

Ambush

By Robert Klein Engler

The damp grass under Wayne's stomach smells of life. He understands, now, why some animals eat it. Wayne waits prone, his head cocked. In the bright sunlight he must squint to see as far as the cinder alley behind Mrs. Wagner's Chicago bungalow. Sweating with excitement, Wayne pushes up his glasses that keep sliding down his nose.

Like a spider in his trap, young Wayne Carter becomes aware of a world without human voices all around him--just the singing of birds, the rush of a car heading south on Oakley Street, and the hum of mosquitos. Then, Jane appears.

Jane moves quickly and hunched over from the shadow of a catalpa tree to the stump of the old cottonwood that rots in the Thompson's backyard. When she stands up, Wayne has her in his sights. He raises the silver pistol and pulls the trigger. Snap! Snap! Snap!

Jane throws up her hands, turns and falls into a heap behind the stump.

"Got ya!" Wayne yells, springing from his ambush. "You owe me another roll of caps."

"Not fair," Jane protests. "You're supposed to count to twenty-five." It's no fun if you don't wait."

"Another roll of caps!"

"Wadda ya gonna do, Wayne?" Tim asks. Tim asks again, teasing, and with a smile, "Wadda ya gonna do, Wayne?"

"I don't know," Wane says. "Leave me alone. Have another slice of pizza. Just shut up."

The Jolly Roger in Urbana, Illinois is crowded and noisy. It's Saturday night on campus, and neither Wayne nor Tim has a date, so they go out, eat pizza together and get on one another's nerves.

Wayne's roommate Tim Harvey likes teasing Wayne. They both will be graduating in

June, and although Tim has set his sights on law school, Wane doesn't know what he will do after graduation. Part of this indecision is because Wayne does not know yet who he is.

"Come to law school with me," Tim says. "You're smart. You got the grades. Those glasses make you look like a bookish Perry Mason, anyway."

"I got another idea," Wayne says.

"Oh, secrets? You can't have a secret from your roommate."

Wayne wishes that were true. If only he could tell Tim what goes through his mind when he watches him sleep or when Tim walks around their small dorm room in Townsend Hall with his shirt off.

The secret Wayne will not tell is that he was recruited by "The Company" to work as an analyst. He saw their table one afternoon on the quad, and filled out an application. They said they needed people who could learn Vietnamese. Shit, I can do that, Wayne thought.

He'd rather learn Korean, but Vietnamese was better than nothing, better than going back to the old bungalow in Chicago and listening to his mother wonder why he doesn't date Jane, who is a "nice girl."

"You're up to something," Tim says looking squarely at Wayne. "I just know it."

"Maybe I am. So what?"

After graduation, Wayne spends six months in Langly, Virginia learning as much Vietnamese as he can. His friends from college wondered what happened to him. There was a rumor that he had decided to become a priest. Few heard from him, even when he is told he will go in country with four other men to work in Saigon. There Wayne will translate North Vietnamese radio reports and newspapers. Maybe, he would help in prisoner interrogations, too.

Wayne imagines Saigon will be a magical city for a young man from the corn fields of Illinois or the flat grid of southwest side Chicago streets. It will be a city something like a blend of Paris and Bombay, with rock and roll music for a sound track.

When he steps off the chartered Boeing 707 at Tan Son Nhut Airport, the heat and

humidity is a slap in the face. Walking on the tarmac in a light rain with a suitcase clutched in each hand, Wayne realizes he packed too much baggage.

"You like this place?" corporal Kelly asks Wayne while they sit on stools at the bamboo bar drinking beers.

"Not so much," Wayne answers. He is happy Kelly talks to him. When Wayne saw a look in Kelly's eyes from across the room, he worked up his courage just to come over and sit next to him.

Saigon's Continental Hotel bar is a place where reporters, company men and soldiers on leave go for a drink and to meet Vietnamese whores. Overlooking Lam Son Square, the hotel is a French island in an oriental sea.

"So, pick up one of those Vietnam chicks and leave," Kelly suggests.

"I'm not into rice," Wayne answers.

"What are you into, then?" Kelly asks, turning to look at the bartender.

"Not this place, that's for sure," Wayne says nervously. This is the first time Wayne ever talked to a guy this way.

"Wanna come back to my place?" Kelly asks.

"You gotta place? It's against the rules to have a place. How'd you get a place?"

"So, do ya wanna come?" Kelly asks again, knowing Wayne will say yes.

There is a slat screen over the window that separates Kelly's small room with its two cots from the sounds and smells of the street. Wayne is not sure where he is in Saigon, or if it is safe, but Kelly has his M16 propped against the wall so he figures it's OK. Kelly pops open a warm beer and hands it to Wayne. The beer tastes bitter, but also sweet.

"Wanna smoke a joint?" Kelly asks.

"Sure," Wayne answers hesitantly.

After the pungent odor of smoke leaves the room, Kelly turns out the flashlight and moves his hand up Wayne's thigh as they sit together on a cot. Wayne isn't sure if Kelly's hand is fire or ice. He realizes Kelly's body is as warm as his. This is good for Wayne. This is what he came half way across the world to translate.

"Take off your glasses," Kelly whispers. "I want to kiss you."

Sometime, in the middle of the night, Wayne wakes up to the sound of shouting and the slap of boots on the street outside.

He shakes Kelly. "Wake up. Somethings happening. Listen."

They both hear the slap of boots followed by the click, click, click of more boots, and then the rapid fire of M16s.

"It's OK," Kelly says. "Our guys got 'em."

"How do you know?"

"The boots," Kelly says. "Our boots got metal in the soles. You can hear 'em. They don't slap like Gook sandals."

"Put on your damn pot," Lieutenant Marty Goldberg yells.

"I will. I will," Wayne yells back, as he adjust the chin strap on his helmet.

Corporal Kelly gives Wayne a look as if to say in their weeks together Wayne has learned nothing. "Don't worry, L. T.," Kelly adds, tapping Wayne on the head, "I'll make sure he keeps it on."

"Jeez, you company guys are a fuckin' pain in the ass," Lieutenant Goldberg says just loud enough so the other two men near him can hear.

"OK, now listen up," Lieutenant Goldberg continues. "We're going a few clicks north of Dac Nong. We'll wait until dark, and then effect the mission."

"And that mission is?" Wayne asks, looking around at the other company recruits.

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"To capture some Gooks," Lieutenant Goldberg says with a tone in his voice which persuades Wayne this is for real. "You guys then get to interrogate them. Any questions?"

"None," Wayne snaps back.

"Good," Lieutenant Goldberg says with authority. "And for chrissake, Carter, secure those glasses."

It's hard to know who makes the first sound waiting there in the jungle by Dac Nong, but someone does. As the squad of VC soldiers nears the ambush, something snaps, then its as if everyone opens fire at once.

Bullets rip up leaves, smack into tree trunks, and whizz into the night. There are spits of muzzle flash. Someone tosses a grenade. The air shakes with the light of an explosion.

Wayne stays close to Kelly on the ground, as Kelly fires his M16 into the night. He fires the rifle until it is empty. Kelly puts in a fresh magazine. He tries to fire again into the darkness. Nothing.

"Shit!"

"What's the matter?" Wayne asks, seized by a panic.

"Fuckin' thing jammed!"

Suddenly, a VC soldier emerges from the jungle's darkness. Without giving it a moments thought, Kelly jumps up to put himself between Wayne and the enemy. The VC points his AK-47 and fires.

"Ump," Kelly groans and slumps over.

Before the VC can fire again, Lieutenant Goldberg comes out of the brush from the side and shoots his .45 pistol at the VC's head. The man jerks backwards, his brains blasted to the left, and falls against a stump.

A black silence envelops the jungle, as if oil drowns every sound, a silence so thick a man could swim in it.

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"Shit," Lieutenant Goldberg says when he looks down at Kelly. "It's not fair. I keep telling those sons of bitches at headquarters these goddamn M16s are no fuckin' good."

Wayne sits by Kelly's dead body all night. At first light they hear the woof, woof, woof of the choppers as they fly over the tree line and land in a clearing. The men gather up their dead and wounded and head to the choppers, hunched over and blown by the rotor downwash. Before boarding, Wayne stands numb and watches as one of the men cuts off the nose and ears of a dead Vietcong.

Aaron Copland's "Quiet City" plays on the stereo. Wayne stops his Lexus under the branches of a spreading oak tree in Lincoln Park. The old tree casts a cool shadow across half the road's width. Wayne takes off his glasses, cleans the lenses with a tissue and puts them back on. From where he parks he can see out to Lake Michigan. Wayne listens to the rise and fall of music, his own breath, and the soft idle of the engine.

It rained this morning and the park road is still slick with puddles that reflect the sky like dark mirrors. Wayne will not get out of his SUV. Instead, he sits and remembers how in the jungle rain resembles oil spread on leaves. Wayne is retired from his law firm, now, but he remembers, too, the dream he sometimes has. The dream comes when he is awake and it comes when he is asleep.

"Day la khong phai hoi cho," the voice says in Vietnamese. "It's not fair."

Wayne looks at Kelly in his dream. They are both young again with the frost of youth. They wear uniforms, now, to mask the light that radiates from their skin. They lie on the grass together, the grass that smells of life. They become the grass. Snap. Snap. Snap sound the caps.

"You owe me," Kelly says.

"Get up, Kelly. Get up," Wayne demands!

The End

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Robert Klein Engler bio: Robert Klein Engler lives in Omaha, Nebraska and sometimes New Orleans. Many of Robert's poems, stories, and paintings are set in the Crescent City. His long poem, "The Accomplishment of Metaphor and the Necessity of Suffering," set partially in New Orleans, is published by Headwaters Press, Medusa, New York, 2004. He has received an Illinois Arts Council award for his "Three Poems for Kabbalah." Link with him at Facebook.com to see examples of his recent work. Some of Mr. Engler's books are available at amazon.com. He is represented by Connect Gallery at 3901 Leavenworth St, Omaha, NE 68105.