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Pawns

Richard H. Geisel

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Pawns Richard Geisel

A break in the routine is coming. I had been working 24/7 for months. Just think of it, new clothes, haircut, regular hours, majestic sunrises, palm trees, gourmet meals, single man about town ready to howl at the moon.

I had been transferred from leading a hunt-and-destroy squad to nursemaiding a platoon of armored personnel carriers. They were having downtime at the base, but the captain assigned me to base security. I have to carry on, they have the vacation and I just keep patrolling.

Some vacation. Instead of walking point, now I have a three-man team walking out the gates of the support base to patrol the perimeter. This is a Shangri-La in the middle of rice paddies forming waves with the wind, where herds of water buffalo graze silently. There is buffalo dung everywhere, spread to prepare the fields and foul the air.

For eight months my life had been a world of silence, listening for jungle sounds not in my hearing frequency. I have no doubt my ears have grown larger. Rustle of leaves, ants marching across dry leaves, voices and the piercing sound of silence. It's hard for me to believe, but yes, I can hear ants.

Picking my steps through the bush became a ballet of movement; my sounds could not become a disguise of the sound of danger. Sounds used to be beautiful and I would search for them. Now sounds are my enemy. I search deeper and longer for them. My ears hurt. I must hear something, but it is better not to hear anything. It is dangerous to hear and not to hear.

Silence in the bush, but here there is no silence. The men talk and scream trying to be heard above the diesel engines. The metal tracks clank along the earth, shaking it, cutting into it and chewing up all under the metal. The men make no attempt to be shadows. They wear their APCs as steel vests; they're invincible. One RPG would destroy my invincibility. I couldn't have

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been a larger target if I were a clown with a handful of balloons in a one-ring circus. The stealth hunter has become visible. I am going to die with these clowns if I don't get control.

My previous job had been to search and destroy, kill people, silently and efficiently. In the bush, I was in total control. No discussions, no committee meetings. But an order had been regurgitated from the unseen sanctum. Move the pawn. My life was changed.

All the kings, queens, knights, and bishops are in their castle. Starched uniforms, needlepoint insignias, three hot squares a day and air conditioning. Move some more pawns. There are no people out there, just gooks and grunts. Pawns. My men are not pawns. The only duty I have is to keep them alive. Standing orders don't trump the moral imperative.

Outside the firebase, there is no moon. The stars in the States are not the same stars that light Vietnam. There, they are a colder white, larger. The terrain is barren with a few tree stubbles. I have a clear field of fire. In the daytime the rules of engagement are different than at night. Nighttime is a free fire zone. I had always lived in free fire zones, day and night. The rules have changed.

The rumbling in my stomach asks me: will I be able to get control, adjust to the new paradigm, are my men going to be safe? There are no schools, only on the job training. These are hard lessons, men die and men are to blame.

My world is upside down; vulgar noise, penetrating light, naked visibility, thwarting my skills.

We get to the coordinates outside the gates where I radio that we are in our position.

I survey the field of stubbles and ruts; there is movement, but they're not moving forward. A million heartbeats; the night creeps on, hour after hour. What's going on? Do something.

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Wheat sways in the wind, a taunting motion. To get a better view I rise from my position. One figure gets taller. What are they doing? Must be scouts for the main body. I inch back to my position and my nemesis gets smaller. He must see me. I slowly raise my arm and wave. My nemesis also waves. What?

Those are our shadows projected out in the field. Lights from the firebase behind us have us lit up like ducks in a shooting gallery. See the ducks, shoot the ducks.

My men are safe this time; my skills have yet to be tested. I have never lost a man, but this is a new game.