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## Grief

Ron Bland

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## **Grief** Ron Bland

We are flying high and fast this morning in our newly hopped up “D” model Huey that we call “The Wreck.” Wrecked and retrieved twice, it has more patches on it than your grandmother’s quilt. Spec. Four Horton from the engine shop has voided the warranty on this bird by tampering with the governor, giving us more power to get the hell out of Dodge faster and lift us out of ungodly small holes in the jungles. The downside is that it could tear the airframe apart. We will take that chance to get out of a hot LZ faster, rather than bouncing along the ground trying to get enough air speed to lift off. We’re all grinning, with a “what the fuck?” running through our heads, because we know that damage is unavoidable.

Just before dawn, we are hustling to get in the air, the temp is coming up from a bitter cold night to another stifling hot humid day. I am in the starboard side jump seat, with Owen Cat filling the same seat on the other side. Our 60s (M-60 machine guns) stand between our knees with a hundred round belts of ammo already stitched together. Now with altitude and speed, I try to make myself fit as tight into this corner of bulkhead behind the copilot as I can, to keep from freezing to death! Owen Cat wears his poncho liner like a ceremonial robe from back on his reservation in North Dakota.

Owen Cat is just a wisp of a man and his naivety makes him fun. He never misses a chance to tell you how his people kicked our ass at Little Big Horn. Unfortunately, if there is a black man around he turns into a gawking idiot. He can’t believe they actually exist, saying he has never seen nor heard of one! One time he asked Nick the Spick what tribe he was from! Thank goodness, for me and all aboard, he is a savage warrior with the ability to see camouflaged enemy positions and call them out faster than the rest of us. Now, if I can just get him to understand the sights on the weapons we use! Let’s just say he’s better at throwing rocks

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than shooting a weapon. Because of the constant movement of the ship, we are mostly pointing and shooting, making even Owen Cat effective in the LZ.

With only my will to keep from freezing, I focus on our 45-degree single wing formation that lets us fly faster and save fuel, but is difficult for the pilots to hold. Shivering in the corner, I distract myself by judging each pilot for his skill at holding his position. Some lag back, others constantly change altitudes and still others are unable to maintain a steady speed.

I grow numb from the cold and vibration, along with the rhythmic slapping of the blades through the air, and the high-pitched whine of the turbine and transmission. Tension builds as we start the final approach. The pilots get focused and ready, believing they are invincible in their armored seats and “chicken plates” (ceramic breast plates). As we approach the LZ, a squelch bangs in our headsets. Then I hear:

“Five clicks out, three birds at a time in the LZ, starting with The Ax Murderer, then Waco and RIP. The rest of us will fill the hole as the first birds leave.”

Again, a squelch.

“Wounded on the ground! Ammo and Cs out! Wounded on, if our gunships can hold the perimeter long enough. And stay on the fucking ship! I’ll leave your ass if I have to! Okay, guys. Show me that shit you bullshit about all the time!” The bastards are never going to let it go that I left the ship two months ago to get the last trooper, ten meters out.

We climb to two thousand feet and circle the LZ, waiting to make our run into complete chaos. Purple smoke that marked the LZ is still trapped under the canopy, concealing the heavy firefight and gunships dumping their whole load of rockets into the surrounding jungle.

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Waco's tail boom wags slightly. He pulls pitch and pulls out of the LZ. We all gasp as green tracers appear to cover his whole ship. I freeze, then let go, realizing I am holding my breath. Seconds later, on the intercom:

“On final now!”

My best guess is we're at 60 knots, 50 feet above the trees. This could be close to a disaster. Just as that thought crosses my brain, the whole ship starts to shudder and shimmy, falling from the sky, and lands with a hard jolt and a bounce, almost throwing Owen Cat out.

Owen Cat and I lay down suppressive fire. Both of our M-60 barrels are glowing red and drooping. We grab our M-16s and burn through twenty magazines each, sending hot brass all over the ship and down the co-pilot's back! Enemy rounds come out of the tree line, blowing up a mist from the wet foliage, that looks like puffs of smoke, identifying the targets for us. Even when you're in the shit, sometimes good shit happens! Mortar rounds are so close they buffet our ship and AK rounds make a slapping ping when they hit our fuselage. The gunships have opened the gates of hell on earth with their mini guns and rockets. Leaves, bark and tree shards fly. Both sides hunker down waiting for the chaos to subside. Owen Cat calls out targets. It's working like textbook this morning.

Then I spot a soldier in the middle of all this crap—Cherry Boy from infantry basic. His legs are gone and it looks as if his insides are leaking out. We couldn't save him even if he was on the operating table now.

Cherry Boy is the only creature on earth I know or have heard of with no belly button. I don't know how many times he has been naked on a bet to prove it. I don't think he has ever bought beer or cigarettes with his own money.

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I can't leave him and certainly I can't leave him alone! A morphine syringe is stuck in his web gear. We leave the empty syringe stuck in our web gear to prevent overdoses. I could take that out and throw it away, and hope someone comes along and gives a second dose of morphine that would most surely end his pain. Or I could help him. I can't send him home like this. With my heart telling me I must help and a sense of defiance telling me the pilot will wait that extra couple of precious seconds, I jump and run. I can feel and hear rounds buzzing near. Some troops are putting cover fire down for me as I kneel in front of him. His lips move but nothing comes out. I calm myself trying to read his lips. Tears stream down my face. He keeps mouthing, "Mom. Mom." I kiss him on the forehead and tell him that he will be okay, and I'll let his mom know he will be along soon. Unable to summon the courage, I throw my unused syringe away and run for my ship.

I tell the pilot to break right out of the LZ, putting Cherry Boy directly in front of me. With six wounded we gain altitude and air speed. I send out a three-round burst from my heart, close my eyes, and we head to the medical pad at Pleiku.