

The Last of the Dead

By George Ovitt

In the final months of the Vietnam War, in the late winter and spring of 1975, I was living in Browns Mills, New Jersey, near Ft. Dix. I had been processed back into the world during the previous year, but as a short-timer, I didn't have any duties. I had been shot in the leg at Mu Doc nearly two years before, undergone a long rehabilitation, and now, after what had been a long night, I hoped I was getting better. The sniper round had ground through my hip bone, and the exit wound looked like the smile of a madman. My leg muscles had atrophied, making walking difficult. Depression had followed me like a cloak of darkness; I used Demerol and Percocet to ease the pain in my hip, and for a long time I could barely endure my existence.

When I got back to the states from the hospital in Manila, I was assigned to the base hospital at Ft. Dix for rehab, and since I didn't have anyplace to go, I rented an apartment in Browns Mills and spent my days staring at the coffee-colored walls of my cheap room. I didn't know a soul. In those years Browns Mills was a small town. It might still be, I don't know, that part of my life is gone. Back then there wasn't much to do there but drink and watch television. I did both.

For a while I tried a job at a diner as a short-order cook, but I couldn't stand up for more than fifteen minutes at a time. The owner was a good guy, ex-Navy, but I was no use to him. He cut me loose after a week, with a bonus and a warm handshake. After a few weeks of sitting around watching quiz shows the apartment closed in on me. I found myself talking out loud to the TV and spending my disability check on bourbon—I could

see that things were going from bad to worse. Then for a while I took the bus to the base to drink coffee in the commissary. I'd sit there, in the company of guys who were short timers, men who'd returned to the world, who were happy to be alive but who missed the rush of war, men who were afraid of what would happen to them now that they'd left the certainty of military life, and I would enjoy the sound of other people's voices, just for a little while, the reassuring talk about a piece of our past that was running away from us, receding into the distance like that last glimpse of Cam Ranh Bay as you were lifted over the South China Sea on your way home. But then they would ask me about my tours, my wound, where I'd been, partly out of curiosity but partly in that swinging dick way that soldiers get, comparing horror stories, and it was no good, I didn't want to go back there again, not in the bluff way soldiers have of reliving their wars. So I quit going to the commissary and started going to the base library. It wasn't bad—no one ever went there—and I could sit in the quiet and flip through books of photographs and travel guides, dreaming about what I might do now that living was my only concern. After a week of staring at pictures of snow-covered New England barns and the alpine meadows of Colorado, wondering what it would be like to walk in a field of wild flowers but knowing that I'd never find out, at last, I got around to doing what I should have done in the first place—volunteering at the base hospital.

The nurses were glad to have me. There weren't enough of them, and the hospital was full of wounded men, some who would recover and go home and a lot who wouldn't. I'd fallen in love with Army nurses when I was in Saigon and Manila. It was the same thing here. To watch them hover around those boys was heartbreaking. There was little

you could do sometimes, but they did what they could, and nobody paid enough attention. Helping them made me feel like I had a reason to live. It was that simple.

In the early mornings, when the nighttime painkillers had worn off and the bed pans were full and a thousand bags of saline needed changing, I would go to the wards and sit with the men, I'd read to them, guys who had no hands to hold a book, or eyes with which to read. They liked magazines, stories about sports cars and fishing and hunting. If they were white they were country boys, mostly from the South; if they were black they were from the cities. It didn't matter. Every grunt likes to hear about cars and women, about dropping a line in the local pond or tracking deer. We were all the same underneath, black and white, crackers and city spades, just boys who'd been in the shit and gotten hurt, scared and alone, dying maybe, or already dead and just waiting around for the pine box and a hole under an oak tree back home.

I didn't hunt or fish or drive—I never had. They got me right out of high school, and there wasn't any time for me to have a hobby. But I could read, and the words and pictures seemed to calm them down, at least those who weren't beyond being calmed. Some of them didn't want me around, and that was fine too. They'd shake their heads or turn away or tell me to fuck off, couldn't I see they wanted to be left alone? And a few would ask me about my leg, and we might talk about the war, but not much. They were over it and didn't want to go back.

The surgical wards were dingy. Dim sunlight came through dirty windows. The place needed paint and cleaning—there was a thick smell of disinfectant hanging in the air, not thick enough to disguise the stench of urine and feces and sweat. It was quiet in some places and loud with complaint in others—it was hell. A chaplain once told me that

God would look after me. I hoped he was right, but from what I've seen of earth I doubt God pays much attention.

After a few days, I started visiting with one man in particular, Henry Clevenger, a Staff Sergeant from Wilmington, North Carolina who was recovering from the loss of his legs and from other injuries sustained in a mortar attack at An Loc. The battle for the provincial capital had taken place three years before. Clevenger was leading a platoon of the 101st during the Easter Offensive when he was hit by shrapnel from an 81-mm round. He was medivaced to a hospital in Saigon where his legs were amputated above the knees. In another war Clevenger would have died on the battlefield. I suppose you could say he was lucky to be alive. But he didn't say it and neither did I.

Did you ever think about that phrase, what it really means? Life is luck. Meaning that you can't count on it—it isn't a given. You're standing in the wrong place, just by a foot or two, or you turn your head at the wrong moment, or, like me, you don't run as fast as you should—maybe you're tired or carrying too much equipment, or your attention has wandered to home, to your girlfriend or mother—who can say? Clevenger was in the wrong place, but not as wrong a place as he might have been. I was jogging across a clearing a little too slowly. We were lucky, both of us were lucky.

Clevenger's father owned an auto repair shop in Wilmington, and Clevenger's dream had been to work there, to fix cars, maybe to race them—to marry and have kids. He said that now that he thought he wouldn't. Maybe before he lost his legs he'd never

given a thought to being a father. It's like that. You only consider things when they're beyond your reach.

Clevenger said that he had survived ten months in combat imagining the pleasure of working on car engines. A lot of guys did that. I never did, not because I didn't believe in the future, but because I couldn't think of anything I wanted to do, or be, when I got home. After a few months I gave up on trying to find a reason to stay alive, I just decided to let it go, and then being there was easier. I wanted to live, but not for any reason I could think of. Just living seemed good enough.

It had taken Clevenger months of rehab to begin to recover, but even as he learned how to stumble along on prosthetic legs, something worse began to go wrong inside of him. Like me, he'd slogged through jungle saturated with Agent Orange. We didn't know yet what dioxin would do to us. Now we do. The war was in his bones, and after a year of hopeful recovery, he began to weaken, and to require hospitalization.

During the time he had been in the hospital or in therapy, he'd never been back to North Carolina. His mother was sick with cancer, and according to Clevenger his father didn't want to see him.

"He says it's too much strain for them to see me now, like this."

"Like what?"

"Fucked up. Legless. In this shithole. Take your pick."

"How's he know about this place?"

"I told him. He say's it would be too hard on my mother."

"What are they waiting for?"

"He said for me to be better. Like I've got the fucking flu."

“They meant well. Probably they’re afraid. It’s hard to take.”

“I suppose.”

“My mother’s the same. She gets nervous when I’m around.”

“But you see her?”

“Not really. Once or twice. She looks through me. I’m a ghost to her.”

“Still. You see her. They call on Sundays. My mother asks if I need anything.”

“That’s hard. I mean, the call must be tough.”

“Yeah. Fuck it. I don’t care anymore.”

I wasn’t any help. My attempts to distract Clevenger went nowhere. Sometimes we sat in silence. I couldn’t think of anything to say. He didn’t want to talk but he didn’t want me to go away. So we sat. Sometimes I’d rub his shoulders for him or massage what was left of his legs—they itched in the warming air, and Clevenger’s eyes would tear up when I touched him. He’d look away and ask me to leave, or he would look right at me and say thank you. Or he would close his eyes and sleep, or pretend to sleep. You didn’t want to think about what his dreams were like.

Weeks went by when we’d hardly talk. The time I spent with Clevenger started to weigh on me. The silence that was filled with his sorrow and my yearning to ease it. I started to think about Clevenger all the time. About his being alone and the burden that had fallen to me. I wanted to save him. He was me in some way, or part of me. It’s hard to describe what I felt.

One of the nurses let me have Clevenger’s home phone number. It was against the rules, but she didn’t care. People think the Army is pretty strict, and it is, but the people

in it are like everyone else. Sometimes they surprise you. I waited a few days before I called, dreading it, but I didn't have a choice.

"Mr. Clevenger?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Gibbs. I'm calling about your son."

"Henry? Is he alright?"

He had a thick drawl. A smoker's voice.

"That depends. He's still alive but he isn't alright."

"What do you mean?"

"He needs to see you. He needs to see his family."

"Did he tell you to call us?"

"No. He'd be angry if he knew. But look, why don't you come? He's in bad shape. He needs you."

"Mr. Gibbs, I don't know you, are you a doctor?"

"No. I'm a volunteer at the hospital. That's all."

"Then I think you should leave us alone. You don't know what you are asking. My wife can't travel; she can't see her son like this. We need to wait until he's better. Then he can come home."

"Your son isn't going to get better."

"You don't know that. What right do you have to say that?"

"I'm sorry. I've seen it before. You can help him now. He needs you now."

“No. It’s out of the question. I won’t subject my wife to such a strain. He had no right. He wasn’t supposed to get hurt. He was to stay back, away from the fighting. That was what he promised us. His legs are gone. How can I see my son without his legs?”

“He’s your son.”

“You don’t have children.”

“No.”

“You can’t understand how we feel.”

“How do you feel? Never mind anyone else. What’s going on inside of you?”

“How do I feel? I feel betrayed. My country took my boy. I wanted him to be a soldier. But not this. Those others do the fighting. Not us, not my boy.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Leave us alone, please. We’ll come when we can. That’s all I can say.”

“When?”

The phone went dead then, but I kept asking the question, over and over. I wouldn’t stop asking, not until someone answered me.

Then, near the end, I came to Clevenger every afternoon with a copy of *Catch-22*, a book my mother had sent me. At first I hadn’t been able to read it—it was long and hard to follow—but then I got caught up in the story, about bomber pilots in World War II, and because it seemed so real I read it over and over again. I decided to read the book to Clevenger as a way to pass the time, and as a way to help him forget his pain. He endured my reading, as I stumbled through passages that were terrifying, darkly funny and sometimes just dark. Clevenger said little during the month it took to get through the

book. He didn't laugh and he didn't weep, as I had, a year before, reading the book in the hospital in Manila. His only emotion was indifference—much of the time his eyes were closed and for all I know he spent our afternoons asleep. It didn't matter. We both wanted time to pass, that much seemed clear. At the end of March, on a day so bright and clear that anything seemed possible, I came at last to the end:

“Yossarian jumped. Nately's whore was hiding just outside the door. The knife came down, missing him by inches, and he took off.”

Clevenger said, “Be nice to take off, just get out. How come you don't?”

“Where would I go?”

“Home. That's where I want to go.”

“I don't have a home. Just my mother. But no place to go to.”

“That's too bad. You got to have a place.”

“I did, but when I left for the war I cut my ties. I left for good. Anyway, I don't feel connected anymore.”

“I want to go back.”

“You will.”

“Maybe. You know you could go someplace else. You walk all right. You're gonna get disability when you're out. Go someplace.”

“Where?”

“I don't know man. Fucking Tahiti. You lack imagination you know that?”

“Maybe so. But what difference does it make? I'm done travelling.”

“What are you doing here?”

“What do you mean 'here'?”

“With me. I don’t get it.”

“Got nothing else to do.”

“That’s no answer.”

“No, it’s not. But it’s the only one I’ve got.”

Clevenger looked at me. Then he asked me again, just with his eyes, why I was sitting there with him. I tried to ignore the question, but it was a fair one, and he deserved an answer.

“I’m not done with it yet, with the war. Coming home didn’t seem to make any difference. I’m still in it, and it’s still in me. I want to be near it, and here is as close as I can get. You’re part of it for me. I can’t be with civilians and I can’t be with the heroes.”

“So I’m elected. Your piece of the war.”

“Something like that. Not just the war. Everything that came before. If I leave, it’s all gone.”

Clevenger almost smiled. “I understand. There’s no getting done with it. It isn’t done with us either.”

“Who knew? When I was in basic I had a calendar in my locker. I’d cross off every day, the way you’d count the days until Christmas when you were a kid. Then in Nam I counted the days again. But after the first firefight I stopped. I got superstitious. Like it would curse me to look forward to the end of my tour. But I figured it would be over one day and I’d go back to my life. Then I was hit. And it turned out I didn’t have a life to return to.”

“I did. I had a life to go back to, or thought I did. Not now though. It’s over for me. The past is gone. I got nothing. No legs, no family, no home. Can you dig it? I’m a dead man.”

“Don’t give up. You’re young and strong.”

Clevenger squinted at me. His face was yellow, sallow and waxy.

“My life is over. I’m hurt deep down.”

Clevenger pulled the sheet down and showed me the scars on his abdomen. He was caved in like someone whose bones had melted away in a fire.

“What does the doctor say?”

“The doctor says shit. He comes around and looks at my chart and grunts and leaves.”

“Still. They fix people up here. I got buddies who are doing fine. No legs some of them.” This was a lie.

“Fucking war. Why’d you go?”

“Why? Same as you. I was drafted. In ’68. After AIT my whole unit shipped out.”

“Not me. I volunteered. I’m regular army.”

“Volunteered? Jesus Christ. Why’d you do that? I never would have gone if I didn’t have to.”

“My old man thought I should. Told me war would make me a man. Made me half a man.”

“I heard the same shit from my father.”

“Why do you suppose they told us that? I mean, my father wasn’t in the Army. He four-f’ed out of World War II. So why push it on me?”

“I don’t know. My father was in it, big time. Big Red One. So it was kind of natural for me. Maybe your father was making up for something with you.”

“I was his substitute.”

“Something like that.”

“Anyway. Who cares? Listen, I appreciate your coming by. I enjoyed that story there. I’m not one for reading myself, but it passed the time.”

“Yeah. It does. You want me to read another one?”

“Naw. I’ll see you later. I want to rest.”

I was there when he died. In the movies soldiers lie in their comrade’s arms and mention how afraid they are, or how unafraid. Then their eyes close and their heads fall to one side. Usually these imagined deaths are dramatic, and if the dying occurs in the middle of a battle the world slows to a stop, as if war itself respected the last moments of the dying. I have seen men die, dozens, and this isn’t how it happens. Men pass from the land of the living to world of the dead in an instant, without the time or inclination to discuss how they feel about it. If they did have the time, it’s likely they would scream or weep—stoicism is only found in movies.

Clevenger died the way a man should. He was lying in his bed, not looking around, not speaking, and then he “was gone” or “passed away.” These phrases possess a certain truth. His eyes didn’t close, his head didn’t move. I saw it happen, by sheer chance I saw him disappear. As I had done many times before, I closed his eyes—there is an unbearable sadness in empty human eyes, an obscene blankness—and then I called for the nurse.

Clevenger was buried in Arlington National Cemetery, back near the steep hills with the fresh graves dug during Vietnam. He has a nice clean white headstone with his name and rank, dates of birth and death, the campaigns he fought in, the fact that he won the Bronze Star. I can picture his father and mother, if they're still alive, driving up 95 and into Arlington, parking and walking among the thousands of identical graves to place flowers on their son's little patch of earth. Maybe Clevenger's old man felt better about his son after he was dead. Sometimes it works that way. It's easier to love a hero than a boy without legs, just like ideas seem to move us more than people. I don't know. But sometimes that's the way it works out.

I'm close to going there myself. It turns out that the war doesn't ever let you go, it pursues you every day of your life, right to the end. You don't forget anything. And in all the ways that matter you never return to the world. I'm there still, with Clevenger and the rest of them, ghosts in the land, floating above the jungle like the white fire that's eating my guts, the fire that burned up our lives and the lives of our enemies. In a little while I will join them. And soon enough all of us who were in that place will be gone.

Or maybe I am the last. It's impossible to say. There's no one here anymore, no one within the sound of my voice. I think I am the last one left. I hope that I am.

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