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A Peculiar Guy

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You say you knew some peculiar guys? Well, friend, let me tell you. I knew the most peculiar guy of all. Wasn't too long ago. Spring of '52, matter of fact. I was in Korea at the time. Wasn't there more than three, four weeks at most. Just long enough to get this here leg of mine messed up. Almost as good as new now, except it bothers me some when the weather's bad.

Much obliged for the beer, friend.

I saw this guy the first day I was in the outfit. The company had been in the line a little too long and I was a wise replacement fresh from the states. There were four of us replacements. The company C.O. had asked for fifteen. We stood outside the C.O. bunker waiting for someone to make a speech, flinching every time a shell went over. The C.O. took his time. It wasn't too long before some of the newness wore off and we began noticing things. That was when I spotted this guy I'm telling you about.

He was sitting across the road from us sharpening a knife on a whetstone about a foot long. He was like a machine... twenty five licks on one side... spit on the stone... twenty five licks on the other side... test it on his thumbnail... spit on the stone, and then the whole routine all over again. His face had a look on it that you sometimes see on old men watching a stripper. It was almost as if he was in love with that knife.

No company supply ever issued a knife like that one. His pig sticker was a home made job with two blades, each about eight inches long and the handle was in between them. Both blades were double edged. It was as nasty a piece of fighting equipment as I've ever seen. One sheath for it was fastened under his armpit on a shoulder holster sling. The second was attached to the first by a shoelace and lay in his lap.

While we watched, a non-com came up, started to walk towards us, then angled over to the knife sharpener. He sat down alongside him, took a cleaning kit out of his fatigue jacket and started to clean the knife sharpeners' carbine. The guy glanced up, but never stopped sharpening his knife. About the time the sergeant was wiping off the carbine, the other guy decided his knife wasn't going to get any sharper. He stood, waiting for the sergeant to finish, then took his carbine without a word of thanks and walked up the road past us.

He barely glanced at us from under his helmet. One look was plenty. His face had changed completely. The only message coming out of those eyes now, was hate... pure murderous hate out of a pair of the bluest eyes I ever saw. I don't ever want to be looked at like that again. Then he was gone.

The carbine cleaner came over and introduced himself as the company First Sergeant. We shook hands all around, then he went inside the C.O.'s bunker. In a little while, he was out and had given
us our assignments. I was now the property of the first platoon. The Sarge gave the others directions to their outfits and told me to tag along since he was going to the first platoon anyway. I'm a friendly bird, so just to make conversation of course, I asked him what's with this knife sharpener. All I got in return was a blank look and a short, 'You'll find out soon enough.' I did.

His name was Radiman... James D. Radiman the third, no less. Rumor said he had a sockful, or at least his old man did. Rumor also had it that he owned a couple of college degrees. He never said anything about it either way. Matter of fact, he never said anything, period. He was sort of a company mascot, but not a tame one. The C.O. didn't send out patrols to take prisoners, he just sent out Radiman. If he didn't get sent out, he'd go anyway. He'd take his carbine, which was never used, his two bladed knife, and leave our lines after dark. If the C.O. told him to get a prisoner, he'd bring one back after daylight. Prisoner or not, there was always blood to be cleaned off that knife before he got any shut eye.

In the morning, he'd make his way past our outposts, bloody knife in hand, the prisoner ahead of him. They'd march up to the C.O.'s bunker and Radiman would squat, knife ready, daring the gook to try something. The gooks never did though. They'd stand there, eyes on that bloody blade, shaking like they had the flu. Radiman's eyes never left the gook and they never stopped hating. Soon someone would take the prisoner away and Radiman would start cleaning and sharpening his buddy.

The hate would leave his eyes, to be replaced by that look of love. This was the only time Radiman's face softened. Otherwise he hated. If he was looking at mountains, he hated mountains. If he was looking at food, he hated food and if he was looking at himself while shaving, he hated himself. He hated everything, except his knife, and everybody, with no exceptions.

No one knew why he hated. We only knew that he did. We hoped he wouldn't get killed, because if he kept bringing in prisoners, we didn't have to. That's the reason why the Sarge used to clean his carbine. Radiman never used it, but the Sarge figured he might need it some day, so he kept it cleaned for him. He never pulled any details either. That was our small way of paying him for the prisoners. When he wasn't out prowling, he was either sharpening his knife or sleeping. We even did his laundry for him and cleaned his mess kit. He never thanked us. We didn't look at him when we returned his gear. We couldn't take his hate.

He never received any letters, yet he always showed up for mail call. He'd stand off to one side hating, just hating. Mail call in the service is normally a pretty happy occasion, but it wasn't so in that outfit. Radiman sure put a damper on things. The clerk would get nervous, mispronounce names and try to hurry it up like it was painful or something. There wasn't any kidding around like there usually is at mail call. When it was over, Radiman would either sharpen his knife or go to sleep. One of the men said that he once heard Radiman
crying like a baby in his pup-tent. I told him to come off it. Radiman
didn’t have tear number one in him.

He never talked to any of the men. Wherever he paused, conver-
sation stopped. We’d crack a few bad jokes and then fidget silently.
He’d move on to some other bunch and the same thing would happen.
After he left, the talk would start up again, but it wasn’t the same
somehow.

For three weeks I watched him hate. Then we got the word from
headquarters. Something was brewing out front from our lines and
they didn’t know what. Radiman was told to bring in a prisoner. He
spent the rest of the daylight hours sharpening his knife. After dark
he lit out and we settled down to spending a jittery night waiting for
his return.

Just after daybreak, he passed through our outposts with his
prisoner. This time however, he wasn’t walking. He was riding this
gook piggy-back, one hand locked in the gook’s hair to steady him-
self, the other holding the knife against the gook’s throat. He rode
that gook right up to the C.O.’s bunker, then he fell off and rolled
in the dirt. We had the gook covered, but he just stood there grin-
ing. He wasn’t scared like the other prisoners. The Sarge knelt down
and cut away Radiman’s bloody fatigues. He had been knifed and
a loop of intestine was sticking out of the gash. I was standing in
back of the gook and saw that the back of his uniform was covered
with blood from carrying Radiman.

Radiman was dying. The hatred was gone from his eyes and he
was gazing up at the men with that look, which had previously been
reserved for his knife alone. When he looked over at the gook, he
beamed even more. You’d think he was thanking that gook for kill-
ing him. Someone put his knife in his hand as if to comfort him. He
pushed it away in annoyance. He coughed awhile and then he was
dead.

The Sarge was squatting next to Radiman, balancing himself
with his grounded carbine, bayonet pointing skywards. None of us
were paying too much attention to the gook. He just walked over
to the Sarge’s carbine, sort of bowed down over it and there was the
bayonet sticking up out of his back. We tossed the gook in a hole
and got Radiman ready for Graves Registration. Then we scattered
back to our posts and prepared for an attack.

No one had told us to get ready for an attack, but we felt that
we were due for one. We were right. That night they hit us hard,
mortars, machine guns, the works. Those dammed bugles of their’s
were blowing all over the place. We threw them back all right, but
not before some of them had broken through. The last of the fight-
ing was hand to hand. Our casualties were heavy and I was one of
them. Damned grenade went off right next to me. Loaded my leg
up with shrapnel so bad, they thought they’d have to cut it off. Didn’t
have to though. Almost as good as new now, except it bothers me
some when the weather’s bad.

Yeah, that James D. Radiman the third was the most peculiar
guy I ever knew. He and that damned knife. It’s a hell of a note, when a guy has to get himself killed in order to rejoin the human race.

Well, much obliged for the beer, friend. Got to shove off. Be seeing you.

On Perceiving a Child...

This child wending her way
down the terrible staircase
like a cautious brook
moving between defiant rocks
and singing a bright babble
of October over the color of leaves
and the life that remains
imbedded in this hill,
skips down, down, down
the staircase.

Her eyes, oriental in this mist,
are ancient as praise and wonder.
Green rubber bands secure
dark hair that Adam touched,
and a pink printed dress
enfolds a prophecy of flesh
made parodox made flesh.
Now she does not fear at the sound
of Wolves, the City or of Winter,
but descending learns
a million tricks.

Tomorrow is already habit
in her limbs while her song
rings beyond wisdom
as she skips down, down, down
the staircase
to womanhood.

... John Murphy