

ME Too

To paraphrase Christopher Levesque, writing for the New York Times:

Rape became such an endemic problem in Charlie Company; one member of its Second Platoon assumed every woman they came across would be violated within moments.

0800 hours, August 22, 1968. Tay Ninh Province

Bobby is walking point when he discovers a camouflaged opening penetrating the jungle floor. He motions us to take cover and then flips a grenade. The kid, he is still a teenager, isn't standing far enough back and from the sound of the ongoing explosions, it is obvious he has discovered a munitions cache. The body of the young G.I. flies from the tunnel's mouth in a blast of orange-red clay, rat shit, and dust so thick you don't know if you're choking on the grit of the gaping hole, or on your own fear.

Several of us crawl to where Bobby lies crumpled. The crescent-shaped birthmark highlighting his left cheekbone is remarkably intact as are his other facial features. What is left of his chest sags into a waist that is a raw pulp of tissue swimming in a cavity of blood and bile. We half carry-half drag our buddy from the stink of spent cordite.

I kneel and try to close Bobby's eyelids but they flutter open as though he glimpses something above the jungle canopy I'm oblivious to. I lie on my back with my head next to his and look up. For a brief moment, a diamond of blue sky springs free of the green squeeze of cover allowing a stream of sunlight to illuminate our faces. I know then what we had is special. I roll onto my hands and knees in a struggle to stand as twin wells of despair disturb my vision. A dark flush of fury impinges on my thoughts. But there are no villages to burn, no enemy to engage, and no water buffalo to eviscerate with automatic rifle fire.

We hack out a landing zone large enough for a dust-up to set down and retrieve the body bag. Not one squad member has a spare word to share as we gather our weapons and head back from another weeklong reconnaissance patrol.

1900 hours, August 23, 1968. Firebase Bravo

An Army of the Republic of Vietnam interpreter shows up with a black pajama-clad female in tow. Her hands are bound behind her back, a braid of Manila hemp loops around her neck. "V.C. cunt!" he hisses.

The khaki-clad officer tosses the rope to me, then makes a circle with thumb and fingers while sliding the forefinger of his other hand back and forth mimicking an exaggerated

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fucking motion.

Quickly, he brings the same right hand across his throat in a slashing manner while favoring me with a lascivious wink. Bobby would've applauded the little man's theatrics. His captive is pretty, if you are inclined that way.

The Gunny grabs the twist of rope from my hand while recruiting a couple of grunts from our platoon. "Hold the bitch down," he cries as he unties her wrists. Sarge has his way with her as the rest line up. When the last one finishes, he waves me forward and nervously steps aside. I approach, as their conquest lies curled in a fetal position below the spiraling smoke of a just-lit joint. None of the soldiers make eye contact as they begin to straggle off in groups of two and three. I am left to do what they are too chicken-shit to do themselves. From across the way, I hear the banging of a door slamming repeatedly against the metal frame of our corrugated hooch.

I turn my back on the evening breeze and light a cigarette. I'm guessing this girl is in her early twenties; neither of us belongs in this situation. As I stub the butt of my smoke against the olive drab undercarriage of a howitzer, I hear the crunch of beer cans being crumpled. Long shadows bring out the chirping clatter of nocturnal insects. Somewhere in the distance, mortar rounds roar into darkness.

I gaze at the face of my enemy, close-up for the first time. Her eyes are languid pools of tepid runoff; Bobby's ran deeper than the fractured ice of a winter's lake. She never utters a sound, not even a whimper. I can still hear Bobby's "Wait a Ho Chi fuckin' Minh-ute" whenever someone throws their cards in and refuses to ante up. She lay within walking distance of her family. Bobby's long journey home has just begun.

The cringing girl's fear is real and her rape complete. She is naked except for a silken

pair of pink panties dangling from her left ankle.

I grab a handful of hair, jerking back her head; exposing a throat rubbed raw by a shank of cord with an improbable knot and unsheathe my Ka-Bar. Her body smells earthy, as though she spends her days living underground in a tunnel of orange-red clay, rat shit, and dust so thick she has to fight to breathe.

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Two drunken G.I.s from my platoon stumble toward me. “Yo, girly-boy, where’s the poontang?” one of them questions.

The other exclaims, “We’re ready for another go-round, what the fuck! You let her go?”

The first soldier shoves me face first against the running gear of the howitzer—the second retrieves the rope that bound the girl’s neck and knots it around my wrists, securing me to the weapon. “You’re our bitch now,” he cries as he yanks the bottoms of my fatigues down.