

## Wasted

February 1971

Nixon reigns in the White House and my ass sits in Vietnam. Forget the images you have from The Green Berets or TV news. Picture a cluster of tents, temporary sheds, and the perimeter of a base fortified with sandbags and barbed wire. Add an overpowering stench from open sewers, intensified by humidity. I pray for my eyes to blur and for my nose to be stuffed up.

I'm stationed at Guy Thung Lung, an Army base in the Central Highlands near mountains, resembling those close to my home in northern California. I pull twelve-hour shifts in a hanger rebuilt as a supply shed, shelved with parts for jeeps and armor cars, and I sleep with thirty-four other men in a wood-frame Quonset hut barracks. Everyone can see our outdoor showers, even the Vietnamese women—few though they are—who do chores for some of the higher ranking NCO's on base. We even have to shit in public since the latrine has no doors.

One night, six weeks after I arrive, our first sergeant Smitty catches up with me on my way to the barracks. Over thirty and already balding, Smitty seems like a stand-up guy.

“Is everything okay with you, Private Denicola?” he asks. “You sure do keep to yourself.”

“Yes, sir,” I answer. “I'm really out-of-it after working twelve or thirteen hours.”

“You only hand out jeep parts.” Smitty shakes his head. “How would you deal with being on the front lines? They go out on patrols at night even if they hump through the jungle all day.”

For a moment I shudder. Ever since the base was attacked, I wake up every morning, wondering if it'll be my last. I probably wouldn't survive in the jungle.

"Sometimes beer helps," he says. "Need any? We're getting a resupply from Nha Trang."

"Guess I'll take a couple." While no place in Vietnam is out of danger, Nha Trang is one of the safest. Wish I was stationed there.

When I get to the barracks a letter from Mom still lays on my cot.

*She writes—Your twelve-year old cousin Christopher is visiting. He looks like you at that age. Green eyes, dark hair and lanky. It helps to have someone that reminds me of you around.*

*Dad doesn't say much about you. But almost every day I catch him with a pained look of uncertainty on his face.*

*I'm not looking forward to his Navy reunion. You know your father around beer. Though it's the only place I find out what happened in the Pacific.*

*I miss you. Godspeed to you getting home. Any chance of it being early?*

*Love, Mom*

No, Mom, I have 313 days left in country.

Suddenly mortar crashes in the distance. Bolduc, blond haired and footballish, is cavalier about it while I have to breathe through my mouth spasmodically and hold my chest.

"Dickless bastard," he calls me in his New York accent. He has the same look on his face that my high school wrestling coach had when he told me, "You don't have a fighter's instinct. Never gonna win without it."

My heart doesn't quit pounding until the M-16's stop shouting at one another.

An hour later, on my way to the chow hall, I see a pock mark on the hillside where there had been vegetation earlier.

#

The following week, a new troop member, Peterson, is issued the bunk next to mine. Right off the bat, he asks me to call him Pete. Shortening my last name, he calls me Denny. We hit it off. Maybe it's because he tells me right out that he's scared shitless.

He's from Oklahoma and has dark skin and blue eyes. Though we're both nineteen, he's soon ahead of me in adjusting. In his first week, he wanders past the edge of the base and finds a whorehouse.

A few days later while lying on our bunks, Pete tells me about the place.

"Well, it ain't more than a hole in the wall," he says. "but I swear you won't find poontang any closer. Won't take us more than a couple of minutes to get there. Come with me."

"I don't know, man."

"You tellin' me you don't miss women?" he says.

"Shit, I want a shot of leg, as much as you do."

"Glory be," he says. "Let's go tomorrow. Haven't had it regular in over a month."

I wonder what it's like to have it regular. I've only been with Cindy Jane. Unless you count last New Year's Eve when I French kissed twelve girls before midnight.

"Are you going with me, or not?" he asks.

"Okay, okay," I say, "but we leave the second our shifts end and get back before dark."

#

The whorehouse has a small bar and a few women sitting on stools. They serve Vietnamese beer which we call tiger piss. Within minutes, a short teenage girl, maybe seventeen, grabs my shoulder and says, “Hey G.I. you wan me?”

I scan the other women’s faces. They’re both much older and from their red mouths look like they’ve eaten too much betel nut.

“Okay,” I answer the girl and pay the Mama San three dollars.

“You numba one G.I.” the girl says and leads me to a cot barely off the bar. The size of the rat hole we’re in and the low ceiling restrict me from bobbing my ass. Her hands let loose, going wild and massaging me every which way. Not like Cindy Jane’s light strokes that were in the same direction. Still, after I rub the girl’s jugs for awhile, I can’t hold off.

As I leave the cubby hole, Pete is haggling with the Mama San.

“You say two dollars for sucky, three for fucky,” Pete tells her. “I get sucky and I gave you two dollars upfront.”

She holds out one finger meaning she wants another dollar. I don’t like the expression on her face. Nor on the face of the Vietnamese man on the other side of the room. And by the way he’s reaching under the table, it looks like he may have a gun.

“Here.” I toss her a dollar in military script money and motion to Pete for us to haul ass.

On the way back, Pete says, “You shouldn’t have paid.” He slips a buck into my shirt pocket. “She must’ve figured my sucky turned into a fucky. I was trying to explain to her I wanted to get another shot.”

“Not worth fighting over a buck. Plus it’s almost dark and that place is grungy.”

“How was the girl you were with?” he asks.

“Pretty good.” I grin. “Wished she’d been older and slower, though. How was yours?”

He smiles widely. “She knew what to do when she was down there.”

A Vietnamese man is following us who I’m sure is Viet Cong. I make a face to Pete and nod.

Pete shakes his head and laughs.

I say, “It’s not funny,” and sneak a backward glance. The man is taking a dump on the dirt road.

We don’t say anything else the rest of the way back.

Hours later, while getting my uniform ready for work, my nuts itch like crazy. I don’t plan on seeing a medic, but within two days, I scratch my balls until I bleed. The doctor tells me I’ve got the crabs and prescribes a shower and powder routine, clean bedding and a reissue of boxers. The regimen soothes the problem.

Pre-dawn the morning after the itching stops, Smitty finds me before work.

“Commander McAllister needs to see you ASAP,” he says. “Your ass is grass.”

“Why?”

“The medical staff reported you were off-limits with a prostitute.” He pauses. “Mac’s strict about this stuff. That’s why he has tight controls over who can have Vietnamese women on base.”

I take all this in and stride to the Commander’s office. The white plaster building is more permanent than most of the others on base. Posters of the military chain of command hang on the walls by his office.

The door is open and he yells, “Get in here.”

I salute and announce myself.

“Private Denicola, why is it you went to an off-limits establishment?” His red hair practically stands up on end.

“I didn’t know it was off-limits, sir.”

“Weren’t you briefed when you first got here?”

“Yes, sir. I didn’t know that was the place they were talking about.”

“Were there any other military personnel with you?”

“No, sir,” I say.

“Maybe five days of shit detail will make you think twice next time.” He stands up, all five feet eight inches of him, and dismisses me.

Shit Detail consists of scrubbing the latrine, installing fresh toilet paper, and grappling with the shit pots in all eight crappers. Each of them holds several gallons plus the contents and has to be dragged thirty or so feet so the mixture can be burned. When I look at the mixture I wonder if any of the guys have had a solid movement since they’ve gotten here. Added to the mess are swarms of insects. As I roll the contents to the burning area, the shit spills all over my uniform. Sweat bathes me, soaks my shirt and stings my eyes. I don’t dare wipe my face with my mucked up hands. A Vietnamese woman stares at me as if I’m nuts.

The burning is no fun either: I pour gasoline on the contents and when the fire finally catches, I watch it go up in flames. The next part—stirring it with a thick wooden stick—creates another putrid smell.

When I finish all eight crappers, it's dinner time. Laundry doesn't have any clean uniforms. I do the next best thing, by taking a shower and trying to get the shit off my clothes. They still smell raunchy. So I put them back on and scrub them as best I can. As always the water in the shower turns cold. My uniform is saturated and doesn't smell any better.

In the chow hall, I start eating. Bolduc walks up to me. "I'm short," he says. "Don't wanna smell shit while I'm eating."

"You ain't that short," Gonzo tells Bolduc. "You still got over a hundred days."

"Give 'em a break," Molina says. "Can't do shit detail without smellin' like it."

I give up on eating before things escalate. Chow hall food isn't worth hassling over.

Minutes later, back in the barracks, I slump on the edge of my bunk.

Pete swaggers in holding a nicely browned loaf of bread. "Looky," he says. "My momma sent me some of her sweetbread." He rips off a hunk and holds it out to me.

I bite into it. It tastes like cake without icing. "Man, this is good stuff."

Pete deals the cards for a hand of poker. Neither of us knows how to play well, but it helps keep our minds occupied the nights we're not on duty.

When I look at my cards, I reach for a beer, and realize I've run out. "Can you spot me a beer until the next run?"

Pete hands me one of his. He takes another bite of the sweetbread and asks, "Is your momma a good cook?"

"She never learned how to bake sweets 'cause her father was diabetic, though she could open a restaurant with her Italian food."

He brushes the crumbs off his shirt. "What's your dad like?"

My mind shifts from her perfectly spiced eggplant parmesan to the Chow Hall's runny powdered eggs "—Guess he was a hero."

"You guess?"

I look away from Pete. "In World War II he was on a submarine in the Pacific. He detected a Japanese suicide boat and ordered the spotlight focused on it. They wiped out the boat before it got them. He saved the entire crew's lives."

"Wow. Swift."

I nod.

#

After the next days' shit detail, laundry gives me a clean uniform and I stop by the showers. Pete gets there at the same time. He keeps his shorts on while he briefly showers, then dries himself off, and wraps a towel around his waist.

"Shit," he says when his towel drops.

I glance over and see he doesn't have pubic hair.

"Hacked it off," he says. "So I don't get the crabs at the sex shack." Quickly, he puts on his shorts.

"Different strokes for different folks," I say, though I think that's pretty fuckin' weird.

When I finish showering, I stay outside to catch my breath. It's nice to be by myself for a while. I don't care about eating in the mess hall and the cooks will give me C-rations. The fruit's not so bad and maybe I can swap the dessert and the cigarettes with one of the smokers for beer.

A loud whistling sound startles me. I breathe in heavily and yell. A rocket drops and explodes the shed next to one of our generators. *God, Molina works there.* All that's left is the shell of the building, still on fire. Several minutes after the attack started, I hear the delayed radio announcement warning of "incoming" and I hurry to the barracks. For the longest while, my breathing doesn't steady and panic shoots through me.

Later while drinking a beer, Smitty tells us Molina's body was burned beyond recognition.

Even though the temperature's over a hundred I'm shivering.

#

Cindy Jane sends me a letter. She wants to know if they call me by my last name like in war movies. She writes about her college classes at Cal, and how she wants to remain friends even though we broke up before I left for Vietnam. Her letter ends with the question everyone asks: When will you be coming home?

"In 301 days," I say aloud.

I always get a pull in my stomach when I hear from her. She knew my lottery draft number was thirty-eight but got angry when I enlisted in the Army. I told her the extra year I have to serve is stateside and it's worth having a warehouse specialty code instead of being infantry on the front lines. She said, "Maybe you won't get drafted."

"They expect to call everyone under 200," I told her. "At thirty-eight, they got my ass for sure."

"What if you go to Canada?"

I told her, "My father would disown me." Plus I didn't have the balls to do it back then. Now every time the base gets knocked, I think going to Canada would've been better than getting zapped.

Late that night, when it looks like everyone's asleep, I jack off. It doesn't take long to get good and hard. I think about Cindy Jane, her wonderfully firm breasts and how, the night before she left for college, she let me go all the way. In the barracks I do it with less noise and more thought than ever before.

#

I plant myself on the floor in the few feet of space between Pete's bunk and mine. My card playing buddy is at the sex joint. The mail has come and I have a note from my father.

*I'm writing because your mother doesn't know what to say to someone in a war. Believe me, she thinks about you every moment of the day. She's getting a package ready to send.*

*I'm damn proud of you. I knew when the time came, you'd stand.*

*We're leaving for my reunion tomorrow. Someday you'll be going to yours.*

*I'm sure, like me, you're doing the right thing. When you get home, we can talk about our experiences man-to-man.*

*Love,*

*Dad*

I crumple up the letter and jam it in my foot locker. The letter feels like pressure. To clear my mind, I go outside. For the first time since I've been here the night temperature is cool. Smitty told me this morning that monsoon season is coming. Watching the stars gives me a calm

feeling even though the stars are in different constellations from the ones I see back home. At the moment I don't want to think about home.

Pete isn't back by the time I go to bed. He's been gone long enough to have sloppy seconds and thirds. I toss and turn on the narrow cot as much as I can and try to sleep on my side.

In the distance, I hear the banging of explosions. The sounds become louder and the weak light in the barracks goes out. Then the door abruptly swings open. The image of the person standing in the doorway is taller than Pete. I bolt upright in my bunk and try to speak. But I can only manage a stammer.

"It's Smitty," he says. "One of our generators failed. Mac sent for Nha Trang's help. Should be back up by morning." He flashes his light on Pete's bunk. "Where's Peterson?"

I tell him.

"He picked a hell of a time to get his rocks off."

While Smitty walks to the next bay, I remain perched on top of my bunk above the mosquito netting. The guy at the other end of the barracks snores. Someone in between tosses and turns.

It must be a good hour later when the barracks door opens. But again it's not Pete. Smitty comes closer and speaks no louder than a whisper, "Need to see you outside, Denny."

As I stuff my feet into my boots, he grabs my shoulder. My heart sinks. He's never touched me before. We go outside.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Pete got shot in a scuffle. He didn't make it."

The night air is heavy. My eyes are wet. An image of the Vietnamese man in the warehouse reaching under the table and shooting Pete point blank runs through my mind.

“Do you need a minute?” Smitty asks. “Or can you see Colonel Mac now?”

I take a breath. “See him now. I sure as hell can’t sleep.”

The lights are on in the hall by the colonel’s office. Either he has his own generator or ours is back up.

“I have a fast question for him then he’ll see you,” Smitty says.

From the outer office I hear Smitty ask, “What do you want the official report to say on Peterson?”

“He got killed near the base entrance. Be vague. He was a good troop. None of the bull about him being off-limits.”

When Smitty leaves, I walk in and salute the colonel.

He waives me off and points to the chair.

I ease into the chair.

“I need a favor from you. Denny,” The colonel says. “I know you were Private Peterson’s buddy.”

I nod.

“I’d like you to write a letter to his family.” He fidgets with some papers.

“Sir, Pete and I only did a few things together. What can I say that might help them feel better?”

“I’ll send the official letter,” the colonel says, “But since you knew him you’ve got a shot at being personal.”

“Guess I could try.” My shoulders sag.

“That’s the spirit.”

When he tells me he doesn’t want a salute, I leave.

Now with the generator back, there’s a small amount of light from the lamp. I can’t sleep, so I begin working on it.

*Todd Peterson was my friend and a good guy. We used to play cards sometimes. He even let me win when he knew I needed it. He talked about his folks a lot. You sound like real nice people. And Mrs. Peterson, I tasted your great baking. Even here, Pete knew how to enjoy life.*

*Joe “Denny” Denicola*

He has beer left in his foot locker. I reach in and remove three cans and somehow it makes me think about Dad.

#

*Dear Cindy Jane:*

*Sorry I haven’t written. A friend of mine died last week and it’s made me stagnant. The heat doesn’t help. Neither does the fact I always feel dirty from the dust blowing.*

*I had guard duty last night. Never a good day when you’ve only had two hours of sleep. But I did hear the new song by The Who on the Armed Forces Network and started thinking about you and the night we saw them live. It was the best night of my life.*

*Sure do miss you. Maybe we can get together again. If you’re not with some college guy.*

*To answer your questions, I still have 290 days left here. And they call me Denny or Denicola. But please still call me Joe.*

Before I decide how to end the letter, I cross out the sentence about getting together and rewrite the whole damn thing.

#

Commander McAllister yells, “Fall in.” We scramble into formation. The colonel clears his throat. “President Nixon has reported that because of the increased strength of the South Vietnamese Army, the war is fading out. He thanks all of the troops for your hard work and commitment.”

With most everyone cheering, I don’t hear the rest of what he’s saying. I wonder if I’ll get home by Christmas.

On the walk back, I listen to Bolduc and Gonzo talking.

“What Mac said doesn’t make sense,” Bolduc tells him. “We’ve had more attacks in the last couple of weeks than we had in the first months I was here.”

I hate to agree with Bolduc, but he’s right.

Gonzo holds the door for me, and as I round the corner to my bunk, I spot a letter sitting on my cot.

*Dear “Denny”:*

*Your note was very nice. And since you were Todd’s friend I hope you can help me find out information on how he died. No one we’ve contacted has any specifics. His girlfriend would like to someday tell his unborn child all about him. And his mother and I have questions. Did he die in a battle? Did he save anyone’s life? Please help.*

*Mr. Charles Peterson*

I flop down on the cot and mutter, “Whoa!”

When Smitty comes by, I tell him about the letter. “I’m short,” he says. “Your young ass can come up with something decent.”

Smitty only has twenty-seven days left, but I think that’s long enough to answer a letter.

Bolduc overhears us and after Smitty leaves, says, “Tell him his kid got blown away in a fuck house.”

I stare at Bolduc. What’s with him? Then I remember, once overhearing him and Pete arguing about something outside the barracks, shouting for a long time—what, I couldn’t hear. I didn’t think their argument had come to blows. But was that enough to cause Bolduc’s reaction?

“I can’t do that,” I tell him.”

Bolduc tears the letter out of my hand. “Then I’ll do it.”

Something goes off inside my head. I hear a guy in the next bay listening to that awful song by the Partridge Family. I imagine Mrs. Peterson sniffing back tears while she’s kneading dough for her sweetbread. And I glare at Bolduc’s self-satisfied look. Heading swiftly towards him, I rush Bolduc and slam my fist in his face.

He staggers backward. “You prick,” he yells and comes toward me. His hand scrapes my shoulder as I turn away.

“Quit this shit,” Gonzo yells. “We’re not here to fight one another.”

Bolduc eyes me.

I throw him back the nastiest look I can muster.

Gonzo grabs and holds Bolduc's arms.

A newbie private holds mine.

"What the hell's this about, Boldy?" Gonzo asks.

Not wanting Bolduc to answer, I tell Gonzo.

"Give the letter back to him," he says.

Everyone listens to Gonzo. He's six-foot-four and does hundreds of push-ups a day without anyone ordering him to.

"Only if he says he's sorry," Bolduc says.

"I'm sorry," I lie.

"Here's your fuckin' letter." He hands it to Gonzo who hands it to me.

My knuckles hurt from my punch. My shoulder aches from his.

With my pen and pad in hand, I go outside to try and get my breathing rhythm back in sync. It's still too light to see the stars. The wind is blowing. My mind is racing. *Pete died near the base entrance. He had detected a man that was a Viet Cong. They skirmished. The man killed Pete, then fled. Had the man come on base, we might have all died. So I'd call Pete a hero.*

In the distance, I hear someone shooting an M-60. Then an "incoming" warning on the base radio. We're rocketed by mortar again. The sky becomes bright with red flames. Flashes of light stream off the barbed wire surrounding the edge of the base. The force of the attack knocks me to the ground.

The sirens screech in harmony, and I crawl the few feet to the barracks. Once inside, I grab a beer from my foot locker. From my position, I can see the calendar on the floor. The number of days I have left 262 is marked inside a circle.

The mortar attack gets louder. I sip the beer, and tell the can, “Do your job. Get me lit.”

Half a beer later, I pick up the envelope and address it to Pete’s folks. I wonder if my father would ever consider lying as doing the right thing.

I won’t find out. Even if I survive, I’ll never talk to him or anyone else about this place.