

Small Comfort · *Mark A. R. Facknitz*

DRIVING WAS SMALL COMFORT. In Limon, Colorado, I picked up an ex-soldier who was hitch-hiking to Colorado Springs, or so he said. He told me about his tour in Viet Nam. He didn't ask if I had been there. My father's Oldsmobile—which my father had too many drunk-driving convictions to use without fear of a year in jail—was probably a clear indication to Billy Baine that I had not gone. I got the same contempt from him that I had turned on others in the six months since my return, and I didn't like hearing it, that useful tone of voice that says “if you haven't been, let's not hear from you.” But it said this just subtly enough that if anyone were to call you on it, you could deny it.

West of Limon the highway goes down through grasslands toward the front range of the Rockies. It was mid-June, early evening, and cooler as the mountains grew darker and larger. Billy Baine talked of being a marine attached to an outfit that went about the Mekong Delta in fast little boats and fired at sampans or the blank green face of the jungle. He talked steadily, drawling slightly, and it was hard to tell if the syllables dropped from drugs or dialect. Finally he plain said it. “If you haven't been there then you can't know what it wa' like.”

“That's true,” I said.

“You just can't know.”

“Probably can't come close,” I said.

“Those Viet'mese women sure were beautiful. This one was incredible.” A shiny Peterbilt tractor passed us going very fast in the other direction. “Hey yeah,” Billy said.

“Which one was that?”

He'd been at the machine gun mounted on the prow of a boat and sprayed fire at a village on a point of land where two channels came together. There was a jetty, and tied to it a raft loaded with crates and covered with tarps and camouflage nets. Someone on the raft returned fire from a light or medium machine gun, flashes appearing from beneath the canvas like “devils pissing at the moon.” Baine aimed for the center and squeezed off several long bursts. Fragments of wood cracked loose and there was no more fire from the raft, but because the captain had not anticipated resistance from the village he pulled back into the main channel

and called in air strikes. After the village was pacified with napalm, Billy's unit went in to mop up. Billy went straight to the raft and found the dead woman and the boy who had been feeding the ammunition belts into her old French machine gun.

"You killed them?"

"Not right then, before. They were pretty much dead by the time I got to the raft." He looked at the darkening mountains, now a deep purple and featureless except for the bright, jagged line at the crest. "Goddamn but she was beautiful, her pajamas half tore off her. You know what I did?"

I had an idea I was going to hear. In my outfit necrophilia had been something a few bragged about, but I never saw it proved. It was the ultimate boast in a combat unit, pure talk in most cases, the one thing we could imagine worse than what we did routinely. "I don't care," I said.

"I torched them. I poured this can of gasoline all over the raft and untied it and kicked it into the current. Then I lobbed in a grenade. Boom it goes, then this other fucking big couple of booms, and I took shrapnel in my cheek and down my arm and chest." He touched the scars on his face and ran his hand down his shirt. "She was beautiful, with skin like maybe you could see through it if you held her up to the light."

"Sure," I said.

"You had to be there."

"I was there."

He let it pass. He rolled a cigarette and smoked it, watching the last of the sunlight, now a thin, bunting-blue line along the ridge of the Rockies over Pike's Peak. I wanted to get rid of him and hated him for making me sad. His story was in no way like mine except in its effect, and I felt how small and ordinary each of our sufferings was. I didn't like him because he had kept his voice low and certain, slow as if speaking the names of cards as he lay them face up in solitaire. I asked him if there was some place in Colorado Springs where I could drop him off.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Not much farther."

"I'll go not much farther. When you connect with a vet you need to stick with him."

I glanced at him. "Sure," I said.

After Colorado Springs we were on Interstate 25. The pavement was

smooth, the driving easy, and he fell asleep. In Pueblo I stopped at a roadhouse for dinner and bought him his, suggesting over dessert that he might stick in town for a while. I said something about mines and work. I had no idea what went on in Pueblo but I wanted to shake him and find a motel for the night. He took the map I'd brought in with me and studied it for a long time, then laid it on the table and put his finger on Raton, New Mexico. "Here, this is where I'll stick, right here," he said.

Again I was driving while he slept. We came through the pass and into New Mexico. It was well after midnight and I found a motel, a flat-roofed line of small rooms with doors so battered they looked as if they were kicked down as often as they were opened with a key. He might have been dead drunk he was so hard to rouse, and I had to half carry him but at last got him dumped on a bed. I put his gear in with him and closed him in. In my own room I tried to sleep but kept seeing headlights, then the darkness, a few small red lights far ahead, and suddenly, just at the edge of sleep, a truck loaded with alfalfa or an old jalopy with no running lights would loom and I'd wake. I took a long shower and at last managed a troubled nap, but around dawn woke up and knew that I couldn't sleep more. I looked out the small window in the bathroom. In blue light for miles and miles there was nothing but rocks and scrub brush—a mean place to leave him, though no worse than where I'd found him.

I was in Taos around lunch and got another room at an old motel that spreads out under the cottonwoods about a mile east of the plaza. I slept that afternoon. Around seven I went out looking for something to eat and found the Taos Inn, the old inn—before the fire, the renovation, and the arrival of a colony of homosexuals that I have heard blamed on San Francisco, New York, and once, wildly, on Columbus, Ohio. The bar was still a cowboy bar, and after eating blue corn enchiladas in the dining room I went in to have a few beers. There were only men, mostly young, who kept their hats on, straw hats that pinched tight and bent down in front like beaks. I was at the bar and a Hispanic about forty-five sat on the stool next to me. He introduced himself as Benny Aguilar.

"How do you do?" I said.

He looked at me oddly for a moment. "I'm a carver. I come here to sell stuff from my place down by Tajique. I make *santos* and some women. Women when I can't do *santos*. People would rather buy a saint who suffers than a woman who spreads her legs."

“Figures.”

Benny grinned and poked me in the side with his thumb. “You have no problem with saints, you, eh?”

“No.”

“So you’re in, *compadre*?”

“What?”

Benny pointed at my beer. “Buy me one and then we go.”

“No thanks,” I said.

“You can’t buy a man a beer?”

“Women,” I told him.

Aguilar got off the stool and stared. “What do you think?” He put his hands up. “What do you think right now?”

I turned to the bartender. “Give Benny a beer and cool him off, why not?”

“What do you think?” Benny said. He wasn’t going to let this pass.

“What do you think I thought?”

“*Chingate*. I thought you were the guy who was looking for the game.”

“Tell me about the game.”

Benny laid invisible cards on the bar. A glass of beer appeared next to them and he picked it up and sucked off the foam. “Ten dollar ante, and it goes until you’re broke or call quits.”

“No one leaves on me?”

“No.” Benny wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. “No sir, house rules—patsy calls closing time.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“Good,” he said, “so you watch your ass. They rob you out of your eyes, I’m telling you.”

Benny took me up the street and then down an alley to a small adobe house. It was one large room with a little kitchen crumbling off the back. There were three men, all Hispanic, friends of Benny to whom he spoke Spanish. We shook hands all around and I took the empty chair at the old dinette table in the middle of the room. In one corner there was a cot and a trunk, but nothing much else. Benny sat on the cot and chalked the torso and head of a saint onto a block of wood and we began to play.

The game was slow, steady, silent. They kept their faces down, and said little except to ask for cards, to bet, to raise or fold. I don’t think I was cheated but I did lose two hundred and seventy dollars, all the cash I had

on me, everything I had except the two hundred dollar reserve I had wedged under the spare tire in the car. At some point while I was getting cleaned out, Benny put his work under the cot and went to sleep.

When I left we shook hands again, solemnly, and until I heard soft laughter through the closed door I had no idea how they felt about cleaning me out. I wasn't ready to care. I went back to my motel and slept well, and stayed in bed long after I wakened. In the war there had always been some reason to get up—orders, the heat, incoming shells, or some jerk who was squatting over your face and passing gas. Probably it was the fear of getting killed that got most of us out of bed. You wanted to be wide awake when you died.

My unit was in the Americal Division, a put-together thing that was so hampered by incompetence, low morale, and drugs that it was disbanded. When I got to Viet Nam in 1969 there were five hundred and fifty thousand Americans there, and by the time I left there were about a hundred thousand fewer. The withdrawal was beginning. It was a time when we fought because nobody knew how to stop. Besides keeping numbers high for the nightly news—number of dead, shells expended, air sorties—there was no clear purpose. In the Kennedy years the Berets had been heroes, a few adventurers in the strategic hamlets. After I left the men knew they were covering the largest retreat in military history, and though ignominious, the purpose was once again clear. But while I was there everyone was young, stoned, and clueless, and I saw several lieutenants fragged by their own men. It was hard to feel sorry for the young line officers. My lieutenants were slow-witted boys from Mississippi and east Texas who had made incomplete departures from small towns where all you could do was drink beer, run over armadilloes, and talk about football and pussy.

I left them all behind me two months short of the end of my tour. I wasn't dreaming of women but wondering if I would ever walk. I was hit by a jeep driven by a drunk corporal and the right tires went over my legs while I lay face down in the mud. Several mortars went off about a hundred yards away while I was waiting to be carried off and according to the telegram sent to my father I was wounded in action. I got a purple heart for being the victim of a hit and run. The army also gave me an artificial femur and miscellaneous pins. I was in the hospital about three months, a whole month beyond my discharge—which was honorable and came with a twenty percent disability, ordinary consequences of an odd war. I had

expected to come back dead, and so this limp would do.

Emil Brevard, one of the very few men in my unit I trusted enough to walk with on search and destroy missions, went back dead. Two weeks before my accident we were walking along the edge of some paddy outside Vinh Longh, moving toward some shacks at the edge of the trees. We had not drawn any fire that morning. We had only seen old people and women, and not many of them. We were strung out in a desultory file, Brevard and I walking point, which exaggerates what we were doing, since it makes our operation sound organized, or even deliberate. We were joking about who suffered most from the heat—Brevard because he was black, or me because I wasn't. The shot came from a light rifle. There was one crack, sharp as if two bits of spruce siding had been slapped together. A lucky shot, it went right through Brevard's throat, front to back, and cut his spinal column between the second and third vertebrae. Brevard went down like a bag of sand sliced from the end of a rope. He was wide-eyed and his throat gurgled. I stood there looking at him. Fifty yards behind us the nearest guys were hitting the ground and yelling at me to get down too, but I kept standing, trying to think of something to say to Brevard to get the fear out of his eyes, and guessing there was no way he was ever going to speak or move again. I think he was probably dead very fast, maybe even by the time I did get myself down onto the ground. I emptied several magazines into the shacks and some of the others came up beside me. They stood and watched me blaze away from where I was on my belly behind the dike of a rice paddy.

"Forget it," the lieutenant was saying. He nudged me in the ass with his boot. "Stop. If there's gook in there you got it," he said, and he sent a few guys forward to see. When we got to the shacks there was no one, no sign of the sniper, just some shot-up shipping cartons and down a well a couple of decomposing ARVNs.

I stayed in bed until afternoon. Around two o'clock I went out looking for Benny Aguilar and found him sitting in front of the house working on his saint.

"Hey," I said.

"What are you doing here? I told you they would rob you blind. Don't come looking to get your teeth extracted too."

"I want another game."

"Sure."

“I had some money in my shoe.”

“Do yourself a favor and go to hell.”

“They didn’t cheat me. What time does the game start?”

“Man, go to Arizona or something. Don’t bother me.”

“What time?”

Benny flicked a bit of wood from the eye of the saint. “Nine o’clock, you stupid mother.”

I went back to the plaza and broke one of my hundreds into five dollar bills. That night when I got to the house there were already four at the table. Benny was on his cot working on his whittling and didn’t look up. He had articulated arms and legs and in the course of the evening he fastened them to the torso. One of his friends gave me his place and leaned against the wall across from me.

The patsy was a big white man with a drawl. He was beefy and tall, his hair silver and slicked back in a ducktail. He was obviously happy to see someone else white and he gave my hand a hard shake and sat back down. “Louis Dreith,” he said. He took out a big roll of bills and looked at the dealer and said, “Gimme a thousand chips.”

“We use the money,” the dealer said. He kept his cool but the other two snickered and Benny looked up.

I took out fifty dollars and put it in front of me. “Short night for me,” I said.

Dreith stuffed about half his money back in his pants. “Excuse me, but I thought I heard somebody say this was ten dollar ante,” he said.

“*Su madre*,” the dealer said and laid a twenty at the middle of the table. He started to deal, “*como una mujer que no quiere nada*,” he explained.

Dreith was blue-red before he picked up his first hand. “You guys don’t play with much flair,” he said.

“They’re working,” I said. As I picked up my cards a ten of diamonds appeared next to the ten of hearts. Later I threw off a six and a four. The cards came back, a ten of spades and an eight of clubs. I’d been hoping for the ten, but the eight of clubs was pure luck, partner to the eight of diamonds I had in my hand and had kept on a whim. The dealer folded. His buddy stayed in for several bets. I bluffed Dreith and finally he showed. He’d put down a lot of money on three queens. I had my stake for the evening and luck I could bank on.

Benny worked away and so did we. The third guy rotated in every now

and then, several times for each of us except Dreith. Dreith was the kind who whooped whenever he won a pot, no matter how big, and when he dealt he did so quickly, instructing us to pick up our cards, or chucking them as if he were pitching them into hats. Benny's friends set their jaws and didn't look at each other. If they were cheating, I don't know how, and they certainly gave me a big piece of the action. Dreith brought out about three thousand dollars in the course of the evening. He began to lose badly and I was getting well ahead. I let one of Benny's friends have my place and went to urinate. Then I watched Benny carve for a while.

"That's looking good," I said.

Benny ignored me.

"Where'd you find this guy Dreith?"

"Same place as you," he said. "I'm going to finish this tonight, you want to buy it?"

I was called back to the table so another of them could get up for a while. An hour later Benny came over and set his sculpture in my lap. He had fastened his saint to a plank on which there were already a pair of oxen. The oxen were yoked and the saint drove them with a splint of blue pine.

"It's done, you want it?"

"What saint is this?"

"*San Ysidro de los campos*, patron of fields and crops. I'll take fifty dollars."

The fresh cuts in the pine were bright and the wood was fragrant. *San Ysidro's* mouth was straight, his eyes fierce, but the oxen were round-faced and smiling.

"Did you do the cattle too?"

"Forty. Who else would do the cattle?"

I handed him the fifty. The friend sitting to my right reached into my winnings and took out three or four twenties and handed them to Benny. I didn't stop him.

"Can we play?" Dreith said.

I was dealing at the moment and so he was talking to me. "You can call the game any time you want, only you," I said. I took a long time being careful as I set Benny's saint on the floor. Dreith threw back the first card I laid in front of him.

"Off the top."

The other two at the table drew in their breath. I took a card and handed it to Dreith as if it were an eggshell.

Finally we cleaned him out. I was aware that I had a lot of money, and about four in the morning went down the street to my motel with Benny's carving. Before going into my room I opened the trunk of the car and settled the sculpture into a soft spot between a sleeping bag and an old blanket. I had the money in a roll in my front pocket and so it was relatively safe and the trunk lid was up when Dreith came up behind me. There was light in the east already, enough that his hair was blue-white. He looked smaller outside, and not quite so puffy.

"You're white, you gotta understand something. It's one thing to get cleaned out by some spics, but you understand."

"I've got nothing to understand," I said.

"I don't exactly have a speech prepared myself. I just need a couple hundred bucks to get home."

"Sorry."

"Look, those guys were cheating. I'm not asking for the whole wad. You beat me. I'm not saying that."

"I don't think so," I said.

Dreith wasn't going to say anything more about anything. He put a hand flat on my chest and tried to shove me back into the trunk. This gave me the chance to grab the jack, one of those with the square base and the heavy bar that the ratchet moves up and down. He caught me in the face with a glancing blow and had landed a painful kick in my side before I could get the jack over my head. He deflected my first swing with a forearm, but the base hurt his wrist and he grabbed it and bent over. I stropped him across the side of the head and he went down. He lay in the gravel, completely silent for a moment. Then he moaned and pulled himself to his hands and knees and swayed his head side to side like a drugged horse. "Don't," he said.

I took the jack into the room with me and pulled together my stuff. When I came back Dreith had picked himself up and was walking very slowly with his head in his hands down toward the road where the light on the cottonwoods was suddenly a deep blue-green, like the surface of the sea seen from far below.

I started for Santa Fe. It was windy out on the highway and in Ranchos de Taos I recognized him though he had his face turned to keep the dust

out of his eyes. Billy Baine grinned when he saw who had stopped for him. "You're sure about this?" he said before getting in. "This place's gotta be as bad as Limon for rides."

"I've got a reason to hurry," I said, and when he was in we started off. "I'm sorry about Raton."

"I appreciated sleeping in bed and taking a shower. I'm really headed somewhere this time, a place called Velarde down by Santa Fe. I met this vet'ran whose father grows pears down there."

"You know anything about orchards?"

"There's mostly trees in them."

I took out the money I'd won and put it on the seat between us. "Take some of that, whatever you need."

Billy Baine looked from the money to me. "What happened to your face?" I glanced in the mirror. Dreith had bruised my right jaw. "I won that from a sore loser."

"How much is it?"

"Twelve, thirteen hundred. Look, if you'd rather we could split it, fifty-fifty."

"I could use six hundred bucks. I could find something to do with six hundred dollars."

"Think of it as taxpayers' money."

Billy Baine smiled at that and touched the bills. He picked them up and counted them in the order he found them. It came to one-thousand two-hundred fifty-six. "What's half of that?" he said.

"Six hundred twenty-eight."

Billy arranged the money, ones on top and fifties on the bottom, the large quantities of twenties, tens and fives in between. He tidied the stack by rapping it on the dashboard, and then put the bills back on the seat between us. "Aw hell, let's you and me go to Georgia or California. Let's just drive," he said.