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The Field Trip

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On Sunday morning First Lieutenant Hostetler, the company commander, came into the hooch and asked Harry if he'd ride shotgun with him to visit some nuns. Harry and the Lieutenant had gotten to know each other and spent time discussing the evils of the world. The Lieutenant was Catholic and seemed to know every nun in II Corps.

They loaded some supplies and, with the Lieutenant driving, Harry with his M-16 and a map, headed out to find the nuns. After an hour they reached their destination.

This place was poor even by Vietnamese standards. In the middle of a fenced compound, a cinder-block building stood in need of repair. A lecherous-looking, bent-over individual loped out, opened the gate and waved them in. The man didn't speak but made slurping sounds when he breathed; drool ran from the corner of his mouth in his cocked head. He was ugly and odious.

"What kind of place is this?"

"It's a leper colony; the sisters are friends of mine."

"What? You brought me here with no warning? Haven't lepers died out? Can we catch this stuff?" Harry was transported back to Biblical times as he looked at these people with this ancient disease.

"Calm down, Harry. I wouldn't come here if it were contagious. They need our help."

They needed help, all right. The place was wretched. The people were gnarled, bent and obviously had an objection to water. A pig sty with no pigs. The Vietnamese shunned these people and considered them cursed. Cast-offs. Not wanted in the cities or towns or villages. Even the place given them to live was third rate, a stinky bog. Jesus embraced the lepers, but Harry could not be so gracious. They did have a cow. She resembled the other inhabitants, a lanky thing with protruding ribs. She was a dowdy gray with long skinny legs, bulging eyes with no cud to chew. Her udder, however, was huge. Her long sad face expressed indifference.

Harry didn't mingle but stayed close to the Lieutenant. The nuns were in full habit despite the heat. Those black and white outfits tugged up around their necks and the hats pulled low made a clothing sauna. They smelled no better than their charges. Surely God would have understood shorts and a t-shirt in this circumstance. The sister superior must have been very devout.

Harry was relieved when it was time to go. The trip back was uneventful. The Lieutenant told him that the sisters were from his hometown, and he felt a need to help them. Harry admired both the sisters and the Lieutenant for caring for these poor rejected souls. His mother used to say, "There's a lid for every pot," and Harry was glad these good souls existed. But he didn't want to be one of them.

A month went by and the Lieutenant asked Harry to accompany him again to the leper colony. This time he said leper colony up front. Harry and the Lieutenant loaded the supplies and headed out. This time Harry drove. Once the Lieutenant found out that Harry had his military driver's license, he insisted on being chauffeured. Harry chuckled that he had been driven around by an officer in the first place.

As soon as they arrived at the leper colony the hackles went up on both of them. Something was wrong. No one came to open the gate. The cow lay on its side, tongue hanging from her mouth to touch the ground. Cautiously, they opened the gate. The smell remained but added to it was the odor of blood and death. Stillness greeted them. Lifeless bodies were arranged on the ground as only happenstance can do. God's final fuck you to these miserable souls.

The pale horse of death traveled silently beside Harry and the Lieutenant as they made their way to the main building. Crouched and wary, the two worked their way through the bodies, not stopping to check them. Ugly in life, grotesque in death. Some staring at nothing and others hid

their faces as if ashamed even to have existed. Animals moved in the distance, shaking, daring the two soldiers to do something about the tragedy.

They made their way to the block building where they found the two nuns. Executed. Shot at close range in the head. Some of the blood was still liquid. Harry and the officer had missed the murders by only a few minutes. The Lieutenant, repining, needed time to gather himself. He had just lost a couple of close friends. Non-combatants. Ladies of God. Senseless murder committed in a rage that led to the unthinkable. Harry stood guard at the door, wondering why the flower of American youth was asked to fight and die for these people. This was not an enemy target. It was most certainly done by the compound's neighbors. A message was delivered here, but no message stronger than intolerance.

The trip back to base camp was long and quiet. Harry's heart ached for the Lieutenant. He was hurting. They drove in the stillness of death. Harry's only thought was "Why did they have to kill the cow?"

In January 1970, Harry returned to the States and tried to assimilate into normal life. On the outside he was the guy he'd always been. Loving, carefree, easy to smile, the first with a joke, but inside he had turned rock hard. His heart a lump of coal, hard and black with sharpened edges that cut and sliced into his soul.

He was alone. Desperate. His wife allowed no talk about the war. She held her position that she had it rough, too, while he was gone. They attended couples therapy, but Vietnam wasn't mentioned. He had two beautiful children, a great job, in-laws whom he adored. Life was as good as it was supposed to be.

Harry's mother-in-law was diagnosed with lung cancer in 1984 and died within six months. This beautiful woman wasted away and left them. He was sad and knew he'd miss her but couldn't

bring himself to tears. His attitude surprised everyone, especially Harry. He wasn't rude or uncaring but simply accepted the situation. This wasn't normal, but what was?

At the Chesterfield County Fair in 1986 with his wife and kids and brother-in-law, Bobby, a crowd gathered around a misshapen, badly burned man on stage. He was an injured Vietnam vet whom the nurses called a "crispy critter" (a burn victim). His lips had been reconstructed, and his ears and nose were mostly missing. Yet he was full of life and presented his harrowing story with energy and humor. Afterwards he invited all Vietnam veterans to join him on stage. Harry said absolutely not. He had been ridiculed enough and wasn't about to get on stage for another round of humiliation. Bobby, Harry's brother-in-law, literally pushed him to the foot of the stairs encouraging him to go. Reluctantly he ascended the stairs along with a half dozen other vets.

The little burn victim looked at the row of men and with a big smile said, "Welcome home, thank you for your service." The crowd erupted with cheers and applause. All the veterans were taken aback.

A mountain of a man, about six-foot-four and 250 pounds, sat on Harry's left and cried like a baby. This surprised Harry until he realized that he, too, was crying. It was the first time any of them had been welcomed home, thanked for their service.

Harry cried more that night, for himself and all those innocent, trusting, and needy human beings two decades before, even the cow, all snuffed out in a senseless act of war and ignorance. Harry could now grieve and begin his healing.