

SOLDIERS

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Jim and I crossed the state line at noon, black Kansas thunder clouds chasing up behind and miles of highway still ahead. Swirls of ocher powder daubed the once pale sky and tumbleweeds rolled along the highway like steel balls in a giant pinball machine. And there was heavy wind, whipping the car and scaring up pheasant and jackrabbits lolling in the ditch.

Awakening from a fitful dream, I rolled up the windows of Jim's old beater and pulled a bandanna over my face. Earlier that morning we'd left Omaha, stopping only once to relieve ourselves by the side of the road. Jim's mood, like the weather, was foul and he hadn't spoken in two hours. Refraining from disturbing his trance, I folded my arms, braced myself against the seat and closed my eyes, trying to lock out the storm. Jim's mood and the piston drone knocking beneath the hood.

Three miles across the border the storm caught us, turning dust into rivulets of mud on the car's hood. Rain blistered the windshield leaving only flashes of visibility between labored swaths of slow moving wiper blades. Then a billboard, barely visible through the downpour, alerted us to a truck stop up ahead. When we reached it, we found a weather-beaten filling station beside a roadside juke joint.

Jim said, "I'm tired of fighting this storm," and eased into the gravel parking lot, but the storm hadn't tired of jousting us. As we ran for the front door, it bombarded us with falling missiles, thunder shuddering the walls as we entered. We removed our wet ponchos and shook ourselves like two retrievers coming out of a pond, then gazed around the room until our eyes adjusted.

Five dismal patrons gazed back at us. Strobe shadows, cast by neon beer signs, cloaked four dingy walls. Through the pallor, a middle-aged bartender behind the counter mindlessly polished a glass with a white rag.

In back, a beefy man played pool alone. The faded rose tattoo on his hairy arm matched the exact hue of his sleeveless T-shirt. Before turning away to continue his lonely game, he gave us a quick once-over. A man and woman, immersed in their whispered conversation, glanced up when we arrived. An old man in a wheel chair watched us approach the bar, his rheumy eyes never blinking.

Jim slapped his palm against the counter, stared at the bartender and said, "Two draws, and a tequila shooter."

"You boys old enough to drink?" the bartender asked.

Jim glared without answering but I said, "We're both twenty-one."

Red hair and ruddy Irish complexion melded with Jim's high Indian cheekbones, and even when he smiled he seemed angry. He wasn't smiling. With a frown on his own craggy face, the bartender glared back at him until he finally noticed our short hair and clean shaves.

"Soldiers?"

"Yes," I said.

"Artillery?"

"Infantry," Jim said.

Muscles twitched in the bartender's neck and he smoothed the greasy black hair of his head and then his mustache, with his fingers.

"Guess if you're old enough to fight, you're old enough to drink."

He laughed and it quickly drew into a dry hacking cough.

"Damn right," I said.

Watching us from the corner of his eye, the sullen bartender drew the beer. As he did, Jim stared bullet holes in his back, even as I nudged him the ribs with my elbow. The bartender returned with two beers and a tequila shooter and Jim immediately killed the shot. When he slammed the glass against the bar, sharp sound echoed like the crack of a small caliber rifle through the room.

After finishing his beer in one long pull, he nodded at the two empty glasses and said, "Again."

Again, errant muscles twitched in the bartender's neck as he drew another beer from the tap and reached behind him for the tequila. Jim finished his second shot and glanced around the room like a stray cat in a strange barn.

"Easy," I said, eyeing his empty glass. "We got ourselves a long way to go yet, buddy."

With a smirk, he said, "In a hurry, sport?"

Intent on the couple in the back of the room, he didn't see me shake my head. Looking like a middle-aged farmer, the man was dressed in overalls and baseball cap. The woman's sallow, weather-beaten face pegged her as his wife. We watched the farmer slam his hand against the table, hard enough to rattle both of their beer mugs, and glare as if he were about to strike her.

"If you had a lick of sense, woman, you'd know what a fool question that is."

Apparently she didn't and her unspoken reply filled the room with silent reverberations. As we watched the scene unfold, Jim's shoulders tensed and he stepped away from the bar. Grabbing his elbow, I held on.

"Not this time."

Halting, Jim tried to stare me down, but I stood my ground, shaking my head. Then, immersed in our trance, we both jumped when the bartender slapped his hand against the counter. When we wheeled around we found him leaning over the bar with an amused look on his whiskered face.

"Didn't mean to scare you boys. 'Nother beer?"

"Sure," I said.

He asked our names when he returned.

"I'm Paul and this is Jim."

"Proud to meet you. Name's Ezekiel, but people round here just call me Zeke."

I shook his hand; Jim didn't bother. Instead he asked, "What's the story on the old man in the wheelchair?"

"Rivers is his name. We call him Old Man Rivers," he said, chuckling at his little joke.

With a lidless stare, the old man in the wheelchair glared at us through the crumpled mass of oblique wrinkles obliterating his withered face. Large angry gaps pitted his features, weathered and spongy as fallen white cake, and a half-smoked cigarette rested between gray lips. Like tangles of red snakes on cold stones, broken capillaries veined his nose and eyes. With gnarled hands clawing the wheelchair and bony arms like the plastic limbs of a child's discarded doll, he looked like warmed-over death.

"I'm buying," Jim said. "Give him whatever he wants."

After pouring a shot of bourbon, Zeke tilted back the old man's head and dribbled liquor into his mouth, causing his blotchy tongue to wriggle like an earthworm growing desperate on a sharp hook.

Jim smiled and said, "Give him another."

As I was watching Zeke whiskey-nurse the old man, someone tapped my shoulder. Six inches from my nose, a pool shooter blithely invaded my space, smiling insanely and blinking one discolored eye that looked to me like a spoiled eye yolk. I backed against the bar. When he spoke, his stale breath smelled like battery acid gone sour. Stumbling slowly over his words, he said, "I'm Doyle. Was a soldier once myself. Ol' Man River's my Daddy."

I said, "That right?"

Doyle grinned and pumped his head like a long-handled water pump. "Nah, not really, but I like to call him that."

Noticing Jim's amused smile, I backed even further away from the counter, but Doyle pivoted and followed me like a machine gun on a swivel turret. Then lightning struck, shaking rafters and sucking air from the room like a giant accordion. Doyle grimaced like a frightened child and drifted back to the red glow emanating from the swaying fixture above the pool table. Raising an index finger, I signaled Zeke to bring more beer.

When Zeke brought our drinks, he grinned and said, "Doyle's a little nuts. Myra takes care of him."

"Myra?"

"Lives with the Stewarts," he said, pointing at the couple in the back. "Looks after Doyle and takes care of Old Man Rivers. He brings them in every morning. Comes and gets them every night."

Zeke's mention of Myra prefaced her appearance through the back door - a pretty girl with pale skin and colorless blonde hair. Thin and wispy fabric clung in blue waves to every subtle feature of her diminutive frame. And, like a low cloud wafting slowly in a gentle breeze, she approached the counter and squeezed in between Jim and me. Zeke placed a glass of white wine in front of her.

"You must be Myra," Jim said, suddenly becoming verbose.

"Yes."

"Rain's a little heavy outside. We came in to drink beer and wait it out," he said.

In a lilting, whimsical voice she replied, "Come in and I will give you shelter from the storm."

As Jim listened to her recite the line from the old Dylan tune, his neck inexplicably flushed crimson. As if reading my thoughts, Myra turned and studied me with pale, unnerving eyes.

"The storm is dark and frightening."

"Yes," I said, suddenly at a loss for words.

"Have you met Zeke, Doyle and Old Man Rivers?"

"Yes," I said again.

Dismissing me with a coy nod, she daintily picked up her glass of wine and went to the old man, stroking his neck with cashmere fingers. As Jim's had done, River's ruddy skin flushed crimson. Static electricity, brushed up by her fingers, raised thin hairs on his head as a booming clap of thunder rocked the roof and wind whistled through the loosely-fitted windows. Again, rain blistered the outside walls and darkness began to drape the windows with muted gloom.

"Myra," the farmer called. "Come answer Mary for me. Tell her what a fool question she's asking."

Moving fluidly away from the bar, Myra glided to their table and listened as the woman cupped her hands and whispered something into her ear. After answering, Myra turned away, leaving the woman to rest her head on the table and weep.

When Myra returned, Jim asked, "What'd she want?"

"Her daughter Emily's gone. Car accident separated them. Mary asked if I knew when Emily would join them again.

"Did they take her to a hospital out of town or something?"

"She's where she has always been," Myra answered.

"Then -"

Before I could finish the question lingering in my brain, Myra placed a finger on my lips and shook her head. "You don't need to understand," she said. "The storm's not over yet."

Excited by Myra's perfume, Jim gently touched her cheek. She didn't move away.

"I wouldn't mind getting to know you a little better," he said.

"Forever?" she asked.

Letting his hand drop, he caressed the length of her willowy arm and said, "For as long as you want."

"Don't talk to her like that!" an angry voice said.

Behind Jim was Doyle, his teeth clenched in an irritated scowl. He quickly wrapped a hairy arm around Jim's neck and yanked it forcibly back, Jim slammed an angry fist at Doyle's jaw, then tossed the surprised attacker over the counter and dived over after him.

A weighted club appeared in Zeke's hand. With a practiced swing he tapped Jim lightly on the neck, just below the base of his skull. Jim sank, unconscious, to the floor.

"Ain't hurt too bad," Zeke said, glancing up at me. "Be just fine when he wakes up."

After helping drag Jim's inert body to a chair, I rejoined Myra at the bar. She was staring at the ceiling as she sipped her wine. She seemed disinterested in the whole affair.

Glancing at my empty beer, I said, "Better have another."

“Sure you can handle your liquor?”

“Jim didn’t start it,” I said, frowning at Doyle.

Doyle was still on the floor, grinning like an idiot as he rotated his swollen jaw with his hand.

“Maybe not,” Zeke said as he drew another beer.

Myra said, “Where have you been, Paul?”

“Afghanistan. We just got back and finished our leave.”

“Saw lots of action, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Kill many of the enemy?”

Her question, asked with a curious smile, took me by surprise. “Maybe a few,” I answered.

“And Jim?”

“I’m sure he killed his share,” I said. “What’s the name of this town, anyway?”

“Don’t you know?”

“Seems a bit familiar, but no I don’t.”

Zeke chuckled and said, “You’re in Inferno, Oklahoma. Hotter’n hell in summer.”

“Could you love a girl like me?” asked Myra, interrupting Zeke’s vivid description.

“Guess maybe I could,” I said.

“You love someone else?”

“Life,” I said. “With the war and all it’s about the only thing I’ve really thought about along those lines.”

“Life is a fickle virgin,” she said, her pale blue eyes suddenly glowing like cold pearls.

“And you?” I asked. “What do you love?”

Myra licked her lips and looked at Jim. He was conscious, but still moaning as he massaged his neck. Without answering my question, she turned to leave, but stopped and turned as if having a second thought. After she touched my hand, I rubbed the icy remnant her touch imparted as I watched her walk through the door, held it open and as she gazed at me.

“Wait, I called. “Where are you going?”

“Come with me and I will show you.”

“Can’t,” I said. “Have to get back to the post.”

“Please,” she said, extending her willowy arm. “I promise that you won’t be sorry.”

I started to follow but remembered Jim, still lying on the floor. Another clap of thunder struck, closer this time, shattering the trance and causing me to blink. When I opened my eyes Myra was gone. Quickly, I downed my beer and tossed some money on the bar.

“Still mighty nasty out there,” Zeke said. “Better have another drink.”

“Another time maybe, but not today.”

Bracing Jim beneath my shoulder, I started for the front door. Curiosity stopped me beside the couple’s table. I stared at the weather-beaten woman until she glance up at me.

“Sorry about your daughter. How old was she when she died?”

A single tear trickled down the woman’s face, and she said, “Emily’s not dead.”

“But what about the car accident?”

The woman's lingering eyes held me locked in place. "Emily wasn't in the accident, just Ralph and me."

Breaking her cold stare, I pulled Jim out the front door. From there, he staggered alone to the car, revived somewhat by the rain. He took the keys from his shirt pocket, tossed them to me and slumped into the seat. I gunned the engine and hurried away before the wipers could clear away the ruthless onslaught of the rain.

A mile down the deserted highway, I glanced into the rear view mirror and searched in vain for the squall. No use. It was gone, along with the two buildings, replaced only by silence that seemed to cloak damp earth around us like a shroud.

Far away, behind reality and disappearing foothills, lightning and thunder flared and crashed like distant fire fights. Further still, filtered light mingled with road dust blown up by our racing tires, streaking the waning horizon. Then, swirling ochre powder obliterated the dying sky, reflecting pale allusions of ancient storms.

END