

Charlie

Last Tuesday, I found myself making my way across the Brooklyn Bridge. I think I was heading toward the island of Manhattan, but what I'd do when I got there didn't really matter to me. Even so, I walked in swift, long, measured strides and with my arms swinging in time at my sides; with purpose, just like they had taught me. I maneuvered around cyclists in those horrid pastel-colored, skin-tight uniforms they wear and tourists in ridiculous *I Love NYC* t-shirts. I would get the occasional request to take a picture, but I didn't stop for anyone.

They had told me to take some time off, that I needed some time away from it all. And, just like that, I had a month's leave. Leave to do what, I didn't know. Was it leave to meander around the city, perhaps? I was certainly doing that a lot. Were my aimless walks supposed to somehow make me better? Would they make the pain I felt every second of every day go away?

How could I heal if the pain was still fresh? How could I forget if the memory played over and over like some shitty pop song in whatever drug-induced semblance of sleep I was left with? They had told me that it wasn't my fault, that anyone could have made that mistake. But if it wasn't my fault, why I couldn't I escape the clawing guilt? Leave was supposed to help with that, they said, leave and the stuffy therapist they had arranged for me to see twice every week. But I knew the truth: the only reason they had even bothered with any of it was so that they wouldn't be liable when I stuck my gun in my mouth and pulled the trigger. Until that happened, all there was to do was to haunt the city as I had been doing and to keep to a steady diet of Valium and melatonin.

I made my slow way along the wooden boards puffing on a Newport until something made me stop. Usually, I'm indifferent to everything that nothing makes me stop, but for some reason, this did.

I was standing in front of a drawing propped up on an easel, and angled so as to catch the eye of the maximum number of passers by. It displayed the skyline, the buildings etched out in a sure, practiced hand. They seemed to be made by ruler, but slight deviations in a few of the longer lines told me they had been drawn freehand. As I gazed at the drawing, I noticed that each perfectly proportionate building would fit seamlessly into the skyline. The foreground was dominated by the bridge on which we stood, every stone textured exactly as the real ones behind it. In fact, the only difference from reality was a small man penciled in near the top of the bridge with his arms spread wide. He looked like he was flying. On the walkway propped up directly below the work was a small card that read \$3.00.

--I'd like to fly like that, I muttered to myself.

I don't know how long I stood there staring at that drawing, but I think it must have been a long time. Suddenly, a man that I hadn't noticed before looked up from his sketchpad. If not for the sketchbook and pencil he was holding or the two crates of prints sitting next to him, I would have taken him for a hobo. His clothes were old and grimy, his beard long and unkempt, and his chipped fingernails were black as the lines on the paper. He gave me a yellow-toothed smile, which I did my best to reciprocate.

--That's one way of looking at it, came the response.

I looked again at the figure in the drawing. He really did have poor flying form. Then, suddenly, I knew what the man had meant. He sighed.

--Sometimes I'd like to fly like that too, he said.

He spoke loudly, but did not seem aware that he was doing so.

--What's stopping you? I asked.

I tossed down the cigarette I had been smoking, ground it out with the toe of my shoe, and looked back the man. He seemed to have little besides those ancient clothes: a tattered pair of pants and a filthy shirt that I expect was once fuzzy and warm. Next to him sat a soft case, which I guessed contained more pencils, and a manila folder with thick cards for making frames. He set down the pencil and sketchbook and stood up. I was taller than he by a head.

--What's stopping *you*? He retorted.

The question caught me off guard. I stumbled about for an answer.

--My mother, I said. It was the first answer I could think of.

He responded in an annoying matter-of-fact tone.

--But you don't really care about what she thinks, do you.

--She's Catholic.

--You're not.

--So why, then? You seem to have all the answers.

--Because you don't want to.

--Fuck you, man.

I began to walk away, but the man ran up and grabbed my arm. I managed with some difficulty to tear it away from him, and to continue on my way.

--Do you get the nightmares?

I stopped abruptly. A cyclist swerved to avoid crashing into me, shouting obscenities as he did so. I turned to face the man.

--What was that? I asked.

--The nightmares, he repeated. Do you get them?

I took a slow, careful step in his direction.

--How do you know I get nightmares?

He chuckled. It was a choking wheezing sound.

--You just seem like the type, he said in that matter-of-fact voice. He pulled out a cigarette and began patting his pockets for a lighter.

--What do you mean, I said suspiciously. What type?

--You walk as though you have somewhere to be even though you clearly don't. Your eyes are never still. You look at everyone to make sure they're not a threat and then everyone one more time to make sure you weren't wrong.

He lit the cigarette and inhaled the smoke, coughing violently as he did so. He cleared his throat, spit some thick, yellow phlegm over the walkway barrier and sat back down, taking the sketchbook back up as he continued.

--Every sound makes you jump. Every movement makes you dive for cover. You look like a rabbit. C'mon, boy, I can recognize a leatherneck when I see one.

I looked at the man, trying to guess his age.

--Korea? I guessed

--'Nam. Fighting against *Commuynism*.

As said the word, he put on an accent. I placed it as Texan.

He coughed again as he took another drag on the cigarette.

--It's funny how they always find a grand word. Which one did they pick for you? *Terr'r*?

He put on the Texan accent again. It sounded just like President Bush's.

--That's right, I said

--That would be a better name for 'nam. Ain't much communism down in a tunnel. There's just snakes, rats, and Charlies¹.

--You went into the tunnels?

He held up a finger and went over to talk with a couple examining one of the drawings. This one was of the East River. They haggled back and forth for a little while before agreeing on \$2.00. He stuffed the bills into his pocket and returned to where I was standing.

--Whenever, we found a rat hole, they'd get the smallest guy to go exploring. That was usually me. I make sure it was clear and set HE² to level the place.

--You were a tunnel rat,³ I asked incredulously.

The man nodded in response as I fumbled a cigarette out of my own pocket and held it out for a light. The man snatched it from me.

--Those things'll kill you.

He lit it with the glowing end of his own and stuck it in his mouth. I raised my hand in protest, but lowered it slowly. I told myself: *it's just one cigarette.*

¹ The third letter in the phonetic alphabet. The word "Viet Cong" would be abbreviated "VC," but spoken as "Victor Charlie" over a radio. "Charlie" is a further

² High explosives

³ Soldiers in the Vietnam war who explored the tunnels created by the Viet Cong. They were to clear the tunnels of enemy soldiers and plant explosive charges to destroy them.

--I'd go down with my bayonet, my .44⁴, a flashlight, some det-cord,⁵ and a couple blocks of C4. I'd spend hours down there sitting in the mud or shit or whatever waiting for Charlies to stick their heads out. I'd always use my bayonet. That was the only thing that really worked, come to think of it. The flashlights never had enough juice and the .44 made me deaf when I used it too much... the C4 worked too, I guess.

He began to tell me about different missions he had been on and how, one time, he had kicked open a canister of tear gas by mistake. It seemed that he had disturbed a small colony of bats, and in swatting at them, dropped his bayonet in a puddle of mud. In searching around for it, he stumbled upon the canister where someone had left it.

--I vomited so much I passed out for a while, he told me. When I came to, I thought I was blind, it was so dark. I felt around for hours before I finally found my way out. Good thing too. My squad heard me screaming, and thought someone had gotten the jump on me. They were all set to pump in more CS⁶ to smoke out whoever was in there with me.

He asked me what it was like in the desert, and if I had any stories I wanted to share. I looked away and told him, with some difficulty, that nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened to me. I sat down against the arch I had been leaning against and pulled my knees up to my chest. He opened his mouth as if to retort, but

⁴ A .44 caliber pistol.

⁵ A cable used in C4 detonations. Each end is stuck into a charge, linking them together so that all the charges detonate simultaneously.

⁶ Chlorobenzalmalononitrile – an active agent in tear gas.

closed it after a moment without saying anything. He added some windows to the Chrysler building before continuing.

--There was this one time, he began. We on our way back from an SAR.⁷ Those were pretty routine for us. One of our SNAKES⁸ had gone down 30 klicks⁹ from our outposts and we were supposed to bring back survivors and torch anything the Charlie's could use that we couldn't carry. Turns out the pilot survived and had done most of our work for us by the time we arrived. He had a broken leg and some pretty bad burns, but besides those, was in pretty good shape. We carried him on a cot as we made our way back to base. Now, our sarge was this real nervous guy. He said he didn't like how the sticks on the ground were in patterns or that they were poked through palm leaves, so about two klicks from our pick up point, he decided to break bush¹⁰. We avoided the trail by about half a klick, and had just gotten out of a skirmish with some Charlies when one of our privates got his leg stuck in a hole. We thought we'd have to carry him back with a ruined foot, but he just yanked his boot out without too much trouble. Turns out, it was just the entrance to a tunnel.

He added a final line to the paper and began rooting in the pencil case. His hand emerged clutching an X-ACTO. He took a sheet of card out of the folder and carefully began to cut it to size as he spoke.

⁷ Search And Rescue

⁸ An type of helicopter

⁹ 30 kilometers

¹⁰ To circumnavigate a standard trail. It was usually done with the intention of avoiding traps or an ambush.

--Like I said, the pilot was in good shape and refused allow us to ignore the tunnel and take him back immediately, so I got the flashlight out of my ruck and climbed on in. It was very easy to navigate in there, I remember, which was odd because Charlies'll usually try and confuse you with twists, turns, dead ends, and that sort of thing. I made my way carefully, watching for wires and boards that looked out of place. When I heard a cough, I immediately turned off my light. I moved as slowly and as quietly as I could, cursing the squelch my boots made in the mud and kept watch for anything out of place.

The man finished his frame and cut the drawing out of the book. He looked at the finished work contemplatively, wrote \$5.00 on a piece of left over card, and stuffed it into one of the crates.

--It was only after a few minutes that I realized why I thought this tunnel was so eerie. I shouldn't have been able to see. I had turned my flashlight off, you remember. The light had to be coming from somewhere inside the tunnel. I began moving even more carefully, listening for the smallest sound. After about half an hour, I rounded a corner and came face to face with a man asleep in a hammock. I made short work of him with my bayonet, but only on second glance did I notice that he was unarmed. I looked about me and saw that I was in a large space with maybe ten or fifteen hammocks, each containing a sick or wounded man. Some were awake, too terrified or too weak to call for help. They spoke softly to one another and stared at me with huge, pleading eyes.

He had a long coughing fit that left him gasping for air. When it was over, he lit another cigarette from the one already in his mouth.

--I had heard about places like these: underground hospitals and bases, but I never thought I would ever see one. The Charlies, we had fought earlier must have been trying to protect it. I remember thinking how young they all looked. There was a man here or there, but most were even younger than I was. My hands shook, but I knew what I had to do. My orders were to clear the tunnel. I kept my mind to what I was doing. I stuck a block of C4 to the wall and stuck a bit of cord into it. One of the Charlies managed to crawl out of his bed and dragged himself along on a ruined foot, trying to rush me. I shot him. The echo resounded in the open space. I walked down the rows firing again and again until my clip was done. I couldn't hear anything over the sound. It's just as well, I suppose. It drowned out the cries.

The man took the cigarette out of his mouth and held it between his fingers.

--When I came out of there, I was shaking horribly. Sarge asked: *Are you alright?* I told him: *Yeah.* Then he asked: *Is it clear?* And I said: *Yeah, it's clear.*

I sat mesmerized for a few seconds, unable to speak. Then I said in a weak, voice, almost a whisper:

--How can you not hate yourself?

He thought for a second before responding. He licked his lips and began to make a few marks in the sketchbook.

--I do. I hate myself every goddamned day, but that's not going to bring those people back... Neither is jumping off this bridge. I didn't do it because it was fun. I did it because I was following orders. And when you're a soldier, your job is to follow orders. No one asks about shell shock, the sleep you'll lose, or the recurring nightmares. They tell you to do something, so you do it. Maybe you do it because you

love your country. Maybe you think the US is some righteous institution that can actually make a difference, but that's not why I did it. I did it because when lives were on the line, mine as well as others', and I was too scared to think for myself, what the hell else could I do?

We sat for a little while without speaking. He smoked and coughed, and I watched the throng of people travel back and forth and listened to the honking cars. I took out a cigarette, but put it back. After a few minutes, I stood up and offered him my hand.

--I'm going to go now. It was... It was nice to meet you.

He caught me in a death grip that I did my best to match. I turned to head back towards Brooklyn.

--Wait, he said. Take this.

He handed me the drawing of the flying man. I awkwardly thanked him, tucked it under my arm, and walked away. The sun had begun to set, illuminating the city in a blood-red glow. I made my way swiftly and with purpose back the way I had come. About halfway to the end of the bridge, a couple stopped me. They were wearing *I Love NY* t-shirts.

--Excuse me, sir. Would you take our picture?

I paused for a second staring at the camera they had thrust in my direction.

--Sure, I said.