Semper Free

His wife sang, “Amazing Grace” at the funeral. She just stood up there and belted it out in her forest green dress like a game show contestant, only slower, measured, with the presence of some rolling grief bunkered deep within. Little emotion scaled the walls that are built early in military life; mostly unnamed and unmentioned. They say it’s protection against tragedy, that duty to a steely restraint is what’s required, what comes with the job.

A few miles away at the beach, the tide was going out.

It struck me as odd, this stiff display of sound and tribute. The only black she wore was a wide, rounded-brim hat that, with her full cheeks, made her look like a model of Jupiter. At the end of her song she said we’re all in this…alone. A feeling of heaviness drew me to her. I didn’t catch her Christian name. Military wives can lose that part of their identity.

Hundreds of perfectly-soldiered bodies stood at attention, Marines, Semper Fi and all that. They stood attentive and erect in the August mid day sun. Black dress-uniforms with wide white belts and polished pewter buckles, they were a powerful, elegant and respectful clothes. Not a single man or woman was daring to sweat. One drop of perspiration would show disrespect for the dead man--a fallen Marine, part soldier, part human. Sergeant Major Roderick T. Larimore was being laid to rest.

Scattered among the family and fellow Marines were a handful of surfers in floral prints and logo’d t-shirts. Boards were strapped to roofs of rusty station wagons and VW buses parked haphazardly behind anonymous green sedans with government plates and no hubcaps. Sun-bleached hair, loose but clean came right up next to crisp, full dress caps. A Marine’s glossy shoes nearly stepped on a bare foot.

“Excuse me, Sir”.

“No worries, bro.”

They Marines eyed us closely, our bare legs checkered beside their razor pleats, but not in the way you might think.

Reagan was President then. And many of the men around me were younger, just kids really, willing to go off and die if they had to, unable to walk into a 7-11, buy a six pack, a straight forty or a lotto ticket if they wanted to.

I stood in line to sign the guest book behind our older friend, Uncle Billy. Nobody at the beach we called home knew exactly where Billy was from or if he really had any nieces or nephews. Billy had always just *been*. We watched the enlisted men print their name and rank neatly on each line, salute the corporal attending the table and move stiffly to the left. Uncle Billy, on the north side of forty in his face, half that from the neck down, took the pen and bent over the table. The attending corporal watched oddly as this aging surf bum pulled his long gray-blond pony tail back behind his head and drew a perfect tiny wave in the guest book. In thick block letters he wrote the words, “*Operation Starlight, Batangan Peninsula, Sept. ’65*,” across the face.

And then Billy signed it, "Capt. William Johnson, 101st Airborne," raised his right hand in something resembling a salute, but his fingers closed one at a time, like he was counting into a fist, and he stepped to the right. The officer stared straight ahead before turning slightly to his left and spoke quietly to Uncle Billy. It seemed an unfamiliar tone for a Marine.

"Used to draw those on my pee-chee folders back at Bakersfield High. Had a nice one on the front of my helmet at Quang Nhai."

I told Uncle Billy I didn't know he was over *there*. He said sometimes he didn't know either.

"You get any medals or anything?" I regretted asking as soon as the words passed my teeth.

"Naw. Not like your grandfather in *his* war."

I went quiet, just like I always did when people brought up my family's past, their wars, their medals, my family of soldiers. My dad the drunk.

I wondered if Billy was digging things up or re-burying them and thought that his time of peace-making must've come and gone.

I never knew Marine Larimore; saw him just once. It was down on the beach near a surf spot we called Devil's Slides. A wide sandy cove, usually safe enough on the inside, but farther out on the point the waves broke hard and fast over a shallow, rock shelf that Billy told us had probably been created by a rockslide from the cliffs that rose from the south side of the cove. It was a weekend, a Sunday I recall. More families and wannabees than the locals cared for, but made tolerable by an oil can or two of Foster's. The Slides' cove hadn't been the same since they'd built the concrete stairs down the cliff. Nothing ever is after the cement hardens.

The morning had been big and thick on the low tide, vertical take offs, heroic tubes, a few broken boards. Small crowds in the water that way, but just a hint of fear below our cool veneer. It was the kind of swell that you talked about for weeks, but not for months or years. Those only came in the winter when the sandy cove was nothing but lonely rock and dying kelp. Johnny had been out, Strider, Will, me. Not Uncle Billy though. He rarely came down on the weekends, said he didn't like the be a part of, "the whole Village People thing."

Later that afternoon we sat on the beach in the high sun, rubbing our toes in the warm sand, calling each other pussies for not going for it. Most of the crew was still there. It was better than going back to the beach cocoons most of us rented. We worked at night, if at all. Billy was the only one with any steady work, or at least with a regular skill. He made custom sails for the rich kid's small racing sailboats, had his garage converted into a miniature loft. Sometimes we'd go ever there during the day when there was no swell and just hang out and watch him work and listen to the old jazz records he had playing and think how oddly comfortable he looked working that heavy duty sewing machine like a skilled grandmother whipping out a new dress for a little girl.

As the sun moved slowly in the high summer sky, Larimore's boy walked up to the group of us. How he chose me, I'll never know. He looked twelve,

thirteen tops, had his hair cut high and tight, green shirt, white lifeguard zinc on his nose.

"Excuse me, sir. Can I borrow your surfing board? I'd like to try it."

I was tired from the morning's session, probably a little buzzed too. Maybe the twang of guilt that crept into my conscience from time to time was poking around. Whatever, he'd caught me off guard. Johnny started to say something but I shot him a look I'd learned from my old man when he was trying to dry out and I'd gotten in his way.

An old thought of my dad swept through me and caused chicken skin on my arms and neck. It was when I was ten, half my life ago and he was home on leave from his last war, for the government anyway. Mom had given up on him around the time he'd chosen to do another tour. At that age, I didn't know what was worse— a new school every two years or a dad who chased an extra few stripes on his arm by letting Uncle Sam have more say in his life than his wife and kid. He wasn't around much. I made the best of it.

"Yeah sure, I told the Larimore boy. "Try not to bust it, kid." I wasn't going to say *be careful* though. Let him paddle around the shallow inside. I couldn't tell if I was trusting his imagination or my hopeful projection. The wind changed directions and freshened. My mouth tasted of metal and I spit in the sand.

The kid picked up my board and walked back to his mom, dragging the fin in the dry sand. She was a tall woman, not heavy but thicker than what I remember my mother looking like before she finally left him. Her hair was a deep black and pulled up under a straw hat with a little chin strap hanging loosely on her neck. She was bent over two sandy-bottomed girls near the water's edge like she was picking fruit or working a rice paddy. One of the girls was holding a red plastic bucket and a yellow shovel, the other was building a sand castle. It was a tight structure, detailed with crisp angles.

The mother stood up above them, proud, pregnant, and looked at her son dragging my board toward her and then intently over in my direction. Her hand moved toward the sky in a kind of wave. But it seemed more in recognition than thankfulness.

"Hey kid." He turned and asked me, *yes sir*, again. "Be careful. It ain't Miami Beach out there."

"Yes, Sir."

"Hey kid, what's your name anyway?"

"Junior, Sir. Roderick Junior."

The war in Southeast Asia had been officially over for eight years but the hurt and the pain and duplicity of it all was still fresh. Everybody wanted to forget, so we buried the idea. Only some people's role would never allow it to go farther than just below the surface. As hard as they tried to push it down, the

memories would bob like a cork and with it all the shit that oozes out of the rottenness that is war. The vets I'd known, friends of my dad, could turn on a dime, seemingly at peace one moment, lost in torment the next.
The smallest things would catalyze it, like a dark haired mother in a straw hat bent over a child.

The kid tried to pick up the board, knowing he shouldn't drag it, but it was awkward for him. He got it to the water's edge and slid himself up over the tail toward the nose, like he crawling under a wire, and tried to paddle. There was a lull in the shore break and he eased himself out into the bay and fell off the side. A few of the guys laughed but I was ripped back to that time when dad was finally home for good. Even the Nam wouldn't take him anymore.

He'd asked me one Saturday morning what I felt like doing and I told him it might be fun to go over to the park and shag some fly balls. We were doing pretty well until I hit one on the roof of the concession stand. It was a nice hit and I could see that my dad was pleased, but it was our only ball and then dad tried to get up on the roof by climbing a chain link fence. He made it up with some crazy leap from the fence to the edge of the roof and seemed real proud of himself.

"Hey kid, your fuckin' old man still has it," Dad yelled in my direction. What did he have though? That wasn't the first time I'd heard him talk like that. And the way his eyes kind of went in different directions when he stood up on the roof, took off his shirt and wiped his sweaty face with it. He threw the ball down with a conviction that scared me. Then the cops drove up.

They started in on my dad right away, yelling at him to get down, to keep his hands where they could see them, all that over-zealous cop shit you see on TV. I thought it all a big joke at first, the way dad was taking his time climbing down, ignoring their threats over the P.A. To my dad they were just a couple of young punks in cheap city uniforms. And when he told them so, they tried to get him in some kind of cop hold. But the army and the war and something dark and unnamed had taught him, changed him, made him…*different*. Even at ten I knew it wasn't his fault. He scared me a lot.

One minute I was catching fly balls against a pale, October sky, and the next, I was looking at two cops laying on the ground, one was unconscious, sprawled next to the black and white cruiser with an imprint of a gun butt on his temple, the other was pinned to the ground by my dad's foot, his cheek ribbed with asphalt pellets and a small river of blood oozing out of the corner of his mouth. Standing over him was the man who had retrieved a little white ball off of the roof, reciting his name, rank and serial number over and over. I didn't know this man.

He started drinking again during the trial, and when he finally got out of the brig four years later, I knew him even less. Maybe I should've tried. But I was seventeen with an alcoholic father and a born-again mother who'd just up and left. I felt like a dog with two leashes being pulled in opposite directions when all I wanted was to yank off my collar and run free.

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The eulogist at the funeral, some kind of mid-rank soldier whose lip seemed to tighten into the shape of a rain gutter as he poured the Corp right into the microphone, said that Sergeant Major Larimore was a warrior, with a warrior's heart. He had the need to be needed. He won't be around to lead and protect his family and his men. Or keep our American shores safe.

Yep, so the rest of us can surf, and wait tables at the Chart House two nights a week and not worry about much at all. Just live in the shadows, let somebody else go off to war if we ever had another one.

And then come home in a bag or a bottle of JD. With Purple Hearts pinned to broken ones.

The dogs of my past wouldn't let go.

A chaplain with a comb-over that hung in his eyes under the heat stood up and said that memory's chisel cannot change what has passed by as *His Will*. Normally, Strider would've been all over this guy, busting us up with his scathing commentary. When I glanced his way, his eyes caught mine. They were death-row-inmate eyes; serious and questioning, part sorrow, part release.

I felt a long drop of sweat start at my forehead and roll down under my sunglasses, through my t-shirt, past my shorts and drop off the edge of my scabby knee into the earth.

"Damn, I could use a beer," I mumbled under my breath.

The word, "Amen" came from a soldier behind me.

* * *

"Dude. Check out the kid! Mid bay, middle zone." It was a tribe's voice, almost in unison. At first I didn't recognize this rare sincerity of a surfer's words. Young Roderick Junior was in a hard pulling rip, desperately clinging to my 6' 4" thruster, the airbrush of Jimi Hendrix on the nose pointed toward the heavens like a rocket as the current drew him out. There was no scream as Jimi's black afro bobbed in the current like a dashboard doll. Maybe Junior was embarrassed. Maybe he didn't want to bother his father who'd returned to his family with a steel shovel. The castle needed a moat to protect it from high tide invaders.

I heard the mother yell "Rod!" and never saw a man move so quickly, except when my dad fell off the couch, pushed off by JD himself. Hang on son, hang on! But Roderick Larimore Sr. was not a good swimmer, his arms beating and pounding the surface into a salty frappe.

Three of us up quick, sprint-paddling the first board we could grab, eyes glued to the kid, sideways at the dad. Johnny stopped at the father, told him to climb on his board and paddle sideways, parallel to the shore, out of the rip, away from his kid. Not a chance though, the love between father in battle with

nature and common sense. He'd save his boy. He'd save a village. That was his job.

Johnny screamed at the father to hang on.

Roderick Sr. screamed for his only son.

The mother screamed for the men in her life.

Strider and I reached the kid just before the board was ripped from his grip by a big set. An aqua marine haze sent Jimi's image into the castles made of sand. Junior's arms were now high in the air like they could be on a roller coaster decent or when the *born agains* say, "Thank You Jesus" from the front row at church. Little Roderick's eyes were filled with some animated horror movie terror. But he never screamed for help, just figured it was his own fault and his own job to get himself out of the shit.

Strider grabbed the kid by the back of his baggy green t-shirt. It said ***31st Airborne*** in bold, blockish script. He coughed out a "thank you, sirs" as I spun and watched Roderick Larrimore Sr. go under, separated from Johnny, who was in no shape to be saving anyone but his own butt. It was the same wave that pushed Strider and Junior into the beach. One in, one down.

I used to blame others for holding the key to some prison of my guilt. And here it was again, sliding lower and lower into some gallant watery grave while I tried to tear apart my own coffin and deny someone this dark water that was my home. I belonged here. This was all the family I had left. This sinking man, he had *earned* the right to die any way he'd like. But why now? On my beach, on a Sunday?

"Not on my beach, Sir," I mumbled and sprint-paddled over to the sinking sergeant. But I could see both our chances slipping away, a few feet deeper with each timeless second. His semi-conscious fingers seemed to stretch out from his hands held high as if asking why, as if reaching for a life not his own to save. I reached for those hands, white and cold, and touched once the wrinkling tips. I could see his eyes glassing over and his lips still moving, still calling for his boy as the sea passed those lips on its way to his lungs. And I felt myself going black, my own lungs moving up into my chest and then my throat. There were stars around my eyes and I started to count them.

At three stars I saw my father's ghost.

At four, my own reflection.

And at five stars I kicked my legs and reached again for Larimore's hand.

There are points in every man's life when they must become an accountant of sorts, when they do checks and balances, cost benefit analysis, decide if the ends justify the means. I moved right past those as if they were but a metaphysical speed bump. This wasn't a numbers game, this was Darwinism, raw survival in an aquatic environment, a place from whence we all come, dust to dust.

Larimore's hand was like ice, his fingers slipping and sliding out of my own and I fought the urge to panic, trying to remember how many times I had been

driven much deeper than this by big wave wipeouts. If I could only get a hold of his wrist, I thought, set some purchase on our future.

But he seemed to be accelerating as he moved away from me, the distance between us moving in geometric space and time. Just before I blacked out, I turned away and swam up, a dim and dull light guiding me. When I hit the surface, I heaved salt water pain, everything in my nothingness. And my hands were empty.

At the surface, there was mayhem, people everywhere. Mostly they were screaming. Johnny paddled back out with Will and they kept asking me, "Where'd he go? Where'd he go?"

"I…I don't know man. He's still down there. Still down."

I puked again, grabbed a sky full of air and got ready to go get my own damn medal. I alone knew how to find and save Sgt. Major Larimore.

Just then two lifeguards pulled up the flaccid and clammy body of Sgt. Major Roderick Larimore. They put him on a rescue board that was piloted by Uncle Billy and started CPR. Fucking Billy, he *never* came to the beach on Sundays. They were doing what they were trained for; like soldiers on the beach, doing their job.

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A young girl cried and was picked up by an uncle or a brother or maybe another distant cousin. It should have been her dad. In the future, a first date's advice, a teenage fight with mom, a man giving her away at the alter, she would repeat that phrase: It should've been my dad. She won't remember a lot about her dad. No one takes pictures at funerals, but the images stick better than weddings and birthdays. An acrid smell of gunpowder, I counted the guns. Twenty-fucking-one, same as I'd be in fourteen days. I had planned on a night of legally heroic drinking, planned on living forever. Peter-fucking-Pan. A horn, Taps. I'd heard it every morning growing up on the base. And came to hate it.

Two Marines pulled a large American flag off of the casket that held the body of Sgt. Major Larimore and folded it with the precision that only comes with ultimate admiration for the living. It was honor with a vengeance.

Did I dive enough times?

Actually, it's a bugle. There's one in my old man's war chest where he used to hide the bottles from mom.

Could I have gone deeper? Held my breath longer?

I tried. I really tried. Did I ever get that junior lifesaver patch at summer camp?

One more dive, deeper, pulling that man's hand into my own, his grip on life the same.

A boy was standing in front of me, twelve, thirteen tops. A dark suit hung lifelessly on him, borrowed from a short uncle or some salesman telling his mother he'd grow into it. Little drops of tears had fallen, leaving rings of salt on the collar. They looked like ashes. He had a peely nose and held his stiff black shoes and socks in one hand, the other stuck out to shake mine.

I tried to stand tall but found myself slouching like an old mannequin whose prop had slipped in the heat of a store display window. The cool veneer that hid the war zone beneath my summer skin was cracking. I saw clearly but nothing made sense. I took his hand in mine and squeezed it hard.

A word like, "sorry" began to escape my mouth. But it was soundless air. I would've called him "sir."

The kid didn't say anything, and we looked at each other in some strange confluence of generations and cultures. I wanted to say something about lost fathers but all I could think of was lost sons. Then he glanced over my shoulder to the west and spoke.

"I'd like to learn how," the kid finally said.

I choked out a "sure, anytime," in some thinly veiled stance.

Uncle Billy came up behind. I thought he'd already left.

He was crouching on one knee, his crows feet-framed eyes darting all around as if he was searching for something, as if they were little troughs that caught the pain and ran it off onto his cheeks so his vision would stay clear.

"You have the right to grow older, kid." Billy was kneeling so that the kid was taller than him. "And then remember all of this. But you don't have the *duty* to it."

They loaded Sgt. Major Roderick T. Larimore into the back of a big black vehicle; a fiberglass box carried with too familiar ease into the mouth of darkness, and drove it away.

There were still a few tiny specks of sand between the toes of its contents, a few drops of salt water in its core.

I'd teach him, make the kid better than me. He'd rip.

A few miles away, the tide had shifted. Like it always did.

Scott Tinley