mountain, however the objective was not to be achieved. Ap Bia would not be taken until the following year, and that only after a 10 day battle, four hundred and seventy six Americans dead or wounded, along with five hundred of the VNA. The site became known as Hamburger Hill, for the rendering of so much flesh to that state in the effort. The day after it was taken, it was abandoned. Public outcry over casualties caused the Army to reconsider goals and objectives in a manner more conservative of human life in this war without end.

At the end of the day, Company C retreated to their previous base. The following morning they would make their way down to the landing zone and extraction, expecting a fifteen mile flight back to the firebase on the edge of the valley. Lemaster would get the details from Battalion headquarters.

As they walked, they came upon the remains of a helicopter, one of the advanced force sent weeks before to prepare for their assault, a victim of enemy fire. Here, and there, were the bones, the remains of crew, those remnants of what was left after the forest animals had their first pick.

***

Lemaster was irate but needed to show restraint.

"Colonel, yes I heard you, but I would like to talk to Major Dillon himself."

Lemaster was galvanized in his resolve as he spoke over the radio to Bastogne base.

"But, that is irregular. You have your orders…," came the reply.

Lemaster insisted, "Colonel, copy, but this is urgent," using this implication to make this more than a matter of wills.

There was a long pause on the other end of the connection, then, "This is Major Dillon; you have something to say?"

"Yes, Sir. I have accomplished most of your objective while keeping most of the men out of harm's way. Now you want them to march through fifteen miles of unsecured jungle, just to return to base?"

"That's right; given the resources at hand, that seems the best decision from my end," came the immediate reply.

"But Major, this seems to me an unreasonable request," Lemaster insisted.

"Captain, unreasonable or not, it is *my* request, and *I* am your commanding officer. I think you have no choice."

Lemaster remembered who he was talking to. Dillon had received the Silver Cross because of performance in battle. The battle in question was an engagement of Company F in which the VNA has infiltrated close to the base camp perimeter, lobbed in mortars and partially infiltrated. During the encounter, Major Dillon was reported to be hiding under his bed, whimpering, relying on his CO to take charge. They survived and inflicted heavy retaliatory losses. Because of the intensity of the fighting Dillon opportunistically arranged for a friend to make the commendation so that Dillon himself was duly decorated for valor under fire.

"You will do it; that's an order!" Dillon reiterated.

"Yes, Sir," came the resigned reply. Lemaster knew that his men, despite their surviving successive assaults in the valley, would be used as decoys on the long march out. The road had been defoliated with Agent Orange. Any traffic was clearly visible to anyone nearby, even at a safe distance. The Major was intending to use them to draw out fire from any remaining VNA who may yet be in the area. If attacked, there was nowhere to seek cover.

Lemaster was angry. He had fought so hard to achieve their objectives but also to conserve the lives of his men. Now this. He began to dis-identify further both with the war and with the Army. He would seek discharge somehow.

"Chambers, form the men up in a column and march them out of here."

Chambers, likewise, was perplexed, giving a quizzical look. Lemaster nodded; Chambers complied.

So they marched.

The additional distracting danger was the state of the road. The defoliation followed by rain then heat had left the roadway a dustbowl. As they walked, the dust was up to their ankles; stirred up, it filled the air. All were acutely aware of the reported effects of the defoliant, now a heavy residue in the dust. But there was no escape. They marched.

Chapter 3

The lights blazed through the deep night, atypical for St. Patrick's Chapel, usually shrouded in deep shadows after compline. Sometime after midnight Jack took his turn. It was a wake, a watch, a vigil for the recently deceased bishop. An unknown bishop, but perhaps it was Bishop Highland, the retired bishop of Atlanta who had been staying in his later years at this house of religious refuge and formation. Jack had attended him at his private masses in the faculty chapel. In any case, it was not their bishop, the Archbishop. In such case there would have been more interest, perhaps some celebration of relief in some quarters. But for whomever they were paying respects, it was the custom to take turns sitting with the body as it lay on view. Out of respect for the deceased, the ritual persisted for several days before the festive ceremony of the mass for the deceased.

Each student took his turn in his assigned place. Entering, briskly striding the length of the chapel, sliding to genuflect on the smooth white marble floor. The display was more like bowling that entering a church for prayer. Walking up the tiered set of pews, each footfall created an echo in the vast chasm under the ornately painted rococo vault.

It was night. Overriding the ritual intentions there was an existential stillness. Each of them alternately prayed, meditated, and read some inspirational material to pass the time. It was the routine of their time in this place, St. Patrick's Chapel. This was a community of prayer. Each day began here, each day ended here, and after breakfast,

before the noon meal, after supper and before retiring, the community of four hundred men met here for organized communal prayer. Somewhere in this formal structure one was to find his individual pathway to God.

The hush. It was so thick it could be cut in cubes and loaded on a truck. Several special students stood for their hour directly beside the coffin with the reposing bishop. Flanking each side was a row of three tall candles on candle stands. This was certainly a dignified and honorable way to face the ignominy of death and the promise of eternal life.

But the mystery of death of a prelate is not always so tidily arranged. On a similar occasion, it is told, the body of Cardinal O'Flannery, an authoritative terror during his lifetime, was similarly honored. During the vigil, the Cardinal suddenly sat up, to the absolute fright of those in attendance in the wee hours. Apparently O'Flannery had died while sitting on his commode. It was some time before anyone dared interrupt his privacy and discovered the body. By that time rigor mortis had begun to set in, fixing the body in its seated posture. The undertaker had done what he could to prepare the body for the conventional supine viewing. However, in death, as in life, the Cardinal would have his way, wreaking fear in the hearts of his charges, springing to a pose of vigilance.

So, while the men watched and waited for their hour, one eye was warily anticipating the unexpected. Yes, death was a mystery.

The chapel was an intense focus of their interior life. This was the administrations expectation. But in addition to engendering in their young minds the essence of piety and obedience, it gave them the opportunity for a full range of introspective exploration and validation. Each was on their own as far as the material they read and used as a source of meditation. Young minds in formation could explore.

The sense of the validity of transcendent reality was certainly conveyed in these special moments each day. And though Jack read from the classics, St. John of the Cross, and other recommended readings, the time also gave him occasion to savor in meditative mood the words of Teilhard de Chardin, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Huxley's Perennial Philosophy, all of which gave him a deep sense of the transcendent connectedness of nature. Human nature was included. And besides the value system or cosmology supporting the church's teaching, there was a more universal sense of the sacredness, the actual, not alleged sacredness of life and of creation, including the human family. This deep appreciation became then the basis for values and action. And if so, either the Church needed to include a sensible way of integrating all this input, which it had not done so far, or its authority was diminished to the extent that other sources made valid points. The latter so frequently seemed to be the case and Jack became an ecclesial cynic.

Unbeknownst to the faculty, this disposition and these values became his basis for assessing his life, the actions of the Church, and the dictates of ecclesial authority. The contradictions became readily apparent and Jack became a skeptic. The Catholic Church really was not catholic at heart.

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"Hey, listen to this. Does this seem pertinent?" Jack had run from his cell, where he was sitting barefoot on the stone window ledge to share with Rob, a fellow skeptic. "It's Jonathan Swift. I have been reading his *Tale of the Tub*."

'To conclude, from all, what is man himself but a micro coat, or rather a complete suit of clothes with all its trimmings? As to his body there can be no dispute, but examine even the acquirements of his mind, you will find them all contribute in their order towards furnishing out an exact

dress. To instance no more, is not religion a cloak, honesty a pair of shoes worn out in the dirt, self-love a surtout, vanity a shirt, and conscience a pair of breeches, which, though a cover for lewdness as well as nastiness, is easily slipped down for the service of both.'"

Each of them had adapted an existential defense to validate their idiosyncratic way of looking at the world by pointing out the inconsistencies and hypocrisies of the authoritarian system trying to shape them.

Rob agreed, "Yes, that is great."

Their skepticism simmered under the surface at all times. Its greatest vindication came one March, at the culmination of St. Patrick's Day, the celebratory feast of their institutional patron. As the student body assembled on demand as a congregation in the chapel for a high benediction, during which the sacred body of the Lord Jesus in the form of the Eucharistic host was to be brought out, something remarkable happened. The plan was to display the Lord in sacramental form in the radiant sunburst of a golden monstrance, a liturgical device or sacred vessel at the center of which was a glass door which opened to receive the bread wafer of the host. Then a liturgy of adoration was to process followed by a period of individual adoration by the faithful.

Joan Baez, in those days, had sung a song, "With God on our side" which was a musical expression of our skepticism about the righteousness of the mainstream. So many political and social forms implied the validation of the party, the nation and in this case the church, by their ability to manipulate the sacred.

So, on St. Patrick's Day, with their complicit presence and obligatory singing, the liturgical party of perhaps forty

proceeded up the central nave, flanked by the four hundred in the tiered stalls in sparkling white surplices under the brightly lit rococo painted ceiling. Rob and Jack were in the choir, high above the scene below, resonating to the sound of the great pipe organ. Their director, a Sistine trained priest of immense proportions, loomed over the choir and rhythmically waving his arms. In his black cassock and white laced chasuble he appeared as an enormous phantom. He was expecting great things, smiling with a mix of anxiety and pride. Directing them with gestures he periodically peered over his shoulder to coordinate the choir's performance with the action below.

Joe's elegantly long fingers stroked the organ keys, playing the processional with great intensity and progressively increasing volume. The occasion was grand. The celebrant and main party approached the lower altar steps and peeled off symmetrically left and right to flank the base of the altar steps then bow. Then, as the processional neared its climax, the celebrant proceeded up the tiered white marble steps to the main altar, a mini-cathedral of carved marble pinnacles lit with banks of ensconced candles amid a garden of exquisite sprays of gladiolus, chrysanthemums and ferns. The lights blazed. How could it possibly be grander?

It quickly became apparent to the eagle-eyed skeptics that something was amiss. The interval, it was too long. The priest had given the conventional flick of the key to open the tabernacle, once, twice, then he started to jiggle it. The door did not open. His goal was to extract the Eucharistic wafer, representing the body of Christ, in its tiny case and transfer it to a large showy monstrance for public display and veneration.

The choir master also noted the delay and frantically signaled for a repetition of the final bars of the processional. The celebrant worked at what should have been an

automatic operation. Seeing the lack of success, next, the deacon climbed the stairs to the holy of holies to assist. He, too, took his turn with the jiggle and the twist. Still there was no result.

Those of the assembly who did not see the intended program as the consummate definition of spirituality tried to check their grins and smirks. It was unbearably ironic. After all the preparation and fuss, Jesus did not want to go along with the plan, to validate what the select few saw as a mechanized travesty of true spirituality. Was he on 'their' side, the majority's?

The organist played on, confounded as to how to build any further crescendo – the window glass may not have stood it. None the less, Joe tried musically to lend some thematic continuity to what otherwise was a sublime fiasco.

Finally, the house handyman, a senior student with particular mechanical skills, was beckoned from the student body. He, too, was soon confounded.

At long last, and with equally grand fanfare, the processional party reformed at the foot of the great white mountain of the marble main altar. The organ played on. The high priests in their lace surplices, gold threaded chasubles and pompommed birettas filed back down the aisle led by six heroically straight faced acolytes.

In the choir and stalls, Jack and Rob could barely keep from laughing. All the pomp, all the display, all the intended show of power and rectitude – and Jesus did not want to come out and play.

As Jack filed down the stone stair out of the loft, he stopped at the small barred window in the thick stone chapel wall. Quite near but in many ways distant from their inner world

of pomp and conflict, a solitary figure sat sprawled on the sun washed slope beside the chapel. It was a young black man, one of the kitchen help from nearby Jamaica Plain, coming or going from work. Yet he was troubled, not well disposed. Evidently he was drunk, as he grasped the neck of a bottle concealed in the brown paper bag.

Jack's heart went out to him.

Here they were, safe and subsidized, arguing about the actual nature of the Virgin Mary in relationship to the main teaching of the church, or the relationship of natural and divine law, and out there was the population the clergy were supposed to be supporting. They meditated daily on the significance of the crucifixion two thousand years ago, linked to the present since we were all the church, the body of Christ. Yet, each day, millions worldwide suffered on the cross of greed, ethnic rivalry and political ambition. This man was for Jack a token of the world in need. His problems were concrete. The solutions he needed would be quite practical and supportive; their theology had little to offer of relevance, Jack felt. In the moment, he was empathically linked with the young man on the lawn. How could he help? How could he serve? In the moment Jack felt quite helpless. This feeling was to linger, partly as his motivation for studying clinical psychology, for being informed about developments in Asia and Latin America. But also it helped form Jack in his approach to suffering, including the suffering resulting from war. He felt he needed to be part of the solution, not the problem. As an American, it seemed especially difficult to do something effective.

But this skepticism was not one of total negativity. Rather, it was born of a view of contemporary issues as might have been viewed through eyes of the ancient prophets. Political order and economic order, no matter how apparently successful and dominant, were not ultimately so. In a higher

order, and in a longer time rhythm, God's plan would preside. And so, reflectively, Jack and his companions had started to align themselves with this deeper level of reality, God's reality as they perceived it from study of the Bible with a fresh eye.

Politics and civil action were not the deepest issue, only the application of a set of more profound allegiances. The Church engendered an orientation to a deeper dimension, the inner life and the doorway to the eternal. Seminarians were here to pick it up or connect; that was their *formation*. The presupposition was that if they learned to perceive and operate on this deeper dimension, we would be obedient servants even to what we perceived to be a politically conniving and tyrannical bishop. Some of them saw the trap, yet Jack and his circle saw beyond the trap to the deeper truth.

Moments such as this long night watch in chapel, or their five-time-daily meditation periods in chapel truly did open the door to a deeper dimension.

"Like a long legged spider on the water, so his mind moved upon the silence." From his humanities studies Jack connected with that line from the classic poet, Keats, in his description of the reflective mind of Caesar before he marched to war. The words captured Jack's discursive mental activity as they sat in chapel, those silent meditative periods, especially in the morning, before the mundane activities and distractions of the day would dance like puppets cross the screen of consciousness.

Consciousness could be fathomed like an abyss, searching deeper and deeper into the indescribable aspects of what Hopkins would call the *inscape* of ourselves and our existence. The program was successful in convincing Jack that the surface world of action, of passion, of tangible

commerce was really of limited significance in relationship to pure true nature and the pursuit of true human destiny, of which we were each a part. And so the normal pursuits of Jack's high school peers, the corporate greed that was enveloping society, and the militaristic dimension of foreign policy were all misguided; the compass of the dominant culture was missing true spiritual north, deceived by a multitude of smaller man-placed magnets near at hand.

Jack read the gospels with this bias.

"It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven," (to see and respond and appreciate the truth).

"He who seeks his life will lose it; he who loses his life (self-interest) for my sake will find it."

"Seek you first the kingdom of God and His righteousness…"

"It has been said, thou shall not kill... yet I tell you, if anyone speaks angrily of his brother…"

"A new commandment I give you; …Love your neighbor as yourself."

The scriptures that seminarians were guided to were intended by the administrative program to lead them to be tame followers converting others into subservience. Jack, Rob and their friends saw them as code for a different reality.

At the time, this contrast only made Jack aware of the web of human hypocrisy in which he found himself. He looked for a solution but had a dilemma. The very program of which he was critical was the one which offered him the opportunity to live in this reflective mode. While it fired him up to join with others desirous of making a new world, it did not help Jack discover how.

In the mental morning swim of chapel, Jack's mind would simply submerge and explore, open, search and drift. In their bleacher bench stalls each student would find such mental space, or choose to sleep. Gradually, as the time for morning Mass approached, but more often on Sundays, the forward stalls reserved for the faculty would fill with their teachers. Although they presented a mix, many were aged sages, well loved and respected by us, despite their idiosyncrasies. The demure and curly white haired Father Tom Simmons, their professor of literature; Father Heaney, their Latin prof with his greased hair and pointed nose as well as wit; Father Lundy who taught them French and who could have read his prayer book as it rested on his protuberant belly. Ah, Father Stang who taught them biology with his rank humor and unhealthy ruddy complexion. None the less, they each had a profound effect.

In deep meditation mode, Jack had a recurrent image, barely with any form, which seemed to represent a more elusive, more sage bank of guides, elders whose orientation seemed to mirror the row of faculty but seemed to exist in a more transcendental, ephemeral dimension. Yet, they seemed very present, very real, though unimaginable even. However, in his mind's eye the one on the end seems to have the most form, or more nearly have form. As Jack began to form a haze image the elder would nod that Jack was going in the right direction; then he would disappear.

Though only a wisp of mental experience, this affirmation was like water in the desert. As most of Jack's peers could not perceive his issues, and most of his faculty accepted his intellectual questioning as something to grow out of, the internal panel of elders was Jack's anchor against total self-doubt and insanity.

So, there *was* another dimension to reality. His desire to construct a life in concert with eternal truth was *not*

misguided. If that put Jack in friction with the established culture, he was not totally in error. He was just following another star. But how to get along and exist in the present, that was the rub?

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"So, what is it you study anyway?" Jack's previously speechless work companion asked.

After four days of silently working shoulder to shoulder together at sea, the words came as a bolt of lightning. Previously Jack had passed the time as they worked on painting the ship by meditating on the forms and colors of the waves of the sea beyond the rail.

Hari and Jack had been assigned to 'paint the boat' per instructions of their boson in his poor English. The 'boat' was the ship on which they were sailing, the Aarnuka Aarnio of the Finnish merchant marine, flying under the flag of Polkii Oi, a company based in Helsinki. Though two years old, the Yugoslav built seafaring machine was being progressively encrusted with nautical rust. All two hundred yards of her needed scraped and painted. It was a continuous task. Today they were doing the starboard railings. While they worked in this floating world the big engines in the stern created a constant vibration as they pushed the crew across the North Atlantic toward Europe. While below decks Jack visited the engine room. There was a spare piston on hand for back up. Each piston was large enough to accommodate a small table and chairs on its upper surface. Such was the scale and constitution of this buoyant world of steel.

But Hari had spoken, in English! Jack was thunderstruck. The two men had been working side by side in silence for four days, Jack had expected because of the mutual language barrier.

"You *do* speak English! Why didn't you say something sooner!? I've been going crazy."

Hari looked shyly apologetic. "Well, I have never spoken to a native speaker and did not trust my English. But I have studied it for eight years in school."

"Incredible," Jack reflected. Finns, he had come to discover, were painfully shy and polite. This was in radical contrast to what he had been led to believe things would be like at sea. Jack's classmates feared for his life among sexually deprived, and depraved, merchant seamen.

With no cash on hand, personally or in the family, Jack was making his way to Europe. He had conceived the trip based on information gained when Rob, his seminary intimate friend, and he had visited Jean Bouchard in Montreal. The two had met at an Up with People rally, an organization to promote universal brotherhood. In conversation Jean had described that Canadian shipping was not controlled by a merchant marine labor union as in the States. Jack learned that there was considerable international shipping at the ports along the north shore of the St. Lawrence River, trading in iron ore and grain, especially in the far eastern sections. In the back of his mind he began to plan.

So much of the fine classical education the seminarians were receiving was based on history, events, places, and language which were of European origin. Jack decided he surely would like to experience some of these places. In a summer's work at home he could typically save four hundred dollars. But this was pledged to tuition and incidental expenses during the year. There was no surplus. His father was a disabled semi-invalid; the Robichaud's had begun as a very basic middle class family and now were scraping. And in those days air travel was a luxury and elective or recreational air travel very rare. There was no such thing as "charge it." Credit cards did not exist. Still

Jack had the urge. In those days much of the time those not able to afford a vehicle traveled by thumb, hitchhiking. At face value, the prospect of hitchhiking across an ocean appeared absurd, but with Jean's information…

"Wonderful day isn't it. Nice sun," Jack commented. "If you are a student, how did you come to be a seaman?"

"My father, he is steward to the captain. He got me this job for the summer. And you?"

"I had hitchhiked to the port of Baie Comeau, where you were loading. A friend of the priests in the school there, with whom I was staying, was an agent with the grain shipping company. He inquired and got me the passage as a replacement for one of your sick comrades."

Uncertain as to whether this plan would work, Jack had set out on foot with a pocket notebook full of researched contacts; these were friends of friends in Canada or in the old country, notably Netherlands and Germany, besides a string of religious houses – monasteries and such. There was no Internet; information came in print, on paper, in books or directories. If Jack got the boat, he would be set. If not, he would go west on Route 2 across Canada for an alternative adventure.

Initially he had interested five classmates to join the venture. But as time grew short and the ambiguity of the arrangements sunk in, one by one they declined, making other summer plans. Finally, just days before leaving, his closest classmate, William, gave him word he would not be going. But Jack was committed. He would make it work.

J-P, his Dad, proud but reticent about Jack's decision, gave him a ride to the entrance to the turnpike, their only four lane. A man of few words, his ambivalence was evident, but he hugged Jack and let him go. Then Jack was on his own.

As it worked out, here they were, riding the waves with Hari and his friends. Things were going well. Although it would take him ten days total, at this rate Jack would land in Amsterdam with an expenditure of sixteen dollars. This was not a bad deal.

"We certainly have a nice vantage, even though the work day is long," Jack commented to Hari. His companion nodded.

The view from the rail was enchanting. The sea was ever changing. As they cut through the swell, the lap of severed wave crests echoed against the hull. Like a plowshare, the bow turned the water, creating a spreading reflected wave which turbulently competed with the sea's own rhythm. The deep water was in constant color change with the changing angle of the sun, from misty greens to deep azure, punctuated by foamy bubbles when disturbed. The soaring shearwaters that initially followed them aloft at the stern had departed. Occasionally a solitary petrel, capable of spending the night on the deep, would be seen gliding within inches of the undulating surface of the sea, tipping his wings and almost dancing on the water.

Though two hundred yards long and many tons in bulk, the ship was dwarfed when viewed from high on the rear deck above the pilot house. The effect was especially dramatic against a three hundred and sixty degree sunset.

International human brotherhood had been an abstract concept for Jack up until now. This acceptance by a crew of Finns, with the prelude of a week among the community of francophonic Canadian priests, was his first immersion in global connectedness. The rhythm of daily life on ship was steady. The crew was up at six for work at seven. Breakfast was not until eight, then working through until a noon meal. Afternoon coffee was a continental ritual and welcome here since the work day resumed until seven in the evening.

Usually this crew then indulged in their national luxury before dinner; this could only be the sauna. Jack received his baptism by steam. Sore muscles, after a day of North Atlantic chill, took avidly to this past-time.

The rhythm was broken on Saturday night. After dinner the men gathered in the galley with anticipatory excitement. The captain would break discipline and send a case to the mess. Jack joined Sowi, Essa, Yarki, Hari and the rest, each with a coffee cup in hand. The box read "Yalovin", which with his smattering of French Jack interpreted as some sort of wine. But to his surprise these men were taking their leisure drinking whisky from coffee cups. This was a stout culture, more than he could handle easily. He tried to do his share, but honestly, with the day's work and the spirits, Jack retired early.

But there came a bang on the door, "Kulkaista, puolue." It was young Yarki. Though Jack knew no Suomi, he realized he was being included in a party. Beer was following yalovin in a cabin down the hall and spirits were high. Jack was honored by inclusion. As the men gestured and drank, the alcohol created an atmosphere of understanding. Soon they were recounting landing in the port of Jack's origin, Boston, and they discussed music and race relations. Only in the morning, through foggy heads, they all wondered how they had communicated so clearly. Soon the ship would make landfall in Amsterdam.

After a respite and tour Amsterdam, visiting the hostels, the street purchased broodjes, eating bread and cheese under the bridge on a rainy day near the Rijksmuseum, Jack travelled on. He hitch hiked the Dutch countryside, stopping to visit a Paulist friend in Nijmegen, the memory of ambient marijuana still a memory from the visit in the city.

The summer continued with rich experiences as he found a new family, the Schroeders, in a small German village near

Heidelberg; he worked both farm by day and factory by night, sleeping when he could in their parlor. Weekends allowed for tour travel and to explore securing a passage home. Jack felt a deeper bond with working families and hardship, the tangible evidence of the community of saints, the human family. The presence of so many amputees of his father's generation reinforced his perspective on the evils of war. Observing the culture of American military bases from the indigenous side made him see that America's perceived superiority and righteousness was not universally shared. On occasions, as when an Army captain and pilot made an emergency helicopter landing in a small farm field, they looked quite foolish to the locals and to Jack. Their sense of superiority was lost on the crowd of villagers.

As Jack returned home and to school in September, coming two weeks late due to ship repairs, the seeds of change in his life path had already been sown.

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At times Jack would later reflect. The most intense memory from clerical years was that of the underlying emotional climate, the state of his soul, as it were. Yes there was humor and mania and celebration and excitement. But the base tone to which he awoke every morning was an existential dread, a deep melancholy. If one were keeping score on the contentment meter, the goal each day would be to climb out of the depths back to zero. Is this all there is; when will he be found out? It was a gnawing feeling of not fitting on the edge of a sense of vast emptiness. Yes, Jack was depressed.

He was a success in the program with good friends and good grades. However, his own way of seeing things was very out of synchronization with peers and administration. The dissonance was a constant burden and he could not see a way to resolve it.

There was a positive side. Coming to grips with this mix of feeling has made it easier lifelong to negotiate living with uncertainty and acting in a context in which decisive initiative is required yet consequence might be long deferred. A tiny vignette which illustrates this is a comic one.

It is three minutes to seven in the morning. Jack had roused himself up, walked in bare feet down the long silent hallway to the foot of the bell rope under the steeple in the middle of the great house. All is incredibly quiet and he is accompanied only by the subtle slap of his soles on the smooth floor. The mornings are now fairly dark as autumn is progressing. A profound stillness envelops the house. Jack has inherited the job of calling the community of two hundred to morning prayer. It is customary to ring at 7 every day except Thursday when the brethren sleep in until 8 if desired. Today is Wednesday, yet in a corner of Jack's mind habitual self-doubt suggests it may be Thursday. But there is no means of confirming and ringing at the wrong hour would bring the ire of 20 angry men. So it is an occasion to refine his conviction as he stands in the moment.

So Jack stands at the base of the tower; he grasps the rope. Part of his mind has doubts but he stares steely eyed ahead, past the doubts. His body knows its duty. As the last seconds before the hour tick by, he throws his weight onto the thick coiled hemp. There is first a mechanical groan in the darkness above as the bell begins to rock on its tired bearings, then, after two swings, the clapper hits the brass rim and the morning peace is broken by the signal to begin another day. Jack is committed.

One by one his comrades awaken, resigned to the beckoning sound. All goes smoothly; all is normal. Jack alone has had difficulty with the moment and he returns to his own room,

barefoot across the cool brown linoleum, having dealt once more with the demon of uncertainty and self-doubt.

And so, it is a war of sorts, an existential war against the forces which storm one's soul. And, as with any war, the primary salvation is comradeship.

***

"The way I see it, Marcel has something that's pertinent," Jack rambled as he and his companion walked the seminary road in the evening twilight.

"What are you thinking?" responded William. William was my most intimate and beloved friend, except for Rob. William was the brightest person Jack had ever known, one of the only people who could follow his train of reasoning with its nuances and contribute something further. He was smart enough to later be assistant in Rome to the man who was to become Pope.

Jack continued, "In *Being and Having* he is creating an entirely different value system than that with which our materialistic culture typically functions. *Being*, which is something we generally take for granted, is not just a birthright, or something static; it is dynamic, something to be further cultivated, refined and appreciated. Instead, most of our society functions around the goal of acquisition, of *having*. Marcel would describe *having* as a pretty meaningless pursuit, existentially incidental. I kind of agree with him. But the consequences of making *having* the primary value in our culture, besides legitimate production to meet actual needs, are crime, greed and war."

Jack realized he was giving a mini lecture but William is accustomed to this and they take turns presiding.

The two young men in cassocks walked for a little in silence.

The theme was often the same. If the kingdom of God were really to be expressed on earth, as it was in heaven –their daily prayer – love would have to dominate human affairs in a concrete way. The Church nominally advanced that position. Yet, in their own hubris, the hierarchical clergy applied their own interpretation of ideas to engulf and encompass all of reality and impose it on the faithful. Their comfort or position was not to be sacrificed.

Jack could see the value in much of the tradition yet his scope of understanding, he felt, outflanked the definitions of the scholastics and archbishop. Hubris also, no doubt. Yet his growth process, and the teaching on the supremacy of conscience, led him on. His own critical insight took precedence and he needed to find a way to act on it.

"Let's walk down this way," William gestured toward the perron, a cobblestone and cast-concrete balcony flanked by two opposed spiral cobblestone ramps which led to a formal garden below. At the base was a statue of Anthony Drexel, the Boston financier and benefactor who had made the palatial grounds of the seminary possible, bowing to a concrete Jesus. No doubt he was confessing his sins of acquisition and questionable business practice, Jack often thought.

The conversation continues, but the interaction is the same, the non-verbal exchange equally important as the ideas expressed. The two men affirmed each other; William and Jack recognized their unique capacity to reciprocate. But in the seminary environment relationship was both critically important yet a risk. The seminary retreat masters and spiritual director would repeatedly caution them against "particular friendships". In a closed society of young men, sexual contact either on an experimental or preferential basis was a perennial issue. There were rules against closed

dormitory room doors, and other opportunities for privacy were discouraged. Yet the issue remained.

William was fair skinned, tall and very attractive. The two men were affectionately close but limited physical contact.

The relevance of physical attraction was not always inconsequential. Many of Jack's peers were undergoing a further rethinking of their identity which would redefine their sexual orientation. During their time at St. Patrick's, Rob, Jack's other dearest friend and intellectual co-conspirator, began decorating his room in a rather masculine but forbidden way. Ornament was forbidden in this monastic world of supposed self-denial. However, each man was all developing his identity and room fashion was one such opportunity for self-expression. Rob had been progressively bringing items from home after holiday breaks, Utrillo prints in limed oak frames, a quilted bedcover but now he had gone too far with the lamp and eventually he had a visit from the Dean. The issue was a brass lamp.

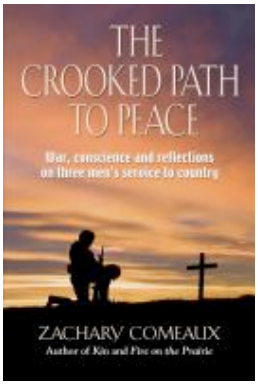
In retrospect, it is plain that Rob's attachment to forms of masculine display was an effort to counter his progressive self-discovery of gay tendencies. He was conflicted. The encounters and warnings by the administration over poverty versus ornament led to a territorial and ideological battle and eventually to Rob's dismissal on grounds of insubordination. Rob eventually entered another religious order in which the issue of gay preference was accepted as part of liberal, progressive lifestyle. Before that, he was denied admission to twenty-five houses of religious study, blackballed due to a recriminating letter from his previous Dean.

Jack would sometimes feel the strain. It was nearly impossible to express the difficulty and intrigue of maintaining intimate friendships as a heterosexual with

one's closest and dearest friend who is gay. Maintaining intimacy while declining sexual contact becomes complex.

This was the late 1960's. Safe sex then only meant fear of syphilis or gonorrhea. There were no subtle dangers in homosexual sexual encounter. The practice became common in many houses of religious formation. Rob was elated with accessible loving sex in the large community he had joined. By 1975 he was dead, a victim of a then little known disease to be called AIDS.

Twenty years later, William followed. Love, as an alternative to aggression or self-defense, was not always a straight and simple path.



War is part of our human heritage. Each generation asks, "What are the costs and options?" The Crooked Path pursues this reflection through three lives. Jean-Pierre, a veteran of WWII, lives with the consequence of his service. Son Jean, a seminarian, develops a pacifist stance. Jean's confident, Paul, is a combat tested Vietnam veteran. Their experience with war tempers their adult lives in construction, medicine, FBI, and counter terrorist activity. The theme never goes stale.

The Crooked Path to Peace