

Last Call for a Loner

By Tom Sheehan

He had never belonged anyplace, and that realization was slowly dawning on him. Of all the places he had been in this whole land, East Coast to West Coast, border to border, foothills or river's edge, none came charging up in his memory rugged with warmth, none touched longingly at him; no village, no harbor, no vast plain running off to the far horizon, no collection of people near such places.

This time out of the barn he had been moving for close to two months, hitching rides generally north, new stars and the wash of pine trees in April's breath calling him on. The contradiction came at him again as harsh as a fist: of all the places he had been, he had been no place. His mind kept telling him the same thing the way a canyon echo sounds, distant, muted, out of a deep solace, hollow, near metallic. It was, he was ready to say, as if he had never stopped long enough to listen.

Now, near the foot of this day, the tidal flats wide and enormous, the sun at odds with itself on Earth edges, he could hear something. It was universal. It bore intelligence. It caught his attention.

As usual he was alone and swore he was the only one attentive to that thing and seeing all this around him, the late sun splattering gold on every surface, moving or still, for as far as his eyes could see. Though he was not unkempt, he was not headed for the boardroom either. A worn but decent dark blue jacket hung on his slight frame, over a red plaid lumberjack shirt buttoned at the collar. The pants were brown corduroy and shiny at the knees and at the thighs. Brown ankle-high boots dipped up under his pant legs. A roadman he obviously was, a hitchhiker, but one apparently who spent his nights abed under cover, his clothes not covered with strange bed residue. This day a shave had been accomplished at some place back down the line. Under his arm he carried his baggy Matilda of sorts, and a vast marshy area spread before him, just a few miles up-river from the ocean. The sea salt and reed grass of the brackish land were stiff as knuckles at his nostrils.

Where he had paused, at the side of Route 107, along the mile-wide marshes, a sign stood its ground as heavy metal. Cast iron most likely, he was thinking as the last of the sun flung itself in reflection. It had a gray field and black letters about two inches high that simply

said, "Saugus," and some part of its beating called upon him. An Indian name, he was convinced in his own reflections, thinking some names have importance, some do not. His name, for that matter, was Chug and he was a loner, acknowledged, as he often said, as the loneliest feeling a man could have. For him there were no roots, no wispy grasp at footholds, no family beachheads he could remember. A loner. It might have been that he had not been long enough in one place, or had never let his past catch up to him. No such determination as yet had fully surfaced on that account.

But now, in the late afternoon, the name Saugus drew him on. It stuck in his mouth. What else was there? Where else? What place could he belong? A trucker's horn suddenly startled him. "How far you going, pal?" The rig was a Diamond-T, a monstrous breed of new redness and shiny chrome sitting beside him on the marsh road, and a hum under that giant hood as deep as a cement mixer. The driver, leaning at him from behind the wheel, half filling the cab, presented red hair and big eyes with shaggy brows and a smile as wide as the window. Chug looked again at the cast iron sign. "Saugus," he said, quixotically, and then with serious conviction added, "To the middle of Saugus, wherever that is."

"What's your tag?" the trucker said, re-adjusting the sun visor, shifting gears from the dead start, clutching, gassing, leaning back in his seat. Artistic, thought Chug. "Mine's O'Malley Fighorn, and ain't that some moniker," he laughed. "My mother sure as hell wasn't letting go her last bit of Irish. My brother's name is Sullivan, Sullivan Fighorn, Mal and Sully, that's us." Deep from his chest rose a laugh as though he was remembering something special, someplace special.

Chug said, "Chug," like it was a simple flake of rock falling off a cliff face. "Chug it's been forever. Plain Chug."

"What's your real tag?" Mal Fighorn bowed his head and looked at Chug as if something else special was waiting on him. Crows' feet almost crinkled with sound at his eyes. A bump sat prominently on his nose, proud badge of badges. Looking ahead at the stoplight now green in the distance, he downshifted the rig, then looked again at his rider. He had shared his name and expected, it seemed, his rider to do the same thing for him.

"Tylen," Chug said, caught by that charge, the depth in the driver's eyes, the fan of crinkles friendly in its marking. Then he added, his breath coming out of his chest like it had been saved up for a long time, "Tylen Chacone."

The two grown men looked into each other's eyes and began to laugh. They laughed all the way up to the red light with an arrow saying "Saugus" beside it. The arrow pointed north. The tears rolled south on Mal Fighorn's cheeks, and on the cheeks of Chug Chacone.

"Ain't we the friggin' pair!" Mal Fighorn said, as he swung the rig into the northbound road, a huge hand pawing the shift lever with adroitness, his feet tap dancing on clutch pedal and gas pedal. "Tylen Chug Chacone, you and me, pal, are having dinner with my dad. Lives here in Saugus, loves his company. And get this," he added uproariously, shifting again, tap dancing again, his brows heavy over bright eyes, "his name is Montcalm Fighorn. He's friendly, he likes his beer and wears twenty years of beard." They laughed all the way into the Fighorn driveway on the far edge of town, near the Lynnfield line. Laughter had taken them right through Saugus Center, past a veterans' monument at a green rotary, past a stately old Town Hall bearing late traffic, past a handful of quiet churches.

Tylen Chug Chacone, loner, felt again that unknown sweep of energy come across his chest or across his mind. He could not be sure which avenue, but it swept at him and by him in the long driveway, making him think he was in a kind of wind tunnel. Once, long ago, someplace in his travels, that sweeping might have been known. He could not remember where. Out back of the house was a barn and another truck, looking like its last mile had been run, sat beside the barn. Painted sign letters on the body of the truck had faded to an unreadable point, pale as old scars. Its tires were flat. Chug thought about old elephants going off alone to die. His mind, he thought, could never compute how many miles of service the truck must have delivered. Now it did not seem so important; it was just rusting away as much as the barn was decaying, though not seen the same way.

A bit later a delicate spring evening hovered around them as they sat on the porch, long and screened-in with at least a dozen chairs scattered its length. He'd bet that some evenings every chair was occupied, it was that kind of house and that kind of porch. In the distance clusters of fireflies dominated the dark landscape. Across the road and up a steep hill, in the growing darkness, an owl called out. Chug thought it to be a place called home.

"So you got a name thing, too," Montcalm Fighorn said, pouring beer from a quart bottle into three frosted mugs still wearing shadowy clouds. "They've been calling me Monty since I can remember. Never by my real name. Hell, I never called this boy by his real name. Enda, my good Enda, never called him anything but O'Malley. And Sully had it the same way." Toward a

bit of darkness off the side of the porch, adroitly, in modest ceremony, he tipped his drink, and the tipping was understood by those who saw it done.

Chug drank slowly and deliberately, and the bearded Monty Fighorn watched his guest drink with dainty sips after the healthy meal. “Don’t be bashful, Chug. End of the day’s the time for a good swallow. Have at it.” He raised his mug and drained off the contents. “Best damn part of the day,” he vouched with certainty, poured another full round, and then raised his eyebrows at his son who went to the small icebox at the end of the porch and brought back another imperial quart. “I’m not the real curious type, Chug, but wonder where you’ve been, what you’ve seen. Mal says you spend the winter in Florida. That so?”

“Two or three places down there. Sometimes they put up with me and sometimes they don’t. I have a special delivery box and they hold all my mail. Usually it’s just a few retirement checks from Uncle I use to try to get through the winter.”

“You in the service, Chug?” Even as he asked the question, Monty knew the answer. The signs were there. Besides the bracelet Chug wore, it was written on the man. His clothes might have been second-line, but he was shaved that very day, and his hairline cut half moons high over the ears. The boots, beat up as they were by the road, were not long from a spit shine. He’d bet there was a pair of dry socks in his small bag if not pinned to the inside of his jacket.

“Twenty-six years in the Army.”

“I got me one of those,” Monty said, pointing at the bracelet on Chug’s wrist. “Where’d you get yours?” The wreathed Combat Infantryman’s Badge, its blue field long since faded, curved loosely on Chug’s wrist. A small chain kept it in place. A circular stain was on his wrist.

“Couple of places were good enough. But first with the 31st in Viet Nam. Then in the desert in the Eighties. You?”

“Nam, too. Four oh first. Caught a bit of hell and was rolled out of there in a hurry. Think I was pinned down for two months then on my way home, on evac. Had one friend, talking about nicknames, who was transferred to first battalion of your outfit. We called him Grunt before we had grunts.”

Perhaps from the dark hill or out of a field now gone into the night, the sweeping energy came on Chug again. Almost electricity, it ran right over the porch as if the fireflies had let everything go. Chug knew a rustling at the screening, a possession of sorts, at the very spot

Monty had tipped his mug. "Talking about names, his wasn't Billy Pigg, was it?" He could not bring back a face, but a piece of it, a nose.

The energy, the sweeping, told him the answer even before Monty Fighorn came up out of his chair. "Damn it, guy, don't tell me you knew Billy Pigg! Hot damn! Thought about him a thousand times. Old Kentucky Billy Pigg. Great boy he was. Marksman of all marksmen, I tell you. Often wondered about him. Often." The plea was in his voice and he nodded again at his son sitting there, the son's mouth agape, his eyes wide in the darkness, wondering what the hell had made him stop and pick up a hitchhiker off the marsh road, the end of the world itself. From the corner of the porch Mal brought back two more imperial quarts of beer and poured the round himself.

"Hate to tell you, Monty," Chug said, setting down his mug, as if his right to drink had been suddenly halted, perhaps his welcome stopped in place. "Died in my arms, not quick, not slow, but long enough to ask me to bless him with water. I did, from a canteen, and him leaking badly, one of them old sucking chest wounds that'll never let go. Said his daddy picked him up one day, about to walk into the river with him and do it up proper, when his daddy keeled over from a heart attack and never got him wet. All that time, it seems, it was all he could remember, being on the grass and not wet. But I got it done for him. Boy had a nose been smashed all to hell before he even got in the army. That your Billy Pigg, Monty? That the one you knew as Grunt, nose broke up all to hell?"

Chug was aware again of the spot Monty had tipped his mug to. The unknown sweeping was coming through the same place, the rustling, the net of screen separating sounds and energies, paying them due respects. And he and Monty Fighorn, old soldiers at the pair, had a sharing of lasting memories coming at them in pieces.

Chug said, "Tell me about that old truck out back. Looks like an old soldier in the Old Soldiers' Home, just waiting to go the last mile. Serve you that good, did it, not letting it go?"

"You're right on that account, Tylen Chacono," Monty said, and laughed loudly, his laugh ranging the porch and out into the night. "Was a hell of a rig in its day. Brought us a little freedom, worked so long and good. It ain't going no place before me, and that's a given." Turning to Mal, he said, "Tell him that's so, son."

"It'll turn to rust in that spot long as I'm around. Bet on it." He tipped his mug, but it was not at the dark space just off the porch. It was more at an idea.

All of it, Chug thought, was measurable.

Monty swung around in his dark red Adirondack chair. Chug heard it creak. “I got an idea I want to run by you, Chug,” Monty said. “No strings attached, as they say. Got lots of room here, most of it going to waste. Boys here got business I don’t want to get into. They do their thing and I do mine. I’m willing to let you have a room for the summer, go and come as you please, go off as you like when you like, doing your road thing if you have to, and head back down to see your friends come fall or late summer. It’s no charity farm nor the Old Soldiers’ Home. You cut some grass, you do some dishes, make your own bed and do your own laundry, and you got a place to drop your head come of a night. And you don’t plan to drink all my beer. Can’t lose anything from where I sit.” The chair creaked again as he stood up and said, “Want to show you something.” He went into the house and toward the back of the house.

Mal said, “He’s going to show you his,” pointing to Chug’s bracelet. “We had it mounted on a piece of cherry wood a lot of years ago. Sets some store by it, he does. Makes me think you should think real serious about his offer. Doesn’t do something like that very often.”

“I’m just a guy barely out of the tank, Mal. Doesn’t know me from a hole in the wall. Why make me out so special?”

“He knows you a lot better than you think, Chug. You and him, you’re like blood brothers maybe. I’m sure you share something I might never know, though it might be like Sully and me. He’s a good man and he finds stock in you. Hell, man, there must be some of that in me, too. I picked you off the side of the road, could have gone right by. Usually do, these days. I have no idea why I stopped. Something in the air, I guess. Would you believe it?”

Only Chug Chacone heard the rustle at the screen, the promise of sound in a small shrub, with a host of fireflies coming closer to the porch.

And so it was, practically for the first time in his life off a post or station, for more than four months of belonging, Tylen Chug Chacone sat on the porch at night with Monty Fighorn. They listened to the fireflies almost, to the owls on the hill, to the old truck turning to honored rust, and every now and then, from a distance, like down a one-way street, to the limitless, endless charge of energy finding its way to a couple of old souls.

In the dread heat of late August, the heavens at rampage, electricity beating about the skies like a thousand cannons at battle, one bolt of lightning followed another bolt through two aged hearts.

Mal told Sully over the phone, “Damned won’t believe it, Sull. Neither one of them spilled a drop of their beer. It just sat there beside them, waiting to get sipped up like it was last call.”

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