

In Passing

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The cord wrapped tightly around the neck causing a gurgling sound in response and he instantly realized that this time death would not come quickly. It had been many years since his hands had brought death and he was out of practice. That morbid thought would have garnered a gruff laugh at another time and place, but at the present he had to focus on the job at hand. The amount of struggle he was facing caught him by surprise, and he doubled his effort to finish this business without any more delay.

For the slightest of instants he felt a twinge of guilt at the position he now found himself in, but just as quickly put it from his mind. This time his action was justified, he reminded himself. There were no friends or family to avenge this death, and that thought brought a strained smile to his wrinkled face as he felt the struggling begin to subside. It was always the same he had learned. People always fought at first, but even the strongest victim began to fade sooner or later, and then death came quietly. Clean. He preferred it that way. It didn't always end so well though. A lesson he had also learned from experience, and one that had nearly brought him to his own premature end.

It had been his first. He could still remember the cold sweat on his palms and his short tense breaths, seeming to thunder inside his head. The fear that had gripped him deep inside barely overshadowed by the arrogant courage present in every eighteen year-old male. Strange thoughts had drifted in and out of his mind. The breakfast that he had eaten that morning; how the grenade that he held in his hand felt like an oddly-shaped baseball; the last time he had played catch in the backyard with his father; how the .45 caliber pistol crammed in under his belt jabbed him in the back as he crouched down; standing in his room holding his draft card in his hands and contemplating torching it; the kiss he had planted on Annabelle Archer before getting on the bus with his green canvas duffel bag; the way had she smiled that sweet flustered smile and told him he'd better come back to her, stuffing a small picture of her in her favorite dress into his hand. That beautiful white cotton dress with the tiny yellow flowers speckled over it; the way it hung over her curves and seemed to flow in even the faintest of breezes and the way it felt under his hands as he hugged her and promised he'd be home to her soon. Then there was his first view of the dense jungle canopy from out of an open helicopter door; his fourth

grade social studies teacher pointing to Vietnam on the map at the front of the classroom; his report card that semester that had earned him a disappointed look from his mother and a particularly nasty beating from his father.

A sudden sound from up ahead had snapped his mind back to the pitch-black tunnel he was blindly attempting to navigate. He froze mid-stride, hunched over with his head nearly scraping the dirt overhead and one hand running along the wall at his side. He squinted into the darkness, marveling that places like this existed. Goddamn Charlie slithering around under the jungle in the dark like fucking snakes. Only a few feet above his head, the rest of the fighting men of the 199th Light Infantry Division would be surging ahead to capture the next objective while these grimy bastards would sneak right under their feet and retake the ground that so many had already paid so much for in blood and sweat. Hell, up on the surface the only territory the GI's ever knew for certain was still in their hands was the area they could see through the sights of their Goddamn rifles. That's why every time someone came across a hole in the ground, they called for men like him to go down into the netherworld and see what devils were lurking where the light ceased to shine. Tunnel Rats they were called. Rats dropped into the damned snake pit, he thought.

You had to be less than five-six to go into the tunnels, more common sense than an actual rule, but orders were orders. His five-three stature had fit the bill, damn his father and his shitty genes, and so he had volunteered. Not because he had wanted to, mind you, but because if he hadn't he would've been called a coward. In this place, that was the surest way to meet your death. The respect of the men around you meant they would watch your back and would, in turn, trust you to do the same. And so here he found himself, carrying a grenade he hoped was powerful enough to collapse the tunnel (but probably wasn't), an M1911 .45 pistol that would be so loud in this confined space that firing it would almost certainly deafen him, a flashlight, because some moron that far outranked him couldn't comprehend that he might as well have a Goddamn marching band announce his presence if he was going to use a flashlight down here, and a KA-BAR 11 3/4 inch bowie knife, which, while the most primitive of all of the equipment he'd been given, might actually be of some use to him. At least his gear lived up to the motto of the 199th, 'Light, Swift, and Accurate'. He just hoped to God that it would be enough.

He continued cautiously moving forward down the tunnel, his hand sliding along the rough concave wall, until it contacted a small protrusion. With only his sense of touch and the miniscule adjustment of his eyes to the darkness, he finally determined that it was the root of a tree. He could tell as he ran his hands over its gnarled surface that in the construction of the tunnel, some worker's pick or shovel had struck and nearly severed it completely. However, instead of dying and rotting away, the root had resumed growth at an obscene angle perpendicular to its former direction, perversely following the wall of the tunnel that had so rudely caused it to be diverted from its destined path. He didn't know why exactly it made him pause. Hell, it was just one more reminder of how little this war left unchanged to add to the sea of shit that was already floating around in his head. In any case, it made a decent guide for his hand and as he shook the image from his mind, he continued to follow it further down the tunnel and into the unknown.

There was the sound again, much closer this time, a shuffling to his right around a corner, past where his vision was able to penetrate the blackness. He silently bent low and withdrew the knife that he had stowed in his boot. No sound, he thought, his mind wandering back to hand-to-hand training. This snake would slither right into his trap and he would not allow himself to give up his position to all the other snakes lying in wait, certain to be coiled and ready to strike. He imagined a little man, hunched over, shuffling down the cross tunnel, and mentally mapped the distance to his target by the approaching sound. Fifteen feet away. Ten feet. Five. At the last possible second he pounced forward, his knife leading the way directly toward where the poor bastard's heart had to be... and hit nothing but air.

It was hard to say who was more surprised, him or the enemy soldier he had just jumped past in the darkness, but both men just froze still as statues. For a fraction of a second that seemed to stretch out infinitely longer, they just squinted at each other in the surrounding darkness. Then, as one, they leaped. Mere shadows of men locked in a mortal struggle in a tunnel barely wide enough to hold them both. Tactics were thrown out the window as they collided. The fighting was brutal, almost primitive in nature. He slashed blindly with the knife and was rewarded by a muffled screech. Then the knife was knocked away down the tunnel by a blow he never saw coming and the butt end of a rifle glanced off the side of his forehead. In a daze, he barely parried away a second swing of the rifle with his newly-empty hand and swung down hard with the grenade he held in his other. The blow struck heavily to the side of the

head, the impact causing the enemy soldier to roll to the side, emitting a shrill yell in a foreign language that reverberated both directions down the tunnel. He saw an opening and, discarding the grenade, he instantly pounced on the small man's back wrapping his arm around the throat in a headlock.

He pulled backward, using his slight size and weight advantage to pull his tiny enemy to the dirt floor. He couldn't see the face, but he imagined it as he squeezed tighter. A terrified grimace, he thought. The face of a man who knows he is going to die but continues to fight until his last breath is stolen away. He heard a sobbing sound and was about to tighten his grip on the throat even further to muffle it, when he realized it wasn't coming from the poor bastard in his clutches. It was him that was sobbing, tears seeming to appear from nowhere and becoming a constant stream down his dirt covered face and into the matted and bloody hair of his still-twitching enemy. Why he was crying he couldn't fathom. This man was his enemy and he had been trained to kill his enemy. He was a good soldier. That was all that he knew and all that he needed to know. And yet he couldn't stop the Goddamn tears.

Finally the struggling ceased and the man fell limp in his arms, but still he held firm. Time seemed to stretch away, but he was afraid to let go, lest the little man in his arms somehow spring back to life to seek vengeance. Everything had changed. He knew that now. He felt a loss of innocence so profound that he knew he would never again be able to recover it.

There was no time to contemplate what had just transpired, however, as echoing voices and the sound of boots pounding against compacted earth announced the imminent arrival of the other snakes, roused from their unseen hiding places. Sliding the corpse of his enemy to the dirt floor, he rose to his knees and reached for the .45 at his back, only to discover that it had been dislodged somewhere in the struggle. Frantically he ran his hands along the ground, searching for a weapon with which to defend himself. As the sound of the approaching boots rounded the last corner, bringing them into the same corridor he now occupied, his hand grasped the wooden stock his fallen enemy's rifle. Mikhail Kalashnikov's infamous model 1947, with its odd banana-shaped clip, felt strangely familiar as he raised it to his shoulder and worked the action.

Silhouettes were all he could make out of the onrushing enemy force, but in these tight spaces and at this close range it wouldn't have mattered. He depressed the trigger and a deafening roar issued forth from

the rifle, as flashes from the other end of the hall indicated returning fire. He saw two enemies fall, their flashes immediately extinguished, before a 7.62mm round tore through his shoulder and he collapsed, his finger still holding down the trigger. He lay on his side, nearly face to face with the man he had strangled only seconds before, and in the muzzle flashes, he finally witnessed the face that had only existed previously in his mind. God, the kid couldn't have been more than 14. The smudged face stared back at him from only inches away with its mouth frozen open in a silent scream, a scene that only took a fraction of a second to permanently burn itself into the back of his mind. The intermittent flashes caused a strobe-light effect and the face with its grotesque open mouth seemed to be in a state of perpetual laughter. A laughing child; laughing at him and his tears that continued to fall; laughing at the circumstances that had fated their chance encounter; laughing at the world and its utter cruelty. Just a laughing child that was now nothing more than a bloody corpse, laying alone in the dark.

To the present day he couldn't remember what had happened next. Only that he had painfully crawled out of that tunnel into sunlight and been carried on a stretcher to the field hospital, his blood dripping through the green canvas with each passing step. He had wished the docs would see him for what he had become and just let him bleed out, but every time he closed his eyes he was met by a familiar face from the darkness, seemingly branded to the inside of his eyelids. So he just lay in the hospital bed, eyes wide open and crying as they stitched him up, his tears carrying blood and filth down his cheeks and onto the pristine white sheets. From there he had been sent back stateside with a gleaming Purple Heart pinned to his chest, the gilded face of George Washington glaring coldly up at him from a purple backdrop, piercing eyes judging his unworthiness.

He had framed the medal and placed it on the wall of the kitchen in his cramped one bedroom apartment, alongside the small picture of a pretty girl in a white cotton dress with tiny yellow flowers scattered over it. That photo, yellowed with age and showing small creases where it had been gently folded and carried faithfully in his pocket, stared across the kitchen table at the man she had loved dangling from a rafter, swaying in a slight pendulum above an overturned chair. She had kept her promise and waited patiently for him to return, but he had broken his and never really come home to her at all. He was still in a faraway land crying in the darkness. And so she and old George just watched silently as the last breath left him and his war finally, at long last, came to an end.