

THE INTERVENTION

Literary Arts – Life Experiences

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The old house was eerily quiet except for the persistent *plop...plop...plop* coming from the slow drip of the kitchen faucet. In the modestly furnished living room, windows shuttered to the outside world let in a faint light from the street. The occasional *swish* of tires on the roadway wet from the early evening's rain interrupted the night's stillness as a solitary car sped past. His eyes had long grown accustomed to the room's darkness. Sitting at the kitchen table, he reached for the glass in front of him and took a long swig of its contents.

Crown Royal. He smiled to himself. *Quite an improvement over the old days.*

Confident in his ability, he leaned forward, and quickly field stripped the pistol, methodically laying its parts on the table in front of him. When he was finished, he leaned back in his chair, satisfied.

I haven't lost my touch. A slight smile crossed his face. His military training and experience had stayed with him. Sighing, he reached for the pack of Camels and drew one out. Cupping the lighter in his hands to hide the flame, he lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply.

Old habits die hard. Lips drawn back, he smiled ruefully as he slowly exhaled.

How long have I been out of the Army? Three months, four months?

Reaching for his drink, he lifted the glass, tipped his head back, and quickly emptied its contents. The liquid burned his throat, but he was desperate to squelch the pain he was feeling. Reaching for the decanter, he refilled the glass.

“Better for you than drugs,” he muttered to himself.

Withdrawal from the drugs had been horrible. In the end, he and Craig had struggled their way through. Uppers, downers, pain killers of every size and shape, and especially codeine, had been easily accessible to the medics. Both men knew that they needed to kick their habits before being discharged. The hallucinations, tremors, sweats, and gut pain were nothing they had ever experienced. But they had survived.

Just as we survived Vietnam.

His thoughts turned to his friends from high school. *Where were they now? It's been over two years since I've heard from any of them.*

Soon after he had returned from Vietnam, he had ventured to a bar across the state line with several of his closest high school friends. There the legal drinking age was 18. It had been a miserable night to venture out, but his friends had insisted on giving him a proper welcome home. The closest and most familiar bar, the *White Horse*, was closed – most likely because of the storm. They persisted and drove on in their search.

The Volkswagen Beetle had struggled along the meandering snow-packed country roads until it gracelessly slid off the road in the swirling snowfall. Undeterred, the group climbed out of the car, heaved it from the drift, and continued their journey. He didn't know where they were headed but convinced himself that it didn't matter.

Reaching an open bar somewhere unknown to him, they found the place more than half-empty, seated themselves at a large round table, and ordered several pitchers of beer. He didn't remember much from the conversation that followed, but two things had jarred him to his core.

He couldn't recall who had asked, but his friends leaned in once the question *was* asked. Staring at him, they waited with anticipation for his response.

"Did you kill anyone?" The words hung heavy in the air as they waited for his answer.

Bastards, he thought. *What possessed them to ask that question? How was I supposed to answer?*

"I was a medic, guys! Medics aren't supposed to kill!" he had responded.

"I guess they didn't care for my answer," he said to the empty room. "Two years later, where are they? Where are they when I need them?" The silence was deafening.

Perhaps they had had too much to drink, but as the group of friends rose to leave, one of them turned to him and remarked, “You know, I think you volunteered for Vietnam to kill yourself. Like ‘suicide by war,’ you know?”

He was stunned and lost for words. He hadn’t seen his friends since that night.

Was it true?

His guilt from the war clung to him like a heavy wet blanket, threatening to smother him. Sitting in the darkened kitchen, the memories flooded in. Midway through the beastly heat of summer, he and his friend had both turned 19. He could still see his friend’s shock of red hair contrasted against his snow-white skin, the boy’s goofy ear-to-ear grin, and his simple sense of humor. His friend died in combat that November. He had blamed the friend’s death on another enlisted man and recalled how close he had come to killing that soldier in a fit of anger.

Fragging, they called it. It had come into its own that summer of ’68.

In a blind, drugged-fed rage over his friend’s death, he had confronted the perpetrator, charging his M-16 to seat a round as he rushed at the man, weapon ‘locked and loaded,’ pointed at the man’s chest. A quick-acting medic came from behind and injected him with a shot of Thorazine to his neck, quickly subduing him and bringing the incident to an end. While a handful of enlisted men had witnessed the event, none ever reported it to the officers.

The next day, he had awoken, alone in his bunker. His friend's death and his own near fragging of the other soldier wracked him with guilt.

There's no end to the pain. Head in hands, he wept silently. His mind numb and vision blurred, he fumbled for the glass, seeking to kill the pain.

His thoughts wandered to that of his father. The old man had met him at the nearly deserted airport when he had flown home late one night after his tour in Vietnam had ended.

I'll give him credit for that. 'The returning war hero.' He scoffed at the thought. *I hate him! What did he call me when I was growing up – a weakling, a coward, useless?*

He thought about the many times his father had locked him in a closet or basement for hours, deprived of food and water, isolated from the family. He had endured the beatings, the spiteful insults, and nights of crying himself to sleep.

Lighting another cigarette, he thought - *Am I a weakling? Am I a coward?*

He took a long swig of the whiskey and methodically reassembled the weapon. When he finished, he quickly reloaded the clip and chambered a round, fondling the pistol in his palm.

The pocket pistol had been his companion for months now. At times, she had ridden with him, hidden in his boot as he rode his motorcycle across the miles and miles of open highway on his way back East. He didn't dare think of it as 'going home' - he had no home.

Other times, he had carried her in his back pocket. It brought him comfort to know that she was always close at hand. Caressing the pistol in his hand, he traced the grip's diamond pattern lightly with the base of his thumb. Taking one last drag on the cigarette, he exhaled slowly and smothered the stub in the ashtray. It was time.

He brought the weapon to the side of his head, released the safety, and pressed the muzzle hard below his right ear. Memories raced through his head.

The last time he had seen his mother - how much he had missed her after their separation. The dark, dank basements where he had spent many hours isolated from his family, crying for his mother, locked away without food or water. The first time that he wore glasses, opening a brand-new world of wonderment. Laying in a farm field hypnotized by fluffy white clouds flitting through brilliantly sunny blue skies. Fishing with his younger brother at Shadow Lake as the sun brightened the eastern sky. His older sister, who shared in many of his childhood experiences - he missed her dearly. The beating he suffered at his father's hand when, his spirit broken, he had tried to kill the man with a kitchen knife. He had been thirteen, maybe fourteen? He had escaped his father's house soon after. The smell of charred human flesh and bloodied bodies, some whose extremities were akimbo as if reaching for help that would never come. The unrelenting heat, the dust, the red clay, and the interminable mud of monsoon season in Vietnam. The guilt of surviving.

He felt the tip of the barrel pressing against his head. *If I shoot myself here, the round may ricochet inside my skull and leave me paralyzed. That's not what I want.*

Tears streamed down his face. Lowering the weapon, he placed the barrel in his mouth. The cold metal and oily taste repulsed him. Removing the barrel from his mouth, he began to sob.

Maybe I am a weakling.

“You bastard! I hate your guts!” He spat the words at his father as the tears flowed uncontrollably now. The silence in the room was deafening.

“Is this what you want?! Will this make you happy?!” Spittle bubbled from his mouth as his anger grew. He felt for his heartbeat and pressed the barrel hard against his chest as if by doing so, he could drive out the pain.

This is where the pain is coming from. Not my head. This is how I need to put an end to the pain.

Suddenly, something inside his head snapped. He spat through gritted teeth, “I am NOT going to give YOU the satisfaction of killing myself. I am NOT going to give YOU the gift of my suicide. I will NOT let you win so you can tell the world that I was ‘weak.’ No, I will live to prove to you that I am anything but a weakling or a coward. I am not going to let you determine whether I live or die.”

Engaging the safety, he ejected the clip and calmly placed the pistol on the table. With a deep sigh, he rose from the table, aware that something or someone had intervened to save his life. He had been chosen to live another day.