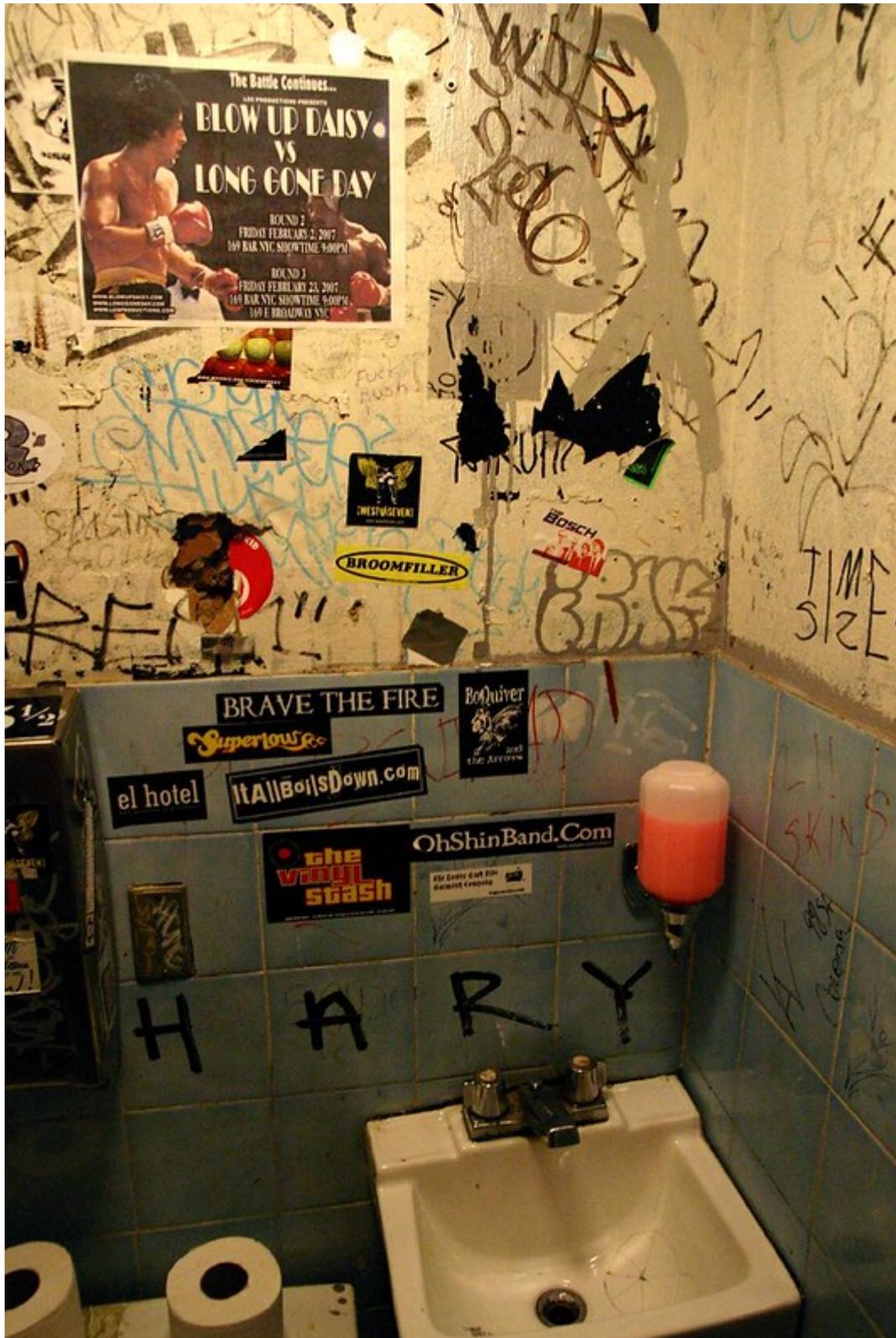


New Fiction by Robert Miner: Shades of Purple



Danny Llewellyn hadn't shit himself since he was a toddler,

back when nobody minded. Since then, he'd joined the Army, gone to war, left the Army. He was, by most people's estimations, a man, especially because his exit from the service had been hastened by injuries sustained in combat. All the pain meds during his hospital stay had stopped him up, and things down there never quite got back to normal. That was part of the reason the accident took him by surprise—in those days, each bowel movement was a protracted trauma of its own.

It happened at the Veterans of Foreign Wars hall in Overland Park, Kansas. The VFW had a bar room. The bar room had a vinyl floor, and the walls were covered in photographs, unit insignia behind glass, and certificates of appreciation for good works in the community. The bar itself was u-shaped, made from teak like the deck of a boat, light and polished. It was the nicest bit of anything in the whole building, which makes a lot of sense when you think about it.

The winter sun had just set. Friday. Danny walked the mile from his apartment to the VFW through wind and gray slush. He had plans to get blind drunk, and he didn't want to drive home. When he arrived, there were three people in the bar room. Two of them, both men, sat next to each other in chairs on the right side of the bar. Their backs were mostly to Danny, and he couldn't see their faces, but they looked older. There was white hair and wrinkled necks and the broad, uneven shoulders which become under the weight of a hard life lived.

Only the bartender saw him come in. She was in her forties, and she didn't take good care of herself, but she had great big tits, and she wore low cut shirts because she knew the fellas liked something to look at. She pitied most of them for what they'd seen and done.

The bartender told him to have a seat anywhere. The man in the chair nearest to Danny swiveled to see who she was talking to. He had a bushy gray mustache and wore a ball cap that identified him as a Gulf War veteran. Danny limped to the side

of the bar opposite the men. The limp was the result of the explosion that had sent shrapnel up and down the right side of his body. The damage to his thigh and hip was especially bad. The doctors said he'd probably limp for the rest of his life, even as the pain got better.

Danny took off his jacket and sat. He ordered a Miller Lite while trying not to stare at the bartender's cleavage.

"What's with the hitch in your giddy up?" It was the mustache in the Gulf War hat. "You get that over there?"

Danny nodded. He hadn't yet figured out how to talk about what happened to him, and he didn't like to lie, so when people asked about it, he said as close to nothing as he could.

"Iraq or Afghanistan?" This time it was the other man asking. He was a head shorter than his friend, so he had to lean over the bar to be seen.

Danny told them Iraq.

The bartender brought his beer in a smudged glass. There was a lot of foam. Danny went for his wallet, but the bartender waved her hand.

"First timers get one on the house. Thank you for your service."

Danny looked down and thanked her.

The old guys held up their drinks, so Danny did the same. His hand shook, and a little foam spilled over the edge of the glass, but the occupational therapist at the VA had told him he had to practice if he ever wanted the tremors to get better.

He took a big gulp of the beer and came away with a foam mustache. He wiped it off, willing himself not to think about shit-burning detail, but the sensation of something on his

upper lip brought him right back with such force that he could practically feel the rough edges of the metal picket in his hands.

Before higher headquarters dropped the chemical toilets, his unit had been shitting in wooden outhouses. Each one had a hole in the floor positioned over a 50-gallon drum. The setup worked, but something had to happen to all that waste. Pour in some jet fuel, light on fire, stir. Danny always seemed to draw shit-burning detail. It wasn't so much about the odor (jet fuel masks the smell of shit as well as anything), but his cackling squad mates had photographed him more than once with the Shitler mustache that inevitably takes shape under your nostrils after breathing in the smoke. All the while, other guys were out on the glamorous missions.

The two old vets were back in their conversation now. The first guy, the one closest to Danny, was doing most of the talking. He spoke with an intimidating energy. Intense. Fatigueless.

The bartender came around and asked if Danny wanted another. He said he wanted two. The fast talker was out of his chair now. He had the body of a marathon runner and the shiny cheeks of someone who still shaved every day. He was telling a story about a helicopter crash in which he'd been the pilot. He described the sound of bullets piercing the cabin, the feeling of losing control of the stick, the centrifugal force as the Kiowa plunged spinning towards the ground.

"I was sure I was going to die, of course." He put both hands on the back of his chair and leaned. "In flight school, they tell you right off that helicopter crashes only have a twenty percent survival rate."

The pilot had actually been in two crashes. The second one was during a training exercise. Mechanical failure. Danny didn't know any of this, nor would he have been able to do the mental

math on the odds of surviving two crashes, but he was still enthralled. His focus was the result of admiration and jealousy. Look at his joie de vivre! This was what happened to soldiers who never pulled shit-burning detail.

Danny was astounded that the bartender and the other veteran seemed bored. She was looking at her phone. He was paying more attention to the rim of his glass. Even if Danny assumed—as he did—that they'd heard this story a hundred times—as they had—it still deserved reverence.

Danny drank fast, and the beer sat heavy in his stomach. Foamy, so foamy, on top of whatever else had built up in there over the last few days. Panda Express. Frozen pizza. More Panda Express. He groaned a little, enough to draw attention.

“Say—” The pilot was looking at him. “What’s your name, young buck?”

Danny said his name.

“I’m Sal. This is Glenn. And the lovely Tina, of course.”

Danny said hello.

“What’d you do over there, Danny?”

Again, Danny did his best to avoid the question. Rather than say what he did, he told them what he’d been trained to do. Often as not, that’s what people meant when they asked about war. He told them he was an 11 Bravo. Infantry.

Sal’s expression brightened. “Glenn, you’ve finally got another knuckle dragger to talk to.” To Danny he added, “Glenn thinks infantrymen are the only real soldiers.”

“I hate it when you speak for me,” said Glenn. Sal the pilot shrugged.

Glenn stared straight ahead and took a drink. Truth was, he

believed that anyone who volunteered to serve deserved as much reverence as a Medal of Honor winner. Heroism was mostly a question of circumstances beyond any soldier's control. He'd won a Silver Star in Vietnam—his was one of the decorations hung on the wall of the bar room—and the citation read like a Hollywood script. But so what? He didn't like talking about what he'd been through either, though his reasons were different from Danny's.

Now on his fourth beer, Danny slid right past tipsy and into drunk. He hadn't eaten since breakfast when he'd poured some questionable milk over a bowl of Raisin Bran.

"Got any war stories?" Sal asking again. "Good ones get another beer on me."

Danny looked down. The pattern of the wooden bar was lovely, soft waves of amber and tan and brown running lengthwise along the planks. They reminded him of Iraqi dunes, which made him think of the day he'd been blown up. He'd been in and out of consciousness, but the view of the windswept sand out the door of the MEDEVAC chopper stuck in his memory.

Danny told them there wasn't much to tell.

"There's a story behind that limp."

Tina the bartender sucked her teeth. "Sal." She seemed to have some power over Sal, because he sat next to Glenn and was quiet for a while.

Of course, there was a story, it just happened to be one that Danny never wanted to think about, much less tell to a couple of war heroes and a bartender whose tits he planned on thinking about while he jerked off later.

But could he omit the embarrassing details without inviting more questions he'd have to avoid? Probably not. The embarrassing parts seemed like the whole thing.

They'd had the chemical toilets for about a week. A week of shitting in luxury—no risk of splinters in your hamstrings, flies kept mostly at bay by the thin plastic box around you, the smell of other soldiers' waste muted by the blue concoction in the tank below. A little hot, maybe, but so was everything else. So was shit-burning detail. And now that was done forever. Danny had begun lingering in the new toilets. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Locking the door to the stall was like shutting out the war.

It was the middle of the night, and Danny's bladder woke him up. Before, he might have just pissed into an empty two-liter plastic bottle and gone back to bed, but now the new toilets beckoned. He took an issue of Hustler from the stack under his cot and grabbed his rifle and stepped out of the sleeping bay.

The sand of the unimproved road looked blue in the moonlight. The concrete Texas barriers, too. It was a short walk to the row of chemical toilets, newly laid gravel at the edge of camp crunching under his unlaced boots.

None of the toilets were occupied. Danny chose one at the end of the row, because even though the likelihood of a midnight rush was low, he liked the idea of not having guys on both sides of him while he did his business.

Danny stepped into the toilet and closed the door. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness before dropping the black PT shorts to his ankles. He took an effortless shit. His last one for years. From the sound, it must have knifed into the water below like an Olympic diver. He sighed. He opened the Hustler and stared at the glossy body of a girl with curly red hair.

That was the last thing he remembered until the fractured visions from his evacuation to the hospital in Balad. No matter how many times his squad mates told him how gruesome, how badass his injuries had seemed when they found him, Danny

could only ever imagine himself strapped to a litter in the MEDEVAC chopper with his t-shirt on and his dick flapping in the rotor wash. The psychologists told him that was probably because of what he'd been doing when the mortar hit. Knowing hadn't yet helped.

Danny's stomach made a sound like a bullfrog. He was too drunk to care about the current of discomfort that shot through his groin. Besides, he was used to ignoring pain. He ordered another beer and drank it and ordered another one.

"You're not driving are you, hon?" asked Tina.

Danny told her he wasn't. He smiled, but he could tell the smile was crooked. Tina gave him the beer anyway. It was nice that she trusted him.

Sal was talking again. Danny didn't know about what. He heard a few words here and there, but his drunk brain was busy trying to overwrite his memories. Maybe there was a way to change his perception of the past. Then there wouldn't be any dishonor in lying.

Through the densifying haze of his vision, Danny saw Glenn's eyes. They were focused on him. Unnervingly focused. Glenn got up and walked over to Danny. Sal was still talking. He didn't seem to mind a mobile audience.

"Not my business, I know," said Glenn, "but that's a lot of beers in not a lot of time."

Sal was still talking in the background. Danny nodded his agreement.

Glenn patted Danny's shoulder like he was afraid it might break.

"Just to say, we'll be here all night, you know?"

The pain that swept through Danny's gut gave no warning. It

stabbed at his stomach, puckered his asshole. Sweat erupted on his forehead. He sprang to his feet, and his chair toppled backward. It smacked the floor—*Bang!* Glen started to ask what was wrong, but Danny was already waddling to the door where he'd come in, only to realize he didn't know where the bathroom was.

He stopped in the middle of the room, holding everything tight, afraid if he opened his mouth for directions, he would fall to pieces.

Tina, Sal, and Glenn looked at each other. They all thought he was going to vomit.

Tina said, "Go ahead, baby. It's alright."

Danny collapsed to his knees. Release. The heat of it running down his hamstrings, spreading across his skin and soaking his jeans. He could hardly believe the stench.

"Stay back," he said.

And then a new memory, a clear one, struck him in the middle of the forehead like a sniper shot. He'd said the same thing, or tried to, when he felt the hands of his comrades on him, lying in the wreckage of the chemical toilet, cut and broken and dying. What if another mortar fell? What if people died because he'd lingered after a satisfying shit?

They ignored him of course. They lifted him up, uncaring about the smells and the stains his blood put on their clothes. They carried him for hundreds of meters to the helipad. They reassured him the whole way.

You're not going to die. We won't let you.

They hoisted him into the chopper and strapped him down and told him they'd see him soon. They squeezed his good hand.

He remembered all this for the first time, sitting there in

his own filth. And then he was levitating again, as Sal and Glenn hoisted him to his feet. They guided him toward the bathroom.

"Thanks," said Danny.

They agreed it was no trouble at all. Danny had his arms around both of them, and he thought that Glenn was sturdier than he seemed, and that Sal had a more tender touch than he'd expected.

Tina waited until they'd gone out of the bar room before she pulled another pint for Danny. She set it in front of the chair next to Sal's seat. She figured that's where he'd be sitting when they returned.