

New Fiction by Bob Kalkreuter: "Unhitched"



He remembered that day. God, did he remember it! His worst day in a year of worst days, a day he'd spent the last six months trying to bury. A day he'd regret for a lifetime, even though he himself had done nothing to regret.

Roger White sat on the unscreened porch of sister's house in North Carolina, watching the morning fog creep up the hillside like a ghost without feet. He held a can of beer and a cigarette.

At first, he told himself that his guilt over the dead girl was karma for everything else he'd done, for the ones he'd killed. And maybe it was.

In Vietnam, they'd all been soldiers, good soldiers, and except for a little luck, his own bones might be there now,

rotting in some jungle stream or skewered in a pit of punji stakes on an overgrown trail.

Why feel guilty about one girl? Wasn't her death a blip? A one-off sin. Who punishes that, an aberration in the chaos of war? Can there even be an aberration in chaos anyway? Isn't chaos, by definition, well, chaos?

But emotions were indefinite things, not measured like spoons of sugar.

Who was answerable for her death? Al Pfeiffer? For sure. The war, the Goddamn American Army? Probably. But only Al was a real person, and he had no conscience. So, the onus fell to Roger, as the stand-in, as the designated conscience for her death. Somebody, surely, owed her memory some measure of contrition.

"A little early to start drinking, isn't it?" said Judy. His sister was a small, dark-haired woman, and she peered at him through a screen door off to the right.

"Oh, you mean this?" said Roger, smirking. He raised the beer can and winked. "I found it on the porch when I got up. Didn't want it going to waste."

"Don't be stupid," she said.

Above, a slight, chilled breeze rattled though the reddish leaves of the Black Oak that stretched across the eastern edge of the roof. Roger wore shorts and a shirt he wore before going into the Army. His feet were bare. There was an ugly red scar on his right thigh.

After going a year without getting shot, he'd been wounded three days before the end of his tour. Shot by a newbie who'd been in country two days, a kid from Maine who'd fired into the latrine, thinking he'd heard a VC sapper sneaking around in the dark.

"I can't believe you're wearing shorts. Aren't you cold?" said Judy.

"I've had enough hot weather to last me," he said.

"I thought you wanted to go back to Florida."

"Eventually," he said. "But it takes money, you know."

"Well, you could get a job..."

"I've been looking," he snapped.

She frowned. "I know it's hard to adjust. But drinking's not going to help."

"Not going to help what?"

"You'll feel better if you get out and see people. Find something to keep you busy. Have you given up on finding a job?"

"I said I'm looking."

Through the screen, Judy's face looked waxy, like a marble bust in a frame of dark hair. "I know I don't understand everything you've been through. But you can't just give up."

"Everything I've been through? What does that mean?"

"You know. Vietnam."

"You sound more like Mom every day," he said, wedging the beer between his thighs. He felt the frosty nip of the can, but he didn't flinch. Perhaps his fear of weakness died harder than his fear of pain.

Was that something he'd learned in Vietnam, he could have wondered. But didn't.

"You never listened to her either," she said.

Ever since he'd moved in with Judy, he'd tried to stay out of sight. The less anyone knew about him, the better. After all, hadn't Al warned him to be on the lookout for trouble?

Still, he wondered if he'd already listened to Al too much. But loyalty in a combat team was rock hard.

Five months ago, Roger had been lying on a stretcher, his leg wrapped in bloody bandages, waiting for a medevac chopper. Despite his pain, the whomp-whomp of the approaching chopper was sweeter than the Christmas morning he'd gotten his first bike.

"They're getting close," Al whispered, bending over him.

Roger grinned. "I hear them."

"Not the chopper. That whore in Saigon. They're asking about her."

Roger froze. "What?"

"Next month, I'm outta here. Three tours are it for me. I'm done. I'm going to find me a cabin somewhere in Idaho."

"Who's asking about her?" Roger said, not expecting an answer.

"You better watch out. Remember, they can't prove a Goddamn thing, no matter what they say."

Roger waited motionless as two men arrived to lift his stretcher.

Al whispered something unintelligible, but Roger didn't look at him. Above, white clouds covered the eastern line of trees. The morning sun was already bright and hot. Too hot. Sweat beaded on his naked skin, under his fatigues.

A medic approached, grinning. He tapped Roger's good foot.

"Doc," said Roger.

"You're going to be fine, Rog. You'll be eating stateside chow in a week."

"Hey," said a stretcher bearer. "Stateside? Wanna trade?"

Roger felt himself hoisted.

"Remember," said Al. "When they come..."

Roger's trip back to the States was long and tiring. On the way, he tried to imagine himself shedding Vietnam like a snake molting unwanted skin. It didn't work.

He wanted to go back to Florida. But that would come later, in a few years. Right now, he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Instead, he moved in with Judy. Later, he'd move to Charlotte or Atlanta. You can get lost in big cities. And lost is what he wanted.

"I'm going to town, if you want to come," said Judy. "But I'm not going to take you if you're drunk."

"I can use a haircut," he said, running his hand over his head.

"Get ready then," said Judy, reminding him of the way their mother used to sound when she was irritated.

Roger finished the beer and set the empty can on the porch. Rising, he walked to the rail, showing a slight limp. Judy didn't want him to smoke in the house, so he took a long drag on the cigarette and flicked it into the upper tendrils of fog.

He changed into a pair of old jeans, unwilling to explain the scar.

"You wearing those?" said Judy, standing beside her Ford Falcon.

"Wearing what?" he said, scrunching across the pebbled path.

"Those sneakers," she said, pointing. "The soles are coming off."

"Nothing wrong with them."

She stared. "Is that how you looked on job interviews?"

He smirked. "You want me to interview the barber for a haircut?"

"Roger, they look awful."

"They're supposed to look awful. They were old when I went in the Army."

"Why don't you buy a new pair?"

"If I had money for shoes, I wouldn't be running low on beer and cigarettes."

She shook her head, climbed into the car, slammed the door.

On the way to town, they rode in silence, descending the narrow asphalt road that cut through the trees and waterless creek beds. Judy drove with slow precision, the way she'd done everything since she was a little girl.

Nothing like the way he did things. As kids, she'd always complained that he didn't think things through. That he let his friends get him into trouble.

If she only knew.

After he went into the Army, Judy kept him updated on hometown news until she moved to North Carolina with her boyfriend. Regularly, she complained that he didn't write.

She got a part-time job as a cashier at Greene's Grocery and invited him to stay with her when he was discharged. By then

her boyfriend was in Vietnam too, somewhere in the Delta, and she was having a hard time making ends meet.

At first, Roger thought he'd be able to hide, to jump start a new life. Instead, he felt isolated and alone. The world he grew up in no longer existed. Perhaps never had.

It wouldn't be long, he realized, before Judy would need more money than he could give her. Yet he didn't know what to do about it. He hadn't found a job, even when he'd looked.

He'd been having a hard time adjusting to civilian life. After two years of hating the Army, of wishing himself home, he'd been strangely confused and angry when he got out, as if he'd landed on a distant planet, unable to cope with the new language and customs.

How could he explain that to Judy without sounding paranoid and petty? And crazy.

In Vietnam, he'd saved some money, because he didn't have many places to spend it. Although he gave her something every week to help with expenses, he expected to be broke in a month. And then...? He didn't know.

She couldn't afford to support him.

"I'm going to get my hair done and pick up a few groceries," said Judy, stopping the car in front of the barber shop. "You want anything?" She stared at him, as if hoping to ferret out his intentions.

"I could use some beer," he said, glancing at her sideways.

"If you want beer, buy it yourself."

"I've still got a few bucks left," he said, fishing several bills from his pocket, handing them to her. "And get me some cigarettes too."

At end of the street, the sun was breaking through a notch in the rippled, gray clouds, panning across the rooftop of an abandoned hardware store and the three dangling balls of a pawn shop. Fog was beginning to stir in the street, warming toward oblivion.

"Pick me up when you're through," he said. "I'll be here somewhere."

He lit a cigarette before he opened the door of the barber shop. The barber and several customers stopped talking and glanced up in unison. The barber nodded and said "Howdy". The others stared at him.

By the time Roger stepped outside, sunlight had shredded the vestiges of fog. He lit his last cigarette and stood at the curb, breathing the warming air. He glanced up and down the street. An old Hudson cruised past, burning oil.

Moving slowly to keep the loose soles of his shoes from tripping him, he shuffled along the curb, inspecting the gutter for lost coins.

His leg was hurting, so he stopped at the pawn shop. In the window was a guitar, a set of wrenches splayed like a fan, an old eggbeater drill, somewhat rusted, and a stack of green army fatigue pants.

He entered. A bell tinkled above the door. The room smelled of oiled machinery. Along the back wall was a line of lawn mowers and large pieces of equipment Roger didn't recognize. Farm gear of some kind, he guessed.

Behind the counter sat a man with a scruffy beard. His left sleeve hung empty. His right hand was large and meaty. He raised it in greeting. "Morning," he said, smiling.

"Morning," said Roger, glancing around.

Behind the man was a rack of shotguns and rifles. Under the

glass counter were several rows of pistols and knives.

"Looking for anything in particular?" said the man.

Roger stopped at a bookcase, filled with old magazines. "Just looking," he said, scanning the titles.

"Been back long?" asked the man.

Roger turned. "Back?"

"'Nam. You were there, right?"

"What?"

"You're Judy White's brother, aren't you?"

"Yeah..."

The man laughed, waving his huge hand. "This is a small town. My cousin stocks shelves at Greene's." He reached across his body and flipped his empty sleeve. "You get any souvenirs? This is mine."

"We've all got souvenirs," said Roger, after hesitating.

The man nodded. "I guess that's right."

Then Roger grinned. "I got mine sitting on the shitter."

The man's laugh was spontaneous, deep and hearty. "You what?"

"Some idiot thought he heard something and fired through the wall. Hit me in the leg."

Still laughing, the man said: "Well, I never heard that before."

"I never told it before," said Roger, moving to the counter so he could see under the glass.

"Next time, say you were surrounded by an NVA division."

"No use. It'll come out. Always does," said Roger.

"Ain't that the truth," said the man, extending his hand. "My name's Joe."

Roger took the huge hand. In it, he was surprised at how small his own hand seemed. "Roger," he said.

A door behind the counter scraped open and a Vietnamese woman appeared, carrying a Coke. She wore the dress of her country, an Ao Dai, with a red tunic and black, silk trousers. She had a narrow face, high cheekbones, and long black hair. Glancing at Roger, she looked away.

Roger blinked. Seeing someone from Vietnam was unexpected. But seeing her dressed like that gave him a start. For a moment he thought she had a white scar above her left eye.

But of course, she didn't.

"This is Thuy," said Joe, watching Roger carefully. "My wife."

Roger nodded. She set the Coke on the counter.

"Cảm ơn bạn," said Joe, smiling at her.

Her eyes lit up. "You well come," she said slowly.

Roger shrugged and moved toward the door, trying not to limp. "Guess I need to be going," he said. He didn't know when Judy would return, but he was sure she wouldn't find him here.

"Come again, if you need anything," said Joe, raising his hand. "Or have something to trade or sell."

Roger stopped and turned. Thuy was sitting on a stool, flipping through the pages of a movie magazine. Her small fingers moved with nimble grace.

"What do you buy?" asked Roger.

"Anything I can sell. If you have something, bring it in and let me look."

That night Roger sorted through his belongings. The only thing he could find was the Montagnard knife he'd gotten in a trade for two packs of cigarettes and three cans of turkey loaf c-ration cans.

But looking at the knife brought back the image of the girl lying in that filthy Saigon alley, her throat slit and bloody, her head canted sideways, as if unzipped. Above her left eye a tiny, whitened scar. The scar he couldn't forget.

Al had killed her. Tried to steal his wallet, he'd said. But Roger's own silence, didn't that make him complicit? Blemished with guilt?

At the time, Roger convinced himself that he couldn't say anything. He denied his instincts, buried them deep. During his tour, he'd become cauterized to violence. Death was everywhere. Why shouldn't it come to a bar girl in Saigon, too?

Still, she wasn't a soldier. She was a young girl, her life ended before it took good root.

Later, he told himself that rules were different in a war zone, that even sins were different. He balked at judging others, particularly Al, who'd saved his life more than once.

Why did the girl's memory send out so many ripples? Become so bothersome. Once they'd returned to their unit, Roger never discussed the murder. He covered for Al the way they always covered for each other. He was silent.

The next morning, Judy hollered him awake. Rising, he smelled bacon frying. She was ready for work.

"When are you getting home?" he asked. "I've got something to sell at the pawnshop. I should get a few bucks for it."

"What is it?" she said, as she opened the front door.

"A Montagnard knife."

"A what?" Outside, heavy rain pelted the porch. "Damn," she said, distracted.

Later, after eating, Roger heard someone at the front door, knocking rapidly.

On the porch were two soldiers, one wearing dress greens, the other stiff-starched fatigues. The one wearing greens was a Captain with JAG insignia, the other an MP with boots spit-shined to a sparkle. He wore a .45 pistol strapped to his side.

"Goddamn," was all Roger could think to say.

The rain had stopped, but their uniforms were still damp.

The captain was a small man with one green eye and one blue. He was a foot shorter than the MP. "Corporal White?" he said.

"I'm not in the Goddamn Army," said Roger.

The captain's eyes narrowed. "Are you Roger White, recently discharged?"

"What do you want?" asked Roger. He flashed back to Al's words, before he was loaded into the medevac chopper. They can't prove a Goddamn thing...

"Please answer my question," said the captain.

"Yeah. So what?"

"Mind if we come in?" said the captain. The MP stood off to the side, looking large and solid. Beyond them, Roger could see the shadow of the emerging sun against the roof line.

"Yeah, I do mind."

Pause. "I have some questions. You can make it easy and answer them, or..."

"Why don't you just tell me what you want?" said Roger.

The MP shifted slightly, glancing along the porch, both ways.

"You served with Corporal Pfeiffer didn't you?" said the Captain.

"Al? Yeah."

"And you had passes to Saigon..."

"What's wrong," said Roger. "Didn't we sign out?"

The captain leaned forward, squinted. The MP tensed. "Look, White. We can get the sheriff up here. Your choice."

Roger felt the need for a cigarette. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled pack. He opened the screen door. "My sister doesn't want me smoking inside," he said, stepping out.

The captain moved to the right, the MP to the left. Roger went to the railing and turned to face them.

"Did you and Pfeiffer go to Saigon?" asked the captain.

"Is that illegal?"

"Did you..."

"Yeah, we went. You know that or you wouldn't be here."

The captain nodded. "Did you meet Phan Thi Binh?"

"Huh? Who the hell is that?"

The captain's face tightened. "She was murdered while you and Corporal Pfeiffer were in Saigon."

"You think it's strange for somebody to be killed in Vietnam?"

The captain exchanged a quick look with the MP. "She was murdered. She wasn't a soldier."

"What was she then?"

"A civilian."

Roger pushed himself away from the railing and glanced down the hill, where a breeze rushed through the trees like an invisible train. From somewhere came the odor of cooking food.

"You've come a long way to ask me about a... civilian."

"I assume you've heard about Lieutenant Calley," said the captain. "The Army is concerned about civilians in wartime. They aren't combatants."

Roger finished his cigarette while he tried to put his thoughts in order. "So why are you talking to me? Did you ask Al?"

The captain pursed his lips. "Corporal Pfeiffer is dead," he said.

"Dead?"

The captain nodded.

"What happened?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. That's not why I'm here."

"Then why are you here?"

"To find out about Phan Thi Binh."

"Well, I don't know who that is," said Roger, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Look," said the captain. "I think you know something."

"I don't know a damn thing."

"White, if we wanted to arrest you, we'd have done it already," said the captain.

"Then what do you want?"

"Information."

"Information? Well, here's some information for you: go to Hell."

For a moment they stared at each other, then the captain stepped back. "We'll be at the Mountain Arms Motel tonight. Think about it." He hesitated. "Otherwise, we'll be back tomorrow. With the sheriff."

Roger brushed past them and went inside, slamming the door. "Al? Dead?" he muttered, feeling light-headed. "Jesus H Christ."

When Judy returned, Roger slipped the Montagnard knife into a paper bag.

"I need to borrow your car," he said.

"Okay, but remember, supper's at six. I'm fixing pork chops."

On the ride into town, he drove through sunlight that flickered between the trees like a picket fence.

In the pawn shop, Thuy sat alone at the counter wearing a yellow, western style blouse.

Without thinking, he checked her left eye for the scar that wasn't there. She smiled.

Joe entered through the rear door and raised his hand. "Good to see you," he said.

"Ever see one of these?" asked Roger, pushing the bag across

the counter.

"Sure," said Joe, hoisting the knife. "What do you want for it?"

"What about trading for one of those pistols?"

Joe frowned. "Not much market for things like this around here. Nice, but... in Charlotte, maybe." He edged the knife back toward Roger.

"It ought to be worth something," said Roger.

"It is. Sure. But most of these pistols..."

"What about that one?" said Roger, pointing to a small derringer with a cracked handle held together by tape.

"That one?" Joe looked from the derringer to the knife, then back again.

"Does it fire?" said Roger.

"Sure. Already shot it. I picked it up in an estate sale. Couldn't get that clock over there unless I took everything else." He pointed at a grandfather clock that stood in the corner, tall and elegant, the wood recently polished.

"What about it?" said Roger.

Joe looked at the knife again. "For the derringer?"

Roger nodded.

Joe studied him. He reached under the counter. "Well, we're vets. We've got to stick together, right?"

"Right."

"Why do you want this one?"

"The derringer? Judy wants something small, to carry in her

purse.”

“In her purse?”

Roger shrugged. “Women... you know. By the way, can you throw in a couple of bullets?”

“Sure.”

“There’s been a bear hanging around the house lately,” said Roger, laughing.

As he reached the door, Roger turned. “Say, you ever heard of Lieutenant Calley?”

“Isn’t he the one who massacred those civilians in Vietnam last year? Why?”

“Oh nothing. Somebody mentioned him, that’s all.”

“Well, come back when you get a chance. Thuy and I want to have you over for supper one night, you and Judy.”

It was almost sundown when Roger reached the lake. He’d driven there several times when he’d told Judy he was interviewing for jobs. He stopped the car and pushed back the seat. His leg hurt and he rubbed his thigh.

A cool cross-breeze wafted through the open car windows, carrying the menthol scent of pines needles and the tilting afternoon sunlight that trickled toward winter like inevitable grains in some universal hourglass. As a boy, he’d been calmed by pines like these, growing along the edge of the lake near his house in Florida.

He’d loved to lie on that bank, looking into the branches. Dreaming... of what he couldn’t recall.

Raising up, he peered outside, half expecting to see Judy crossing the field, carrying sandwiches they’d eat together in the autumn twilight, while she listened to his stories of

adventure and the distance he'd someday run from home.

A distance he now wished away.

Al, he thought. You bastard. You fucking bastard...

But Roger didn't know quite how to complete the thought. Had Al been killed on patrol? Was that how it happened? Perhaps, but Al was the savviest soldier in the platoon. Still, luck was always the high card. You didn't spend a year in 'Nam without coming to that truth. Or maybe the compound was shelled. That happened on a regular basis.

Another thought crossed his mind, but he put it away, almost in fear. Impossible, he thought. Things like that didn't happen to Al Pfeiffer.

Not that it mattered anymore. Al's death left Roger as the only witness to a murder he hadn't witnessed. Was Roger being convicted by his own silence?

Truly, Al had been right. They were on his trail.

In the end, guilt was a tar baby, beyond the ken of law, of everything, and he didn't know how to parse it into smaller pieces, ones he could manage.

In this case, a young girl was dead and he... what exactly did he do?

Nothing. But he also knew that nothing could be something. Together, he and Al were guilty. Together...

Looking back, he saw a patchwork of emotions, all pulled to the breaking point, each a failure.

He picked up the derringer and loaded a bullet. Getting out of the car, he went to the edge of the lake. A breeze blew a column of wavelets into the muddy shoreline, making a tiny, lapping sound.

Lifting the derringer, he took a deep breath. Sunlight struck the side of the small barrel, like a spark. His world narrowed to a pinpoint.

Then, on impulse, he heaved the derringer far into the lake where it splashed and disappeared into the dark water.

Damn, he thought. What have I done?

By the time he reached Judy's house, a quarter moon was hanging over the trees, coloring the tight noose of clouds a faint gray.

"Roger?" she hollered.

"Sorry," said Roger, coming inside. "I'm late."

Judy came into the living room and stood arms akimbo.

"I said supper was at six," she said, her voice strident with irritation. "I already ate, so yours..." She stopped and stared at the front door.

Behind Roger stood two soldiers, a captain in dress greens, and an MP wearing a holstered .45.

"Sorry," said Roger again.

"What...?" she said.

"I have to leave for a day or two, so I brought back your car." Saying this, he didn't feel as bad as he thought he would, rehearsing the explanation all the way from town. Still, he felt queasy.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"A misunderstanding. It's okay."

"Who are...?"

"A girl was killed in Saigon while I was there. The man who

killed her..." He hesitated. "He's dead."

Her eyes flicked to the soldiers and back to Roger. "Who's dead? I don't understand. Who are these men?"

"Ma'am, my name is Captain Tolbert. This is Sergeant Solis. Sorry to barge in like this."

Judy stared as if they were foreclosing on the house, throwing her into the street.

"Your brother is helping with an investigation," said the captain.

"An investigation?"

"He's not under arrest," said the captain.

"Why should he be under arrest?"

Roger turned toward the captain. "I told you everything I know."

"I understand," said the captain. "You'll be back by Friday. We need to complete some paperwork."

"Roger," said Judy. "What's this about?"

"Nothing. It's nothing."

"What did you do?" she asked.

"I fell in with somebody who... well, couldn't control his temper."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

Roger hesitated, looking at the captain. "Can't we finish this here, tonight?"

When the captain spoke, his voice was barely audible. "The Army doesn't want another front-page story, like Lieutenant

Calley. Corporal Pfeiffer's dead. We need your testimony, properly documented."

"To cover your asses," said Roger.

The captain stared at him, silent, stony.

"And if I do what you want?" said Roger.

"Then you're done. You can get on with your life."

"I'm done?" said Roger, snorting.

"Absolutely," said the captain.

"What life is it you think I'm getting on with?"

The captain gave him a puzzled look.

"No, the Army will be done. This is only a job to you. I'll never be done."

Roger moved toward Judy and gave her a hug. "When I get back," he said. "I'm going home."

"Florida?" she asked, cocking her head. "That's... wow... You're ready?"

"Yeah," he said. "I am." He wondered which home he would find when he got there, the one he remembered, or someplace new, where he'd have to forge a fresh set of rules for himself, just to survive.

Either way, he'd have to make room for the young girl he'd found in a Saigon alley. That wouldn't change. He'd made that choice long ago. She'd live with him forever.

Finally, though, he felt unhitched from Al, from the bond tethering them together. Sure, he'd made his own mistakes, plenty of them. And he'd live with them. But Al's mistakes were not his. Not anymore. He didn't have to justify them.

“When you get there,” said Judy, looking at him as if she wondered whether he was listening to her. “Remember to write. More than you did from Vietnam.”