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Hostilities

It had taken Noreen an hour to change the appearance of the living room completely. When her husband, Russell, had left for the university after supper she had busied herself decorating and transforming the dull first floor of their house in the Glebe into a bright stage. Thursdays he taught his evening seminar on Canadian Labor History and would not be back until nine. By then there would be a dozen of their friends waiting for his return and the grand celebration. She knew how he hated to observe birthdays or holidays, but this anniversary would be different. Twenty-five full years in Canada. A knock at the front door shattered her reverie and she let in the first of the guests. By eight-thirty nearly everyone was present, embarking quickly on the merrymaking, listening to Bob Dylan gruffly enumerate the more salient of society's ills. Tonight it would be Dylan, the Lovin' Spoonful, the Four Tops, the Mamas and the Papas, the Supremes, and maybe a little Aretha Franklin or Simon and Garfunkel. The record albums Russell had brought with him twenty-five years ago.

As Noreen admired her decorating, George, already tottering from drink, put an arm around her and said, "Couldn't we hang the flag upside down?"

Noreen brushed George away by saying, "That flag has meaning for Russell." As did the posters she had hunted for all over Ottawa. The living-room walls were pure '60s, with a faded American flag thrown in for good symbolic measure.

"Do I have to salute?" Henri said, standing at rigid attention. Like Russell and George, he was a history professor at the university.

"Not with your clothes on," Noreen retorted, becoming testy over having to defend her decorating.

Henri unbuckled his belt and there were several loud whistles of approval. "No treat . . . he's hung like a mouse with a pituitary deficiency," George informed the whistlers. "*Imbécile! Vautour!*" Henri countered and playfully pushed George down onto the couch.

At eight-fifty Noreen shut off all the house lights. "Russell is always back between nine and nine-ten," she promised. "No spitting or fornicating in the dark."

A few hoots rebuffed her warning. Someone voiced a complaint about the ancient music. "The '60s are dead," a voice declared, and Noreen replied, "The '60s are more alive now than they were in the '60s."

"I think Russell would appreciate an orgy," another voice called out.

"I heard he's into celibacy. Is that true, Noreen?" George jokingly asked.

"You know that Russell believes in excess . . . in everything," she answered.

"If we stay in the dark any longer, we won't need our eyes. They'll be vestigial organs, like Donald's brain," Henri said.

"You're a demented historian, what do you know?" Donald, a chemist with a federal government department, teasingly retaliated.

"What do scientists know? Darwin was a fraud," Henri told Donald.

"Freud was a Darwin," Donald taunted.

"Just stay in the mood to party," Noreen said, scurrying about the darkened room and adding final touches, deciding that a picture of LBJ hanging between posters of the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix would delight her husband.

By nine-fifteen Russell had still not arrived. The drinking and bantering continued in the dark. Aretha Franklin had replaced Bob Dylan, and was demanding "R-E-S-P-E-C-T . . ."

"What if he doesn't show?" George asked.

"Quiet!" Noreen ordered him.

The door began to open and the partyers shouted their greetings. When the lights came on Russell was confused by the gathering and decorations. "What in the world is going on?" he said as Noreen embraced him and the others offered their congratulations. His birthday was not until May; they had their nineteenth wedding anniversary last

month. He saw the flag and posters and attempted to think of an explanation.

"You really don't know?" Noreen said, certain that her husband was feigning ignorance.

"A celebration to scare away winter?" he said, taking off his boots and coat.

"Winter doesn't scare easy," George said, bringing Russell an opened bottle of beer.

"I happen to like winter," Russell said, grabbing the bottle and taking two gulps.

"Twenty-five years ago today, Russell. January 27th, 1969," Noreen, who taught Grade Three, said as though to a dense little boy.

"A most historic and memorable day," Henri added, first in English and then in French.

"January 27th?" Suddenly Russell realized the date's significance. "Jesus Christ, Noreen!" He kissed his wife and lifted her off the ground. "Twenty-five years," he said, sounding unsure that a quarter of a century had passed so quickly. He slowly put his wife down and said, "Bless my Canadianized soul . . ."

On January 27th, 1969, waiting until the cover of darkness, Russell drove his car over the border into Canada, stopping long enough to fill his pockets with Canadian soil. "A quarter of a fucking century . . ."

The guest of honor, excited and rummaging through a cluster of long dormant memories, disappeared into an upstairs bedroom and returned wearing a United States Marine Corps shirt, along with a pair of sweat pants he had changed into.

"Corporal Professor reporting for duty," Russell yelled out and snapped to attention, beer bottle in hand. Two of the men saluted him.

"You were a real soldier?" Daphne, an English professor, said in disbelief, stepping close to Russell and inspecting his military shirt. She was the only one dressed stylishly for the occasion: high-heeled and décolleté. Despite a three-year friendship with Russell and Noreen, Daphne just now learned of Russell's military past.

"What did you think we're celebrating?" Russell said to Daphne.

"You don't seem like you could have been a soldier," she said.

"What does an ex-soldier seem like, Daphne?" he said, his expression sour. Then, relaxing, he continued: "I was the greatest of combat

soldiers." Russell finished his beer and attempted unsuccessfully to balance the bottle on his head. "I could have been a general," he mumbled, mimicking Brando in *On the Waterfront*.

Despite twenty-five years in Canada, a citizen for twenty, two jars with Canadian soil, MA and PhD in Canadian History, Russell always referred to his American background with a blend of mockery, irony, and fondness. Even though he was vague with details from his past, Russell made no attempt to conceal that he was a former American.

"Is this a happy or sad occasion?" Henri asked, handing his friend another beer.

"Happily sad . . . sadly happy," Russell said, opening the bottle with his teeth and spitting the cap high into the air, the tiny sphere falling near the stereo. "Let's see any politician do that."

"I bet a few civil servants can," George said, "and not with their teeth."

Daphne inspected Russell's teeth, pretending to search for a bottle opener in his mouth. "Where did you learn to do that?" she asked, astonished by the act. "I can't even twist them open." Daphne considered Russell to be mildly eccentric, but admired his energy and spirited sense of humor, all of which she attributed to him being from the States originally.

"In Vietnam," he answered casually.

Daphne cringed as though the word *Vietnam* was vulgar. George said, "A toast to the Viet Cong, wherever they may be at this precise historical moment."

"I saw *Miss Saigon* in Toronto," one partyer revealed, and another boasted about seeing it twice in London, England.

"A toast to King Kong," Donald said, pounding his chest.

"Which side did you fight on, Russell?" Henri asked, awkwardly going through the motions of hand-to-hand combat with an unco-operative Donald.

Russell pointed to his corporal's stripes and forced his usually bass voice even lower: "On the side of righteousness, *Monsieur*."

"You weren't actually in Vietnam?" Daphne said, touching Russell's corporal stripes, seeming to be testing them for authenticity. Her expression still displayed disbelief at Russell's disclosure.

Russell put his arm around Daphne's waist and exaggeratedly inhaled her perfume. Slowly shaking his head, he said, "Daphne, my platonic and incredulous friend, pardon the ghastly phrase, but I was in the jungles of hell."

Daphne giggled and immediately became embarrassed by her reaction. Donald handed her a marijuana cigarette he had just prepared and she took a deep, serious inhalation. A few seconds later she handed the joint to Russell as he sang the first line of "The Marines' Hymn."

"But why a Marine?" Henri asked, after taking the joint from Russell and inhaling deeply, coughing after he had asked the question.

"I was a patriotic keener, gentle colleague. While you were breathing in the dust of old Canadian archives, I was being exposed to Agent Orange . . ."

For no apparent reason someone began to sing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." No one joined in and the solitary singer abandoned the song. On the stereo the Mamas and the Papas, having replaced the Queen of Soul, were singing "Dedicated to the One I Love." Russell opened another bottle with his teeth and once again spit a cap towards the ceiling. Daphne caught the cap before it hit the floor.

"Sign her up for the Expos. Hands you read about in the sports pages," a voice exclaimed and everyone else clapped in appreciation.

"A Marine is the last thing in the world I would have guessed. I would have believed an orthodontist or maybe an opera star before a Marine for you," Daphne said, and tossed the bottle cap to George on the couch.

"Daphne, do you believe there was a Vietnam War?" Russell asked, his expression wedged between a smile and a scowl.

"What do you mean by that?" she said defensively.

"Merely probing your sense of reality. Some people never comprehend what they can't touch," Russell said and held out a hand to the woman. "Touch me, Daphne. Feel my Marine Corps past . . ."

Daphne silently but firmly traced a path with one of her fingers from Russell's wrist to his elbow.

"Why is it so difficult to believe that I was a U.S. Marine, a leather-neck, in Vietnam? I mean, we're all overly educated," Russell said, his expression releasing into a soft grin.

"How about not talking about war," Noreen said, putting on a different record album and turning up the volume in an attempt to drown out Russell. The Four Tops declared, "Reach out, I'll be there . . ."

"Then why did you put up the flag?" Russell said to his wife, his grin remaining but his words becoming louder.

"For twenty-five lovely years in Canada, Russell, not what came before. We should erase that part of the past."

Russell said, "I'm not going to erase anything," and went over to the American flag on the wall. "I'm here because of what came before. There are certain immutable laws in the universe, my dear: cause and effect, eat and defecate, ejaculate and impregnate. History is unerasable and linear."

"It is cyclical and sexy, that is constant and absolute. History is very *sick-lical*," Henri argued mischievously.

Daphne went over to Russell, by the flag, undeterred by his sarcastic manner. "Did you kill anyone?" she asked.

"Daphne, give it a rest," Noreen scolded.

"It's all right, my dear. Intellectual curiosity should never be discouraged," Russell, pulling on his long curly beard in contemplation, told his wife. He had vowed never to shave when he came to Canada, and save for a few surreptitious trimmings, was good to his pledge. In spite of the long beard and being in his mid-forties, Russell appeared youthful. "I didn't put notches on my gun, Daphne," he said.

"Was it one or ten or a thousand, Russell? You must have some idea," Daphne persisted.

"I didn't keep track. I let others worry about body counts."

"You don't know at all? . . ." Daphne was completely amazed. At a previous party she had shown similar amazement when Noreen confessed that she could not give an accurate number of how many lovers she had had before Russell.

"It was dark in the jungle," Russell said, widening his grin.

Noreen, uneasily listening to what her husband was saying, finished an entire joint herself. What damn journey into Vietnam this time? She always grew uneasy when Russell talked about his wartime experiences, pulled the memory trigger again and again, uncertain of his target. "It's over, Russell," she said, her glance stern, trying to dissuade him from telling his war stories. Even nestled in their house in the Glebe, Russell an assistant professor and she an elementary-school teacher, Noreen had

stayed awake too many nights listening to his disturbed sleep to believe that she and Russell could avoid his war; but not with their friends around, not wide awake in Ottawa in 1994. She often thought that if not for her husband's memories of the Vietnam War, they would have the perfect marriage, at least judging against the relationships some of their friends had.

"Not here, Russell," Noreen said; at night, alone with her husband, she could be much more compassionate when Russell crawled through the jungle. "Back to the lousy war and my hubby's guilt trip," she said coldly.

"Not fair, not true. I simply don't want to forget," the former United States Marine said. Growing more excited, his voice becoming even lower, he continued with more determination: "Santayana—not to be confused with Santana, of Woodstock fame—said that he—or she—who does not learn from history is doomed to repeat it. Something pithy or pissy like that."

"The dipsomaniac warrior speaks," Noreen said, turning her back to her husband and giving Daphne a cautionary glance.

"Were you a deserter, Russell?" Daphne asked seriously, ignoring Noreen.

"I feel the bombs about to drop on Hanoi," Donald said, putting his hands over his ears. In the background George was telling people that Santayana's first name was also George, the difference, of course, that he was a living George, and Santayana a dead George. But Daphne's attention was on Russell, his blue eyes roaming around the living room, over the jungle, peering into crevices that hid countless excoriated souls. She could not imagine a man with such an innocent-looking face ever in combat, *actually killing people*.

"Deserting was my calling, Daphne," Russell said, his mood balanced between levity and depression.

"Why did you desert?" Daphne asked, demanding an answer.

Russell shook a finger at the questioner and then drank from his bottle. Before he spoke, he took an exaggerated drag from a joint and appeared to be reflecting on the past. He was short and muscular, his blond hair shoulder length and unruly, a swaggering and joking Biblical prophet.

"I know what you want to hear, Daphne," Russell said and smiled at the woman. "I rarely tell anyone about my war adventures. Being an academic causes you to bottle up your emotions, so to speak."

"I'll drink to that," Henri said, and George shook his head vigorously in drunken concurrence.

A couple began to dance as Russell continued with his story. "I deserted with my medals in hand and I had a handful of them. I was a brave cuss." He pointed to the service ribbons and medals on his shirt.

"Weren't you opposed to that war?" Daphne asked.

"Not in the way you think—"

"You don't know what I think, Russell," she said angrily, and sat down on the couch next to George.

Russell opened another bottle of beer with his teeth, rubbed the cap between his fingers—for luck, he said—before placing it on the coffee table, near the couch, and then knelt down on the floor at Daphne's feet, impulsively kissing her on the right ankle. "You underestimate my ample powers of insight. I'm a perspicacious PhD, mentally equipped to comment on any aspect of the human condition. You, Daphne, were a dupe of TV and newspapers, like most people who weren't there. Search and destroy, Haiphong harbour, Camranh Bay, Ho Chi Minh trail, B-52 bombers, napalm lunacy . . . What could they possibly mean expelled over the North American news? No need to answer, Daphne, the question is purely rhetorical. Your thinking was nurtured by media clichés. The media had their own surrealistic war. It wasn't a lie necessarily, just another war. Like parallel worlds. The media-transmitted war, brought to your snug and cosy home, had no smells. War smells, take my shell-shocked word for it."

Daphne furrowed her brow, and finally smiled, thinking that Russell was making a joke.

"Don't laugh, Daphne, it's true. I swear on my PhD. Death smells, bombs smell, fire smells—"

"You deserted because of the odor?" Daphne said, with lightly disguised mockery, protecting herself, just in case Russell was trying to make a fool of her.

"No, goddamn no!" Russell shouted.

"We're not deaf," Donald whispered, holding a finger to his lips.

"Terribly sorry, Don, my boy," Russell said unrepentantly, "but I need to tell the beautiful authority on CanLit. I owe it to posterity."

"Why don't you turn on CNN and see what war they're covering now," Noreen said. "There are plenty of contemporary conflicts for you to analyse."

"No CNN when I was fighting in Nam," Russell said.

"They did a good job covering the Gulf War," one of the dancers said.

"You're easily impressed," Russell told the dancer.

Three more revellers positioned themselves close to Russell and now everyone in the living room except the two continuous dancers and Noreen was sitting near the ex-Marine. On the stereo the Supremes were singing "You Can't Hurry Love," Donald and George and Henri briefly and woefully lip-syncing. A small debate was going on, over which was the best cinematic depiction of the Vietnam War, and titles and synopses flowed out. *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket* . . . Russell had assumed his lecturing style and he had the reputation as his History Department's most entertaining lecturer.

"So, tell me why you deserted," Daphne said, leaning forward towards Russell.

"Sit back and I will give you the truth," Russell said, gently pushing Daphne back.

"She won't like it," Noreen, pacing nervously behind the couch, warned her husband.

"How do you know, Noreen?" Daphne said, without making any effort to conceal her annoyance. "You and Russell seem to think you have my head all figured out."

"There are so many other wars we can have an intelligent discussion about," Noreen said. "Doesn't anyone want to talk about Sarajevo—1914 or 1994?"

Russell raised a hand over his head and said, "Daphne is entitled to hear about what I went through and I'm going to tell her. I didn't risk my life in Vietnam so that I'd be afraid to speak the truth in Ottawa . . ." When he lowered his arm, someone handed him another bottle of beer. Noreen suggested he go easy on the drinking, and Russell said he was allowed to drink as much as a moderately-sized fish on his twenty-fifth anniversary, one of the inviolable imbibing rights, he claimed, of professors who make it through twenty-five years of anything.

Russell held the unopened bottle against his chest and went on with his lecture: "I was a soldier, not because I liked it, but because I had nothing else to do. I hadn't discovered the blissful euphoria of academia yet. Patriotic keener was merely one of my disguises." He stopped speaking, opened the bottle with his teeth, spit the cap into his hand, and took a long drink of beer, then put the cap—neglecting the good-luck rubbing this time—and bottle down on the floor. "It was Gus who taught me to open bottles," Russell said, after a deliberate pause. "In Vietnam, Gus showed—"

"Not your story about Gus . . . please," Noreen interrupted her husband.

"His story must be told. Gus was my bosom buddy and source of sanity—"

"*Russell*," Noreen said pleadingly, but her husband was not moved.

"Gus and I were out on patrol and we found this Vietnamese broad—"

"*Woman* is the proper term, Russell," Daphne said, pleased to be able to correct the centre of attention.

"Certainly, Daphne. No argument whatsoever. I get carried away when I think about Vietnam. Let me start again. This attractive, adorable Vietnamese woman—"

"Don't, Russell," Noreen pleaded once more.

"I want to hear, Noreen. I'd like to know what motivates a deserter. A large number came to Canada," Daphne said, giving Russell's beard a slight tug. "I don't want to rely on news broadcasts and Hollywood movies all my life."

"Seek the truth from the war-horse's mouth, beautiful, inquisitive scholar, and ye shall be set free," Russell said, and reclined on the floor. Daphne sat down next to the raconteur and he put his head in her lap, gazing up at the ceiling.

"Skipping the licentious details," the patrolling soldier continued, "this Vietnamese woman conveyed to us that she wanted to share a little worldly pleasure with us. Gus and I, being red-blooded Americans overseas, saw no harm. We thought what she was offering was a blessing, a reward from our commanding officer for fighting valiantly far from home. What the hell, we hadn't heard a shot in hours so we flipped a coin to see who would fuck her first."

"A euphemism wouldn't hurt," Donald interjected. "There are women here."

"Spare me the mixed-company, double-standard shit," Daphne told the chemist.

"Give it to him, woman. Equality in scatology," Russell said, snapping his fingers in encouragement. He stopped his finger-snapping and resumed his story: "You might have known that I lost as usual. Gus went into a nearby hut with the Vietnamese purveyor of pleasure and I stood guard outside, the designated lookout, watching out if the war decided to bother us. I stood there waiting for my turn like a good soldier."

"I'm leaving the war," Noreen announced and started to walk towards the kitchen. "I'll brew some non-combatant coffee for anyone who wants some. I've heard this story too many times," she said, before reaching the kitchen.

Another joint was passed around the room. Random comments were offered about current hostilities going on in the world, arguments arising over the nature of war and aggression, about what were the most realistic war movies and whether war could be better depicted in fiction or non-fiction . . .

Russell pounded the floor with his fist, silencing his disputatious audience, and repeated, "I was being the designated lookout," he seeming to become less drunk, more ensnared in the jungle and memory. "I hated the war then because it was boring. Amid the rockets' red glare, amid the bombs bursting in air, amid the goddamn dying, there was tedium and more tedium. I was so damn unsophisticated and unpolitical in those days. I finished high school, went through three mind-numbing jobs in a year, and enlisted at nineteen in the Marines. Before I was twenty I was a well-seasoned soldier."

Russell sat up and looked around the room, searching for any enemy that might be lurking. ". . . I'm thinking about the pleasure awaiting me and I get blown off my feet. I hear Gus hollering and I get up fast as I can and barrel into the hut. The Vietnamese woman was gone and my buddy was squirming on the ground. He was bleeding, bleeding badly—"

"She killed him?" Daphne exclaimed, and George fell off the couch, trying to imitate a severely wounded soldier as Henri attempted to get him to sit up straight.

"*It should have been only that . . .* The mat Gus had lain down on was booby-trapped and just about blew all his guts away before he had a chance to fuck her. She had been sent by the Viet Cong to help win the war."

"My God, that's horrible," Daphne said. All the people present reacted differently to the grisly story and Russell surveyed their expressions, as though he were diagnosing patients in a hospital waiting room.

"Gus was holding his stomach," Russell said, pressing his own stomach, "and screaming like I'd never heard screaming before. I could see blood all over but not exactly what had happened. I found out later, from the medics. The poor bastard was begging me to shoot him. I even aimed my rifle at him but I couldn't, not Gus. That's when I decided I was done with the United States Marine Corps."

"What happened to your friend?" George, getting back on the couch, asked, his face contorted. Henri unconsciously touched his stomach and Donald squeezed his eyes shut in revulsion.

"After all the killing and smells and being a heroic soldier, I said no more then and there. You know, the separate peace and a farewell to arms routine."

"Did he live?" a woman and a man asked at nearly the same time.

"I got a medical chopper and it was incredible what they could do to save a person . . . That was over a quarter of a century ago. I should have killed Gus."

"You deserted after that?" Daphne said.

"Hell, I had no place to go in Southeast Asia, and no marketable skills aside from destroying anything that moved, opening bottles with my teeth, and smoking grass. When I got back to the States to recover, I recovered and departed. I kissed the fucking ground when I got to Canada," Russell said and pointed to the two soil-filled jars over the mantelpiece. "That, my friends, is the soil I kissed on January 27th, 1969 . . ."

Daphne noticed the tears in Russell's eyes and touched his shoulders gently, wanting to console the man. Russell stood and pulled Daphne up with him. Looking at her for a short time, he whispered that she was beautiful, and then kissed her on the mouth.

"Noreen's going to see you," Daphne protested worriedly.

"We have a modern marriage, tempered by the pain of the past," Russell said as he took Daphne's arm and led her up the stairs to the second floor, loudly announcing to the roomful of partyers and Noreen in the kitchen that he was going to show this unscathed Canadian woman his war souvenirs.

Donald left the living room and went to Noreen. She asked him to hold a tray while she placed the coffee pot and cups on it. He said to her, "Russell can sure get descriptive. He has a strong imagination."

"I hope I'm not shattering your innocence, Donald, but there isn't a torture or treachery the human mind hasn't thought of and implemented enthusiastically," Noreen said.

"You must have to comfort Russell. His memories are awful."

"Don't worry about me, Donald," Noreen told the man. "It's Daphne you should be concerned about. She's going to learn about war . . ."

Donald followed Noreen into the living room and put the tray down on the coffee table. All the people in the room were still discussing Russell's story, Henri moaning, "*C'est incroyable, c'est incroyable . . .*"

The gathering regained its earlier sociability. From the stereo speakers the Lovin' Spoonful were singing about "Summer in the City" . . . But it was January 27th, 1994, and summer in the city seemed incomprehensible during an Ottawa winter, as incomprehensible as it had seemed to Russell on January 27th, 1969. Before the song was over Daphne screamed and rushed down the stairs. She appeared terrified. A woman grabbed her and held tightly, Daphne trying desperately to flee the room.

"What did Russell do?" the woman asked Daphne.

Donald and Henri ran up the stairs; George lowered the volume on the stereo. Everyone in the living room was speaking or moving in confusion, like insects exposed to a sudden, harsh light.

As Russell walked down the stairs, tucking his shirt into his pants, Donald and Henri behind him, Daphne wept, "His stomach and chest are nothing but scars . . . nothing but horrible, horrible scars," and she closed her eyes, an immeasurable distance from Vietnam given insubstantial measurement.