

Changes

I liked it here, not just because it was five blocks from my house and closer to my home turf - where I finally felt safe and could stop looking behind my back - but because the Cottonwoods merged above the pinkish-amber street lights to form an enveloping orange-and-yellow canopy. It was better for me here, and I felt more secure with each step. It was always better here; warmer and more inviting than just about anywhere else, more so than other street in town. On rainy days you could walk down the sidewalk under the protection of the trees and not get so much as a drop of water on your head. Then, when the storm stopped and the sun broke through, as the clouds turned from black to gray and finally, potato white; while it was brilliantly sunny everywhere else, on Clarion Street, the water would have finally trickled down through the branches high above and it would be raining again, cool and soft under the leaves. Sometimes I waited for the rain to stop on those special days, so I could walk through the trees and feel that cool water as it found its way back to the ground all over again.

It wasn't raining now, however, and it wasn't summer. It was ghostly autumn, with hints of the killing frost that was sure to come within the next week or two. Nor was it in the middle of the day. It was twilight and I left them all behind that day, without saying goodbye or telling anyone where I was headed. I was alone, a twelve-year-old on a mission that was vague and aimless yet somehow necessary. How could I have explained the need for those trees? Who would have understood or even listened on such an occasion? I would have asked

the impossible, I would have asked for them all to look beyond their own tears and honor my petty selfishness. Of course, I went anyway.

Cottonwoods, in the fall, burst like flowering titans high above, first a pale yellow and then a vibrant orange and ultimately a heavy, dark brown before the leaves pull free from their branches. They tumble here like massive, floating drops of rain in the breeze. Cars slow to a crawl when the wind whips through the tunnel on Clarion Street and the whirling leaves obscure normal vision. Once, en route to the skating rink, Eddie had to pull me back to safety as I bolted out of the car window to feel those leaves on my young, pale hands and arms. He was always getting me out of a jam like that. Older brothers do these types of things with a genuine reluctance that almost borders on neglect, yet they do it anyway, programmed to fight and defend by some inner voice that tells them the right thing to do. For my part, I accepted his rescue efforts with the same reluctance, borne not of neglect, but of some sort of pre-programmed DNA in my design that told me I was always to be the victim. Which is why the Cottonwoods looked so odd, so strange in the twilight on this odd and strange day. Even the asphalt street and sidewalk segments, some sections older, pockmarked with aggregate stones bubbling to the surface, some newer, bleached white and smooth, didn't seem to be the same as what I had always seen before... their seams didn't meet and it looked to me as if an earthquake had grasped them like a demon from underneath and heaved them up, letting them fall back down again, jagged and displaced.

There were, I learned, three steps to sepsis, but the last one - septic shock - is the most dangerous. In stage three, the body can't fight off infection at all, even with the most potent antibiotics. It happens more often than medical people like to admit and this is what happened to my big brother Eddie. The bitch of it all is that only mom could afford to fly

all the way to Europe to see him in the hospital, and when she did, he seemed on the mend, minus most of his left leg. But news of his injury, courtesy of a crude, but effective Viet Cong bobby trap, was welcome in our house. It meant that we'd get him back, that our fears as we watched Frank Reynolds and Howard K. Smith each night would finally be over. No more fretting and twisting ourselves into knots as the newsmen gave details of the latest carnage, silhouetted in black, with tangled maps of the Mekong Delta, the river snaking its way behind them, somehow always just a bit out-of-focus on our brand new, color Admiral television. Our war was over.

We didn't know it at the time, nor did we find out until much later, it happened in a dark, tangled place called Dak Cheung - not in Vietnam - but in Laos. Even in places we weren't supposed to be, they saw us coming. How do you hope to win a fight like that? A misstep, a careless moment and snap... but hey, Eddie was alive and, by the time we found out, was already in Germany in a warm, safe, hospital bed.

The cemetery where we buried him didn't have any Cottonwoods, just out-of-control scrub arborvitae that were allowed to run wild before turning brown and dying or growing to immense heights, then carved and shaped like green, feathery spears. Mom had barely gotten home from her three-day visit when they said Eddie had taken an "unexpected turn for the worse". Guarded, then serious and finally critical. Well, not exactly final, since critical meant still being alive.

He came home that next week. In my mind he was the only fatality our little town suffered in the war, but I am sure there were at least a few others. But they didn't matter. What mattered was that Eddie was gone, a piece of all of us was gone, like a light in an advertising sign that goes out and you can't even remember the product because all you can think of is that one, stupid light that's missing. It's all you can see.

It's why I left the funeral, I guess. Just before they lowered Eddie into the ground. It was just too much to think he'd be in that cold, steel vault forever. I needed the Cottonwoods. They weren't going to leave me like Eddie did. I knew they would still be there despite it all. In spite of everything that had happened. They, at least they, weren't going to change for a long, long while.