

### **April Fool's Day**

Meg and I were part of the crowd stretching away from the statue of Abraham Lincoln on Bascomb Hill as speakers of various stripes riled protestors, giving them an outlet for their anger and indignation. It had been our second protest that week, and though we'd been participating in such demonstrations since the semester had begun, neither of us had come to feel entirely comfortable at these events. Not for lack of trying. We wanted to wave signs and shout and chant with abandon, to add our voices to a chorus venting righteous indignation and force change through the strength of will and sheer numbers. Since arriving in Madison, I'd come to hate the war and more than ever and hate anyone responsible for propagating it, but while protesting, I never felt the passion that burned like a hot coal through the floor of my stomach. Instead, the protests were a matter of principle. They felt almost obligatory, an exercise, bridging the gulf between intellect and emotion.

My desire to lose myself in the sweep of such events was tempered, to some degree, by my hometown and upbringing. Some of it I attributed to the conversations Tom and I had had before I left Gillett, talks about simultaneously hating the war and supporting the men actually fighting it. Some of it was nested in the knowledge that after graduating from high school that spring, my brother Clay would enlist and throw himself headlong into his goal of serving America as a Screaming Eagle. Hate the war and love the soldier. Despite the fact this particular soldier-to-be's stance royally pissed me off, blood mattered.

When Meg and I protested, even our protest signs failed to blend in. Hers were legitimate works of art, bearing witness to her artistic sensibility, marked as much by her awareness of line and form, of composition and arrangement, as by her opposition to Vietnam. Often, Meg's signs were inspired by pieces she was studying in her courses. In February, she'd spent hours with pen and ink creating a sign resembling an 18<sup>th</sup> century print entitled "Gin Lane" by William Hogarth. Hogarth included an undertaker who will be kept busy tending to the casualties of Gin Lane; Meg included General Westmoreland directing coffins down a ramp from the cargo bay of a military transport. Hogarth included a jester dancing amid the chaos and ruin around him; Meg included Ho Chi Minh doing the Frug. And Hogarth prominently featured a prostitute covered by syphilitic sores dropping an infant to its death; Meg foregrounded a bloated Uncle Sam dropping babies diapered in jungle fatigues into an abyss. On her sign for April Fool's Day, she'd used acrylics to create a modern version of Pieter Bruegel's "The Triumph of Death": skeletal dogs scavenging a razed Vietnamese village amid corpses and smoking ruins, a cart full of skulls drawn by a gaunt horse led by President Nixon. Though I encouraged Meg to keep these signs, she never did; they either made their way to the trash barrel on our way back to the dorm or were given to a fellow protestor who asked her for them.

On my signs, I used simple block text to make literary allusions that elicited polite head-scratching if they attracted any attention at all. Except that day. I'd scrawled four lines whose sad irony I loved: "My friend, you would not tell with such high zest / To children ardent for some desperate glory, / The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori.*" As the final speaker at the protest concluded his remarks, I held the sign aloft amid the raucous cheering, and when I did, I heard a voice situated somewhere between Leonard Cohen and John Wayne meant

for me. “Hot damn, young man. Nothing like resurrecting the ghosts of the past to speak to the present.”

“What was that?” I asked, looking in the direction of the voice.

“That sign,” he said. “Goddamn Wilfred Owen. Could’ve used a healthy dose of him in my field manual.” The man speaking wore a long, olive-drab overcoat, and he hadn’t shaved in weeks, the red of his beard matching the tendrils snaking from beneath a black wool skullcap. He reminded me of an irate Lucky Charms leprechaun torn from his world of magical marshmallows. “Owen calls on Horace, and here you blow the dust off the old Limey. You must actually crack a book every now and then. Good for you, Junior.” He clapped my shoulder, his hand blunt as granite through my jacket.

The crowd had begun breaking up, groups of people improvising their own chants as they scattered in all directions. Meg grabbed my arm and held tight. “It’s cold, Walt.” Though she wore a heavy coat, I felt the shiver passing through her.

“Good plan,” I said. “Sunroom?”

“Perfect.” Meg’s smile ended her brief spell of teeth chattering.

As we started for State Street, I turned to the man who’d commented on my sign. As he shifted from one foot to the other and hugged himself, Tom’s voice came to mind. “One second,” I said to Meg, then asked the grubby leprechaun, “Would you like a warm drink?”

“A literate mind reader,” he said. “I’d be foolish to turn down such kindness.”

Meg tugged at my sleeve, and her expression asked what was happening. I returned an *it’s okay* look and she nodded.

The three of us exchanged introductions on the walk to State Street, the dome of the State Capitol looming over the city and everyone in it, and made our way up the long flight of stairs to

the Sunroom Café. Upon opening the door, a warm rush of mingled scents washed over us—minestrone and pastries, strong coffee, grilling sausage, pungent Asian spices and ginger. Meg and I moved toward our favorite spot, a small table near a window overlooking the stream of pedestrians below, and pulled over a third chair for Tyler. Our waitress, her hands covered by intricate henna tattoos, brought us menus and took our order for a bottomless pot of coffee. When she returned with the coffee, Meg and I ordered our food—Meg, the grilled chicken salad, and I, the pasta with sausage and fresh mozzarella. Tyler held up his hand, indicating coffee would be enough for him, but I invited him to order as well. He looked skeptical, but I insisted. “They pay me the big bucks at the University Bookstore,” I said, “just so I can treat strangers to dinner. Besides, you’re looking a bit hungry.”

“Your call,” he said and ordered the crispy Thai peanut noodle bowl without hesitation. There in the café, his coat now hanging from the back of his chair but his black skullcap still clinging to his head, Tyler was no longer as wired as he’d been on Bascomb Hill. He drank his coffee purposefully, drawing from his mug as though the steaming liquid had no effect on his tongue or throat, and slumped in his chair as he scanned the room systematically, only breaking his patterned surveillance for sounds rising above the general hum, a mug clinking especially loudly against a saucer, a plate crashing in the kitchen, a diner emphasizing a point emphatically.

To say that a level of discomfort existed between the three of us would be an understatement. Meg and I were accustomed to having entire conversations without saying a word, but Tyler threw everything out of balance. We attempted the customary pleasantries, but Tyler’s muttered responses either bore an edge I was reluctant to press or a cryptic character that puzzled me. Me: “What brought you here today?” Tyler: “That should be rather apparent, no?” Meg: “Do you think these rallies are making a difference?” Tyler: “For the benefit of Mr. Kite.”

Me: “Is Madison home for you you?” Tyler: “I was ‘round when Jesus Christ / had his moment of doubt and pain. / Made damn sure Pilate / washed his hands and sealed his fate.”

Not until our orders arrived and I made the offhand comment that Tyler seemed to enjoy his Thai dish did he come to life. “I can taste it,” he said.

Meg furrowed her brow. “Taste what?” she asked.

Tyler smiled, his expression disbelieving but with a maniacal edge. “Vietnam, of course.”

I spoke. “But aren’t you having Thai—”

“Smart boys shouldn’t ask obvious questions,” he said, “or did you bum that sign from someone else?”

For a moment, I felt as though I were back in Tom’s classroom, though when Tom pressed me, it had never felt like this. “So what does Vietnam taste like?” I asked.

Tyler smacked his lips and smiled. “Not bad, smart boy. Good starting point.” He closed his eyes for several seconds before speaking. “It tastes like a thousand things,” he said. “It’s nuac mam from a barrel of fermented anchovies on the sidewalk in Saigon. It’s cheap whiskey on the lips of a bar girl in Danang. It’s the filth of a rice paddy that doubles as a ville’s latrine. It’s the emptiness you force down your gullet when you’re pulling pieces of a kid from Nebraska from the bamboo after he steps on a bouncing Betty. And it’s the green M&M’s the medic keeps tucked away for when the shit really hits the fan.” Tyler was looking at me, but I felt he was seeing someone, or something, else, not really over my shoulder, but behind me, as though he were staring through me at an indeterminate point in the distance.

For what felt like several minutes but couldn’t have been longer than a few seconds, we sat there. Meg lowered the forkful of romaine and grilled chicken she’d been about to place in

her mouth. Tyler snorted. “The culinary tour of Vietnam for cherries. Still hungry, friends?” He finished the last of his noodle bowl. “So why aren’t you humping it in Southeast Asia?” he asked me. “Mommy and Daddy have enough cash to send you to school and get you a college deferment? Or did you score one of those precious spots in the National Guard?”

His words hit me—not so much for what they said, but for the condescension that reminded me of Clay’s venom in August—and for an instant, anger roiled in my stomach. I didn’t take his bait, however. Meg appeared concerned, but I gave her a *stay calm* look and drew a deep breath. “None of the above,” I said, then gave the thumbnail of the medical deferment allowing me to attend the university. He continued staring through me, but I sensed him taking in every word. As I finished, Meg gave my forearm a squeeze.

“Lucky bastard,” Tyler quipped. “What I wouldn’t have done for a million dollar hangnail.” He’d again come to life, riding the same wave I’d sensed back on Bascomb Hill, and he told us his own story, stopping only to punctuate anecdotes with long draws of coffee mug or to motion our waitress to refill the pot. He’d grown up on his family’s cattle ranch in Ada, Oklahoma and had gone to Oklahoma University after high school. He majored in philosophy (to his father’s chagrin) and participated in the ROTC program (at his father’s insistence), and shortly after graduating, he was commissioned as a lieutenant in the United States Army. Less than a year later, he was leading a platoon from the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 23<sup>rd</sup> American Infantry Division in the Quang Ngai Province.

When he dropped that tidbit, he looked at me as if he were testing me. I passed. “You can’t be serious,” I said.

Tyler looked at Meg. “You’ve got a smart one.” Then, he looked at me. “As a heart attack, kid. I wasn’t part of Charley Company, thank God. I’m don’t even want to think of what

I might've done had I been with those boys. My unit cleaned up the mess, though. That's one seriously fucked-up shit hole."

"Tell me more about that shit hole," I said.

For the next hour, Tyler shared Vietnam stories, and as he did, Meg and I saw him go through a range of emotions. When describing the sunsets over the calm, South China Sea, he was placid, serene, as though he wished to remain suspended in the pinks, oranges, and blues. When describing hordes of children shouting "G.I. number one! G.I. number one!" and begging for American chocolate, he went cold and said that he and his platoon knew that after getting the chocolate, they'd talk to the VC. He told us about the totems men carried and the souvenirs they collected: the pantyhose of a girlfriend stateside; the snapshots of family, friends, and lovers; the baseball glove one private clutched to his chest as he dreamed, his legs twitching as though wanting to run and run and run; the ears and thumbs secreted away in the bottom of rucksacks along with the fleeting, eternal fury, confusion, and desperation that prompted bearers of such tokens to slice them away in the first place. His words alternately dripped rancor and desperation when he told us about Hill 508, of taking it three times over the course of four days, each time abandoning it, leaving him to wonder what the purpose had been in two of his men dying on that hill. "Goddamn cluster fuck," he said. So many anecdotes involved death, and when he spoke of it, he sounded older than his years. In being exposed to death in vast quantities—of soldiers he knew, of civilians chalked up as "collateral damage," or of the occasional elusive Viet Cong—he claimed to have been numbed to it, desensitized, and we bore witness to how his very words had metamorphosed death. The dead didn't have names. They were "crispy critters" and "crunchy munchies," and they didn't really die; they "kicked the bucket" or "bought the farm" or "caught a Freedom Bird out of Indian Country."

Tyler's final Vietnam story involved a young soldier from Wisconsin named Paul. "I felt for him," he said. "Farm kid. Could tell he was scared shitless those first weeks. I took him under my wing. Had to. The others would have been merciless on his innocent little self. Paul gave new meaning to the term 'cherry.' When he wasn't scared, he was fascinated by the rice paddies and the animals. Awfully damned fond of water buffalos. We'd be humping through a ville—story of our lives, that endless fucking humping—and I'm supposed to keep everything tight, textbook SOPs, but here and there, Paul just drifts, stroking the nose of a buffalo or tugging up rice to study the roots. I had to keep him close so I could reel his ass in. He was better after a couple of weeks, but I could still sense him wanting to drift. At night, when we'd set up camp, everyone else is talking shit, playing cards or writing letters, maybe hunker down to smoke a joint, but Paul digs in and he pulls out a bag of corn. I kid you not. Plastic bread bags tripled up and filled with hard yellow kernels 'from back home,' as he put it. He'd sit there with his hand shoved in, just moving them around, almost like he's looking for something. Other times he'd pop one into his mouth and roll it over his tongue. Sometimes, he'd plant one of those kernels like he's Johnny frickin' Appleseed. Strange, but no stranger than other things I've seen." Tyler paused, as if measuring just how to phrase his next thought. "The thing is, those damn kernels are what scared the shit out of me, brought me here today."

Tyler tapped his mug with a spoon, the *ting* sharp against the sounds of the café, and studied the tablecloth before looking back up at me. Meg looked at me questioningly. This wasn't what she'd anticipated when she suggested warming up at the Sunrise and I invited Tyler to join us. I lowered my chin and knitted my eyebrows, gesturing to wait on what Tyler would say next. She took a deep breath and looked out the window. Meg was the most patient and understanding person I knew, but I wondered if where Tyler had taken us was too much even for



her. He was pushing even my envelope, but I wanted him to finish his story. “You’re looking for Paul?” I asked.

“Among other things,” Tyler said. He hunched as if trying to make himself smaller.

“Paul had been in-country for a month, and I was a short-timer at that point. I just wanted to ride it out, notching my stick and waiting to catch a bird back to the world, but we get caught in a real shit storm. Middle of the monsoon season of course. Some little dink I’d given chocolate probably gave away our location. Not yet dawn, can’t see squat, air’s thick enough to chew. My boys are going nuts, firing into the darkness. God only knows what the hell they’re shooting at. All I can see are tracers and quick flashes from their mortars and the claymores on the perimeter. Rounds from their AKs are zipping past, so I find the RTO and call in arty. I send the coordinates—couldn’t just sit on my ass. Had to make things warm for someone on the receiving end of all that ordnance. And for a while, that jungle lit up like you wouldn’t believe. And the wicked sound! Their firing on us was Peter, Paul, and Mary compared to Uncle Sam’s Jimi Hendrix. After we drop some National fuckin’ Anthem on them, after all that firepower, then comes the quiet. Only sound is the rain. I’m checking to make sure I still have all my parts, just like everybody else in the platoon, then everyone starts talking shit, like they’re the biggest swingin’ dicks in all of Southeast Asia. Only there’s no Paul; kid’s nowhere, so we fan out. Dawn’s breaking, and I’m expecting to find his shit blown halfway to Hanoi. I’m half-composing a letter in my head for his parents when I come across him. He’s sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree swinging his feet and whistling. He’s got that damned bag of corn in one hand, plucking kernels out of it with the other, pinching them between his thumb and index finger and throwing them, kind of like you’d throw a dart. ‘Hey, Paul,’ I say, ‘where the hell you been?’

“Sonofabitch doesn’t turn around. Just keeps tossing kernels. I step into the clearing and see what’s across from him. There’s a dead VC sitting with his back against a tree and the top of his skull caved in. No sign of the big stuff; no burns, no missing limbs. Just that bashed-in skull, and I can see water pooling in there. And here’s the kicker: every few seconds, a kernel of corn plops in—sploosh...splaosh...splaosh. Finally, Paul turns around—blood spatter across the bridge of his nose and on his hands. ‘Air’s clearer out here, lieutenant,’ he said.

“‘What the hell?’ I say to myself. There he was. Just whistling and swinging his feet, tossing corn into a VC skull. I tried talking with him. Asked him about the shit storm, what he’d done. No response. I tried big and scary, tried buddy-buddy. Nada. Not a peep, not what he’d seen or done, or why he was tossing kernels of Wisconsin corn into the bashed-in skull.”

Meg was still looking out the window toward the street below, crying. She turned to Tyler. “So what did you do?” she asked.

Tyler squinted, gauging her before he continued. He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. I held Meg’s hand and nodded. He continued, his voice low. “We were supposed to report back to base camp in two days, so I just kept the kid close. Damned if I knew what he might do. I wasn’t letting him out of my sight. He didn’t act any differently those two days. Back at base camp, I wrote up what happened in the sticks and recommended him for evaluation. The boys called him in, and that was the last I saw of him. But for the rest of my time there, I couldn’t shake that image of him in the clearing. Still can’t. Got under my skin. Wondered what made a kid who liked petting water buffalos’ noses cross the line.” Tyler shook his head and drained his mug. “Why do any of us? What if I’d been with the 123<sup>rd</sup> in My Lai? I’m human, though—you know what I mean? I needed to hold someone accountable. I started thinking it through. Didn’t know the kid’s background, so it’s hard to point fingers at mommy

and daddy or bullies on the playground. Maybe a DI in Basic failed him, didn't bust his chops and build him back up into a bigger, better, badder version of himself. Maybe a character flaw—didn't have the cojones to handle the fucked-up shit a nineteen year-old grunt faces in the jungle.

“I mean, all of that's part of it, but I wasn't satisfied. So I starting asking the big questions. My professors in college would have been proud. Causation, right? I've got to pin this shit down. So I'm hashing through them all—Plato and Aristotle, Thomas and Hume and Locke—and after a while, my head's swimming, but I keep circling back to the same cluster: the ones who put him there in the first place. LBJ and Westmoreland and Congress and the military-industrial complex and the American people who don't bother to connect the dots before coloring them in on their ballots, or who act thoughtlessly and squash the voices we need. God, this country could use healthy doses of Robert and Martin. Maybe with them, there's no Paul pitching kernels or any of the other sad, sorry shit I've seen. Maybe the kid's still back in Wisconsin milking cows instead of caving in skulls.” Tyler clutched his mug, his knuckles rigid, his fingers a mottle of white and crimson, and he drew long, slow breaths, as though trying to restrain something trying to snake out of him.

“I don't know,” he said. “I just don't fucking know.”

As Tyler's story unwound, I was calculating. I'd floated ROTC to my father as an option to get me to college sooner than later and postpone or even eliminate the possibility of my going to Vietnam. I knew the length of the contract after graduating. I also knew that Tyler's appearance didn't meet regulations for an officer in the United States Army. When he loosened his grip on his mug, I tightened my grip on Meg's hand. “I know some questions shouldn't be asked, but aren't you still an officer in the United States Army?”

Tyler beamed. “Hot damn, son. You know your poets and can do some math. Young lady,” he said to Meg, “don’t let this one get away.” He shook his head and laughed, a low, chuckle from his stomach. “When they shipped me stateside, I’m going through all that philosophical reckoning, and you’ll like this one: I remembered what Emerson said about scholars, how they’re just pissing in a bucket unless they do something with their learning, so I did something. I walked away, figured I could handle being AWOL. Let the powers-that-be expend their resources on keeping Ali locked up; I had some rope-a-dope of my own to steer clear of the authorities. I figured on Canada, but first I wanted to check on Paul—thought maybe I’d find him back here in Wisconsin, taking care of cows or something. That’s an image I can live with, not the one I’ve been humping all this time. Along the way, I’ve been whooping it up at marches like our little soiree today. I blend in well enough not to draw any undue attention.”

It was my turn to chuckle. “The panhandle philosopher,” I said. My own laughter led me to release Meg’s hand and realize just how tense I’d become sitting hunched at that table for so long. I raised my arms, pointing my elbows to either side, and stretched through my chest and back. Meg tilted her head and looked at me. “So does it do any good?” I asked Tyler, looking at Meg. “Our marching, our chanting, our signs? Will it end it?”

“Damned if I know,” he said. “I remember an old preacher saying ‘the path to hell is paved with good intentions.’ Hell, most of the peaceniks don’t know Diem from their own asses if you press them on it.” He paused. “I guess it doesn’t hurt, though. If nothing else, venting like this might keep people from resorting to more extreme measures. They can talk all they want about bombing armories and ‘by any means necessary,’ but I find gatherings like this far more productive. Aristotle nailed it, you know. Everyone needs to vent. Something about tragedy and crowds and catharsis.”

I thought of my father and brother and Tom as Tyler's words hung between us at the table. Streetlamps winked on outside the window.

When Meg and I left the Sunrise Café and parted ways with Tyler, we held each other tight as we walked back to campus and her dorm. She didn't speak, and I didn't press her to, though I could feel her processing a thousand thoughts. When we entered her room, she still didn't speak; instead, she quickly undressed, and before I'd even removed my coat, she began undressing me—not violently, but urgently, unlike anything I'd felt with her. As we made love, that same urgency was there, in the strength of her arms, the placement of her hands, in the movement of her hips and her mouth. The silence was thick in the room as we lay in her bed.

Much later, our legs entwined, she finally spoke, her voice a mixture of regret and thankfulness. "That could've been..." she said. Her unspoken thought floated between us with greater volume than it would have had she voiced it. "He scared the hell out of me, Walt." She swallowed hard. "He's not much older than us, but he felt...ancient, and the more he spoke, the more I kept asking, 'Could this have been you?' Would this have been you? If..."

We each reached for the other's hand, fingers linked tightly beneath the sheet as Meg went on. "And I kept telling myself that no, you wouldn't have, but that 'what if?' just wouldn't go away. And if you'd come home talking like that, carrying all that weight—how much of that would have been on me, Walt? How much would I have been responsible for that?" She sniffed and wiped her eye with her free hand. "I'd held out hope—and I believe you did, too—that not only would you make it back alive, but that you'd make it back...okay. I encouraged that. Me. What if I'd buried you and all our dreams in some fool's hope?" Her breathing grew more rapid and she turned onto her side to face me, her mouth inches away from me as she spoke, her voice

now a desperate whisper that couldn't hide her sorrow. "I mean, I knew that terrible things happened over there. I could see that every day on the news and in the papers. But my god," she said, swallowing hard, "until you've spoken to someone who's actually been there, until you see that stare and hear that hollowness in his voice, until those words paint pictures no one should ever imagine, you can't even come close to feeling it, and—" Her words had sped up as she spoke, a rapid sibilance I could feel, but she paused and slowed down before finishing the thought. "And I don't know how I could've lived with knowing I'd had a hand in that."

As we lay in her bed, I remembered the weight she'd helped me carry a year earlier and did my best to help Meg with her burden that cold April night. "But I'm here," I said, "and you didn't. That's what matters now. I'm not Tyler or Paul or some other version of myself. I'm Walt. I'm me. We're us."

We talked into the night before drifting off. At times the conversation was serious—the prospects of Tyler finding Paul and abandoning one life for another in Canada; of how Tyler couldn't be the only one affected by Vietnam as he was; of the ramifications of that war on soldiers, families, nations, history itself—but more often than not, the conversation came back to us as we recounted stories of our past—of meeting in Tom's class, of our visits to the meadow, of the time she spent with me and with my mother during my recuperation. And as we shared those stories, I sensed Meg's burden lighten—in her laughter, in the gravity of her gaze, in the very weight of her limbs and her touch as we lay beneath the sheets in the comfort of flesh on flesh as cold rain drummed against the window. I felt Meg's breath on my chest. "So it's okay?" she said, though it was more statement than question.

"Of course," I said. "Bum knee and all, everything is going to be okay."

“Good,” she said as she yawned and exhaled, her breath tracing a warm path across my chest as she fell asleep.

“Good,” I said. Her head rose and fell with my breathing, and her hair spilled over me onto the bed. I was thankful that Meg had found the peace we both needed. Good stories had that effect.