

Broken

January 1972 Vietnam

The last thing I remember is chugging beer and staring out at the sky. Then I hear a gunshot and my right hand gets ripped. I feel frozen to the ground and can't move well. "Fuck, I've been shot," I scream. At first there is no pain, only blood. Then the pain starts. The burning feels like a hot fire poker. I see Gonzo get hit in the chest. A second bullet barely misses my ass. Soon after I must pass out.

When I wake up I watch medical people scurrying around and smell the unmistakable odor of hospital disinfectant. I know something is happening. But no one's paying attention to me. I yell, "What the hell's going on?"

A short, red-haired nurse with a long tired face, tells me to calm down, you're in the hospital and you're going to survive. In the next few minutes as she takes my vital signs, she says to me, "Private DeNicola, you're at Cam Ranh Bay, and you took a bullet to your right hand. You lost a lot of blood," she adds.."

I ask her if she knows anything else about what happened.

She just tells me, "They said they had a tough time keeping you awake."

I remember it hurt like fuckin' hell and someone rubbing my arms and shoulders and me thinking that's not what burns. What I can't figure out is how the whole thing happened. No

base radio announcement of an attack. No sirens. Only being outside at night and someone shooting at me from a distance. My left hand shakes when they tell me Gonzo's dead.

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They move me to a crowded room with several other men. Everyone else is worse off than me. It's pretty okay. The nurses are women, it's air conditioned and they've given me real food and some meds. But my hand hurts full time with the meds. Can't imagine what the pain would be like without them.

The next day, a tall man with a dark mustache, stops by my bed. "I'm Captain Richardson," he says.

"Are you my doctor?"

He nods then tells me, "The bullet broke bones in your hand and wrist. It'll take some time to heal. After the cast comes off you'll need to strengthen your fingers. Until the right hand heals, you'll have to do everything left handed."

"Guess I can manage, 'cept I'm not sure people can read my writing."

"For now we'll keep you here, Joe. You can go home when you've regained some movement in your hand."

I eye him in disbelief. "You mean to California?"

He winks.

I'm about to tell him I still have thirty-two days left in-country, but quickly shut my mouth.

"With the Vietnamization of the war, more men are being sent home."

Suddenly I see twilight, and the reinforced trenches smelling of dank, clammy dew. Mortar fire slits the air. I hear Gonzo yelling, "Get back to the barracks. Incoming."

I get hit and stumble from the bullet, Gonzo's shot in the chest right in front of me and falls on his face.

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During the flight from Vietnam to Hawaii, I'm numb. Maybe some of the medication from the hospital has yet to wear off. Or maybe my mind hasn't caught up with going home.

Hours later, I sit on a plane waiting for the takeoff from Honolulu Airport. I get to fly civilian the rest of the way to California. During my time there, I'd dreamed of this moment. And now, I'm on American soil. Several people around me complain about the heat. If they'd been in Vietnam, they'd think it was cool here. An alarm blares and my reflexes push me forward. The seat belt keeps me strapped in. When the pilot announces that the alarm has gone off because someone lit a match, I exhale.

After the plane reaches altitude, I flip through the pages of a magazine. Since none of the articles interest me, I drop it and gaze at the other passengers. If I see another box of macadamia nuts open, I'll scream. Or if someone else says poi tastes like paste, I'm gonna yell that C-rations taste like shit. After watching the couple hug in the row in front of me, I open my wallet and look at the picture of Cindy Jane. I can't wait to see her even though we broke up before I left for the war. I didn't think it was fair to Cindy Jane to keep her tied up for a year with someone who might not return.

I turn my head toward the window and watch the water below. I have to spend my last leg home with a bunch of camera-clicking yo-yos. Resting my head on the pillow I close my eyes.

When I get off the plane in Oakland I wait, standing near the smoking section. My ass hasn't liked sitting for so long. An older woman with bluish-gray hair stares at me for a good couple of minutes. I look to see if my fly's open. It isn't. I step over to her, and ask, "Is anything wrong?"

"How many babies did you kill over there?"

"Whoa," I answer and shake my head.

She wags a finger at me. I walk away.

After my duffel bag arrives, I call Cindy Jane in Berkeley. "Hey," I say. "It's Joe."

"Oh, Joe," she sounds less excited than I am. "Where are you?"

I tell her I'm in Oakland and need a ride to the base to pick up my car. It's a lie. The Army would take me there.

She says she'll meet me in an hour, but doesn't have time to chit-chat.

More than two hours later, some guy, dressed in jeans and sandals, and wearing a pony tail, gawks at the name on my uniform. "I'm Ethan," he says.

I can't place him.

"Sorry, I'm late. CJ asked me to take you to get your car."

She's going by CJ now. There's an uncomfortable pause. He hasn't even asked me about my hand. My face forms a question. "Why didn't she come?"

"She thought it'd be better this way."

I can feel the blood intensify behind my eyes. My hands and feet don't know what to do. When I start breathing again, I tell him, "Let's go to the base and get my car." My voice has a crack in it.

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During the time I was over there I had thought mostly about Cindy Jane and making it home alive. And now that I'm home, she doesn't want to see me and I don't want to see my parents. In the next two days I get several phone calls from my mother. She finally convinces me that no matter what shape I'm in, they need to see me.

I drive from the base to Highway One in San Francisco. It's at least an extra hour to Santa Cruz this way—I need the time alone seeing the ocean. I've never believed in Astrology though the part about me being a water sign makes sense. As I drive farther and farther south of San Francisco the traffic eases up and I smell the crisp ocean air. The waves crash against the shore and the sun glimmers in the distance.

At Half Moon Bay, I tell myself, no matter how much I try. It's not working. Gonzo and Cindy Jane monopolize my mind. I pull the car to the side of the road and cut the engine. Drumming my fingers on the steering wheel, I think about how Mom has guilted me into coming home. I'm not ready for family.

For a long while my breathing is uneasy—my mind still in the war. I think about Gonzo. And how it's crazy or bizarre or some such shit that I feel like I knew him in a deeper way than I've ever known anyone else. And all I remember now is his height, six foot four, his home, New Mexico and in his wedding picture, his wife barely came up to the middle of his shoulder.

It's a good forty-five minutes before I start driving again.

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In Davenport, a half hour from Santa Cruz, I stop another time and get out of the car. My hand is sore. I tell myself, I killed Gonzo. If I hadn't been outside, he'd be alive. I stand next to the car and watch the strong wind blowing leaves all around the nearby park. Finally I say aloud, *Gonzo's already dead. I can't change that.* I suck in some air and force myself to start the car and drive the rest of the way to Santa Cruz.

I squeeze into a parking space in front of my parents house. The well cared for homes with their neatly trimmed lawns haven't changed. I hesitate in getting out and note the fuchsia flowering in their beds. It's better to be in a place where flowers bloom—instead of being blown up. It takes all I can muster to pull my body out of the car. Toward the end of the block I see a tall palm tree. A jet engine whistles from a nearby plane—it causes a strange pressure on my ears and a faint pain in my chest.

Mom appears at the door, steps toward me, and hugs me tightly. She must have recently applied her perfume, faintly smelling of lemon. Or maybe it stands out because I've been away for so long and have forgotten about it. She looks as good as ever, a beautiful woman with high cheekbones and dark hair. She prides herself on her appearance and is wearing a simple pants suit.

We walk through the front door. I love this house, with its tall ceilings and the main rooms opening into one another.

“You look good, Mom.”

“You could use some meat on your bones,” she says and motions to my hand. “They told us you'd been shot.”

I can tell she has difficulty speaking. If she talks much more, she'll cry. She never wants people to think that she does. She didn't cry the day of her own mother's funeral. When her brother told a story, I heard her whisper to Dad, "I can't say anything, otherwise I'll start blubbing."

A second later Dad grabs me. "What's this nonsense about not being ready to see us?" he says.

"I've got a lot on my mind." I shrug my shoulders.

He seems older and softer. I wonder if he's stopped lifting weights. Or is it because his gray hairs now outnumber the brown?

Dad kisses me on the cheek

"Okay, that's enough of that," I tell him.

"I'm just so happy to see you, figlio mio."

When I was a kid I hated visiting my grandfather, Nonno. He thought nothing of kissing all his grandsons. One time Dad threatened to take away my bike when I refused to get out of the car to see my grandfather. It wasn't until Mom came back to the car and said, "Nonno promised he won't kiss you," that I finally opened the door and went inside.

Mom walks to the stove. I follow. She stirs a large pot with a wooden spoon. I breathe in deeply and luxuriate in the rich aroma of the tomato sauce. "Is it the family recipe? Or the quickie sauce?"

She nods. "It's *my* sauce."

"Are we having pasta?"

"Eggplant parmesan and the seven fishes."

I frown.

“Not all seven just the ones you like.”

“Why?” I ask. “It's not Christmas Eve.”

“You weren't here for Christmas,” she says, biting her lip and turning away.

I only like the spaghetti with mussels, the seafood salad, and the soup. I used to call the smelts, squid, octopus, and eel the “the obnoxious four.” As if the eel didn't taste bad enough, my grandmother would buy them alive and keep them in a sink in the garage, killing them right before stewing. I hated the way they squirmed. They reminded me of snakes.

“No eel, then?” I ask.

“No eel,” she smiles briefly.

“Today's a celebration, Joe. Even your cousin, Christopher's coming.” Dad pulls out a chair and sits at the table.

Christopher's only twelve. I hope he doesn't want to play Monopoly. I'm not in the mood.

I can tell from the wonderful aroma that Mom is cooking the sauce with meat, the way she normally does. My grandmother never allowed meat on Christmas Eve. Like many older Italians, she was superstitious “To ward off the seven deadly sins in the new year,” she used to say. “Christmas Eve dinner has to come from water.”

“Have a meatball.” Mom smiles. “Dinner won't be ready for another hour.” She grabs a plate, slaps a meatball on it, then smothers it in sauce and hands it to me.

The meatball is light. Mom makes the parmesan cheese and oregano come together perfectly. “This is fantastic. Even better than I remember.”

She beams and continues stirring.

Several moments later, Christopher arrives and Mom says, “Christmas Eve dinner’s ready.”

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The barracks is still. Outside it’s quiet too, except for the hum of a low-flying helicopter. I know we’re being attacked. “Where the fuck is the “Incoming” announcement?”

Gonzo isn’t stirring. How did he get so small? He must’ve stopped doing push-ups.

I lift him out of bed and hurl him to the floor. “Gonzo move your ass, now.”

He stares at me. There’s a bewildered look on his face. I can’t get my bearings. Why is he wearing pajamas?

“Joe.” I hear. Then a little louder. “Joe. You’re having a nightmare.”

Through the window, I see the streetlight.

“It’s shell shock,” I hear Dad say.

I realize I’m home. I stop breathing so heavily. For the longest time I just stare at Christopher with my mouth hung open.

“Christopher,” my mother says. “Let’s put you out on the couch.”

“Oh God. Why is this happening?” I say aloud.

I shut the door. Sitting on the edge of the bed in the dark, I try to figure out what just happened.

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I get up before anyone else, make my coffee and sit by the window. Within minutes Mom is up.

“Toast?” she asks and shakes the bag of bread before she unfastens it.

“No.”

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“Yeah.” I sigh. “Last night was a one-time only thing. It won’t happen again.”

Her toast pops up. As she spreads jam on it, she says, “Wish I could believe that.”

We sit and uncomfortably avoid one another. Her by chomping on the toast, me by staring out the window at her new humming bird feeder. It looks like it was once a wine bottle. Though I won’t talk to her about wine or beer. She wouldn’t think too kindly of my alcohol consumption.

“When the Army told us you were shot in the hand,” she blurts out. “I could only think you were coming home without it.”

I sigh. It sounds too much like a groan. “I would’ve written—my left-handed writing was a mess . . .” I shake my head. “I got the chaplain to write to Cindy Jane. Didn’t she tell you the whole story?”

“No.” Mom clears her throat. “Let’s not talk about her.”

At the mention of her name, I picture Cindy Jane wearing a cream colored sweater and jeans with a blue scarf wrapped around her waist. *Clear her out of your mind!*

Mom finishes the last bit of her toast. “What would you have written us?” she asks.

“I don’t know.” I inhale. “But what happened last night has nothing to do with being shot. Well. Little to do with it.”

“So. What was that all about?”

I open the palms of my hands. “Look, I scared Christopher, but it’s over.”

“You’ve got a problem. You need help.” She blows air from her mouth. “Doesn’t the Army have any counseling?”

“There’s a group I could join. But I’ve heard that most of the guys in it were in the field. I was at a base. They had shit happen to them you wouldn’t believe.”

She shakes her head. “You need something. Not talking about it doesn’t make it go away. It only takes more time to get over it.”

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Later in the day while I’m throwing stuff into my duffel bag, Dad comes into my room.

“What’s happening?” Dad asks. He sounds ill-at-ease.

I stare at him. *Is Dad trying to be cool?* I continue packing.

“What time are you leaving?” he asks.

“Soon.”

“Why don’t you stay a while? We could have a beer and watch the ocean from the deck.”

I nod. Dad has never offered me a beer.

We walk into the kitchen. He hands me a can, takes one for himself and I follow him out the back door and up the widow walk.

On the deck we sit on wicker chairs with the same green and white striped seat covers from years ago. I remember the many times I watched the shoreline from here. The day is sunny, but windy. The surf is choppy.

Out of the blue, Dad says, “Tell me about Gonzo.”

I swallow and squint at him. “A guy I knew over there.”

“I gathered that and I guess he didn’t make it.”

“I don’t know what to say . . . He was a strong guy. Kind of a leader. We all listened to him.” I take a swig of beer. “When I got shot, he got offed. If anyone should have survived it should have been him. Doesn’t make sense.”

“It never makes sense,” Dad snarls. “War’s not logical. When I think about the men who didn’t survive the ship I was on in World War II, I wonder why I did.”

Dad has never been this candid with me. No one talks for awhile. We just keep sipping our beers. Then Dad forms a strained smile. “We really should be thankful you’re back from the war in one piece.”

“I’m here,” I say. “But part of me is still over there.”

Dad’s mouth tightens. “I know the feeling.”

There is another quiet moment until Dad gestures toward the ocean. “I can see a dolphin,” he says. “I should go get my binoculars, though . . . by the time I get them, he’ll be gone.”

I look out at the waves, but I can’t see the dolphin. Dad’s right. It has disappeared. I breathe in the cool breeze. “It’s a beautiful day. I’m glad I came. It brings back some great memories.” I gaze at Dad. “Some of them can help make the last eleven months go away. Maybe just like the dolphin disappearing.”

“So long as they don’t get buried only to surface later and haunt you,” Dad tells me “Don’t be like me. Talk about it.” He takes another gulp from his beer. “I want you to know if you need a counselor or something we can help with the cost.”

Does he mean a psychiatrist? This is so alien to me, I don’t dare ask.

He opens his mouth and closes it then a moment later, “I’d like to know more about when you were shot,” he asks quietly.

I think about how my hand got hit and Gonzo died. “It was really strange,” I speak slowly. “There was no siren or anything on the radio. The attack just happened . . . As I started to duck, a bullet blasted my hand. Gonzo got greased in the chest. Then another bullet swung way close to my ass. I think I passed out and then I must’ve been awake for a time because I heard someone tell Augusto, Gonzo has a sucking chest wound, keep talking to him. Next time I was awake I was on the ‘copter . . . The thing is over there I was always so fuckin’ terrified. But sometimes after I talked to Gonzo . . .”

“You weren’t scared.” Dad says.

I shake my head. “I was still terrified.” I sip the last bit of beer. “But when we talked he helped me get through another chunk of time . . . I’m sure he was scared though he never seemed to be. Our bond was so much stronger than trust. Don’t know what to call it.”

“I know what you mean.” Dad says.

Things get quiet for a moment, then with one hand he grabs my shoulder. “Stay the night,” he asks.

I’m not sure talking about it helps. But at least Dad and I finally have something in common. Sitting up straight, I draw in the sea air and listen to the sound of the waves crashing. I hook an arm around Dad’s neck and agree to stay the night.