

KIA

I deeply regret to confirm that your son PFC Jeffrey E. Smith died 7th of March 1968 in the vicinity of Quang Tri, Republic of Vietnam. He sustained shrapnel wounds to the body from hostile mortar fire while on an operation. Please accept on behalf of the United States Marine Corps our sincere sympathy in your bereavement.

—*Gen. Leonard F. Chapman Jr., March 9, 1968*

Saturday, March 9, 1968. I was up late last night drinking with my father. The hangover this morning was why I was running late to help wash the windows and clean the blinds. Mom didn't really need my help with the cleaning; it was what would come next that she could not handle. For when the cleaning was over, we would pop a few beers on top of those we would have already consumed and then pack another goodie box for my younger brother Jeff in Vietnam.

My presence would serve to lighten the moment. Crack a few jokes, play the role of Jerry Lewis or Bob Hope to Ma's Dean Martin or Bing Crosby. She would sing, then invariably lapse into tears. My job was to make her laugh and I was good at it. I would say something that would elicit her memories of lighter moments when the household tension wasn't quite as unbearable. I was Ma's

sounding board, not only the elicitor of mirth but also the deflector of her wrath and sorrow. It was a role I had dutifully served since childhood.

I was twenty-two, the oldest of Ma's six children and the first to leave home. I had married my wife, June, fifteen months earlier. Jeff called my wedding "The Great Escape," referring to the popular war movie of the day about Allied soldiers tunneling out of a Nazi prison camp. Serving as my best man at the wedding, Jeff joked about my pulling a Steve McQueen on him, hopping on my motorcycle and riding off into the sunset with my young bride, leaving Jeff to deal with the turmoil at home.

And then less than three months later, Jeff engineered his own getaway from the dysfunctional household, cutting his shoulder-length hair and setting aside his guitar, not to mention his crusade against war and all things confrontational. He enlisted in the Marine Corps. Our family's own dominoes tumbled forthwith: Ma and Dad separated within days of Jeff's departure for boot camp, then Ma filed for divorce as soon as Jeff was sent to Vietnam. The rest of our brood—teenagers Joe and Jude and my youngest siblings Jim and Jane—were left more confused than when they had entered this world.

As for myself, I struggled with my loose grasp on maturity, providing for my wife while juggling my spare time between my parents. The consumption of more than my fair share of beer seemed to help. But the lubrication was a blessing and a curse. Especially now that Jeff was halfway across the world, slugging it out along the DMZ with Fox Company of the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines.

My wife was not overjoyed about how I was spending the day. Helping Ma was okay—no harm in that. But June knew we would be drinking as much as we worked. Her irritation was obvious when she kissed me good-bye before driving up the road to Rockford, where she worked as a hair stylist.

I checked the clock. It was almost 10 AM. *Dammit*, I had told Ma I would be there bright and early.

"That sonofabitch has brainwashed all of you kids. I don't know what you see in that sonofabitch." I knew those would be the first words out of Ma's mouth as soon as I arrived. She blamed

Dad for Jeff's having enlisted in the Marines. She blamed Dad for driving a wedge between her and me, my father being able to share beers with me at the Elks Club while Ma worked the overnight shift as a switchboard operator at the telephone company, making sure the twelve thousand residents of Belvidere, Illinois, were properly connected to each other and to the outside world.

I shuffled out of the second-story apartment's back door and down the steps. It was a cool day. No sun, just a white glaze from the blanket of gauze hanging overhead. I kick-started my Honda 450cc and released a sigh, leaning back as the engine cleared its throat with a steady rumble, its throbbing in sync with the pounding inside my head.

I thought of Jeff's words and laughter. "The great escape—yep, that's what you've pulled off, bro." Remembering his joy and light-heartedness made it possible for me to endure what would surely come next. But just to make sure, I stepped back into the apartment, popped the top of a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon, and chugged it in three swallows.

"Here's to your health and good cheer, bro," I said aloud, toasting Jeff with a belch and a tear before dropping the empty can into the wastebasket. And then I returned to my motorcycle, revved its engine, raised the kickstand, and toed it into first gear. With a spray of loose gravel I gunned the bike from out of the alley and onto State Street, heading north to my mother's house.

The headache would not go away. It hammered away without letup despite the cool wind ripping through my hair as I zipped along on my usual route, timing the traffic lights perfectly, as I usually did. About the only thing different on this ride was the jerk driving the ugly green car that seemed to be tailgating me. To return the favor, I drove erratically, easing off on the throttle and downshifting to third gear from time to time. I hung a left onto Oak Street and zipped past the old brown clapboard house our family had lived in when we first moved to Belvidere five years earlier, and then cut over one block, downshifting again and laying the bike almost horizontal to the pavement. Showing off, I shot the throttle coming out of the turn and did a wheelie—nailing it perfectly in both gears, making my black-and-silver bike dance—

before downshifting again as I cut sharply into the driveway on the right side of Ma's two-story white house.

Overjoyed that I'd won some sort of nonsensical race, if only in my mind, I killed the cycle's engine and was preparing to drop its kickstand when I heard a car pull up in front of the house—the same damn ugly green car that had been riding my ass.

Because I had not been wearing goggles or sunglasses—or even a helmet, for that matter—I wiped chilled tears from my eyes, blinking to adjust them to the sky's haze. And then the moment focused in perfect clarity.

Invisible hands seized my throat. No breath, no air, no sound other than a rumbling deep within my gut. My knees went limp. The motorcycle dropped onto its side. I didn't hear the metallic crash of the bike's gas tank crumpling against cracked concrete, didn't hear the sharp footsteps of the well-dressed men as they solemnly made their way up the driveway. Both wore Marine Corps dress blues.

The taller of the two was a lieutenant colonel; the shorter, a staff sergeant, obviously diminished by war wounds, shuffling slightly as he dragged a stiff right leg. There were no handwaves of recognition, no smiles. Their eyes were awash with cold determination, which only enhanced my numbness.

The colonel asked, "Is this the residence of Mr. and Mrs. John E. Smith, the parents of Private First Class Jeffrey Smith?"

I nodded, my eyes riveted on the Western Union telegram in the colonel's left hand. When I asked what had happened to my brother, the colonel said he needed to speak with Jeffrey's parents.

"I'm his goddamn brother!" I yelled. "What happened to Jeff? Is he okay? He's only wounded, right?"

The colonel lifted his chin slightly and sucked in a breath. Then he bowed his head and hesitantly glanced at the sergeant. Neither spoke; their silence was thunderous, telling me that my brother was dead.

I can't tell you what my thoughts were. I'll always remember the noise, though, that of a big jet's afterburners cranking up, full blast, making me shake and shudder, at the same time numbing my mind. And I'll always remember the pain, like someone smack-

ing me with a thick board—first slamming it flat across the back of my neck, then nailing me again, this time driving the sharp edge into my flesh, short-circuiting all circulation, slicing through every nerve. My mind was racing, telling me to grab a weapon and kill these bastards.

But I couldn't. My arms hung limply at my sides.

My breathing quivered as I led them through the back door into Ma's house. Through the kitchen and into the living room, where my mother smiled broadly when she saw me, then collapsed and started sobbing when she caught sight of the uniforms; screaming how she'd always hated the Marine Corps, damning Christ and flailing her arms, damning my father and hysterically pounding her fists on the floor. I was on my knees, at my mother's side, trying as best I could to soothe her. I hugged her, holding on for dear life until she screamed herself hoarse. But even then her sobbing continued, now in harsh, gruff gasps spewed between hiccups.

The colonel tentatively approached Mom, bent down to offer his apologies, but she slapped at his hands and arms. All the colonel could do was say, "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Smith," which he repeated over and over.

Odd, but I don't remember the colonel ever saying my brother was dead. My mother would tell me years later that she had no recollection of it either.

What remains is a blur of bits and pieces. I made a lot of telephone calls, pleading for assistance, and friends and neighbors gathered to help sustain my mother through the horrible hours and days ahead. I phoned our parish priest and Mom's best friend, Betty Brenner; they both arrived shortly thereafter. Once Ma was in stable hands, I got into the backseat of the official green car and pointed out the directions to the interstate, where my father worked weekends at the Standard Oil service station. The Marines were cordial, sharing what little information they knew, but it was difficult to understand them because the roaring inside my head wouldn't go away. And then we arrived at the gas station.

"You'd best wait here," I told the Marines, which didn't sit well with the colonel. He wasn't used to being ordered about by a mere civilian, but he wasn't aware of my father's hair-trigger temper.

In younger days I would have smirked and not issued a warning, content to see my father's fists at work, enthralled by the madness. Like when I was eight years old, and a neighbor—a man much bigger and younger than my father—wouldn't give back the football that Jeff and I had accidentally bounced into his flowerbed. I ran into the house and told Dad, who stormed out the door. The neighbor, unafraid, said, "Your little bastards—" That's when my father destroyed the man's face, hitting him with four punches that sprayed blood everywhere. Dad handed me the football and told me to be more careful kicking the ball from here on out. And then he smiled and said, "I don't want to have to do that shit again, you hear me?"

I usually heeded my father's advice. I also tried to stay on his good side because he terrified me.

Now, the colonel was just the messenger. So as he got out of the car and attempted to follow me across the asphalt, I said, "Why don't you just wait here, sir. I'll take care of it. Dad won't hit me."

The colonel, obviously confused by my casual warning, halted.

My father had stuck his head out the door of the station when he had seen the car pull up and block the entrance to the gas pumps. His pissed-off expression evaporated when he recognized me. "Hey, son!" he shouted as he approached, smiling and waving. But then he froze when he noticed the Marines standing behind me, knew immediately what their presence meant, and then screamed "No!"

Thirty-six years later, I can still see my father's face. He is the toughest man I've ever known, and I had never seen him show weakness, had never seen him back down from anything or anyone. But at that instant his body seemed to collapse—mouth agape, arms limp at his sides, eyes welled with tears. Sobbing. And then, as if someone flipped a switch, he attacked—lunging, his hands aimed at the colonel's throat. Dad would have killed the officer had I not thrown my arms around him and pulled him away. Much to the colonel's credit, he did not attempt to protect himself. Neither did the sergeant step in to stop my father.

I don't remember the drive back to my mother's house. What transpired once we returned remains a fractured jumble of bits and pieces—Dad rushing to Ma's side and her screaming for him

to go away, that Jeff's death was his fault; Ma's close friends looking at my father with contempt; the parish priest mumbling inane shit about my brother's death being "God's will"; my dad taking a step toward the priest and me jumping between them; the house filling to capacity with sorrowful friends and neighbors; the Marines who had delivered the news of Jeff's death standing off by themselves, speaking to no one because no one desired their company.

I have no recollection of seeing my younger brothers and sisters.

Later, over beers with Dad and me at the local VFW post, the two Marines spoke about having the shittiest job in the Corps. For the past five weeks, ever since the North Vietnamese had launched the Tet Offensive, it was the duty of these two warriors to visit quaint little homes throughout northern Illinois and deliver the worst news any parent can ever receive. Not that I really gave a shit about their troubles—they were alive; my brother was dead. The hell with compassion. I wanted answers. Yet they had nothing to add other than what the official Marine Corps telegram offered.

"Vietnam is a weird place," the sergeant offered, then abruptly cut short his evaluation when the colonel caught his eye. Something unspoken passed between them, so we lapsed into silence, which had a strange comfort to it.

My father had been a killing machine in his youth, a Marine's Marine with a chest full of combat decorations earned at hellholes called Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Saipan, and Tinian. But now, as we shared beers with the Corps' messengers, my father looked old and defeated.

Later that evening, sitting in a dark room at my wife's cousin's house in Chicago, I was alone with my misery, a beer in my right hand, the fateful telegram in my left. I kept reading the damn thing over and over. Willing the message to miraculously change, willing myself to snap out of the nightmare. But no matter how hard I cried, how fervently I prayed, how blasphemously I condemned a heartless God, the message never altered.

What was eating away at me was the guilt. I had always been there to keep Jeff out of harm's way. His fights were my fights. No one screwed with my brother. But when he had needed me most,

in the heart of a real combat zone, I wasn't there to help him. In the biggest test of Jeff's life, I was convinced I had failed him.

I was sick to my stomach. And then I lay back and cried until there were no more tears. Only memories.

I drank myself into oblivion once the Marines had informed us of my brother's death, sitting alone in darkened rooms clutching the damn government telegram in my fist.

Still drunk ten days later at the Witbeck-Wheeler-Sabien Funeral Home, I entered an enormous sanctuary paneled with walnut, empty except for the open casket pushed up against the far wall. Dad, my brother Joe, and June stood back as I approached Jeff's body. It was as if I floated to the casket, my feet not striking the ground; a loud roaring filled my ears. I have no idea how long I knelt beside my brother's coffin, speaking with him as if he were still alive—telling him everything I had felt too foolish to tell him so long ago. I apologized for past hurts and petty jealousies. I told him for the first time that he truly was the better brother, the better pole vaulter, the better football player and basketball player.

I told Jeff that I wished it were me in that coffin and not him—I told him how much I loved him, how I wished I had told him that before. Then I stood and bent over the coffin. I brushed my hands across his Marine dress blues, thinking that at least the Corps had cleaned him up, sending him beyond in style.

Jeff's face was chalky, serene, so at peace. I kissed him on the forehead, then on the cheek. But I wasn't ready to say good-bye. Dad and my brother Joe had to drag me away.

My memory of the funeral, held on Tuesday, March 19, is a blur. I sat in the front row of St. James Catholic Church, shaking uncontrollably, hearing nothing that Father C. K. McCarren said. I sat beside my father in the front seat of the hearse on the ride to the cemetery, my body racked by spasms.

I was still shaking at the graveside service, then roughly shaken by the sharp cracks of gunfire from the Marine Corps honor guard. I cried in silence as the buglers played "Taps."

Jeff's body was lowered into the ground.

I'm told it was a cold, rainy day. I don't remember.

A close friend of mine, a member of that honor guard, pressed two spent cartridges into my hand. When he did this exactly, I don't know. But once I returned home, I drilled a hole through each one and linked the shells with a piece of rawhide, then draped the necklace around my neck.

Less than two weeks after Jeff's funeral, I stopped by the house in hopes of cheering up Ma, plus making sure my sisters and brothers were doing okay. Of course, I knew my mother and I would share a few beers. Not that I was desperate for a drink. Hell, drinking was as natural as breathing now—I had been doing nothing but since the day the Marines had arrived at Ma's back door with the telegram. In this instance, though, I had worked my way through at least three Pabsts when the knock came at the door. When I opened it, a young Navy seaman stood on the porch, a clipboard in his right hand, his left resting atop a seabag. Numb once again, I signed the receipt for my brother's belongings that had been shipped from Vietnam, then carried the seabag into the living room.

Mom was still in the kitchen when I opened the bag. The first item I pulled out was a bloodied, torn fatigue jacket, which I immediately carried outside and burned on the front lawn. By the time I returned to the living room, Ma was crying as she lifted out Jeff's personal belongings. Blinded by rage that some twisted, sick asshole in Nam had piled a bloodstained combat jacket atop Jeff's belongings, I had no idea what items Ma had already retrieved from the seabag. Nor did I ask. She told me that there was neither a wallet nor pictures.

My arm felt ice cold as I reached into the bag and extracted the few remaining items: a utility cap, starched utility shirt and trousers, and a watchband, which added to my confusion. The Viet Cong would strip the dead, taking weapons, uniforms, and watches. They used the watches as timing devices for their booby traps. But the Marines said Jeff's body had been immediately recovered, so how could the enemy have taken the watch? Had the Marines lied

to us? Why would they do something like that? Did Jeff really die as we had been told? I knew he had used drugs before joining the Corps. Was my brother doped up when he was killed?

After Jeff died, my dysfunctionality took on extra dimensions. Not only did I thoroughly embrace alcohol, but I also became kind of psychotic. Although happily married, I would leave the house without warning, slide behind the wheel of our car, and disappear into the darkest corner of my soul—to drink, to bury my grief, to escape; it was all one and the same.

I suspect that June knew what I was up to all along, but much to her credit she never complained, never protested.

The visitations were always made long after the obligatory last call at Lynie's or the B&A Tap, my favorite taverns. With a six-pack of Pabst in hand, I would drive up State Street and hang a left onto Appleton Road. My destination was about a mile away, directly across from the VFW post. Visiting Jeff was simply a matter of stepping over the rusted fence of St. James Catholic Cemetery and making my way deep into the shadows.

My brother's grave was easy to spot, despite its not yet having a headstone. The Veterans Administration was working on that problem, but admittedly it had its hands full. The war in Vietnam had slipped into the shitter, and the enemy's Tet Offensive had caused the agency overwhelming bureaucratic grief. American servicemen were dying in large numbers; thus the backlog in headstone distribution. Not that it mattered, for the mound of black dirt drew me like a beacon.

I had been coming here almost every night since Jeff's funeral and burial four weeks ago. We shared beers. Mine were gulped; Jeff's were dropped sparingly on his grave. But this night was far more difficult to endure.

It was April 17, 1968—Jeff's birthday.

Normally, this was a time of reverent festivity in our Irish Catholic household—Holy Week, Christ's Resurrection. But all that seemed meaningless now, which is why I had avoided our church's Easter celebration three days earlier.

Today, Jeff would have turned twenty. Instead, he remained forever nineteen.

As I kneeled in the mud at the foot of his grave, I heard Jeff's words ringing in my ears: "Time to go huntin' some gooks. Yes, sir, am I gonna look good in them dress blues or what, bro?"

The memories came flooding back—Jeff and me sneaking into our father's closet and carefully pulling out his dress uniform, each of us taking turns slipping into his blues; running our fingers gently over the bronze ball-and-bird emblems fastened to each of the collars; our fingers tracing the path Dad had chosen, tiny fingers touching the row of campaign ribbons fastened to the uniform's left breast that testified to his participation in the Marines' historic Pacific island-hopping and other ribbons signifying his Bronze Star, Purple Hearts, and the Presidential Unit Citations.

"How many of these are you gonna win, bro?" Jeff asked.

Without hesitation, I said, "More; more than Dad."

Jeff laughed. "Yeah, me, too."

I repositioned myself in the mud at the foot of Jeff's grave. I listened to the rain splatter onto the mud, heard a dog barking in the distance. For a moment, I thought I heard my brother's laughter. I shuddered, then opened another beer, sharing it with Jeff.

That goddamn dog barking was driving me nuts. I pounded my fists into the mud. "Dammit, Jeff, I'm sorry . . . I'm so sorry. You've gotta believe me. You know I always was there, fighting your fights, never allowing you to get hurt. Then when you needed me most I . . ."

My brother's silence was deafening. There was no absolution. I had failed in the biggest test of my brother's life. Now he was dead. What I had sought on the anniversary of my brother's birth was a sign from God, something spiritual—anything other than the bitter cold and soaking rain that seemed not so much to fall on me as to define me.

Somewhere into the last beer I passed out, relinquishing one nightmare for another, waiting to hear a voice that never came.

And when that voice didn't come in the nights that followed, I hated God even more as I fantasized about killing the son of a bitch who had killed my brother.