

Angst, more than anything, led him to that hill with those pugnacious people. But there among them, Leonidas Kaczynski, the revolutionary, was born.

There, on Hippie Hill, Leo found his voice among the chanters and marijuana smoke and orgies. His teenaged malaise oozed about in the couple of years prior to the Summer of Love, and into its initial weeks, until sometime in early September of 1967, when an LSD trip elicited a rectification of his personal mores.

Vietnam, Leo thought, was still futile and caitiff, but he decided that his war, like the one he so vehemently opposed, was hopeless, if not a little ostentatious. He could do better than to vilify, he chose to believe. Plus, the sudden ubiquity of his cause began to irk him.

That year, an ocean away, a 23-year-old from Visalia lie prostrate at Con Thien.

Angst, more than anything, led him to that hill with those pugnacious people. But there among them, Marine Cpl. Gary Boone, the war hero, was born.

There, on the "hill of angels," Cpl. Boone once discerned his identity among the 1st Battalion and the artillery fire, the bloodshed and the guerrillas. His youthful brio spilled over in two tours and was spent by the time of his discharge in late 1973. Three years prior, he was awarded a Medal of Honor for his gallantry on the hill.

Vietnam left Cpl. Boone, who opted to drop the military prefix six months after he left the service, disillusioned, if not a little mercurial. Combat, he now thought, sullied his very soul. He longed for simplicity back home.

II.

Leo's radical penchants gradually descended from their former heights and he landed a newspaper job in Petaluma, working the police and technology beats before becoming one of the paper's three columnists.

After some back-and-forth with the editorial staff, and himself, he titled his column "Progressive Lessoning."

"A flight from materialism," Leo wrote in a Sunday edition of the Argus-Courier in the summer of 2002. "A pilgrimage toward a deeper wholeness is the prescribed antidote for all who have fattened in suburbia. What use is four thousand square feet of house if one lacks four thousand rectangular dollars of savings? What good is thirty gallons of gas if the creditor's footing the bill for your sport utility vehicle anyway? When did cul-de-sacs, soccer practices, stucco finishes and thousand-dollar televisions become gateways to the void? Oh, and there are subdivisions and subdivisions of void.

"You didn't know the Jones' rat race has always been aimless? Maybe you and your spouse can discuss a change of direction at your next outing to Applebee's or on the way home from Saturday's mixed doubles match. Yeah, my cappuccino is richer than you. My belly's had a fuller experience than Jack and Jill could ever hope for in that mega development. But hey, at least you can bare that spick-and-span garage with pride."

His editor received dozens of letters that week in response to Leo's alienating diatribe. More trickled in as vacationers pulled their SUVs into the driveways of their 4000-square-foot stucco homes and retrieved their newspapers from their well-manicured lawns.

So Leo responded the following week. Amid his 700 words was a certain line.

"The gutter punks on thrifted quilts down at Hippie Hill lead fuller lives than you. (And they're better spoken, too, as evidenced by your obtuse letters.)"

III.

In 1987, on Fourth of July weekend, Gary's first wife, Pamela, purchased a camouflage-patterned t-shirt from a supermarket. It was on sale. It read "Proud Marine Wife" across the front.

"Proud?" he asked when he first saw her wearing it. She sat at the kitchen table playing solitaire.

"Nice to see you, too," she jabbed back. "How was work?"

It had been a long day at the body shop for Gary, who shook his head and ignored his wife's question. He suspected it wasn't genuine. One of his employees called in sick and a parts delivery was pushed back until after the holiday.

He unbuttoned his shirt and sighed. Pamela collected the deck of cards, quietly got up from the table, and retrieved an apron from the pantry. She walked to the stove and lit it.

“I don’t know who the hell you think you are, Gary,” she said. “It’s just a shirt. It doesn’t mean nothing. You’re gonna come home and tell me —”

“Do you have any idea what I did over there, Pam? I lost a goddamned war. That’s what the hell I did... And you’re *proud*.”

He drove his grease-ridden fingertips into his temples, boring gusts of air hotly from his nostrils before opening his mouth again, his eyes still closed.

“Take it off,” he said sternly as he opened his refrigerator and reached for a Coors.

“Now, damn it!”

He popped open his beer, left the opener and the cap on the counter, removed his shirt and swung it over his shoulder as he stormed off to the garage to work on his most recent restoration project — a 1958 Plymouth Savoy.

Pamela had never before seen Gary’s emotions clamber up from their always tame, flat-lined level of composure — not when she got a DWI on Christmas Eve or when she ran their MasterCard over its limit at a Lake Tahoe casino; not at the altar on their wedding day or at the foot of his mother’s deathbed.

The t-shirt fight incited a vow from Gary. Never again would his military past be disclosed to a woman — not his second wife, Beverly; neither of his two daughters, Dana and Crystal, nor the bookkeeper he frequently flirted with at work. No one of the gender would ever know.

No female, that is, except for a California congresswoman who, in an attempt to balance her anti-war stance, wanted to publicly meet the Vietnam War's only living Medal of Honor recipient in California. After a year of sending staffers nagging after Gary, she landed the appointment and promptly invited the press for the occasion — a cocktail-hour event in the lobby of her office.

IV.

“Progressive Lessoning” was discontinued that fall and Leo was demoted to general assignment. He was planning his next move, griping about each petty article he was assigned in the interim.

On the Friday before Thanksgiving, he was sent to a Mountain View hospital to write a story about a Palo Alto family who had given birth to triplets earlier that week.

“Show the readers how grateful the parents are,” his new 27-year-old editor instructed, leaning against Leo's cubicle while gobbling down a bag of Cheeto's. “You know, focus on gratitude and blessing.”

Leo leaned back in his chair and wore a snidely leer.

“This is an important story,” he quipped in reply. “This — this matters. Abundant blessing in San Mateo County. This — this is breaking news, you know. You’re onto something, Jake.”

He filed late and short on Saturday night, hoping the story wouldn’t run. It instead made the front page of the Sunday paper.

The next morning, when letterhead from the office of U.S. Representative Nina DiMasi, of California’s 8th congressional district, came across his desk with a sticky note reading “All yours!” fixed to the top, Leo fumed and swore it would be his last assignment.

It was.

V.

It was early December. Gary was two hours into his afternoon slog to San Francisco. Radio broken, he had been reciting his address for the congresswoman and her crowd for nearly two hours.

In the morning, before he set out, he rummaged through an old Red Wing shoebox in his attic, where he kept his medal and other wartime mementos — a mostly empty diary, dog tags, a half dozen photos, an NVA Ground Forces badge, a weathered pack of Pall Malls. He couldn’t peel away his heed. Each piece garnered careful, reflective examination.

But each diary entry needled at him. One gushed of nationalism and cursed “rice ball bastards.” At the foot of the page was a poorly-sketched torch. “This We’ll Defend” was written in block letters beneath it. He tore the sheet out and began to shred it into centimeter-wide slivers.

Folded neatly at the back of the leather-bound diary atop a South Vietnam 500 Piastres bill was an unstamped Manila postcard. Its edges were worn and cracks littered the surface of the image, which portrayed The Rizal Monument. Scribbled in black ink across the back was a poem written by a comrade who accompanied him on the rest and recuperation trip.

Nearly 35 years later, the corporal was leaning against some milk crates in his attic, rereading his friend’s words.

*“When youth was a soldier, and I fought across the sea, we were young and cold hearts of bloody savagery; Borne of indignation, children of our time, we were orphans of creation and dying in our prime.”*

He stuffed the postcard into his shirt pocket along with the medal and carried the shoebox down to his kitchen counter.

“Walters was the real hero,” he recited aloud as he passed through Modesto.

“What business did we have there? We couldn’t win. The whole damn thing was an uphill fight. But that kid threw his body on an NVA grenade and I’m living proof of that. I wouldn’t have done what I did, ma’am, if it wasn’t for him. I would’ve been dead. He was the real hero. His medal ought to weigh a whole lot heavier than mine and that’s the truth.

“I have here something he wrote and I’m gonna read it for you and then I’ll be done.”

He managed to boil the address down, but not before he mowed through a dozen cigarettes and pulled his 1989 GMC S-15 off to the shoulder for a palm-faced breakdown. He managed to boil it down, yes, but not before the warfare flashbacks glutted his wits — not before the images of shot-up and blown-up friends and the lying-in-wait enemy pervaded his senses.

There before him lay the jungles, the Punji traps, the vipers, the gutted-by-mine American bodies. Viet Cong gunfire reverberated around his cab.

He concentrated on the road before him, shunning the highway-lining foliage to his right for fear of seeing white sclera or movement in the brush.

His mind continued in spiral. Thoughts of turning back loomed as passengers. And the traffic was just compounding things.

He had survived through throngs of North Vietnamese Army units at Con Thien. He sustained himself through operations like Kentucky and Buffalo. But it was the memory of it all that had him defeated. He didn’t want to return, but he had, numbing himself for a third tour. And there, behind his steering wheel, the sheer horror of it all had never been so tangible.

There he sat, gridlocked in the right lane of the Bay Bridge, a crisp Marlboro on his bottom lip and beads of sweat gathering along the surface of his back, palms, and forehead. He locked his lips around the cigarette, clinging to it, grasping for the present.



VI.

Leo fantasized about squandering the Medal of Honor assignment — asking outrageous questions, filing a coffee and mileage reimbursement for an empty story.

“A Friday chock full of self-serving futility,” he imagined writing. “There they were, regurgitating the same old platitudes about the same old rotten war.” His glare was already fixed on the honoree.

He pre-composed some other sentences, too, all reflecting the sentiment — that which could never actually print in the Argus-Courier.

There in the right lane of US-101, enraptured in the bliss of plotted defiance, nothing could faze. His cruise control was set at 50 miles per hour and his windows were rolled down. Whiskey teased his tongue.

For a mile or so, as he passed through San Rafael, a Lexus LX closely tailed him, the driver letting out intermittent honks, annoyed with the pace of the pattering green Toyota Tercel before him. The matter never occurred to Leo, who was by now sufficiently wind-blown, his necktie drooping with the knot loosely intact near his sternum.

Traffic was light as Leo approached the Golden Gate Bridge. His story was almost skeltoned. He reached again for his scotch flask and riffled through the collection of cassettes in his driver’s side door. He blew on a copy of Fleetwood Mac’s self-titled album and popped it in.

VII.

Gary's hands now shook rhythmically to a tempo he had long ascribed to San Francisco — too fast.

After exiting the freeway, he was immediately disoriented, having been whisked into SOMA bedlam under a gray sky. In the span of four blocks, he had swerved to avoid cyclists, a madman with a shopping cart, and an idle parking monitor. The bustle and the high-rises, the pedestrians and the horn-honking further disturbed his reach for mental armistice.

Stopped at a traffic light, he scrutinized his surroundings through smudged, murky glass. A disheveled cross-dresser with a Santa Claus hat sat on a nearby curb, shivering, cursing the air and the passersby who breathed it. The driver of a hydraulic-raised Cadillac the next lane over hung his right arm over his steering wheel and puffed a marijuana joint in his left hand, staring in Gary's direction through a small billow of smoke.

"A damned zoo," he groused.

He again contemplated turning back. He was wearied from the drive, lacking the energy necessary to corral a thought.

Out of cigarettes, he eyed a convenience store situated on a corner three blocks ahead.

VIII.

Leo's lone pit stop on the hour-long journey came at his favorite Marina cafe. There, he got his lede down on paper, savored a cappuccino, and freshened up — just enough — for the press conference.

He took a drink to go.

Plopping down in the driver's seat of his car, he sighed deeply, sipped his organic single-origin coffee, and smiled at the sight of his press credential with the kind of pleasure a young boy feels before lighting a firecracker or stomping on an ant pile. In 90 minutes or so, he would again be unbridled. Not only would the deadlines be gone, but so would the observance of a code of ethics he had always regarded as hollow.

Already, he was awakening the philosophies he had long before sent to hibernate in the tucked-away quarters of his mind. Tomorrow, he thought, he'd let them all roam, herding them onto paper, ordering them with the sort of care he had been withholding from his work since his demotion, arousing dormant passion.

His fingers tapped buoyantly on his steering wheel as he sang along to the sounds coming from his warbling car speakers. He watched a street trolley carrying schoolchildren pass by, took another sip of his coffee, and leaned out to inhale the sea air.

IX.

Dusk was setting in early and Gary was lighting another cigarette. He repeated aloud the directions of a stranger at the Qwik Stop he had just departed.

Turning lane restrictions kept him from making his first left. He looked at the clock on his dash. He was already late for his briefing with the congresswoman. He pounded his fist against the ceiling and ran his fingers through his hair, determinedly inhaling his cigarette.

Sights of Chinatown triggered further frustration, and eye rolls, inside of the S-15 as he tried to navigate southward toward DiMasi. He sped toward stoplights and weaved through increasingly trafficked roads, jerking his head from one side to the other in search of a familiar street name. He tried desperately to recall the directions he had received minutes prior.

He flicked his cigarette out the window, shifted to third gear, and darted ahead, southbound now.

The streetlights had illuminated. Headlights and bicycle flashers now clustered the roadways. Latin dance music blared from the window-tinted car to his right. He struck his steering wheel three times — “Damn it, damn it, damn it” — and clenched his teeth together.

The traffic wasn't all he was battling. The steep inclines he now faced impeded his ability to zigzag the manual transmission pickup through the congestion.

After cutting off a moped scooter, he had to slam on his brakes and shift down when the car before him came to a stop at a yellow light. He laid on his horn in frustration, rolling down his window to spit.

When the stoplight turned green, the corporal revved his engine and quickly honked to prompt the car to accelerate. It did, seconds later, as its driver held his left hand out the window to catch the wind.

X.

Leo was ready to make statements. He'd do so in his story on DiMasi's Vietnam presser and he'd do so the next day, with a pre-packaged essay for The American Prospect.

He fumbled around for a thermos behind the passenger seat, which he intended to use for his coffee. Extending backward, he was able to grip it. He set it between his legs and screwed it open. It reeked of the residue of a crusty, days-old latte.

But he couldn't show up to the presser with a paper cup. He rinsed the thermos with an ounce of scotch and poured it out his window.

He pondered his afternoon and the evening ahead. He considered his politics and assertions.

*This pageantry is just insufferable. We're running a what — a fucking murderer out in front of government and press? Yeah, let's glorify this cold-blood. Let's enshrine his ass.*

*Oh wait. We already have.*

*This is just a joke. What a fucking joke.*

*Shit. This musty mug. But they need to see this. We killed one population; can we slow down the extermination of another? I mean, God damn.*

*I should start composting again. They don't know that I don't. They won't know. I'm going to start with this cup. I can donate it to that school. Or isn't there a community garden in Santa Rosa?*

*Why did I move? I miss that yard. Damn, I miss it.*

Recklessness flashed in his rearview mirror.

“Who the hell does this guy think he is?” he muttered to himself as he twisted backward to look at the pickup behind him.

XI.

Gary tapped his horn and punched at the air in the direction of the Tercel in front of him.

“This son of a bitch.”

He extended forward to examine the hood of his truck. He shook his head and accelerated in a show of displeasure. His front bumper steadied two feet from the Tercel's fender. The little car yet pattered, blowing blankets of exhaust backward.

Gary hoisted both fists in the air and extended his middle fingers. His teeth pricked the butt of his cigarette.

“See this, asshole?”

Eyes riveted to his rearview mirror, Leo pulled over to the curb to let the crazed driver of the truck behind him pass.

The sun had set and now more than half an hour late to his meeting with DiMasi, Gary abandoned his purpose in the city he loathed.

He lurched over to the right, halting to a brisk stop, sending his truck into whiplash and trapping Leo in his parking space. He flung his driver side door open and flounced toward the car.

“Who do you think you are?!” he shouted.

Stevie Nicks serenaded.

“Just what the fuck was that?!”

Leo was confused. He looked for support from nearby pedestrians but spotted none on the suddenly quiet street.

Gary reached to open the door of the Tercel, but found it locked.

“C’mon, you piece of shit! I’m gonna kick your ass!”

"I'm sorry." Leo said, hands raised in the air. "I don't know what this is about."

"The hell you don't! What did you throw at me back there?"

Leo's recall had deserted him. He tried to think clearly.

*What the hell did I throw at this asshole?*

"C'mon!" Gary grunted, grabbing Leo's shirt sleeve through the open window. "Get out here, pussy!"

"I — I was just emptying this cup," Leo said, showing his thermos. "I was rinsing it out. I'm sorry."

Gary again reached for the door handle of the Tercel.

"Yeah — I know a fuckin' acid bomb when I see one, you hippie-haired son of a bitch!"

Leo raced to roll up his window, but Gary's left forearm hampered the effort as he grabbed for Leo's shirt collar and fidgeted for the lock on the door.

"It was just some whiskey!"

Leo's voice now sounded of flap as his throat parched. He gulped.



“I’m sorry! I wasn’t throwing it at you!”

His door opened and Gary drug him out of the car.

“I know what the fuck that was, you bastard! You ain’t gonna just run away this time. Face me like a man after you done try to kill me. You gonna throw that acid at me and run? Huh, mother fucker?!”

Leo glimpsed the interior of his assailant’s truck: a pack of cigarettes, a wrench, some papers, a familiar invitation on the passenger seat.

Resistance surfaced and he hastened to form a barb.

“What are you, some kind of PTSD freak?!” he shouted with a shove. “Huh?! Some kind of goddamn soldier?!”

Gary landed a heavy blow and rocked Leo’s head backward, against the asphalt.

“Go to hell!” Leo subduedly let out.

He spat upward at the corporal, but missed. He bit at his wrist but only grazed it.

Gary clasped his hands firmer around Leo’s neck, forcing him backward toward the idling pickup. Leo kicked and grabbed at the aggressor’s grip, gasping for breath.

Thoughts of foregone romance now scurried about his mind, transfixing his very rationale and presence. He relaxed his arms at his side. His feet slid backward from beneath his car and his knees bent. He considered his older sister, his only sibling, and wondered if she still lived in that tudor in Wichita. He performed quick arithmetic, trying to calculate the ages of his niece and nephew. He wished to be with them, to give them another gift or read them another story. But his eyes shut in withdrawal.

Gary's head shuddered violently and his neck veins protruded as his face filled with hot blood. Life left the body he straddled. He reached for the man's necktie and briskly wound it around his neck as a streetlight flickered above and a sports car sped down the hill.

He scrambled backward, to the passenger door of his truck. He leaned against it and huffed in the chilled San Francisco air, staring coldly at the victim of his rage. Christmas lights adorned the pristine street. The Tercel was left running. "Landslide" played faintly from the stereo.

Gary's legs were limp. He shuffled along the front hood of his truck and used his arms to round the side, flinging open his driver side door and keeling over into the cab.

After a minute, he propped himself upright and struggled to light a cigarette, stroking his fingers through his disheveled hair and blankly staring forward.

He reached into his glovebox, pulled out a .44 Magnum, spewed his cigarette to the floorboard, and inserted the barrel of the gun into his mouth.

Tears filled his bloodshot eyes. He removed the gun and dropped it onto the passenger seat, reaching into his shirt pocket. He placed the postcard on his lap and hung the medal around his neck before reaching again for the Magnum.

He let out a sigh, struggling to cock the gun with his trembly hands. Looking to his left and right, he was longing for familiarity. He thought of Visalia and pulled the trigger.

There, in Nob Hill, Cpl. Gary Boone, 59, and Leonidas Kaczynski, 54, were both declared dead at the scene of their encounter.