

The Fundamental Clarity of Light



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The smallest thing can trigger a memory. A few notes of music. A certain fragrance. For you, stepping off the airplane in the middle of the night, it's the damp heat that clings to everything and flows into your head while you're sleeping. At least that's how it felt the first time you were here, forty-five years ago. It was October 1969, and you'd just arrived in Chu Lai, South Viet Nam, to join the 198th Infantry Brigade.

For the next year you lived in a state of raw awareness, as though the war was illuminating everything with an acid-etched light that revealed every detail around you, no matter how minute, but that also cast deep shadows that were impenetrable, and disturbing. The contrast between what you saw and what you never thought you'd see was blinding at times.

The light was charged with energy. It was liberating and exciting. There was fear, but your fear was transformed by the light into a kind of power that made you stand up amid the grinding madness and run toward the sound of the gunfire because you didn't want to miss out. Adrenaline coursed through your body like an electric current, and then nothing else mattered, because you were like a terrible young god whom neither steel nor fire nor death could touch.

There was still the darkness; the shadows that held secrets you didn't want to know. It was in those deep shadows that ambushes happened, booby traps exploded, men cried out in brutal death. This time it was a friend. Maybe next time it would be you. Why not? You knew it could happen. Death was always there, a few steps, a few seconds, a few inches away. It took some and spared others, leaving you to wonder why you were still alive when other men, no better or worse than you, were dead. But there's no logic to death, no sense of fairness. Death is unconcerned.

During your third month in-country – the exact day doesn't matter, because they had all become so much the same – your platoon was walking down an abandoned railroad track. The exact location doesn't matter either, because it wasn't anywhere in particular; just grid coordinates on a well-worn map. The afternoon sun pressed down as you walked along, kicking up a little dust; wary, tired, thirsty, but still scanning the middle distance, trying to recall the maximum effective range of an AK-47. *Four-hundred meters?* This was the kind of thing you were supposed to remember, especially now that you were a squad leader, except the heat and the stress seemed to drive thoughts and memories right out of your head. *Five-hundred meters?* To the west, palm trees and rice paddies were backlit by the

lowering sun, an ochre light spreading over everything, obscuring the potential danger that was always there. It was beautiful, you thought, wishing you didn't have to walk so damn much, thinking how nice it would be to sit under one of those trees, with a canteen of cool water beside you, when a 7.62 mm bullet passed between you and the radio man – the antenna was always a give-away – just a slight noise marking its passage, then another bullet eighteen inches in front of you made a sound like a sheet of paper being cut with a very sharp razor, the small piece of lead parting the air and, like a passing boat, leaving a wake that brushed softly against your face. All that before you heard the report of the rifle and threw yourself to the ground, firing your weapon at the same time you were thinking about the sniper and how he'd led too little, then too much.

A couple of months later you were not quite so lucky. Then it had been the middle of the night. Your company perimeter had been penetrated by Viet Cong soldiers who came in shooting and throwing explosives while from a tree line six-hundred meters to the west, their mortars pounded the village you were defending. They had cut the wire only ten meters from your position. Moments later, at the front of the bunker, you raised your head to fire your weapon and told the new guy, Bill, to watch out the back. By the light of fires and parachute flares,

you saw without really seeing a hand grenade land a short distance away, just inside the wire. It exploded in the same instant and hot metal cut your face and neck, then you were sliding back on your stomach as though the force of the blast had pushed you, blood running down your neck and soaking your shirt, all the pounding, smoky roar of war momentarily silenced by the unthinkable thing you never believed would happen. You wiped your face, turned to look back at Bill, blood on your hand glittering in the light of a burning house, started to say something and a 60mm mortar round slammed the top of the bunker, pushing you into the freshly dug earth, the concussion so powerful you thought for one too-long moment that your legs had been blown off. How long were you stunned, unable to think straight or do anything? Time didn't stand still. The war didn't stop. What did you do in those seconds, lying on your stomach in the dark while dust sifted down on you and Bill from the layers of sandbags above the steel railroad ties and bamboo poles supporting them, deafened, actually deafened by the explosion, until something, some urge to prove to yourself that you were still alive, drove you forward to the opening where, if you'd looked, you would've seen the place on the ground where the grenade had exploded.

You picked up your weapon, and began firing out into the night, beyond the wire, not seeing anyone, not knowing if there

was still anyone there, just firing your weapon because that's all you could do. The power flowing out of your rifle could destroy those who had come to destroy you, but it flowed the other way too, through your hands and arms, into your body, giving you strength and courage, pushing back against the reality that death was still nearby, shredding your fear round by round, letting you think you were in control when the truth was that no one was in control. Everything – the night, the fires, the explosions and flares and jets shrieking in from Chu Lai – everything was completely, thoroughly out of control. Random chance governed every second, every minute that slipped past, bringing you closer to...what? Death? Salvation? You didn't know and you didn't have time to care just then. It was enough to be alive. Later, after the assault had ended and the dead and wounded were counted, you left your weapon with Bill and climbed into a medevac helicopter, falling against the bulkhead as it took you and others to an Army hospital to be cleaned up, operated on, and given a Purple Heart.

Sometime after dawn, lying in a bed with patches on your eyes, the unfamiliar smell of clean cotton sheets floating up to join the stink of blood and fire and Betadine, you're flooded with an exhilarating relief that you're lying in that bed with patches on your eyes, instead of on a table in the Graves Registration Unit with a tag on your toe.

Back with your company a couple of weeks later, beer-drunk or marijuana-high, as you tell the story of that night, how death missed you twice in a matter of seconds, the crystalline rush of fear will fill you again, and you'll understand how the narrow distance between you and death makes you feel thoroughly, radiantly, intimately alive.

You remember other things: men you knew who came home earlier than scheduled – unmoving and silent. Hugh was one of them. He will always be twenty-one years old, and you'll never forget his face, no matter how long you live beyond his twenty-one years. A booby trap killed him, after he'd been here only ninety-seven days. Others died during your time here, but Hugh was different. More innocent, perhaps; not cynical yet, like you. He was killed before he could become cynical. Was that a blessing, or not – that he died in a certain state of innocence? He's still dead, you think, so what good did innocence do him? For that matter, what good did cynicism do you?

You got tired and muddy with Hugh, and terrified sometimes, even though no one ever admitted to being terrified. "Shaken up," maybe, or "had a close call," but terrified was too close to the truth. You got drunk with him, and ate crappy food out of olive-colored cans with him. You dug foxholes, marched

fifteen or twenty clicks, got soaked in the relentless monsoon rains – but you didn't die with him.

Why him – and not you? You all knew that every day was a roll of the dice. Usually you rolled a good number. You dodged the bullets, missed the booby traps, and kept going. But it didn't always work out that way. Some men ended up bleeding and mangled, lying in the dirt of an anonymous field, ten-thousand miles from home; ten-thousand miles from their future.

Hugh went home, and was buried. Closed casket at the funeral. No one who loved him wanted to see him like that – slashed by hundreds of 3.2 mm steel balls that had exploded outward from a stolen Claymore mine marked “Made in USA.”

You were his squad leader. Could you have done something, anything that would've kept him away from that trip wire; kept him alive? You've asked yourself that question many times over the last forty-five years. The answer remains the same: I don't know.

What you also remember: a village burning while old women and young children sat nearby crying. You started the fire, after a man in your company had been killed a few minutes earlier by a sniper. His name was Warren. You hadn't gotten to know him well, and now you never would, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that he was one of us, and he was dead. Setting

the house on fire wasn't exactly premeditated. You'd just lit a cigarette and were standing there looking up at the palm thatch roof, then idly took out your lighter again and lit a low-hanging corner of the thatch. Just to see it burn.

You couldn't kill the lifers who decided what you were supposed to do each day, not without going to jail, and you were never going to find the man who killed Warren. You'd sure as hell never find the one who killed Hugh. But you could kill Vietnamese, burn their houses, rough them up, take what you wanted and move on. So you set the place on fire, and it burned quickly, pouring thick black smoke into an otherwise perfectly clear, beautiful blue sky. Someone in your platoon saw the house burning, so he set another house on fire; then more men set more fires, until the whole village was reduced to piles of smoking ash, and the dinks that hadn't run away were standing around wailing and yelling, like they always do.

Maybe you thought it would feel good, or that you'd avenged Hugh's death, or that somehow the fire would burn off the silent anger you felt almost every day, but couldn't quite talk about. You didn't feel avenged, though, or righteous or vindicated, nor did it feel that somehow the balance of the world had been set right; as if one dead soldier weighed against one burned village would make it all come out even in the end. It didn't come out

even, and you still felt angry and tired and dirty, and the whole fucking thing was still pointless.

That day and many others play over and over in your head, year after year. That night in the bunker when death almost found you. The bound and blindfolded Viet Cong prisoner you slapped around a month later, and threatened to kill — not that he understood what you were saying; not that you cared. The house you watched burn, not concerned that it was someone's home, just thinking that it was a miserable little bamboo shack, and how pissed off you were, how tired, how violently you had been disabused of your illusions about war and justice and death. Thinking that none of it mattered.

But some things did matter. There was the little girl brought to your unit out in the field by her mother, who thought that, surely, the GIs could do something about her daughter's burns that were caused by napalm — that greasy, viscous gel that stuck to things and people and animals, burning at eight-hundred degrees. Only Americans had napalm. Only Americans had the means to drop it wherever they wanted. You'd been out in the field for ten months by then and thought yourself immune to the ways in which human bodies could be broken or destroyed. Until the child was brought in. Six or seven years old. Burns on

her arms and chest. Maybe elsewhere too. You didn't know, because you couldn't make yourself look.

It would be years before you would have children of your own. Daughters, in fact: three little girls you hoped would never experience the horror of war or the pain of napalm.

You remember it all, like newsreel footage that can't be edited or erased. You can't pretend it didn't happen to you and the men you knew, and you can't forget how quickly everyone was reduced to an almost feral state of existence. Shocked at first, stripped of your naïveté and your thin covering of civilization, you felt revulsion at what you saw and did. Then, little by little, living with careless destruction, walking past long-dead bodies as if they weren't there, the air strikes and leeches and jungle rot all became commonplace elements of your life, and the revulsion turned to rationalization and denial, and deeply buried fear. By the time you saw Hugh's blood soaking into the earth of a barren field, you'd been in an almost mindless state of casual brutality for what felt like years.

The memories are like furniture scattered among the rooms of an otherwise empty house. You keep moving the furniture around, hoping to find some arrangement that will be comfortable, that you can live with for a while. Maybe the rest of your life. But it never works out that way. You keep bumping

into things in the dark, opening old wounds that never really healed. As you kneel down to wipe your blood off the floor, you remember other blood, other rooms, other years, and you know then what it feels like to be nakedly, painfully alive.

You'd cry, if you had any tears left, but you don't, not today anyway, so all you can do is give thanks, to whom or what you don't know. You utter words of gratitude, because you're fortunate to have lived through it all, to have arrived at this day, forty-five years later, despite not knowing why or how; despite the young man's voice, deep inside, asking you the same question again and again: *Is it truly fortunate to survive and then have to live with these memories, year after year?* Your answer is always the same: *I don't know.*