

AMBER'S BUNKER

The only light in the bunker was from the ends of cigarettes. Hidden from the sun, the mud at the bottom never dried and the stench of rot mixed with filthy bodies and tobacco. Occasionally, a Zippo would flare or a flashlight would click on, shielded by a hand, but the rest of the time it was dark. Even that light was too poor to make out more than a cluster of tense young men in drab clothing that was uniform only in its color. But in total darkness, that last, dim image glowed in the mind's eye. Men smoked and farted and sweated and cursed and waited in the smelly darkness.

"God damn it's hot."

"Tell me somethin' I don't know."

"Fuck you."

"It's been so long I just might. Will you tell me you love me?" That broke some tension and several men laughed. The New Guy sat in the mud, so hyped at being under fire for the first time he laughed uncontrollably. He still wanted to throw up, though. About every five minutes they heard another rocket scream and shake the earth. It didn't matter if anything was hit, but as long as Charlie could do that, he owned the night. The New Guy heard that one VC would carry one rocket for six weeks through the jungle. They would fire it and then tell the man to go back and get another. This was all just crazy.

A throaty challenge from outside and hands slapped weapons. Intense shouting followed, which ended with "Sorry about that." In the dark, everyone was the enemy. The threat of a nervous grunt wasting some poor lost GI made the prospect of death even more horrible. They didn't count you as a battle death if you got it by friendly fire.

You were still dead to your folks though and you got the same aluminum casket. The bunker was hot and it stunk and a rocket might be coming for them right now, but no one wanted to leave.

At the first rockets, the New Guy had chased after the men from his hooch through the pandemonium down into the bunker where he fell and someone stepped on his hand. Now, sweaty, scared, and hurting, his morale was about as low as it could be. In-country two days, he had eleven months and twenty nine days to go before he returned to where people wore real clothes and ate real food and slept in real beds. It was really happening now, he was being shot at. But it wasn't even like training where, when they pretended to shoot at you, you had a rifle to pretend to shoot back. He didn't even have his rifle yet and there was nobody to shoot at. The presence of other men provided his only comfort. They all cooked in the same heat and the same stink and the same fear.

A week before he shipped out, The New Guy had found a hippie chick in Seattle and they stayed naked for almost two days. Her name was Amber and she painted his body. They got dressed only to go out and get food and beer. She had her own dope.

"Hey, did that New Guy make it?" The young soldier recognized the voice of the Platoon Sergeant who had greeted him that afternoon.

"You mean me?" he croaked.

"What's your name?"

"Parker."

"Yeah, Parker. Hate losing men without knowing their names. Especially the

first day.”

The Sergeant had a handlebar moustache and he seemed like a pretty good guy. He told the New Guy that he had only been at the camp a day or two himself. Soldiers like him with two months to go were pulled out of infantry units put in the base camps until they rotated home. The Army didn't like it for short timers to get killed or to lose a hand or a foot. It was bad for morale. If I had two months to go, the New Guy thought, I could be a pretty good guy myself.

Someone piped up, "This place stinks. The only thing it needs is a sign out front that says 'Men'".

"Why don't we put up a sign that says 'Women' and see what happens?" answered another.

"I knew 'Nam would get to you sooner or later, asshole. You finally find a woman and all you wanna do is watch her shit." That one was funny. The New Guy recognized the comedian's New York accent as the man in the next bunk. Humor from a familiar voice was some consolation.

The shriek of a rocket was followed by a huge explosion which shook the bunker. Dirt trickled from the log roof onto the fugitives. After a moment, someone commented, "Ammo dump, I bet."

"Maybe it was the officers club?"

New York answered, "Naw, the officers club is in the deepest hole at this base camp. They gotta protect their liquor and their whores. Don't worry, they're safe." More explosions and no one spoke. GIs had been covering the ammo dump and if

their platoon had the guard mount that night, it could have been them.

"So, ah, New Guy, where you from?" asked the Sergeant.

"Spokane, Washington."

"I'm from Portland," a new voice piped up.

"I wish I was in Portland," from New York.

"Maine or Oregon?"

"Doesn't matter. 'Long as it isn't Portland, Viet Nam."

"Soldier, you have a bad attitude!" The Sergeant's voice shot back with mock authority. "I want an attitude check!"

"We hate this fucking place," three voices sing songed half heartedly.

"Now men, let's have a positive attitude check."

"We positively hate this fucking place," muttered two voices. It was an old Army joke, and the Sergeant's attempt at satire lay on the floor in the mud. The New Guy figured the Sergeant must have been a pretty good NCO out in the bush and he was glad he was his NCO.

The young soldier was suddenly aware that he was very, very tired. Arrival in country, processing at the airport, a hot night in a warehouse barracks with two hundred men, and all the other changes had caught up with him. He leaned his heavy helmet back against the dirt wall and he dozed in the putrid sauna.

Amber was there, long brown hair and thin body. He remembered how easily she got out of her jeans and tee shirt, the only clothing she wore. He was shocked that she didn't wear any underwear. The soles of her feet were almost black from going

barefoot all summer. Although she had small breasts, she had large brown nipples which he found tremendously exciting. She pushed him down onto the mattress on the floor and undid his GI belt. "You all wear these stupid shorts," she commented as she slipped off his issue boxers. The five days with Amber were so wonderful that it wasn't until he was over the Pacific that he wondered how she knew so much about GI belts and GI shorts. That made him a little uncomfortable, but he had a year in a combat zone to look forward to, so a dose of the clap seemed a weak threat. He would just go to the medics and get some shots. What are they going to do, bust him to private? Ship him to Nam?

In his dream, she once again tenderly invited him to explore. No girl had ever trusted him or kissed him like that and he had never done any of other stuff either. When he got back to The World he was going straight to her house. There would be no mattress on the floor or behind blankets on a rope. Next time, they would get a real bed and a real room. He kissed her again deeply and as he began nibbling his way down her neck she whispered his name.

"C'mon turkey, you want to spend your whole tour down here?" The New Guy was jerked back into a bunker lit by flashlights. Dirty, wet men in undershirts and muddy boots crowded toward the passageway and up into the night. The New Guy struggled into a crouch and followed into refreshingly cool air. An eerie light from the fires revealed more soldiers tramping back and forth. All of them carried that same, beaten look. The New Guy had to pay close attention to follow the men of his own platoon back to their hooch. Without them he would be lost and he might never find his

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way home again.