

Peter Molin's Strike Through the Mask!: "So Say We All and the Veterans Writing Workshop"



Justin Hudnall, the founder and director of the San Diego-based performative writing-and-reading collective So Say We All, asked me to lead a Zoom writing workshop for veterans and veteran-affiliated writers. (The event was co-sponsored by The Wrath-Bearing Tree.) I first met Hudnall many years ago at a writing conference and have long admired what he has achieved with So Say We All. Judging from their social media posts, their readings are very well-attended and lively and fun. They are not always centered on veterans writing, but many have

been, and Hudnall has sponsored several writing series specifically for veterans and has published anthologies of vet-writing.

Hudnall asked nice, and I wasn't about to say "no." The thing is, though, I'm not much of a creative writer or a memoirist. I do teach writing, but it's college composition and research papers, not imaginative literature. Nor have I have attended an MFA program. I didn't feel completely unqualified, because I have participated and led vet-writing workshops before. But compared to vet-writers such as Ron Capps, Matt Gallagher, and Tracy Crow, authors with many published books who have led dozens and hundreds of writing classes, I knew I didn't bring much experience or authority to the endeavor. But Hudnall believed in me, and I was intrigued.

One reason I was intrigued is that vet-writing workshops have been huge forces in contemporary war-writing. Organizations such as Warrior Writers, Veterans Writing Project, Words After War, The War Horse, and Voices from War have been instrumental in helping veterans discover their writing voices, find outlets for publication, and build audiences. Situated structurally midway between isolated amateurs in the hinterlands and professional publication in New York City or elsewhere, writing workshops, along with online vet-writing journals, form the material core of the vet-writing scene.

The evening of my workshop, I logged on to find ten participants waiting. The mix was evenly split between men and women. Two Vietnam vets were in attendance; the others were post-9/11. A few had not served in uniform, but had family members who were vets or had worked for the military. I knew a couple, and learned that several had published before, while others were just beginning their writing journeys. The subtitle of our workshop was "Finding Your Voice," which suggests that it was aimed at beginning writers, but I had prepared writing prompts meant to engage both new and experienced writers, veterans and civilians alike. We had two hours, and

so I had crafted four prompts, thinking we'd probably have time for three, with one in reserve.

The prompts were designed to preclude dark or graphic responses, which was somewhat disingenuous given that's exactly what many vets want to explore in their writing. Still, good work could be done, I thought, helping participants connect physical detail with emotional resonance in regard to less sensational subjects. I allotted fifteen minutes for writing on each subject, with ten-to-fifteen minutes following to discuss and share.

The first prompt I borrowed from a Warrior Writers workshop I had attended: "Write about an article of uniform or piece of equipment that was important to you and still lingers in your memory." I've seen this prompt used in other places, too, and there's even been contests built around the theme. It's also a staple subject of vet social-media threads, so I thought it would be a good one to start with.

I wrote to this prompt alongside the attendees. In truth, I had been thinking about the prompt all day and then wrote my passage an hour or so before the actual workshop. Be that as it may, I wrote about Leatherman utility knives:

When I first joined the Army I noticed that many soldiers more experienced than me carried on their belt not just a jackknife, but a particular kind of multi-purpose tool called a Leatherman. The Leatherman resembled a Swiss Army Knife, but without the elegance of design. Where a Swiss Army knife seems like, well, it was made by Swiss artisans, a Leatherman was dull black and seemed forged out of cheap or leftover tin. It wasn't even all that functional. When I got my hands on one for the first time, I noticed right away that the blade was neither long nor sharp, the bottle and can openers marginally useful, and the scissors and saw functions pathetic. A saw? The only function that seemed like it could be useful were the pliers, but how often was that going to be necessary? Plus,

when I priced a Leatherman in the local military gear store, it seemed very expensive for what you were getting.

But that's the thing—the idea was not to buy a Leatherman with your own money, but to obtain one through your unit supply shop. Leathermans were cool; the soldiers who had them whipped them out with panache and were always all the time finding some little task to do that could only be performed with one of the multitools. And not only did all the cool guys have a Leatherman, they were able to obtain them for free, because they knew someone in supply with whom they had made a deal to get one off-the-books. To actually have to buy a Leatherman was evidence that you weren't yet worthy enough to wield one. If you were a newbie in the unit, not having a Leatherman was a sign of exactly how new you were.

And so it was for the first twenty years of my military career. No Leatherman for me, just ordinary old pocket-knives of one brand or another. But then, in training at Fort Riley prior to deployment to Afghanistan, we drew a lot of personal gear. In fact, we drew gear three times at three different places, and there were individual issues as well. And every time we opened our bag to receive new equipment, the supply guy would drop in a Leatherman. Not once, not twice, not three times. By the time I packed my duffle bags to fly to Afghanistan I had four Leathermans.

I didn't think I was now cool, but something had changed, and things were different.

I shared this vignette and we discussed it for a few minutes. A participant then volunteered to read his vignette, which against my expectations, turned out to be very graphic. I offered comments meant to be supportive while also returning things to a less intense place. Other participants either had not written anything or were not ready to share, so we talked generally about the prompt and writing process.

The second prompt invited participants to write on a trip they had made in the military, or just before or just after. This prompt was inspired by a University of California summer writing-intensive for veterans I had once co-taught. At the writing-intensive, a student-veteran of Chinese-Uighur descent had written about a trip he had made cross-country from Fort Benning, GA, to California after completing his service. His short essay, which described the places and people he had met on this long trip, with the residue of Army-service and his family in China on his mind, had many of us in tears when he read it at our final group event.

I hoped to capture some of this magic, and indeed this prompt was more of a hit than the first one. Most of the attendees either read their vignette or chimed in with comments about memorable military journeys. One vignette described a bus ride while on leave through the wilds of New Jersey and New York. Another described deploying into the Middle East at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom on a military landing craft. I didn't write on this prompt, but read a classic Brian Turner poem, "Night in Blue," about flying home from war:

*At seven thousand feet and looking back, running lights
blacked out under the wings and America waiting.
a year of my life disappears at midnight,
the sky a deep viridian, the houselights below
small as match heads burned down to embers...*

We only had time for one more prompt, so I posted one that occurred to me from reading the veteran fiction and short-stories: I asked participants to describe a memorable character they had met while in the military. Like the second prompt, this one generated a vibrant response. Everyone either read or spoke about a larger-than-life person they had known in the military. In some cases the vignettes were light-

hearted and affectionate. More seriously, one was about someone who had been important in the author's life at one point but who had since drifted away or perhaps was no longer alive.

As a model for consideration, I deliberated between two vignettes from contemporary novels. One was from Nico Walker's novel *Cherry* in which Walker describes the death of a platoon-mate named Jimenez:

The battle roster number was EAJ-0888, and we were trying to think of who that was. We knew it was a guy from First Platoon because Staff Sergeant White had called it in. We knew it wasn't Specialist Jackson, First Platoon's medic, since line medics weren't attached to Bravo from HHC and if the dead guy were Jackson the battle roster number would have started with HHC and not E. The first initial A wasn't much help as we weren't in the habit of calling one another by our first name. It took us the better part of ten minutes to come up with a guy from Third Platoon whose last name started with the letter J...

The last time I saw him was about eight hours before Haji killed him. He'd been boxing Staff Sergeant Castro in the weight room, sparring, and Castro had popped him on the nose pretty good so his nose was bleeding—not broken or anything, just bleeding...

Jimenez was a cherry...

The other passage was from Stephen Markley's novel *Ohio*. Markley's not a veteran and *Ohio's* not exactly about the military and war, but two soldiers who fought overseas are central characters. In one place, Markley describes a group of soldiers reminiscing about a deceased comrade named Greg Coyle who referred to everything as a "MacDougal," as in "Bring that MacDougal over here" or "And then this MacDougal said...":

When they stood for inspections, Dan, like everyone, would get

ripped, maybe because he'd stored his compression bandages in the wrong place or always tried to get away with not wearing the side plates of his body armor (those heavy, awkward five-by-five bastards). Greg Coyle, no matter how goofy he was, never got ripped, was always on point. Coyle, who referred to everything as a "MacDougal." A bore snake, pliers, a target at the range, military-age males, MREs, ops, battalion—they were all just MacDougals to him. To the dismay of the whole company, within weeks of their deployment everyone was saying it.

"We're getting those up-armored MacDougals next month."

"Those powdered MacDougals—goddamn! Better than Mom's homemade MacDougal."

"That other MacDougal was getting rocked by IEMacDougals."

They landed in Iraq in 2006, when the country was no joke, but that joke worked right through rocket attacks and EFPs.

The second thing Dan did after he got out and visited Rudy in the hospital was attend Bren Della Terza's wedding in Austin, Texas. A lot of his friends from Iraq were there, guys he hadn't seen in a while because they'd gotten out after two tours. Badamier, Lieutenant Holt, Cleary, Wong, Doc Laymon, Drake in his wheelchair, "Other James" Streiss, now with two robot hands. They of course got drunk and began referring to everything as a "MacDougal," annoying the hell out of those piqued Texas bridesmaids. Decent, churchgoing women who had never seen soldiers cut loose. How hilariously stupid they could be. In his buzz, Dan found himself wishing to return to 2006, to be back on patrol with his friends.

Ultimately, I chose the Ohio passage; the death of Jimenez passage from Cherry is fantastic but also both graphic and full of Army infantry jargon I was not sure everyone would get.

At this point, nearing the end, everyone except one participant had shared at least one vignette. This last participant now volunteered to read his passage in response to the first prompt, about a piece of military equipment. As he read, I could see why he had hesitated at first. The piece was brooding and complex; the piece of equipment was intimately connected with a serious family event, but widely separated by the passage of time. For such a short piece, it really packed a punch; it was both very moving and also very accomplished. I was glad the author shared it with us, and I hope he finds means to share it more widely in the future.

And with that our time was up. "You're up, you're moving, you're down," as we used to say in the Army to describe the quickness with which infantry soldiers must pop up-and-down when charging against enemy fire. I didn't offer many pearls of writing wisdom, nor tips for professional success. The main thing was to make the event absorbing in the moment. Writing is an individualistic endeavor at heart, but I wanted to convey how meaningful writing can also be inspired by the company of sympathetic fellow authors.

As I reflected on the event in the days following, I realized I had not availed myself of two very worthy vet-writing handbooks: Ron Capps' *Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story* (2011) and Tracy Crow's *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Story* (2015). Both are full of sensible advice, inspiring examples, and creative writing prompts. *Writing War* includes many excerpts from classic and contemporary published war-writing, while *On Point* offers more personal modeling of how the events of one's life might be transformed into memorable prose relatable to all. But each is highly recommended.

So, to end, thank you Justin Hudnall. Other workshops in the So Say We All/Wrath-Bearing Tree series have been led by Andria Williams, Abbey Murray, and Halle Shilling. I don't know Shilling, but I can vouch that Williams and Murray are

both authors and teachers with much to offer students and emerging writers.

Another author in the war-writing scene, Jesse Goolsby, once wrote, "There are blank pages in front of us all. If one wants a different war story then go write it, and I wish you well." I like the spirit of that, and I hope that the So Say We All/Wrath-Bearing Tree collaboration continues. Here's to all the leaders of vet-writing workshops and to all who participate in them.

Works mentioned in this article:

Ron Capps, *Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story*. CreateSpace, 2011.

Tracy Crow: *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Story*. Potomac, 2015.

Stephen Markley, *Ohio*. Simon and Schuster, 2019.

Brian Turner, "Night in Blue," *Here, Bullet*. Alice James, 2005.

Nico Walker, *Cherry*. Knopf, 2018.



New Poetry by Corbett Buchly: “Messages from Below”



SWAM AMONG STARS / *image by*
Amalie Flynn

messages from below

the radio signals emanated from the depths
commuters puzzled over the whistles and squawks
that cut through their favorite programs
cryptologists went to work

but the waves soon turned to beams
tunnels of coded energy
aimed not at humans
but at a point somewhere near Wolf 359

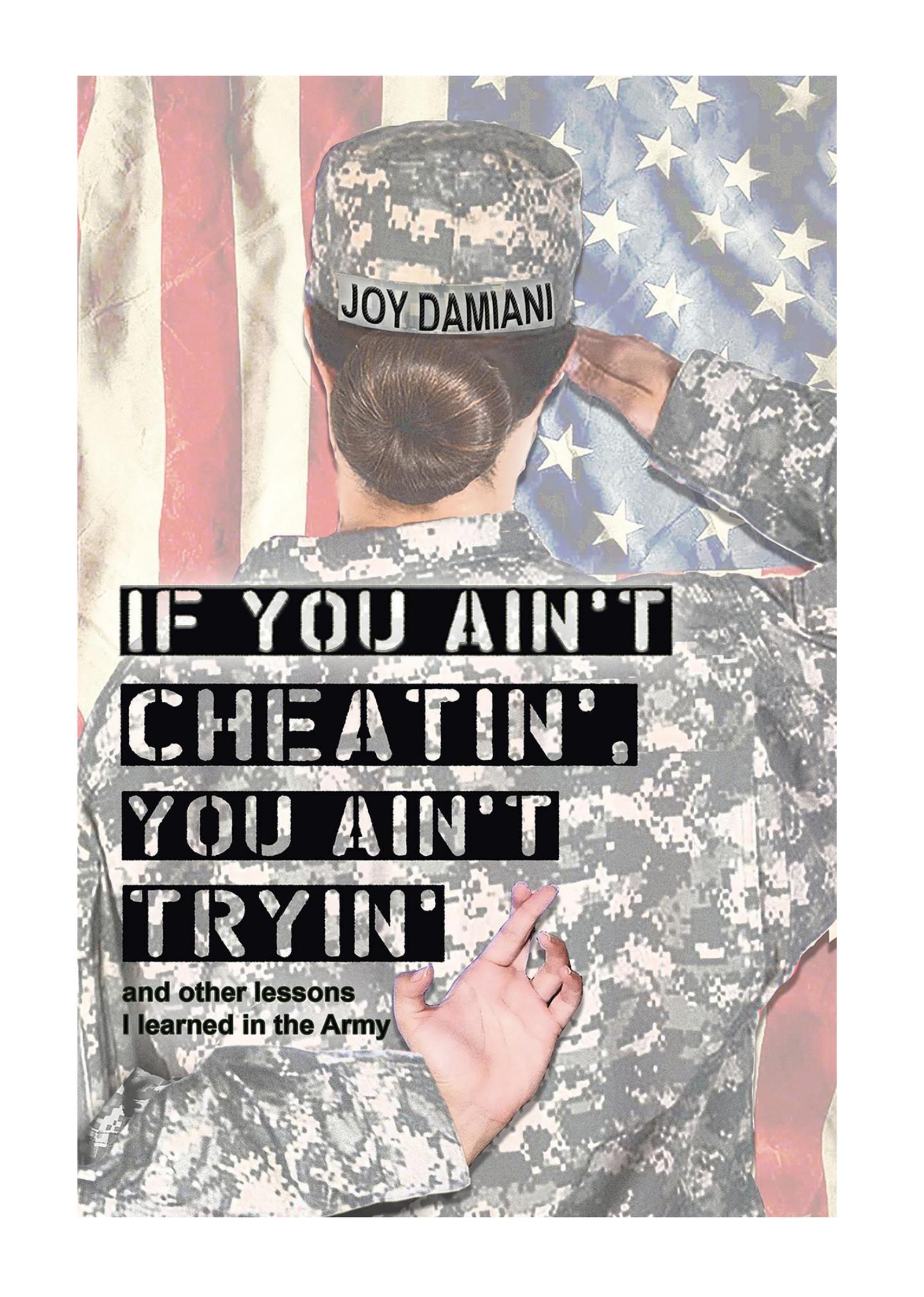
first assumed to be a submarine human colony
but scans showed no excess carbon emissions
so dolphins were next guessed to be the cause
no one suspected the humpbacks

as the oceans acidified and the air warmed

the whales were busy
at last their solar ships rose from the sea
and the whales ascended

as if rungs laddered from deep to deep
born of the sea they swam among stars

**New Nonfiction from Larry
Abbott: Review of Joy
Damiani's "If You Ain't
Cheatin', You Ain't Tryin'"**



JOY DAMIANI

**IF YOU AIN'T
CHEATIN',
YOU AIN'T
TRYIN'**

**and other lessons
I learned in the Army**

Joy Damiani: *If You Ain't Cheatin', You Ain't Tryin' (and other lessons I learned in the Army)*

[Available on Amazon in Kindle and paperback versions](#)

You will hate this book. You will hate being compelled to finish Damiani's story in one sitting (you're excused if it takes two). You will hate spewing coffee (or other beverage) onto your computer keys if you are reading the book on Kindle, or sopping a few pages of the paperback, because of Damiani's humor and sarcasm. And you will hate that the story she tells is, regrettably, true, not only about her personal experiences but also about her analysis of military culture in general and the Iraq War.

Formerly known as Emily Yates, the author now goes by Joy (her middle name) Damiani (her family name). She "traded in" her "old name" to put closure on her divorce and to move ahead with new projects. As a musician and songwriter she has released a number of albums and music videos; a recent music video, a lively romp, is entitled "Brains in Meat Suits." She is also a poet. "I Am the Savage" relates to her time in Iraq, while "Yellow Ribbon" criticizes the empty patriotism of civilians who feel that a yellow ribbon on their car absolves them of complicity in war. Damiani has published essays on veterans' issues, especially the difficulties faced by women vets returning home.

She now turns to memoir. *If You Ain't Cheatin', You Ain't Tryin'* (Joy Damiani Words & Music, 2022), "Dedicated to every veteran who has lived these lessons and to every young person who learns them for the first time here," is divided into thirteen chapters that describe Damiani's teenage pre-military years, the reasons she joined the Army at age 19, her six years in the military, with two Iraq deployments writing "Army news" as a Public Affairs Specialist, and concluding chapters that assesses her experiences and offers a bit on her immediate post-deployment life.

The book begins with a brief mention of 9/11 and then a flashforward to 2004, where Damiani, as a nineteen-year old Public Affairs Specialist, has to revise the post newspaper to include a KIA report and a photograph. She “mechanically considered” the change, “calculating the dead in terms of column inches.” Then she learns that the KIA was actually a friend, Tuazon; he had only been in Iraq for two months. She had learned to separate herself from any emotions about her stories, especially about those killed, but she realizes her well-crafted professionalism is starting to crack when she thinks of all the dead and that she is just repeating a script: “A wave of nausea washes over my body . . . I was so proud of my well-rehearsed presentation—showing no sorrow, always professional! But now I seem to be playing the part without trying.” She smooths over the crack with Jim Beam.

Damiani’s journey to the Army is somewhat circuitous. Her sarcastic bent and dislike of authority lead her parents to more or less spirit her away to the Family Foundation School in order to cure her of her sins of sarcasm and rebellion. (The Family Foundation School, in Hancock, New York, closed in 2014 amid lawsuits and accusations of physical, psychological, and emotional abuse of its teenage students). In the eighteen months plus she spends at the school the only bright spot is a class in folk music, where she develops an “affinity” for Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Kris Kristofferson, among others, and writers Jack Kerouac and Hunter S. Thompson. Sure cures for rebellion! Unfortunately, Damiani is not suitably cured of her sarcasm, and she faces another six months of “supervised rock-picking.” Eventually, she decides to leave the school and hitchhikes back home to Syracuse, where her parents put her on a strict regimen in order to live at home. She also enrolls in a local community college and after six months back home gets a call from an Army recruiter, offering her, for a five-year hitch, a journalism, or “Public Affairs Specialist,” opportunity. It takes Damiani all of twelve seconds to answer in the affirmative.

She goes to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for basic training. She stumbles through, with sprains, blisters, a broken nose, and two black eyes, but compared to her time at the Family Foundation School she writes that, "the Army's attempts at indoctrination seem almost quaint." Her rebellious tendencies are still in evidence: She does qualify in marksmanship but names her M16 A-2 rifle "Bungalow Bill" after the Beatles' song. She also pokes her finger in the eye of the Army in other ways: "The drill sergeants ignore me when I hum 'The Times, They Are A-Changin'' while on guard duty, or when I use my turn calling marching cadences to lead the platoon in a rousing chorus of 'War! What is it good for?'"

The next chapters detail Damiani's first deployment to Kuwait for training and then to Iraq. When she finally reaches Baghdad her job "is to put out a decent newspaper . . . I've come to take it seriously." Although she is still a rhombic peg in a triangular hole she does have the commitment to do her best; "the option of apathy has never even been on the table before." She has integrity about her work even as she remains cynical about the "big picture." At the same time her dream of being a real "war reporter" is evaporating: "Now, I feel defeated, rotting away in a combat-zone cubicle, waiting-wishing-for one of those incessant mortar attacks to successfully explode the headquarters." After her complaints, bordering on insubordination, Damiani does get the opportunity to go out on joint U.S. and Iraqi patrols. Unfortunately, that assignment is short-lived. Because of her criticism of an incompetent co-worker on the journalism team, she is removed from her associate editor position and basically has to cut and paste articles from Google searches. She still has seven months to go.

After a year in Iraq Damiani's cynical side begins to emerge more and more. She writes: "I've already spent the better (or worse) part of twelve months in Iraq as part of what I have come to recognize as an illegally-invading force." She notes

that Orwellian language needs to be used to present everything in a positive light. “‘Interrogation’ becomes ‘intelligence-gathering’”; the “occupation” is “‘reconstruction’”; the “war” is a “‘peace-keeping mission’”; “suicides” become “‘non-combat-related deaths.’” She feels herself to be a “foreign invader.”

Interspersed with her time in Iraq, Damiani uses flashbacks to chronicle her disastrous marriage. She was married a few months before deployment and right before her return to the States after a year in Iraq she realizes that the relationship had devolved further, that she has become “expendable.” As she sits alone in her trailer at Camp Liberty she reaches her nadir, writing that she “eyed my assault rifle and let my mind wander . . . absentmindedly measuring the distance from the trigger to the barrel, the distance from my fingers to my head.” Damiani does return home and the marriage hits bottom, involving her arrest for domestic violence and a stay in a psychiatric hospital after suicide threats. She is released after seventy-two hours and returns to work at [what base?]: “The information war must go on. The war inside my head will have to wait.” Her resentment over assignments grows: “I’ve come to accept that by the time a typical day is over, I will want to cut someone open and feed them their own intestines. I see this as a step forward in my quest for self-realization and inner peace.”

When there appears to be light at the end of the military tunnel the threat of stop-loss is the oncoming train, to paraphrase poet Robert Lowell. Damiani believes that she will be out before stop-loss takes effect, and if she re-enlists she can choose her duty, but the Army comes up with a creative way to hold on to her. They devise an Orwellian “do-not-retain,” but still deployable list, albeit a falsehood, which is a method to guarantee her second deployment to Iraq. Damiani agrees (without really agreeing) to return, and it is worth a look at her reason: “The thought crosses my mind that

I would feel like a jackass if I tried to get out of the Army on time while everyone around me shipped out. Even if it was an option, could I bring myself to be that soldier? I'm not deploying because I want to, or because I think it's a good idea. I'm doing it because deep down, I believe that if I don't do it—if I get out of it on a technicality—I will be making light of everyone else's sacrifice. I'll be saying that I am special, that I deserve to stay home when my fellow soldiers pack up and go to war, and that the contract I signed is negotiable . . . Without realizing it, despite every effort to resist the Army's conditioning and retain control of at least my own mind, I have suddenly become the kind of soldier the Army has always wanted: even when given the choice, I can't quit the team."

She returns to Iraq for fifteen months, and the Public Affairs duties are not much better. Damiani's major project is photographing visiting morale-boosting cheerleaders. She also details the secretive drinking and an attempted sexual assault by two soldiers she thought were friends. Faced with an extended deployment, she decides on the (not so) subtle course of annoying her superiors ("Intimately aware of the drastic repercussions for out-and-out revolt, I've swiveled my sights in the familiar direction of subtle rebellion. The delicate dance of expressing my displeasure while also staying out of trouble requires more finesse than I usually can claim").

This entails including quotes from Hunter S. Thompson and lyrics from Bob Dylan in official emails, to the consternation of a major and a colonel, and creating a custom-made ID badge with a decidedly unserious face.

As the memoir winds down, Damiani becomes more critical and somber about the whole enterprise, seeing failure everywhere. She writes: "As far as I can tell, five years after the 'surgical' airstrikes flashily-nicknamed 'Shock and Awe' leveled the nation's cities, government, and infrastructure, our presence in Iraq is a clear indicator that if an exit

strategy ever existed here, it has to have gone horribly awry. Either that, or—I shudder at the thought that I don't want to believe—this whole debacle could be intentional.” As a kind of bookend to the death of Tuazon mentioned at the beginning of the book, she learns of the death of a friend from her first deployment, Mele, killed by an IED. Choking back tears she is left with one thought: *“What is the fucking point of this? What. Is. The fucking. Point? Nobody is winning here.”*

The book closes in 2011, three years after Damiani's return to the States. She is twenty-nine years old. She spends some of her GI Bill at Cal Berkeley, where one of her courses includes study of the Iraq War. Her fellow students are ten years younger. To them, the war is an object of study; to her, it is still “present tense.” She writes: “My friends are still fighting it, after all. Sometimes I wonder if I am, too.” She begins to second-guess herself with “what ifs?” and “maybes.” But after all is said and done, she ends with the recognition that “The Army didn't make me blind. My sight is the clearest it's ever been.”

Although she might protest my estimation, Damiani is the type of soldier the Army *needs*. She refused to take the easy way out, to fall victim to simply “playing the game” to make her time more agreeable. Even with the disappointments, the misery, the betrayals, and the lies that she endures, sometimes with humor, sometimes with rancor, she retains the integrity of her commitment.

For further reading:

“Joy Damiani, Writer, Podcaster, Musician, and Army Veteran,”
Interview with Frank Morano,
<https://wabcradio.com/episode/joy-damiani-writer-podcaster-musician-and-army-veteran-11-11-2022/>

A selection of music videos:
<https://www.youtube.com/c/JoyDamiani>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/joydamianmusic/>

<https://www.wrath-bearingtree.com/2020/09/artist-profile-musician-emily-yates/>

New Nonfiction from Thomas Donovan: “After the War”



Marines Walk Over Hills, Guadalcanal, 10 January 1943

There was a heavy snowfall that February night in 1946. A six-year-old boy watched from his bedroom window as the big

snowflakes slowly covered everything. The intrusive sounds of my Uncle Ray's raspy cough and talking to himself sounded louder than usual.

When World War II ended, my father's brother Ray, after serving 27 years in the Marine Corps, retired as a Master Gunnery Sergeant and came to live with us. Ray saw action on Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Midway, and the Philippines. Hidden in his dresser drawer was a box of combat medals including several Purple Hearts, none of which he ever talked about.

Three weeks of every month Ray walked around the apartment like he had a ramrod up his back. Never talkative or loud, always clean-shaven and neatly dressed. But the arrival of his monthly pension check was the start of a tough four days for the family. Ray kept just enough of that check to finance his monthly four-day bender. Surrounded by enough beer and cheap whisky, he stayed almost legless for those four days. Eating very little, he just sat at the kitchen table, drinking around the clock.

Usually a somber and quiet man, during the daylight hours our drunken uncle suddenly became a talkative, funny and entertaining guy. At night, not so much. Ray raved, sang and talked all night to his buddies who lost their lives on those South Pacific islands. Nights like that always seemed longer than usual. The mornings always smelled of stale beer and spilled whiskey. The family tried to somehow adjust.

Along came that pristine snowy night in February '46 when the snowflakes fell

like in one of those snow globes that people shake. That night Ray crossed over some mental bridge into a land where things were not what they seemed. At 2 AM he barged into Mom and Pop's bedroom. Loudly he insisted they both needed to get up and come into his room where he had this guy Martin Block in the dresser drawer.

Dad worked three jobs; Mom worked one. They got little enough sleep, so I was surprised to see them follow Ray down the hallway to his bedroom.

Being six years old and by no means at the top of my class, I still knew a few things. One was that this guy Martin Block was a radio personality who hosted a music show on WNEW called "Make Believe Ballroom." I was also pretty sure this Block guy wasn't anywhere to be found in my uncle's bedroom, let alone a dresser drawer. I crept into the hallway where I could watch.

The voices grew louder and took on a harder tone. My hands began to sweat. Ray shook the dresser, yanked open drawers and pulled clothes out. He shouted, "Damn it, Block, they're here. Where the hell are you?"

Pop turned to leave. Attempting to stop him, Ray slipped and knocked Mom down. Seeing she was OK, Pop flew into a rage. He slammed Ray against the wall and threw him on the bed. "That's it. I'm finished with you. First thing in the morning, I want you the hell out of here."

Ray tried to get back up on his feet and slipped down on the bed, "You want me out of here, I'll leave right now."

"Good, and take your cheap whisky with you." With that my father led Mom to their bedroom and closed the door.

Ray, using the dresser for support, slowly pulled himself to his feet. Still cursing Martin Block, he staggered over to his closet and pulled out a ratty old suitcase. He crammed in whatever he could grab. Struggling out of his undershirt, Ray stood there naked from the waist up.

His misshapen body was covered with scars. There were long lacerations, incisions, and signs of wounds that had been crudely stitched up. Having never seen him shirtless, I

suddenly realized the price he paid for those Purple Hearts.

Ray slipped into a fresh undershirt and took a clean-pressed khaki Marine Corps shirt from the closet. After some trouble locating the armholes, he finally got it buttoned and tucked in. He pulled on an old coat and placed his Marine Corps hat on his head. Straightening up, he looked at himself in the mirror, and saluted.

When he shuffled down the hallway I stepped into view. Barely upright, Ray leaned against the wall. "Uncle Ray, don't go," I pleaded. "Wait until tomorrow. It's snowing hard out there."

"Sorry kid. Not staying where I'm not wanted." He stumbled out the apartment door into the cold. Bare fingers pulled the coat collar around his neck in the blowing snow.

From my bedroom window, I watched Ray leaving tracks through the deep drifts. He stopped and turned, as out of nowhere in the deserted street someone came running up behind him.

Falling snow made it hard to see. The two figures grappled, and the man ripped the suitcase from Ray's hand. Then he put his arm around Ray's shoulders and steered him back towards the apartment.

That's when I spotted the dark grey pajama cuffs sticking out from the bottom of my father's coat as he led his brother back through the snow. Mom was waiting by the front door as Pop led Ray into his bedroom.

My father never cried – never. But the snow must have left some dampness on his face as Mom reached up with her ever-present Kleenex and wiped away the moisture. Pop stammered as he tried to tell her not to worry. He would do something about Ray; he'd take care of it. Mom cupped both her hands on his face. "It's OK, Frank. Come to bed."

Still at my bedroom window, I watched those large, soft

snowflakes slowly fill up the tracks on the sidewalk. Soon they'd be no sign that anything had ever happened out there. It'd all be gone. Except for the memories – those memories remain.

New Fiction from Eddie Freeman: “The Skirt Fetcher”



Sadie was a do-gooder, someone who was aware of the deeply rooted systematic injustices that perpetuated oppression throughout the world, and who wanted to do something meaningful about it. She was a liberal cliché and she knew it. Sadie found it interesting how drugs caused the woman who lived behind the grocery store to give an outward physical representation to the inner processes of her mind. Which is to say, while most of us carted around incorrectly remembered personal histories, useless grievances, and unhelpful fantasies, this woman had found a way to bring her mental garbage into the physical realm; she filled shopping carts full of non-redeemable waste, trash which was result of overproduction which was caused by capitalism. Sadie could admit that she did not want the transient woman in her own apartment, and she didn't believe handing money to the woman would be helpful, but almost involuntarily, Sadie cultivated empathy for the woman. Sadie's mental garden of empathy was bathed daily in love, and attention, but it was admittedly hard for Sadie to share the fruits of this garden with anyone. Sadie strived to pass out her excess empathy at her workplace, as though her empathetic thoughts were lemons that grew in unneeded quantities in her front yard and could be left up for

grabs in a plastic bag by the cash register. Sadie worked for Saint-Loup, a high-end clothing boutique.

A stocky woman, wearing expensive boots and a fashionable top entered the store. The woman maintained a powerful-yet-clumsy gait, as though she were important but unsure of herself.

“Villeparisis dress, size forty,” the woman said.

It took Sadie a moment to realize the woman was requesting a garment. Sadie fetched the dress from the back and brought it to the sale’s floor. The shade of the dress channeled a rosé targeted at hip young women. The dress had a sash in front which, if asked, Sadie would describe as sexy-Michelle-Obama chic. Had the designer not added a few almost imperceptible qualities, the piece would resemble something a punk girl could wear to prom to both sincerely celebrate and ironically comment on the occasion. The Villeparisis’ touch ensured the garment was worthy of a stylish and well-mannered rich woman. The outfit was cliché, original, traditional, and new, all at once. Though, in Sadie’s opinion, the garb was a few years out of style. The woman tried it on and nodded. Some women, who were spending upwards of four thousand dollars on a dress, wanted Sadie to spend the better part of an hour engaging in flattery. Sadie sensed that this woman wanted as little human emotion as feasible to seep into the interaction. The woman paid with a card, and Sadie learned her name was Rachel. When Sadie handed Rachel the bag containing the dress, Rachel grabbed it without a word and walked out.

Sadie, who was thirty years old, lived with her mother and younger brother in Napa. For a time, she had paid sixteen hundred dollars a month to rent a detached in-law unit, which consisted of four hundred square feet of livable space. That space had been cramped with her mattress and boxes containing psychology text books, much loved novels of her childhood and books she had not yet had the chance to read. Most nights, her seventy-year-old female landlord invited her into the main

house to watch TV. Sadie accepted. After a year and half of watching murder shows on the couch of her landlord, she figured that if she was going to spend her nights watching TV with an older lady, she might as well save sixteen hundred dollars a month and live with her mom.

At dinner that night, a pizza her brother brought home from his job at King's Pizza, Sadie recounted her interaction with Rachel. Though their exchange with Rachel was wordless, Sadie believed she had allowed her acceptance of Rachel to shine through her eyes.

"It's possible she just didn't want to talk," her brother, said. "Like, maybe she was holding in a fart."

When Sadie was twenty-one, she had graduated from the University of Irvine with a Bachelors in Psychology. She knew that to utilize her degree and training, she would need either a masters or a doctorate. Instead of immediately applying to graduate school, Sadie increased her hours at Target. She had no illusions about the American health care system. She knew that an individual's insurance might cover a year of therapy sessions, but by the time a provider had an opening, six months of that year had passed, and then the individual might be seen less than once a month. Sadie daydreamed about opening her own clinic where financially strapped people could walk in and receive free therapeutic attention, but she also knew that earning a doctorate would put her in six figures in debt. As a woman in her early twenties, she had believed she was using everything she had learned from the university when she helped Target customers, some of whom could clearly benefit from mental health services. She gave them as much validation and encouragement as she could. For Sadie, the logical next step was to work for a high-end clothing boutique that paid its employees more, and had fewer customers. That way, Sadie could shower the relatively small number of shoppers with meaningful attention. Sadie had recently begun working for Saint-Loup. She had embarked on her dream job. She was beginning to

understand that her brother and mother viewed her life choices differently.

Two weeks later, Rachel returned to Saint-Loup. She said she wanted a conservative cocktail dress, something that would be appropriate for her son's birthday party. Rachel had offered a detail about her personal life and Sadie would not shirk from the opportunity to support her.

"I couldn't imagine being a mother. The cooking, cleaning, waking the kids up, being a chauffeur, it's like you work twelve jobs," Sadie said.

"My son is twenty-four," Rachel said.

Sadie nodded empathetically.

Sadie wanted to be absolutely present. With her facial expression, she yearned to say that even if Rachel was addicted to pain pills, even if she interacted with her child as little as possible, even if she spent every day burning through her husband's money, and had never had a job of her own, Sadie would give the woman something that she lacked—something that she needed. She smiled as though she would give her soul to Rachel, as though, if she had her druthers, she would run away with Rachel to a concert, a night club, or a cabin in the woods, where the two friends would share with each other, from the infinite patience dwelling inside of them, except, it wouldn't really be patience, because patience wasn't needed with friends who cared so deeply about each other.

Rachel found a dress, tried it on, and decided not to buy it.

Sadie's mom made turkey chili for dinner that night. Her brother Evan ate quickly, putting away more than his two

female family members combined.

“At work today, this old boomer was screaming, you make people eat out of a box at this restaurant? Cause I accidentally entered his order in as to-go. I put his pizza on a pan and he was fine. Anyway, it’s too bad you weren’t there Sadie. You could’ve given him your phone number, and told him that when he woke up in the middle of the night, weeks later, upset that his pizza was in a box, he could’ve called you, and received comfort and support,” Evan said.

His smile indicated that he had thought up this joke hours ago and had waited all day to deliver it at the world.

“And it’s too bad you’re not a stand-up comedian, because humanity would benefit immensely from your witty observations on life,” Sadie said.

After dinner, Sadie went to her bedroom and browsed Tinder. The first profile she saw belonged to Tony, a man she knew in high school. Sadie acknowledged the significant drawbacks involved with online dating in her hometown. She swiped left on Tony and blocked his profile. Almost immediately, her phone rang. She cursed herself for maintaining the same phone number since she was fourteen years old.

“Yes?” Sadie said.

“It’s nice to hear your voice,” Tony said.

Sadie said nothing.

“I’m wondering if you told people... about our thing... because, I’m an important person in tech now. ... I want to know you’re not disparaging my reputation,” Tony said.

“Oh,” Sadie said.

“If you told anyone, you should tell them you forgive me.”

"I don't forgive you," Sadie said.

She hung up her phone and blocked the number. Once, when Sadie was in high school, she had found Tony attractive. He invited her to his house when his parents were out of town. She drank the whiskey and cokes he handed her. She had been able to keep her clothes on, but he had forced himself on top of her, grabbed parts of her body, penetrated her with his fingers, and brought himself to completion. At the time, she told no adults of the incident.

At the store the next morning, Sadie noticed a short man in a starched, tucked in, checkered dress shirt, and grey slacks. Sadie asked a number of times if he needed help, but he always demurred. He was content to watch the store while writing things on his phone. The other employee on the sale's floor ignored the man completely.

A couple in their sixties walked in. The woman wore heels, faux leather pants, and a flowy grey cashmere sweater over a white top. The man, who was shorter than his wife, dressed in worn blue jeans and an old Kirkland flannel, as though proudly flaunting his wife's fashionable inclinations. The woman admired a long, Verdurin scarf. Sadie stood by eagerly. The man locked eyes with her.

"This would make a great addition to my rape kit," the man said.

"He's so wild," the woman said, and patted his arm.

"I'm looking at woman's clothes, I just want my life back," the man said.

"We admire your sacrifice," Sadie said.

After the couple left, Rachel entered the store. There were customers who called out to Sadie because of their obvious

need, a need that perhaps only Sadie could perceive. Sadie wanted a valid connection with Rachel's core. Rachel exited the fitting room wearing a twelve-hundred-dollar sweater.

"It looks fine," Sadie said.

Rachel reentered the dressing room. As Rachel changed, Sadie thought about a time when she was a child, when she viewed her friends as a natural resource that enabled her to live, no less necessary to her existence than clean drinking water.

Sadie saw her current life as relatively empty. She had excess energy to devote to Rachel, but had absconded from her duty.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said you looked fine. You looked absolutely incredible in the sweater. It was stunning," Sadie said.

"It's okay," Rachel said.

"No, you're an incredible woman, and the sweater brought out your incredible nature. I should've told you that you're incredible. I'm just off today," Sadie said.

Rachel said nothing.

Sadie took a deep breath.

"I'm off today because this boy sexually assaulted me in high school and last night he called me on the phone," Sadie said.

"Oh, I hope the rest of your day goes better," Rachel said.

Rachel looked like there was more she wanted to say, but whether her unspoken words contained support or an admonishment, Sadie could not tell. She left the store. Sadie had not noticed, but the man in the starched shirt was typing furiously on his phone during this interaction.

The next customer Sadie helped was a blond hipster woman who

wore tight blue jeans, black chunk heels, and a grey V-neck shirt. The woman was beautiful and she had expertly applied her makeup, but compared to the other customers, her clothes were heavily used. The woman was younger than Sadie. She tried on a number of La Petite Bande tops. Finally, she approached Sadie, holding a La Petite Bande garment.

“Do you ever have sales, or offer discounts?” the hipster woman asked.

Sadie held the blouse in her hand. She looked at the woman and understood how badly she wanted it.

“Would a seventy-dollar discount work?” Sadie asked.

“Yeah,” the woman said.

“Some of our clothes get stained with lipstick, when people try them on. The lipstick comes out easy, with just a little bit of vinegar. If this top had a stain on it, I would have to give you the discount,” Sadie said.

The woman brought the top to her mouth and kissed it.

“That works,” Sadie said.

She rung up the blouse, subtracting seventy dollars from the total.

On Tuesday, Sadie had the day off. She went for a run and was back in her apartment, covered in sweat, getting ready to take a shower, when her phone rang.

“Sadie, this is Celine Diaz.”

Celine was the owner of Saint-Loup. Sadie had met her only once before, during her job interview. A woman named Ashely worked as the store manager, handling all of the day-to-day operations. Sadie had heard rumors that Celine was a multi-

millionaire, if not a billionaire, who had purchased Saint-Loup during a period of brief-but-intense interest in clothing retail. According to the rumors, Celine had recently become interested in learning how to fly a helicopter, opening sustainable sushi restaurants, and making wine. Saint-Loupe was receiving less attention.

"I want to thank you for your hard work and attention to detail when arranging clothes," Celine said.

"You're welcome," Sadie.

"Do you know who Marcus is?" Celine asked.

"No," Sadie said.

"That does explain some things. Marcus oversees a lot of my business ventures. He acts as my eyes-on-the-ground when I'm otherwise occupied. He informed me that you had told a customer about a sexual assault you experienced. He mentioned the customer was Rachel Feldman. She's been a loyal patron for years. He took the liberty of calling her and she agrees that we should let you go. Marcus also said, that you advised a customer to damage a top in order to receive a discount," Celine said.

"Yes, I did those things," Sadie said.

"We're going to discontinue your employment, but the problem is, we don't have anyone to replace you at this moment. If you're willing to stay on for a few weeks, I'll give you a good reference. You can quit right now, but then you wouldn't be able to apply for unemployment," Celine said.

"I can stay," Sadie said.

Sadie wasn't in a position to turn down any income.

Sadie put on a holey pair of jeans and a Lou Reed t-shirt. For a moment, she fantasied about wearing the outfit to her

remaining shifts. She imagined the conversations the outfit would spark. Sadie loved an ice cream sundae that was available at a popular fast-food restaurant, but she found it difficult to justify the treats' plastic cup, which would outlive her. Being fired was a good justification. She bought the sundae and began walking around downtown.

She passed a number of restaurants that had only a few, if any guests, which made sense, as it was a dead time between late lunch and early dinner. The outside patio of Baddiel's was completely packed. A sign indicated that the space was reserved for a private event. Sadie sat on stone bench in front of the patio and surveyed the scene. Many of the men gathered were guys in their twenties, who wore dress shirts, and gave arrogant looks to the other people present, as though every man thought they were the next Mark Zuckerberg. Within five years, the most interesting aspect of the other people present would be the stories they would tell about the future tech celebrity, the man they were now sitting across from. Sadie guessed correctly that she was looking at tech workers. A few of the men were in their fifties, but they had hip haircuts and were in good shape. A youthful and industrious energy permeated the group. A few women were present but Sadie was able to get a good look at only one lady, a redhead with colorful Ed Hardy style tattoos. She wore lipstick and kept a cocky smile, as though she was more than used to holding her own in a roomful of men. Despite her loneliness, Sadie was not in the habit of openly gawking at groups of strangers. She assumed some men noticed her, in her terrible jeans and questionable t-shirt, but something about the scene had piqued her curiosity. She wouldn't stop staring until she determined what it was. Most of the men sat at one of five giant tables, conversations were conducted across several tables at once. At the far end of the patio, away from the loud men, a pair of women sat at a two-seater. One of the women appeared to be in her late fifties or early sixties, the other in her thirties. The ladies looked at one another with a

laser focus, but it didn't seem as though they were particularly enjoying each other's company. Sadie assumed they were afraid to look at the guys. The older woman was Rachel.

Two men wearing dress shirts exited the patio and walked in front of Sadie.

"Excuse me. Sorry, I have an awkward question. Like a really awkward question. Why are those two women over there sitting by themselves?" Sadie asked.

"That's our boss, Rachel, and her secretary," one of the men said.

"And why are they sitting alone?" Sadie asked.

The men exchanged looks. Their facial expressions indicated had had a few drinks each.

"Rachel is a little girl who took on a man's job. We make predictions about the specific demand for medical equipment over the next sixteen quarters. Our work impacts a billion-dollar industry, but Rachel doesn't even know what an algorithm is. She can't spell it," the man said.

"I got my first job when was I seventeen working for Jack in the Box. My boss there was better than Rachel," the second man said.

One of the men on the patio caught the eye of the guys talking to Sadie. With a happy drunk grin, he pointed to Rachel. He had inferred who they were talking about.

"Our boss has Downs syndrome. That's why she's alone," the man on the patio said.

He spoke loudly. It was likely Rachel heard him and possible Rachel saw Sadie, though she tried to hide behind the men she was talking to. Not a single person spoke in Rachel's defense.

During Sadie's last shift, Rachel walked in. She surveyed the clothing, and refused to look at Sadie. Ashely, the only other employee present, was helping a customer. After Ashely finished, she ran to the back to complete her managerial tasks. Rachel finally approached Sadie.

"Sachar skirt, red, size forty," Rachel said.

She went to the back to fetch the skirt.

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 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."