

TIROS

A Moral Tale of the Vietnamese War

In the cool dawn light we breakfast and bathe together.

There arises the smell of men and their morning ablutions, like the salt tang that rises above all other exudations of the sea. Agamemnon once prepared for battle to these morning smells.

Over the hills the guns begin to rumble: a salvo, then another, to hail the new day. Clouds hang listless and purple over the land. In the crowded tent latrines—a concession to the gaping landscape—there is no talk of yesterday or tomorrow. We prepare for one day at a time only. It is better that way. One's expectations are reduced to what one can see, what one can manage, in any twenty four hour period. One enters the battle lighter, not shackled with unnecessary baggage, only the desire to survive this day, to return to camp in the evening.

Concentration slips easily this time of the day. Dreams cling to sleepy bodies even though they are awake and on their feet. I allow myself the memory of the dark Vietnamese girl in Saigon. Delores is her English *nom de plume*, perhaps because it almost rhymes with Desire. She's not quite seventeen, yet moulded like a mature woman by hundreds of men, not all of whom have been gentle with her young flesh. She likes me, I her, though we have very little language in common. We found each other even though there were lines of soldiers waiting intrepidly with hands in their pockets. I remember her tenderness with me our last afternoon together. Her mouth made a wild, exotic orchid out of the word "love." She pointed to her womb—her empty, abused womb—and turned her eyes to the wall.

Later, she slipped a simple gingham shift over her beautifully proportioned girl's body and left to take up duty at Sushan's bar until four in the morning, the hour when the last of her clients succumb to exhaustion. I imagine her trundling back to her unimaginably small room at sunrise to bathe and sleep. To wash the

abuse from her body. I cannot save her from her fate any more than I can save myself from my own. We are both outcasts, cast in our roles until death. Together we represent the oldest professions on earth: warrior and whore. Two of the most explicit and ugliest words in any language.

Today our platoon is to advance four miles into dense jungle in search of the green and brown snake of the enemy. He is a snake, we are told this. We believe this. The mythology, the fable, is necessary, if we are to do our job, if we are to track him and kill him mercilessly, though our job is never defined clearly, only rationed out in small portions, like the day's allotment of canned and dried goods. He moves like and lives the life of a snake, slithering effortlessly through dense grass and burrowing deep into the sandy loam of the jungle.

At night, he moves like a snake, imperceptibly; in daylight, he becomes one with the shredded bark and glossy leaves of the unnameable trees. He wears little clothing. His skin is leathery. He sheds it from time to time, enters a second and third body, a second and third life. Occasionally we find the wrinkled cellophane of his body discarded on the forest floor. He is a pathetically small creature who never leaves his boyhood behind, who moves with the effortless grace of the born athlete, and who has eyes that return the relentless stare of the jungle.

I bear him no hatred as a man only as an idea. After all, he is the brother, husband, cousin of the girl in Saigon, the child to whom we all make love, whom I think I actually love. Like her he is unable to understand or escape his predicament. However, Saigon was last week; today we must search for that brother, husband, or cousin and kill him.

Our sergeant rushes us through breakfast and orders us out. Our reliable US army watches note the time. It is eight o'clock. The jungle is only habitable until eleven o'clock. From then until sunset the heat is unbearable, the smell of jungle vegetation fetid and sickening.

As we penetrate the ocean of dark vegetation we lose sight of the sky and the purple clouds. Only the rumble of distant guns tells us we are not entering a paradisiacal garden. By eight o'clock, the sun is already searing the tops of the trees. An unforgettable aroma

rises about us, the smell of the primeval jungle. In the heat the jungle becomes an animal. It tears at your flesh, sucks out your oxygen, tries to turn you into itself. Flowers open anomalous fists, dispensing aromas as potent as the poison in their stems can release. Vines visibly climb trees. Gigantic ferns splash sharp tentacles in your face, lacerating the skin. Huge insects buzz around you, like propeller craft. Our hands are soon chaffed from pushing aside the underbrush.

No animals are visible but you can hear them shuffle out of sight at our approach. Sometimes we disturb a nest of monkeys and their shrieks escape through the trees. But we don't see the animal or his small tormented family. We hear them climb through the canopy and escape into the sky. Nor do we see the sky. For the rest of today's mission we'll probably not see the sky, only its green simulacrum simmering overhead.

Though our enemy is usually older than us, his perceptions are keener. This is his country, after all, and he knows it first hand. He has trained since birth to negotiate the jungle, to make it his friend. The jungle isn't his enemy, as it is ours. In a land of ice and snow we'd probably have the advantage but not here. This jungle is as alien to our natures as Mars or the moon. He can sleep in its barbed trees. He can burrow into the soil and live there for weeks by the light of a candle. He needs very few rations. He can locate edible roots. He can collect rain water in the palms of his hands. His simple camouflaged khaki tunic blends in with the variegated trees and the tall yellowish brown elephant grass.

He can also use the jungle to kill. He can dig a deep hole, implant a necklace of sharpened bamboo spikes at the bottom, overlay it with a tracery of branches and leaves, and wait for his prey to step into the hole. Four of our company have been seriously maimed in this way. One has died. The spikes can penetrate a person's foot to a depth of several inches, destroying the nerves in the foot. A limb can be lost if the victim isn't evacuated to a hospital right away. Usually the spikes are coated with dung or some other bacterial infested matter.

Today, we thread through the jungle cautiously. We have had no contact with the enemy for two weeks. But this doesn't add to our confidence. A few miles ahead, our destination for today, the

area has been bombed overnight by our B-52s, the bombers we built to fight the Russians in the cold war, not the Vietcong in Vietnam. Intelligence reported back last week that the area is probably a maze of tunnels and a suspected underground base for the enemy. We had believed the area safe and secure. We could hear the big bombers drop their load at three in the morning. Our mission is to investigate this report, assess the damage, and find and capture any enemy stragglers.

Our life is without material possessions. We have two changes of clothing, a supply of cigarettes, the occasional paperback book, a photograph or two, and the usual warrior gear. Yet there is a strange oneness to our life. We are dog tags, name plates, a firing weapon, a haversack of ammunition, knives, and other soldierly supplies. Even my footprints in the sand of the latrines match the other man's to a shoe size. Mostly, I know and call my fellow soldier by his surname, not his Christian name, which somehow gets lost along with everything else of a personal nature in our army life. Though the use of surnames is significant. It keeps the person at a discrete distance, establishes him in our minds as a co-worker, a co-warrior, not an intimate friend—a common Smith not a more intimate Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. Friendships, accordingly, are rare or superficial, and enmity is omnipresent and rampant, like the pestilent flies.

Among the men, there is little understanding or knowledge of this war, its causes, *raisons d'etre*, future prospects, which probably distinguishes it from any other war in recent memory. There is little differentiation between aggressor and aggrieved in this war; no overweening belief in the justness of its cause, as there has been with other wars this century. When we lose a man or a group of men there is a moment of illumination. But you soon realize that it is really only a moment of anger and hatred for the enemy. It is an abstract sort of anger and hatred, one that never quite congeals into something comforting and permanent, as did the image of the cruel Bosche, say, in the last great war to save civilization. Here there is no civilization to save.

This anger and hatred come blindly, intermittently, unannounced. They are later acquisitions, you might say, like those other emotions awakened by war—fear, loneliness, despair. They

come with the first burst of machine-gun fire from the jungle, which catches you off guard; with the first precisely placed mortar shell that shatters a skull or severs an arm or a leg. Actually, it's an anger and hatred aimed not at a specific enemy but at the face of war itself, at violence itself.

Of course like anything else it can settle into the soul and take root there. Like our fatigue (with which it becomes one) it can take possession of you. It spreads through you until you hate the jungle, the sand, the sun, the cloying air, the magenta clouds at dawn. You begin to hate the whole world and everything in it. Perhaps, also, it is this anger and hatred that the men sometimes take out on the young girl in Saigon. Several times now I've seen her with fresh bruises and cuts on her arms and legs, which she acknowledges ignorantly with a shake of the head, as though someone else's problem.

We beat our way through the jungle one step at a time. We try to move quietly but this is impossible. Branches snap noisily, boots sink deep into oozing mud, birds scatter through the trees. We announce our coming with every step. Without our compasses we'd be lost. We are warned against the flashing of their glass lens. Nonetheless, you see men snatching glimpses at them all the time. Time becomes something else, measured by trepidation and fear and not our army watches. Soon it is time for our mid-morning break.

The sergeant reports we are near a safe clearing. How he knows this we are never told. We can eat our morning rations and rest. Suddenly we reach the clearing. We see it first as a burst of light through the canopy of trees. It is a welcome sight. Ten of the platoon form a circle to protect us. Another six fan out to protect them. The other fifteen or so find patches amid the field of elephant grass and stretch out. Only when you lie on the heated, scented grass and extend your limbs to the full do you realize how bone tired you are. How easy it would be to close your eyes and fall asleep. How easy for our little platoon to close its eyes and lose itself in a lethal sleep.

Fatigue has a life of its own in war. It is your constant companion—but more foe than friend. At base camp you might actually steal a good night's sleep, setting your natural fears aside and trusting that others, in machine gun nests encircling the camp,

will safeguard your sleep. But it's an imperfect sleep. The fear won't let go its grip. You dip in and out of sleep without actually reaching shore. You hear every sound, every rustle in the trees. If you do succumb to sleep you leave this nightmare world behind for the nightmare world of dreams. Night terrors are common. Men flee from their dreams screaming. Others have to turn on a light. At night the camp is like a nursery of frightened children, reaching out to their loved ones in pleas and prayers, but too scared to put out the light.

Fear's other subtle way of registering itself in battle is through hunger. You are always hungry. Men devour huge meals at every sitting. Even this mid-morning break is an occasion for gluttony. Many have doubled the rations they are ordinarily allowed to carry in their haversacks. Yet no one complains. Some, however, try a different approach. They counter their fear with another kind of philosophy. They welcome their hunger and keep it always at bay, never indulging themselves. Hunger keeps them alert to their surroundings and thus alert to danger. These are the ones who never sleep, who have sleeplessness graven on their faces.

I carefully place my M-16 rifle beside me. The heat seems to emanate from the molten centre of the earth. It rises from the sandy soil in excruciating waves. Our uniforms cling to our bodies. We dream of clouds. We dream of rain. We dream of a cool night's sleep. The constant all pervasive heat makes it necessary to replace our boots every two months. The leather and canvas disintegrate like wet cardboard. But in between, our boots reek of mould and our feet of an insidious fungal growth.

I open a can of sardines. Sardines, we are told, have the highest concentration of vitamins of any canned food. They are Danish sardines, caught in the frigidly cold North Sea. Sandwiched between some Nabisco whole wheat crackers they make a nutritious meal. It's important what you eat. You don't want to get sick.

I want to be alone these precious few minutes but this is not going to happen. I see a figure coming my way. His name is Wiley. He is a buddy, a friend, I suppose, but not one I have actively sought. In truth I have no friends in this war only people I converse with, eat with and sleep beside, share the latrines with. He probably wants to borrow my can opener. He is always losing his gear and

wanting to borrow mine. I can't say I mind. Or let's say I mind and don't mind, one emotion cancelling out the other. He carefully sets his haversack down beside my own as though he means to have it converse with my mine.

"Would you let me borrow your opener. I've lost mine."

I notice he never uses either my surname or Christian name. But then I only call him by his last name.

"Sure, Wiley. Have a seat."

"A hell of a day."

"Yes," I say, not wanting to engage in small talk.

There is always the chance that you can catch a few minutes of precious sleep after the mid-morning and noon breaks. But not if someone wants to distract you in small talk.

"Aren't you hot? What I wouldn't give to take off my shirt."

"You'd be eaten alive."

"Who cares. At least, it'd be a cooler death."

"You'd never get your purple heart."

"That's for sure."

I can't believe I've said this, can't believe the inanity of my remark. Talking to someone you accept and tolerate but don't really like or admire you speak a different language, your vocabulary becomes accordingly diminished.

Wiley's eyes are red as though he's been crying. In fact, I've seen him cry several times and even tried to console him once—but to no avail. He wouldn't tell me what was the matter. On one of those occasions he had received a letter from home, from his aged grandmother. This time I don't even want to know.

He's twenty-six and what most people would call pathetic or a little slow, so perhaps he has been crying. Early on, I concluded that he has little to live for but this war. You meet such people here. Yet the war bothers him all the time. No one complains like he does. His only family back in Denver is a grandmother, who, he says, turned ninety last year. He talks about nothing except the war and this grandmother. He rewards me by living up to my lowest expectations of him.

"Heat like this at home would kill my grandmother, you know that." He says, as he uses my opener on a can of beans. The beans, like my sardines, are warm from the heat.

“Yes, I know that, Wiley.”

“It would snap her poor heart in two.”

“Yes, I’m sure it would.”

“Know what else too?”

“No. What else too?”

“If she saw me now she’d drop dead, I’ll bet.”

“I hope not. She must love you a lot.”

“Oh hell, no. Nothing like that. She’s blind in both eyes.”

As I say, I feel sorry for him and can’t be cruel to him, even in my thoughts. He is a drop out from high school. There are many of those here. Mindless young men fighting a mindless war. He almost didn’t make it into the army. He has very poor vision—he wears bottle-thick glasses—and is a terrible shot. One of our platoon told me he earned the lowest scores in his training exercises. I doubt he’s fired a single round in our three month tour here. But then we are one of the more fortunate companies in that we have seen almost no action in this war.

I am thinking these uncharitable thoughts and eating my sardines and crackers when suddenly it happens.

There’s a great whirring sound, a blinding light, and a thunderous explosion. We are under mortar fire, the most terrifying of all situations in combat, especially when you are exposed in an open field, with nowhere to hide or seek shelter. Like bullets, shrapnel can fly hundreds of feet. You want to scurry into some deep hole but there are no holes in sight. You are scatter blinded by the blast and then deafened by the sound waves.

I try to compress my body into as small a target as possible, crawling on all fours as far away from the perceived point of impact as possible. There are screams and outpourings of prayers and obscenities. “*Jesusjesus, Jesusjesus, Jesusjesus,*” is a common refrain, the world’s most popular expletive of pain and relief. With my side vision I can see that a section of the tall elephant grass has caught fire.

This time I recognize the high pitch whistle of the shell before it explodes. This second explosion isn’t as close as the first. I check my body to see if I’ve been hit but can find no sign of injuries. Often, apparently, you can be hit with shrapnel and not register the

fact immediately, until the brain processes the pain. Pain, they say, is all in the mind, the injured organ only the conduit to that pain.

This time I've managed to keep my eyes closed and my ears cupped. I bury my face in the grass. It has always amazed me how a man under fire fears most for his face, as though the only vulnerable part of his body, hiding it like a child who doesn't want to be discovered, hoping you're not the one to be hit. You try to shrink into yourself and become invisible. You automatically call out in prayer for your well being. No one, not even the hardened atheist, fails to cry out in some sort of prayer at such moments. The reaction is instinctual.

The explosions are followed by long bursts of machine gun fire. Fortunately, it's a familiar sound, not the sound of the enemy's fire power. Their own weapons are usually slower and less powerful and never waste bullets like we do. I take comfort in the sound of our weaponry, the steadfastness of the sound. We sometimes joke that our enemy's weapons are outdated or are like those of a child, the child whom the enemy resembles when he's caught or shot. This is especially true of their old Chinese or Warsaw Pact weaponry, their semi-automatics in particular, which resonate through the thick jungle with a pathetic *pop, pop, pop*. But, of course, their guns are every bit as lethal.

The fire storm continues for some time until it loses its credibility and begins to sound like pure rage, shots sprayed randomly at the jungle. Nonetheless, I draw comfort from the sound and hope it never stops. But then it does stop and the air rings with silence. I uncup my ears and hear . . . the groans of the wounded, the curses of others, the silence possibly of the dead.

The sergeant's voice cries out: "Check for your comrades. Numbers not injured call out."

Suddenly I'm worried about Wiley. I've not heard him groan or call out. Still hugging the ground I call out his name.

"Wiley, Wiley, for God's sake answer me."

Those not injured call out. But not the names only the numbers. The numbers by which we're known to each other in combat: *1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6*. . . . It's our sergeant's way of keeping track of his men after a firestorm, his own contribution to the war effort, the strategy and anonymity of war, and he's forced his method upon

us. I'm number 10 . . . 10 out of 30 . . . and call out my number when it's my turn to do so. (There is no number 13.) The silence is compounded with the sounds of relief. Wiley, I know, is number 12, but there has been no response.

I call again: "Wiley. Wiley. Are you all right?"

But there is no answer.

I crawl over to him, five or so yards away.

He, too, is face down, shielding his face, front, feet. Staying close to the ground, I reach for one of his legs.

I get no response, not even a groan of pain. I sit up, still reluctant to show my head above ground level. I try to roll him over but he's too big. I sit up and try again. Wiley is either unconscious or dead. A piece of shrapnel has lodged itself in his forehead. There is no other damage that I can see, only this misplaced gouge in the forehead. There isn't even much blood. I imagine taking my penknife and prying loose the nugget of metal from his forehead. The eyes are closed. There is a look of peacefulness on the face as though Wiley is enveloped in sleep not death.

"12 is down," I call out. "12 is down," It must sound like a call for help but really is an acknowledgment of death. The sergeant repeats the message. Overcoming my fear, I sit straight up, feel his pulse. But there is no pulse.

"Stay covered," the sergeant calls from within the high grass. But I don't pay attention. Two others close by, 14 and 16, have been hit and are lying on the ground groaning in pain. I crawl over to them. A third, a little distance away, is splayed on the grass, arms outstretched. He is motionless, face down, caught like a Pompeian figure in the posture of flight. I reach 14 and 16. But their wounds, to their arms and legs, appear superficial.

I call out: "14 and 16 hit in arms and legs. We need a medic."

The sergeant again echoes my words.

Within our moments our platoon medic has arrived. Together we lift the two men to sitting positions and more carefully gauge their injuries. The medic determines the wounds to be non life threatening. He then points to Wiley's body. Hunched over, he goes to the body. Hunched over myself, I follow.

But once he sees the nefariousness of the wound and determines there isn't a pulse he returns to the two who are alive.

The sergeant yells out the “all clear” and orders a retreat.

I stay close to Wiley’s body to keep him company, while I wait for help in removing the body. Wiley’s large body is pulsing in the heat. I place my hand on his chest as though to offer some relief. His legs are still warm, the calves perspiring through the thick corded cotton as if still alive. A large, bulbous fly lands on one of them and I smack at it furiously with my hand. The fly buzzes off into the green heat of the grass.

I lay my head against Wiley’s thick legs and close my eyes. I know I am failing in my duty this moment but have no confidence that I, by firing my weapon aimlessly into the jungle, can help our situation in any way. However, someone nearby has started firing again, though we’ve received the “all clear.” There is another period of silence and then the welcome call to pull back. I try to move Wiley’s body on my own but can barely manage a sitting position. He is too heavy, over two hundred pounds. In this heat, I reckon, even heavier.

Then I see Stevenson, number 18, scurrying towards me. He isn’t afraid to be on his feet. He is frantically waving his arms, as though to warn me of danger. Instinctively, I wave back. He is, next to me, Wiley’s only friend.

“Jesus, he’s got it bad.”

“Yes, dead,” I reply.

“Jesus, he’s dead?”

“Yes, dead.”

“Jesus, Wiley.”

“Help me,” I say.

These few spare words are all we can manage.

Together we are barely able to lift Wiley’s body. We carry him towards the jungle, to the exit point where we left it before. The sergeant shouts at us to hurry, to keep our heads down. He assigns another two to help us and others to help the wounded and remove the dead. All in all it looks as though two have succumbed to their injuries and another five have been wounded. A lucky two mortar shots, I’d say, for our sad platoon of thirty souls.

Back in the jungle our task becomes more difficult. Repeatedly, we stumble, fall, pull ourselves up again. We sweat a great deal. Stevenson and the other two helpers keep swearing at the

jungle and the heat, a low, murmurous chant of *Jesuses*, which I assume is their way of expressing their relief or expunging their grief. The efficient sergeant says a chopper will set down in the next clearing in about an hour.

After about half an hour we reach another break in the jungle, a clearing of giant elephant grass several acres in size. We'd passed uneventfully through the area hours before. The sergeant gets on the radio again and we hear the familiar staticky response. We are to remain in the clearing with the body and wait.

It is just after noon now and the sun, which is directly overhead, is relentless in its heat. It is the heat that, at home, assaults your face when you open a hot oven door. The heat and my emotional exhaustion make my head swirl. I would love to lie down under a wet blanket and sleep.

The other two leave and Stevenson and I are relieved to sit down and stretch out our bodies. We line up on either side of Wiley's body, guardians of his eternal sleep. It seems his body is already becoming bloated in the heat. An odour of offal rises from his prostrate remains that is almost sweet. The flies become more persistent and it is impossible to drive them away.

The soldiers who'd been guarding us at the other clearing arrive at this one. They bring us the news. They killed the Vietcong who was responsible for the attack. He was a young kid who seemed to have acted alone. The mortar was American—one of our lethal 81mms. Apparently, he'd had only another two rounds. He didn't try to escape and was shot in the head. The sergeant orders these men to fan out, to encircle our resting area until the chopper arrives.

We don't have long to wait.

We hear the sound of the big blades a few miles off, like wet sheets cracking in the wind. The sound is dramatically amplified by the dips and hollows of the land. The sound could be that of a dozen helicopters. The sergeant is on the radio the whole time guiding the big bird in. Eventually, it finds us and hovers miraculously overhead, like a huge clamorous windmill.

It brings a welcome burst of cool air and pleasantly rearranges the hair on our heads. But instead of landing it drops a canvas gurney for the five wounded and the two who are dead. Wiley is the

last to be hoisted above. It is a moving sight to behold: a burial not on earth or at sea but in blue sky. The piebald canvas gurney with Wiley in it ascends slowly into the sky and is drawn into the chopper's belly. The craft sways sideways and is away even before the body is secured inside.

We break our position and return to base camp. It has been a horrid and useless day, with nothing accomplished. That night, an hour or two after sundown, Stevenson comes into my tent. Earlier, I'd been busy in my head composing a letter to Wiley's aged grandmother. By now I'm in bed reading by torchlight, trying to cajole my mind into thinking about sleep and erasing the memory of this day.

Stevenson wants to tell me something. His expression is serious and makes me think he might be in some trouble. He sits down on my cot and lets out a shudder. I think he's going to swear but he doesn't.

"Are you sick?" I ask.

"No. Just cold. It's awful cold all of a sudden, aren't you cold?"

"Stevenson, it must be eighty degrees. How could you be cold? Maybe you have caught a cold."

"I never catch colds. It's more than that. I'm really cold. Every part of me is cold," he says, shivering to make his point.

"I believe you."

"I just feel awful cold, that's all."

"You've had an awful day. We've had an awful day. A pointless, wasteful, awful day."

"The worst. Yes, I suppose that's it. Wiley's death and all."

"Yes."

I want so much to commiserate but the words won't leave my mouth. There are no words of commiseration to be found at this time.

"Listen Mark, I have something to tell you."

His use of my Christian name surprises me. We've never been this familiar before.

"What is it, Pete," I return the familiarity.

"It's about Wiley . . . poor John. He was only twenty two. He had his whole life taken from him. We should have treated him

better. They flew him out tonight, you know. He . . . you know . . . he thought highly of you. You know . . . I mean . . . you were his friend.”

“You and I were his only friends, I know.”

“No, it’s more than that. You were his best friend.

He considered you his best friend. His closest friend. It wasn’t like that between him and me. We were friends, tent mates, but not the best of friends, if you know what I mean.”

I have no idea what he’s trying to say so I can’t help him say it.

“No, I didn’t know. That’s very kind of you. But I don’t think I . . .”

“No, really. I’m not fooling now. He’s dead, I couldn’t lie. You were his best friend. He told me so often. We were close, sure, tent mates, but not that close. You were the one he admired and liked the most. I understood. It didn’t bother me. He used to tell me what you’d been talking about before putting out the lights at night. I understood. As I say, it didn’t bother me.”

The admission truly puzzled me as I couldn’t think of a single conversation with Wiley that hadn’t been about the war, the mundane tribulations and demands of living in a war zone.

“Like what? I’d like to know.”

I don’t know but he said it often. Mark’s the best friend I have. He listens to me and always has something good to say. Oh, I remember now. He told me maybe a month back that you advised him to read more. You told him he had a mind and should do something about it . . . should get an education when he got back to the States. He told me about it because he said it was true. He’d been thinking the same thing himself. He ought to read more . . . books on religion and stuff. He ought to complete high school when he got back. He ought to go on to some nice college. Maybe ministry school. He thought you were right for him in every way. He considered you a teacher. He told me this at night, before we turned off the lights.”

Stevenson reaches in the haversack he has with him.

“I also wanted to give you this. He carried two things with him everywhere he went, and one of them is yours, this book.”

He hands me a slim paperback, its edges tattered as if chewed by a dog. It's a copy of St. John of the Cross's *Poems* in English, an old Penguin edition, which I'd picked up in Saigon in the city's only English bookshop, run by an eccentric Brit who'd served with some Royal Fusiliers in India before the Second World War. As a matter of fact, I'd not read the book, merely planned on reading it. I'd given it to Wiley . . . to *John* (I was determined now to think of him by his Christian name) some time before when he asked me something about God. I remember now I thrust the book in his hands as a way of cutting him short, of putting an end to our conversation, which, for some reason, irritated me at the time. I remember I'd told him to keep the book. I had no need of it myself.

"It's yours, I think. It has your name on the front. I know he'd want me to return it to you."

I open it but don't remember writing my name inside. Sure enough my name is written on the frontispiece, together with the date, January 2, 1969, but no other markings in my handwriting that I can find. This surprised me for I always write in my books. Probably, I'd only read a few of the poems and then set the book aside. I can be insensitively dismissive at times.

But under my name and the date, Wiley had inserted his own *ex libris*.

John Jerome Wiley
Private US Army
Willow Road, Denver, Colo. 80222
USA

And then underneath: *Generously given to me by my friend Mark.*

"You should have it. You give it to him. It has your name in it. He'd want you to have it. He read it every night before he went to bed. I'd hear him speaking the words aloud to himself under his breath. It was like a bible to him. He even said so himself. 'It's like a bible to me,' he'd say. It's about all he's got. Besides *this . . . something else you should have,*" and he reaches in the haversack and withdraws something. At first I think it another book but then

realize it's some kind of leather bound case. Stevenson hands me the case.

“This is the other thing, I mentioned, which he always carried with him. As his best friend, you ought to have it. He said he had it since he was a kid. His grandfather give it him. His grandfather was a prisoner in the first world war. He came back from Germany with this. Wiley always carried it with him.”

It is a man's leather grooming kit, with all the paraphernalia a gentleman would require for his grooming and other day-to-day necessities, including matching ivory backed hairbrush, mirror, and comb, plus penknife, silver soap container, silver drinking cup, corkscrew, etc. The penknife is the kind that holds every conceivable sort of blade and tool, including nail scissors and file. It is tooled of the finest steel, with a casing of antelope or some other exotic bone. A beautiful hand crafted device as were all the items in the case.

I thank Stevenson and he stands to leave, but not before letting out another convincing shiver of cold before he goes.

I continue to go through the magnificent case.

There is even a can opener, as good as the one issued with our kits. I marvel at how the utensils fit so snugly into the satin-lined calfskin case. German ingenuity at its best, I think, possibly a case issued to German officers at the front during the First Great War. Possibly Feldmarschall von Hindenburg's own toiletries case. A little silver plate cites the name of the Solingen manufacturer and the date, 1914.

For a moment I feel I am prying into Wiley's family's past, indeed into his very soul. I remember all the times when, on one of our missions, he'd ask to borrow my can open or, in my tent at night, my penknife or corkscrew. It's like realizing one had a friend all one's life and didn't know it.

I open the St. John of the Cross poems and read at random. The text is unmarked, I think, until I get more deeply into it. Then I notice these strange thumb nail indentations in the margins. It's not a method I usually use myself to mark up my books, though I've done so on the odd occasion when I've not had a pen or pencil at hand. The markings, I must assume, are Wiley's.

I read the parts that are marked and then read the whole poem for their context. They are significant lines, ones that I, myself, might very well have singled out for approval or further study. They are seminal insights into the writer's soul. They reveal the reader as much as they reveal the writer of the poem. A person's mind reveals itself in such markings but in a good way, a positive way. We are, I suppose, the sum of all the great books we've read and underscored in our lifetimes.

The Wiley I knew begins to metamorphose into someone new, into this person I didn't know, or, through blunt ignorance on my part, never allowed to be born. I realize how much of my image of the man had been formed by my reaction to his physical being, his lumpish, overweight body. My whole evaluation of Wiley the person had been based on physical appearances. I remember seeing him walk across the compound one day and thinking what an ugly, sad person he was, his legs thick and crooked, his head thrust forward from his body like that of a horse. It was an ugly image but one that had graven itself in my consciousness to this day—to remind me of my own gross insensitivity towards this individual, whose soul was trapped in an ungainly body.

A surge of guilt races through me. I draw some relief from the fact that I never spoke harshly to him or conveyed my opinion of the man personally, only my impatience with his small talk—and that I kept to myself, never shared with another. I certainly never maligned the man behind his back. But my demurrals are hardly enough to stanch my guilt.

As I delve into the poems, using Wiley's half invisible marginalia to guide my way, I feel I am in the hands of an astute teacher, a spiritual master. Wiley becomes, in fact, something more. He becomes the great teacher I'd sought but never found. Indeed, these underscorings or annotations, which in substance is what they were, display a wisdom that is, I want to say, on a par with the intuition that inspired the poems themselves—or almost. In some cases I question his response but then, upon further reflection, come to see the validity, the truthfulness, the wisdom of his selection.

Soon I come to accept his choices in every instance. These underscorings reduce the poems to their bare essentials. They are like poems hidden within the poems, like beacons that light the way

into the hearts of the poems themselves. I have no doubt that the good saint would have approved of these selections and bent his head humbly before them.

Gradually, as the night wears on, I come to see Wiley not as the ordinary person I knew but the extraordinary person I might have known, the person I might have learned from, had not war and the paltry conditions of life here, on the edge of an alien, inhospitable land, intervened and dulled my senses so completely. Wiley, his ungainly body, has become disembodied at last. The only part of his unfortunate body left intact the marks of his thumb nails, his great omniscient thumb nails, plumbing like a secret decoder the mind of the deeply spiritual sixteenth century Spanish mystic. A time when a triumphant Christianity was a means to every end, spiritual and worldly, a window to every possibility and opportunity, every beat of the human heart, and nothing else of meaning existed beyond its pale.

It sounds melodramatic to say it but my encounter with the real but now dead Wiley changed my life. Certainly, I would say it got me through the war. It provided me with a purpose, a direction, even an understanding of my place in the universe where I'd lacked one before. It got me through the war and the transition period back to civilian life. Maybe, more fundamentally, it saved my life. Or let's say St. John of the Cross, as interpreted and underscored by his namesake John Jerome Wiley of Denver Colorado, got me through that terrible war. Each morning before going into battle I read a poem or two of this saintly monk, whose own church had turned against him for a time only to later honour him with sainthood.

Of course I traced over his thumb nail scratchings with pencil marks of my own, so that the markings were easier to see. But it was these poems and John Jerome Wiley's highlighting of them that got me through my day, which gave me the incentive, I want to say courage, to survive that meaningless war and the vile propaganda with which it was cloaked by my own government from the start. The poems shed meaning where there was no meaning in the world. They made sense of the madness because they made sense of man's struggle with his God—and of God's own struggle with his creation. Mostly, they kept my eyes raised above ground, focussed on the

woods not the trees, focussed on the sky not the earth. To them and to John Jerome Wiley I owe this debt of gratitude.

I'm a university teacher now and in nearly every course I teach I include these poems. They are a life line, a lodestar, a beacon of hope that I try to share with my students. My copy—I've replaced the tattered Penguin with a durable hard back edition—is still underscored but in bright red ink. They aren't my underscorings but those of this soul whom I knew briefly yet never really knew, and to whose memory I shall pay homage for the rest of my life.

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