

The Soldier's Relief

The mask-faced surgeon working on him, sweating over him, replied, "What was that, soldier?" But Pearson's eyes had already rolled back, his lids nearly shut, his mind drifting toward the ether. A cloudy mindlessness settled over him, as though he hovered in some other place, some in-between place.

The surgeon's assistant stood over him too, digging and wiping, breathing and discussing, exchanging instruments, coughing, and digging some more. Pearson felt no pain, but opened his eyes when his body jolted. The surgeon's gown was bloody, his face mostly silhouetted in the tent's candlelight.

"New load comin' in," the surgeon's assistant said.

The surgeon puffed into his blood-spattered mask, then wiped his forehead with his gown sleeve. "Damn *mestizos*."

"Why are we helping them, anyway?"

"Uncle Sam's got interests 'cross the border. Pershing's going after that Pancho Villa with ten thousand."

"We need more whiskey."

They worked on his left shoulder. Sharp metal instruments grated against each other like rusty scissors. Sweat from the surgeon's forehead rolled and dropped into the bullet's entrance wound where Pearson's shoulder had been. Pearson did not feel this, but knew it, as he knew that when the surgeon stopped digging to exchange instruments, and there was a new sound of one hard object against another hard object, it was no longer the scalpel against some other instrument, but metal against bone.

Then the surgeons rested. They sat beside each other on a bench near the gurney and ripped off their masks. Turning his drunken head, Pearson saw them pant and wipe their faces, then light bloodsmearred cigarettes with bloody fingers and smoke them through beards that crept almost to their eyes, beards thick and wild as this foreign terrain. With each cigarette drag below matted hair, their eyes lit like fireflies. They whispered to each other, but the soldier could hear only buzzings.

Then the assistant stood and the surgeon spoke up. "You tell Cutter, from now on, if they ain't gonna make it, or they ain't no use and can't soldier anyway, I don't want 'em. You tell 'em, send in only soldiers we can patch up to send back out."

Pearson tried to speak, to ask about his condition, but his voice was dry and powerless. His eyes rolled back. The assistant whispered something, and the surgeon replied, "This man has no chance. That there's a gangrened shoulder. His legs'ur strong, sure, but infection's goin' to the heart. Maybe two days. Maybe. Look at 'em. Fever's bad. He's verging on loony this very moment." The assistant whispered again. "No, we're not amputating. We have to move on."

Pearson was struck by the realization that he needed a priest. Pearson needed to confess.

He wished he was back home in Tennessee. Back when he took his pointer mutt hunting, scavenging his daddy's acres over footpaths that wound slipshod about the large white house, the twisted brambles and thorns. The pointer pulled the leather leash, her shoulder blades flexed on her back where her coat faded from reddish-brown to sandy-red, legs bent, chest near the dirt, nostrils twitching, tail tremulous with her focus as she pursued the quail or rabbit or squirrel. An unlit cigarette dangled from his mouth to be smoked following the hunted supper; for he was sprightly then, and had not yet read, somewhere, that *war will do funny things to a man*. Strange that he could not recall the dog's name now.

Now, the dog's soft ear danced before him, more real than a memory yet real only in the past, flopping about like a canvas tent door. He stared into a void, until the door-snap drew him back to the wartime present, to the sounds outside of the tent in the strange land's night, the pops and explosions. They sounded like summertime fireworks, but no. In the distance, quiet and muffled, men were dying in the dazzling lightshow.

Pearson's eyes were opened wide now. The tent door undulated in the night breeze. The surgeon dragged on his cigarette, dropped it on the pressed grass floor, then exhaled a thick white smoke ring that rose against the candlelit stillness, above and away from him. Into black night flooding the corners of the tent ceiling, the ring lost proportion to the physical world. Featherlike, it descended until it hovered just above the head of a young girl.

Her black hair was parted down the middle and tucked behind her ears. Hair further back dangled forward and hid her ears. A Mexican girl, she was small, perhaps twelve years old. Her sun-darkened skin shined. It triggered a feeling of solace, hinted at a memory Pearson could not place. She had narrow eyes, her thick eyebrows raised as though belonging to a smiling face, but her mouth was calm. Her halo remained a while, then dissolved. Gazing at her, he felt guilty, as though he somehow had a hand in her life's certain misfortune.

She placed a tiny hand over the toe of his boot, and he tensed. She squeezed, and his body relaxed. When she let go, he lost his breath but then regained it. He wanted to demand she put her hand back, but couldn't. In an ankle-length, faded flowered skirt, she sashayed on dirty bare feet toward the tent door. A small purse hung from her shoulder. It bounced lightly against her side, obviously empty or near empty, a child's way of growing up in a world where children grow up quickly.

She turned and said in broken English, "Are you a good person?"

The breeze lifted the tent door as she floated out and away.

Pearson watched the door. He watched for a long time. He dozed off and then found himself awake and watching the still door. Surgeons worked on soldiers elsewhere in the tent, they discussed their cases indistinctly and smoked many cigarettes. Muffled gunshots and explosions in the distance poked the night's quiet; mosquitoes buzzed.

The tent door swung again. A man sat outside on a bench, a torch behind rendering him in blackness. He smoked a cigarette, and with each drag his eyes blazed red. When the door fell closed, the fire fleck eyes remained. Or perhaps these flecks existed in the very fabric of the soldier's vision, a vision levied upon him by a greater power. Perhaps Death had come for Pearson, but wanted to finish his cigarette first.

The night breeze lifted the door. Beside the bench, a torchlit horse—a big roan—stood in the grass. The fire cast a net of iridescent lines across her saddled body. A long black mane pawed a reddish-brown coat. He thought again of his dog back home. She had moved like a sleek snake, weaving about and below the brambles, spying the tasty rabbit in the lonely summer dusk; one leg and a mug of whiskey for himself, one leg and some bones for the mutt, his best friend: that was comfort. After daddy's conviction—remembering now—after the molested servant girl—his only other friend—was taken screaming madly off, after the house and estate were auctioned, what was there to do, and where to go? The army. El Paso. The Mexican border.

He was on his feet now, though he did not know it, floating clumsily, his knees near buckling, toward the tent door flapping in the breeze. The door lifted, and a fog gave way to the horse's coat, so akin to the mutt's. Pearson leaned his forehead into the horse, and pressed.

He mounted. He rode.

One officer said, "Where's he going?"

Another replied, "How far can a dead man possibly get?"

In the morning, Pearson studied the dead tree's limbs clawing the pristine sky. The horse picked for long blades of grass among fallen branches and rodents and desiccated vulture dung. The soldier watched the tree under the oppressive sun and listened to his companion's loitering and thought of nothing and lay still. He dozed off, then woke to the rumble of riders crossing the land a thousand yards away. He started to lift his head but it throbbed. Veins where the top of his neck met the bottom of his skull surged not with blood but with want of it. Shivers coursed down, his eyes watered, he turned cold and his body shook once. Then he twitched many times. He purged a milky pile, the size of a desert pack rat's stool.

He scraped his forehead against the dry dirt despite the red ants, and moaned. The horse milled about. Now his wounded arm pulsed, anesthetic worn off. Lying on his side, gathering dust as the sun rose westward to high noon, he climbed out of his uniform shirt, gripped it with his teeth, ripped it and tied it into a sling. The sun, directly above, drew fountains of sweat from his face and under his clothes, though the heat on his wound soothed the pain.

He thought of his friend back home, the black servant girl who idled by the oak near the cellar door each afternoon, waiting for him and the dog to come and play. How if daddy was off they'd scuttle to the meadow down the hill and out of sight. They'd run the dog by throwing a ball back and forth until she lay down panting, and then the girl—Lilly was her name—would lay on the ground behind her, hug her and drag dirty fingernails over the dog's dirty belly. She'd rub the underneck and chin, massage the flabby fur on the back of her neck where her mother carried her, and pick the scum from her eyes. And how he and Lilly played tic-tac-toe in the dirt, and he taught her songs from his church and she taught him songs from hers. This was years ago, and he'd hardly thought about it since.

And then a right hand grasped his right hand, but he was not surprised. It was the Mexican girl, smiling, holding her mule's rein in her other hand. She pulled and the soldier was standing. He wobbled on buckling legs while she retrieved his horse. She held it as he mounted, then rode her mule out into the desert, and he followed at a creep.

Pearson had a thought as he rode that everybody he met in his life resembled someone else he had known. The Sergeant Warner's mean humor and bitter smile had resembled his father's; a Mexican soldier had a calm while dying that reminded him of Pastor Avery. This young Mexican girl was kind and elegant like his old friend, and like her, had a tranquil way, as though she'd made peace with her poor destiny. He wondered if there was a crossover between souls, if we shared pieces of each other, and therefore could locate a friend within a stranger.

After they rode a while through the shimmering day, Pearson noticed that she was a hundred yards ahead. A smoky column of dust rose behind her. At night the pain in his arm increased, but he continued to ride, and he rode all night long drifting in and out and through varying levels of consciousness and dream, the horse knowing to follow the four-legged trail, Pearson's good hand knowing to squeeze the rein, his thighs to squeeze the saddle.

In the morning she was three hundred yards ahead. The silence was complete in the terrifying blue. He followed into the shadow of a ridge. A wind sent whispers through the soldier's mind. Once, he laughed out loud. He could not remember why afterwards, but it left him in pain. His arm ached, his stomach ached, his dry throat ached and his head. He spotted a hole in the ridge wall, a tiny cave, so he stopped. He sat for a minute. The girl's mule stirred no dust from the ground. So she had stopped too. This felt, strangely, expected.

The soldier dismounted and approached the ridge, alternately laughing and grimacing from pain. His left arm dangled in the gooey sling like an aborted appendage, the shoulder area

swollen and tender. The horse inspected the grounds for anything useful: skeletal shrubs with perhaps some green, coarse brush whose roots held some water and flavor. With his filthy right hand, the soldier gripped an exposed tree root and pulled himself up, the throbbing coming to life along the left side of his body. From the tree root, he wrapped his hand over a rock, then rested, then climbed some more, dry dust floating about and layering his being. He spat dust, and wiped his dusty face with his dusty forearm, and the sickness eating his shoulder and spreading pain down his arm and in toward his heart also gathered dust.

When he reached the cave, he looked over the land for the girl but could not see her. The fierce blue bewildered his eyes. He turned and entered. About twenty paces in, the passageway turned and blacked out the daylight. The soldier stumbled upon puddles. He washed himself the best he could, scoured his hands and face, then delicately removed the sling and scrubbed. He splashed his left shoulder, drenched it. It felt raw and tender, infected, though the water felt good and healthy. Then he put his face to another puddle and drank, and though it tasted sour and scummy, he drank for a long while. Then he sat back and slept.

His eyelids twitched. Wet exhales and wheezing inhales, as though the bacteria in his shoulder had penetrated his lungs, became monstrous snoring. His own shriek woke him, ricocheted off the unseen walls and returned with a message: I have gone AWOL. It stung, a whip to his greasy face. What would Sergeant Warner think of him now?

Tears fell down Pearson's cheeks, cast a shower of stars off the cave ceiling. He had taken up the rifle they'd given him. He was a patriot, a freedom soldier. He'd used their pistol, their blade, their cudgel. He was a killer, yes; no, he was a murderer. He had such little time.

Now the stars from his dream became audible: their muted explosions sent lights bouncing off the cave walls, a cosmic splendor swirling this earthen womb. The soldier witnessed this circus as an idiot would, eyes and mouth wide and wet.

The sounds grew louder. Strange voices.

The girl returned. She slid her hand into his and helped him to his feet. The light of morning stabbed the cave's shaft as he stumbled to the opening.

War was underway below. To the left, about five hundred yards down the mountainside, six or eight American soldiers fired into the day. Three hid from bullets behind a boulder and covered another three who crept along the mountain wall, scurrying, pausing, scurrying from one bush or boulder to another. Near a cluster of tethered horses, which included Pearson's roan, a soldier lay out of gunshot range nursing a bullet wound to his leg. Another lay dead in the dirt. *They probably come for the horse*, Pearson thought.

Five hundred yards out and to the right, about fifteen Mexican *Federales* fired rifles from the safety of a gentle slope that descended into a shallow valley. Their horses milled at the bottom, picked at the shrubbery. Pearson teetered as he watched the posses fire at each other, yell to their comrades, reload and fire some more.

A narrow ridge rimmed the mountain wall to the right of the cave entrance. One hundred yards down, the girl waited in the heat's blur. Pearson made for her, focused on the trail to avoid slipping and tumbling into the crossfire. He was nearing where the ridge turned out of sight when he heard, "Pearson, you stay put now."

Three Americans had nearly caught up to him while the others continued to exchange gunfire with the Mexicans. Fear tightened in his crotch. He hurried on, his hand jumping from one grip to another, from a bush to a flimsy tree to a hold in the rocky wall and on.

“Goddammit, Pearson,” another soldier called, and fired. Fragments of chalky mountain splintered off and pelted him on the back of his head; the fine dust settled in his hair. He did not recognize the soldier’s voice. He looked at the three single file faces hurrying toward him, but he could not make them out. They were jittering swirls in the heat, holding guns and enlarging with proximity. He kept on. A bullet hit the rock again; another hit the ground near his foot. “I swear I’m gonna kill you, man.”

Pearson, so close to the bend, stopped. He turned around and held up his one arm while the dead one dangled. He’d always been a good soldier, he wanted to say.

Suddenly bullets hit the mountain face above and between the three soldiers, storming the stone. The soldiers crouched, covered themselves with their arms. Four Mexicans had circled round and were discharging. A bullet found one soldier’s eye. His knees gave out and he sat, then tipped over the ledge and tumbled, leaving a piece of thick-haired scalp glued to the mountain face by his dark blood.

As the bullets continued, Pearson made the final stretch, rounded the bend and hustled—though his shoulder pulsed and propelled pain through his body—down a thin trail. His boots slapped the dirt and kicked the brambles, which grew thicker as he scrambled down the mountain’s backside. He ran for what seemed a long distance, the girl ahead though out of sight, the bottom of her flowered skirt sweeping the dirt around a bend a moment before he could see it.

Gunshots echoed off the mountain walls and through the valleys and earth.

Then the earth was not there. The soldier fell, and for a painless moment he forgot himself and the weight of his crimes, a weight he suspected he would have to bear until he no longer could, and then would have to bear some more.

He landed in a wide river that he knew to be the Rio Grande. The cold water surged painful shock through his arm and chest; he clenched his eyes and wailed, reached out and grabbed onto a large log of driftwood, solid on the inside though covered in soft, waterlogged bark. This log had traveled from far up north, had ridden the current through deep and shallow water, fast over rocks and rapids, slow through lazy stretches. And it continued to ride the Rio Grande all night, over the border and into Mexico, Pearson clung to it with eyes closed.

When the sky hinted at sunlight, he opened his eyes, surprised to find himself breathing still. The water was colder and tasted brackish, a fresh and salt-water mix. The river would open to the sea soon. The left side of his torso and his entire left arm were numb, but his right hand ached, his knuckles having gripped the log branch for so long he feared he could never let go. With a yank, he tore his hand and body free.

The river was wide but not very deep. With one arm flailing and splashing and legs cycling against the current, now and again touching the muddy floor and pushing off toward land, he rode the river flow onto a sand bank under the shade of low palm trees that stood almost parallel to the water. He dropped to his knees. The sand chafed through his fraying pants. Then he hobbled, legs spasming, through the thick bramble, and collapsed on his back in the sun-whitened dirt.

It was warmer this far south. His army uniform had been reduced to rags, the leg-trimmings shredded around his soggy boots. Chest and shoulder hairs curled through the rips in his undershirt. A foul stench emanated from nearby.

He rested as the sun rose.

The stench was stronger when he woke. Moist and violent, something near him was rotten. He moved to sit up and look around but winced from an intense pain, a stabbing to his

chest. It was his shoulder, he realized, swollen below his damp shirt. Through a small hole he saw green, separated by an uneven, river-like ridgeline, from blue.

With his good arm he pulled himself up by a branch and stumbled inland. He smelled smoke. Soon he came upon fences made of eroded logs and rusted wire enclosing goats and waddling roosters with families of chicks following like tails. Shacks stood across the fields, garments of all colors dangling from clotheslines.

Everything Pearson did now took a long time. He lumbered like a man already dead, no duty to report for, no appointments to keep. He walked on, passed mangy dogs and pigs, gangs of marching kittens and chickens, soldiers all. Children ran laughing, babies wailed in mothers' arms. Men and women cooked meals together, pigs and chickens and carcasses Pearson did not recognize speared from mouth to anus, suspended on huge skewers over family fires.

These families, this village, seemed identical to ones he and his company had destroyed. With his head down, he listened to the laughter and the rapid speech, and he wondered, would somebody of his ilk destroy this village someday soon? He looked up and tried to make eye contact; he wanted to exchange smiles. But his eyes could not meet theirs, as though he was a threat, or a pariah, or a ghost.

He walked the dirt road. The sunlight worked to dry his oozing wound. Soon there were no more shacks. Tall, old trees blocked the sun. He came to a canvas canopy. Two young Mexican women with long black hair and unwrinkled skin sat beside a firepit talking, giggling and tending to the food cooking in three tin pots. He stopped and stared at the steam. Drool gathered in the corners of his mouth. He remembered he had money.

A third girl, younger, sat at a table on a wooden bench weaving baskets of braided green leaves. He observed her. She must have been about twelve years old, with smooth, dark skin, and

black hair tucked behind her ears. Her slender, sun-wrinkled fingers chose leaves from a pile and conducted each blade into place.

“You make that?” he asked.

Startled, the three girls stared. He looked into the little girl's eyes, pointed at the baskets on the table, then pointed to her. She nodded, and smiled. “You buy?” She put down her basket-in-progress and held up a finished one. “How much?” she asked.

Pearson was impressed with her English.

“*Dos dólares,*” she said.

“*No quiero, pero,*” he put his hand to his mouth, then looked at the steaming pots on the fire.

When he and the girl finished their plates of rice and spice-smothered chicken, they looked at each other. He shrugged his one shoulder and she shrugged her shoulders in response. He put his finger to his nose and she did the same, and they smiled. She crossed her eyes like a clown does. He giggled and she laughed. Then he noticed that the two women sitting by the fire were watching him, and they were laughing too.

He was tired now that he had eaten. More than tired. The moment, he felt, was near. He had to keep moving, so he pulled from his pants pocket soggy bills and a few coins that added up to three dollars and twenty-eight cents, and gave it to her. She put it in the small purse that was next to the pile of leaves and appeared nearly empty. He stood to go.

“Mista,” she said, a hint of desperation in her voice as though she might cry. “Please,” she begged, holding up a basket.

He showed her his empty hand. “*Lo siento.*”

She jerked the basket in the air.

“*Lo siento,*” he tried again. “I’m sorry, but no. *Por favor.*” He hoped she wouldn’t cry.

“Okay,” she said. “You come back, *por más comida.*”

He took a moment to decode her words. “You want I should come back for supper?”

She nodded and smiled.

“Okay,” he said. “You sold me.”

“Promise?” She extended her hand.

They shook. Then he walked off. He found a bed of soft grass in the shadow of a tree.

Death creeps up like a white sheet sweeping the wind. The world hushes...

He kicked. In a shock, he opened his eyes to find leaden bullets of sweat rolling down his forehead and gathering over his eyes in pools. Confused as a creature risen from the grave, he blinked at the glittering dusk above tree branches that reached for heaven. Moving was painful. He stood, hobbled off, and soon found himself staring at the young girl’s baskets on the table near the cooking fire.

When she saw him, she was frightened. But she put her hand over her heart and smiled. She motioned for him to sit on a low chair beside the fire. She teased the ashes with a branch and set a pot over it.

The sun was setting through an entanglement of bushes and trees stretching back into the wilderness. The thin clouds’ bottoms looked like red strands of silk cooing the lower evening’s orange. The sunset unfolded a panoply of colors and shapes to arouse thoughts and memories that Pearson endured as she prepared a meal.

Soon the world was darker and only a wink of sun was visible through the trees. The girl placed a plate of hot food—rice with bits of sausage and yellow and red specks of spice—on his

lap, then pulled a chair next to his and sat with a plate. She began to eat, but he did not move. His eyelids ebbed. She tapped his leg and he opened his eyes.

She was such a soothing presence, an angel in an angry world.

She moved the plate from his lap and watched the sunlight dim on his face.

“Soldier,” she said. When she repeated it he opened his eyes wide as waking.

“*Si?*” he whispered.

“Soldier, you are a good person.”

A wave of heat passed behind his face. Then he felt comfortable, and somehow clean.

The sun was gone. She took the pot from the fire and went to rinse the plates and forks.

When she came back, she laid a hand over his face and closed his eyes.