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Of Mud and Fog And the Cold, Dead River

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Little, stinking, worthless, piddling wars . . . Korea, Indochina, a dozen others . . . were history . . . and now this little hunk of world; worthless, barren, war-shattered country apart from home, apart from the world, the scene of another piddling war, one of several past and many to come before the world would or could resolve itself into peace or total conflict.

And Second Lieutenant Edward H. Haley had but one thought and that was the thought; the thought of these stinking, piddling wars. And here he was, fighting in one of them, he and his platoon, second platoon, Fox Company. And here they all were, what was left of them, trapped neatly by a large enemy in a small part of this piddling war.

Well, crap, he had done his damndest to avoid a situation like this. He had held his platoon from retreating long enough to cover the rest of the battalion that had been in real trouble trying to get back to the relative safety of the line separating the Reds from the U.N. forces. And this was like all the little wars that had been and were yet to come, just two armies piddling around piling up casualties.

Anyway, here he was, surrounded, practically, just like in the movies and books and TV. At least he knew approximately how they stood in relation to the enemy. There were only a few troops behind him, across the river, blocking his retreat. The Reds had not yet had time to really dig in back there after they chased all the U.N. troops out of the swamp leaving only his platoon and they had done a damn good job of covering, he knew.

So that was the only way out, back over the river and through the thin line of enemy into what was by now no-man’s land and then back to the lines.

Damn it all to hell, he thought. How had he ever in a million years got himself bucked up against a stinking river? That was lousy tactics and against every book and it was a stupid move. As an officer, Haley, you stink, said Haley. But your Sergeant over there and a couple of the other RA’s told you there was no other way we could have gone except down the river because the Reds had jumped it above you and you had to chance trying to get below them but they were too fast and now here you are. So we will have to cross the river. And we’ll have to cross the river right into their thin line. Thin line, crap, it will be tough to crack; we will be like big fat green-headed
Mallard ducks sitting on a city park pond where it wouldn't even be sport to shoot them.

The R.A. sergeant was his biggest help; he had seen Korea, long ago, and a couple of the minor actions since then. He had a fine combat sense, Haley knew; he was like a hunter or trapper of two hundred years past when it came to playing and winning the game of hunt and be hunted called war, infantry style.

Haley was glad the sergeant was close to him. He did not know exactly how he had come to win the respect of his men. He was, after all, the lowest form of Army life . . . second lieutenant, ROTC graduate, college boy, and Jesus Christ, second lieutenants were a very highly expendable commodity, especially when most of them got knocked off early and many of those were knocked off by a slug from an M1, not an enemy rifle. But once the sergeant had told him he need not worry about getting his in the back, because he was doing OK, knew when to admit he did not know what the men knew, and had held up under fire and had led the platoon as well as any man could have and had kept his mouth shut except when he had something to say that was necessary. And now that he knew combat and had been tried in battle and found not wanting, he was secure in the knowledge that his men trusted him and would not question his words if he should as much as breathe the command, the much maligned and misconstrued motto, "Follow Me."

He moved quietly among his men, listening to their low conversations, checking on the wounded, the wounded who could walk and fight and the wounded who would have to be carried across the river and through the enemy. He listened to the men who talked of the fight behind them and the fight before them; but he heard mostly among his men talk of home, the states, their women. And it was not the rough, crude, filthy talk you heard in a bar or on a corner, but it was the talk of lonely men, tired men, tortured men, of their women and their talk was love and lust was never.

And he thought, too, of the women; of his woman. Of the women he had always known, the sweet, unspoiled girls he knew in high school and the husband-hungry college broads who were not hard to make if you worked it right. He thought of the few girls who had become very close to him, with whom he had shared his most private thoughts, his greatest problems, his darkest secrets, if he had any.

And he thought of Anne, who was Love Itself; who was so like him in every way; who knew him and his thoughts; who never had to tell him anything or listen to him try to explain his feelings, for each was the other; their understanding was Completeness in Itself. And he thought of Anne, who was back there, back home, alone, with perhaps his memory to give her something to wait for, something to build her living on.

You are an egotist, Haley. But you know better. You know how she feels because you are like her and she is like you. And you know what she is to you. She is the only thing that keeps you alive here and now in this stinking living burning hell.

In the distance, the nightly artillery duels began. Dusk had
passed; it was dark, except that the moon, full and bright as day-light was just beginning to show.

Crap! That moon really screwed things for you, boy. Crossing that river tonight will be suicide. They are waiting for you, idiot. Just waiting, drooling, hungry; they know you are over here and they are waiting for you to cross that river and let the moon cut you all into perfect silhouette targets for their snipers to plink at all night, just for fun. Crap! Maybe ol’ Sarge will come up with an answer; he’s got to!

So he started looking for Sarge and while he was, he could not keep the thought of her from his mind. He wished to God he had married her. No, he could not have; they had known too well what could happen; he might never return; the odds were against his returning, in fact. She must be free.

He had her love to think about, her wonderful, beautiful love which she had given so freely, so honestly. Their love had broken the rules, he knew, it bothered him more than a little. They had talked about it and had cried a little over how easy it was for kids to slip up and it was really tragic when you thought about it, and maybe it was common and maybe it was not so common, but their love was and they were as close as he felt it was possible to be; and he wished she were his wife.

And now her letter in his pocket where he could touch it and it reminded him of the place where he was and it drove his mind and his body to all extremes that he might now survive.

He could pick out a couple of the various U.N. artillery batteries if he listened and tried to determine their direction. But he wasn’t sure of their exact positions, only sure of their direction, the direction he wished to go.

He found the sergeant, and the sergeant had an answer. The sergeant had felt of the air and had tasted and smelled the feeling he had found on so many nights alone in the swamps along the Big River that divides the States, the feeling that crept along the River at night, even on a stark white night like this, the feeling that promised a murky, grey dawn, a changing night before dawn; a night changing with the coming of thick, thin-coffee colored fog.

And fog would be their saviour. For when the fog rose steaming, cold, slow and grey from the marsh, the mud, from the still slow river and made itself into a great grey everything that would hide the moon, cover even the night, then the platoon could cross, and meet the enemy before their existence was known. With the fog as cover and the moon hidden, the breakthrough would be possible, even probable.

He briefed his men, each one, and told them to rest and wait.

And the cold pre-dawn was only greyness and blindness and it was their saviour. Quietly, like hunters in the cold grey damp of the deer camp at dawn who prepare to move and stalk and surprise their ghostly quarry, the remaining few had moved slowly at the first real darkness from their cover into the river, into the great grey everything.
The crossing was slow and frightening and hell. The river was shallow and cold and dead and death was the word the river spoke. And the men crossed and waited for all hell as they crossed and waited.

The enemy must know we are here, said Haley to Haley. In fact, through the night and even now, the enemy was occasionally sniping into the greyness, a report and a flat splat that told of alert men plinking at shapes, at imagined forms, at wisps of fog; men that were alert and frightened but secure because they, too, knew the odds.

They were ready, indeed. His men knew and he had told them although he needed not to tell them that they must hold their fire until they had been positively discovered, and then they were to shoot like hell and break through. He hoped and was certain that they could make the shore before discovery, for there was a good stretch of muddy beach between the water and the enemy's cover. And if they could make that beach, they would make it through, as many as could, as many as would, and he would have done his best to save them.

The fog was there, all right, but it was lifting now, not fast, but he could see the signs. They were nearly across. He only wanted to get them there in time, before the grey everything ceased to be.

He was at the uppermost end of the line, the sergeant at the lower, his men spaced evenly between them. The next man to him, he could see, but barely, and that was all.

He reached the shore, and he crouched low, his knees in the mud, the reaching stinking mud. Somehow he had always managed to find the mud.

But here at least the mud was a beach, and the beach was the place to get a run up for breaking into the cover, and through the thin, thin line. He hoped the line was thin; it could be nothing more than the advance guard of Red troops, for he had certainly outrun most of them. Perhaps, even, there were no troops here at all.

He started down the beach, behind his men kneeling, laying, crouching in mud at the edge of the water. As he passed, each moved off on his own, into the brush. It did not take him long to pass the few remaining. He did not hold much for the wounded that were being carried by the bravest, the greatest, in his command, for they would be slow, and the thin line could stop them.

Behind him the firing that he had expected but still could not believe existed broke out. He knew that the firing was blind, at noises, for the fog was still the Dominant, and it was their saviour. He came to the sergeant, and with a parting word of comrades, watched him run, bayoneted rifle ready, into the cover. They would meet again, beyond that thin, thin line, and organize. And return. Haley moved farther downriver, out from behind the sergeant.

He stopped. He turned into the beach, and stood, hesitant, in the edge of the river. Without warning, for fog has no warning, no need for warning, no desire for warning, as it is and must be with all that is natural and beyond men, the great grey everything split a little and revealed the cover's edge and in the cover's edge stood a
man with a rifle, an enemy, a sniper who had risen upon hearing the parting whispered word of the comrades, a sniper with a rifle, loaded and ready. The man shot him.

Lieutenant Haley spun hard into the water when the bullet ripped a hole in his chest. It blinded him; it stunned him; it hurt him; he screamed as he spun into the water. But as soon as he fell, he rose again; he was not aware of any power that caused him to rise, perhaps it was his anger, his fear, or an undefined. He got up from the river water and spat blood, and his mouth filled again with his own life and he spat it out again. He rose out of the water and turned with hate into fog towards the cover and he raised his carbine and when the fog again revealed the man still standing waiting he gained his vengeance.

You son of a bitch. He touched the trigger once lightly and because the carbine fires very fast, once was enough. Seven spent cartridges splashed sizzling hot into the flat, dead river. He saw the holes appear in the man at the edge of the cover; they described a fine parabolic curve beginning at the man's right hip and ending at the man's left shoulder. Six neat holes, for one had missed. The bullets tore into the man's abdomen, his chest, ripping through and carrying life with them into the fog. Haley felt pity.

Haley felt the great, deep regret and sorrow consume him. He staggered a step in the water towards the edge of the mud.

At least, I was not shot by my own in the back at least I think I did OK maybe the edge of the bank is so far away but I know it is just a few feet. Just a few really just a few Jesus Jesus it hurts it hurts...

Another step, slow, crooked, lurching finally, a step towards the edge of the mud.

Crap... this is maybe what it is like dying OK God here's your man and he is a mess because he did not listen to other men when it came to You but I tried to find the Love and the Truth and all I had was the Search that is all well maybe I will know soon... maybe not... no reason I can't make it I am quitting I am a dying pessimist dying before death... quitting giving up. I'm not done I can make it it is not too hard the edge is just over there Jesus, Jesus, blood tastes queer... for God and country... and her and the letter, the letter blood tastes...

He stumbled and fell. His knees were in the water, his elbows in the mud. He raised his head and looked high through fog into the great grey everything.

Jesus! Jesus Christ! It hurts!... and then he screamed one word, one word to the fog, the world, the enemy, the universe, himself.

ANNE!

He screamed the word once, and he died. He died with his feet in the cold dead river, his carbine under him, his face in the mud.

And back where home was a girl learned of his death. The great sorrow, the great regret, found her, too; and her grief was beyond grief; and no man can describe the bottomless, blank, despairing feeling that is realization of loss beyond loss.
And the woman prepared herself to face a society that would condemn her now because of their Love and she would stand alone were it not for the many who understand and know of Love; but she was strength itself with that which they had shared.

She was glad now that she had written and told him of the result of their Love for now he had died knowing that he lived within her. And she felt within her the stir of Life, small, deep within her belly; the stir of Life that would someday understand, and love, and search for Truth and Love and Completeness as they had done; and society and degradation and the blindness of men could never touch them because of what they would be and what he had given them.

And she looked out the window of her tiny room and her first tear shone at last and faded and became forever.

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Why being afraid to be afraid
Do you draw away?
When I am searching for no one
There is always someone
Who finds me searching
And sadly looks away.

The sky is blue with bluebirds.
Don’t go! Don’t go!

You are drawing away again.
But I have just come from the garden,
The apples are red like blood,
And there is sweetness.

Now you are close enough to touch.
Are you no longer afraid?
But the wind is sobbing!
The apples are bleeding!
And I am afraid
I am afraid!

... Lola DeLong