

Jocelyn Osoria

My Name Is

Behind a crumbling building we stop to sleep on the dusty field. We have only a day's journey before we officially hit the DMZ.

"Alright ladies, who's taking their beauty sleep first?" Speed asks.

"I stood guard last. I need some shut eye." King says.

"Same here. I'm fucking exhausted." Pork says.

"What are you so fucking tired for? Eating fucking Spam all day?" I say.

"Fuck off."

He really must be tired, because the mound of a man immediately sets his jacket and blanket down and lies down. I let it go. A man's gotta know when to boost morale, and when to shut the fuck up.

"It's you and me tonight, how bout it?" Speed sits next to me, sitting his rifle on the wall.

"Don't get too excited. Tomorrow, we're gonna be fighting more Charlies than we ever have. It'll be the Charlie motherland."

"Yeah, yeah. Different place, same shit." He pulls something out of his pack, first a needle and then white clumps in a bag.

"Jesus fuck, again?"

"They don't call me Speed for nothing. How else am I gonna stay up?"

We called him Speed because he's always the first one to shoot when we ambush – or so they told me when I first came to Vietnam. One day he began shooting up speed instead of shooting up the VC.

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It was an especially hot day.

"Speed, what the fuck are you doing!" I yelled.

He didn't bother to answer. I watched in horror as the syringe shrank and the veins in his arm bulged.

Before I could object further, I was pushed to the ground. King, our squad leader, was over me, sweat dropping off his face onto mine. I grimaced and looked away, putting my hands up to get him off.

"Fucking gross."

"I just saved your ass from a sniper." King said. "Get your head out of your ass, this ain't the suburbs, ok? There's a hell of a lot worse things to do than be high,"

"Like standing around with your head out in the open." Pork added.

"Ok, I get it. Let up, I can't breathe."

He smacked my head and put his attention back towards the VC. I wheezed as I sat up and took back arms.

It was my first time in combat that hot. I had gone through all of this in training. I'd trained real hard. I didn't want to be the one to die easy. The gun felt both like a lifeline and my worst enemy. I couldn't shoot straight like I did in training. I couldn't tell where anything might be hiding. It was as if the tropical heat was evaporating all the thoughts in my head, leaving it hollow and ringing with fear. My hands shook and I

began shooting anywhere I thought Vietcong could be – behind a door, a window, or wall; or maybe camouflaged between the trees shortly behind the desolated village. I ran out of ammo, and I looked for Speed. He was shooting, laser focused and accurate. Bodies began to fall from places I had overlooked, and shadows I hadn't paid attention to.

"Die! Die! Die! Die!" Speed kept shouting and laughing.

As he kept shooting, King advanced. Pork followed closely behind, somehow crouching and keeping his balance with a M60 in hand. Afraid to be left behind, I mirrored their agile steps. I looked back at Speed, who was still several meters back.

"Come on, Speed. We've gotta go."

"Not until they're all dead."

"There's more up there, we gotta help King and Pork, come on!"

On that promise, he passed me and went ahead, leaping over foliage. I was the last one to catch up at the border of the abandoned village and the dense jungle.

"Bravo Two Three, target clear." King radioed in to Lieutenant Burr.

"Poor baby, just did his first SAD mission." Pork ruffled my head.

I stood dazed. Despite my reliable squad, I felt betrayed.

"Alright, Lieutenant gave us the go ahead to head back to Long Binh." King said.

"Where are they?!" Speed spun around, trying to find more bodies to drop.

"They're over there! Go get em, Speed!" Pork pointed North.

Speed rushed forward, ducking behind trees

"All clear!" He kept moving forward, declaring the path was safe.

"We're right behind ya, Speed!" Pork called out.

Terror must have painted my face, because Pork tried to reassure me.

"Lighten up. You get used to it." Pork patted my back.

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That was half a year ago. Speed is something like a best friend to me, although I'm convinced we would hate each other in the real world. He seems like he'd be the loudest kid in class, while I usually brooded in the back of the room. He's more of a looker than me, by a long shot. I like to think I'd be smarter than him, at least in science or something.

I look up as he injects himself. Soon enough, his pupils will be the size of the moon and he'll jumble his words, talking non stop about killing them and how great his focus is. I don't bother with him in that state; it's annoying.

For once we weren't in the jungle, and I can see the stars above us. Once upon a time, not so far from Nam, my father Henry looked at these stars too. In rare, quiet moments, I learn more about my father than I ever have. He would've looked up at the night sky, when he could, and scan for a silver streak of hope to take him back before the war.

He would've sat with blood on his hands, but thankful that it wasn't his own. He would've set fire to homes. He would've ran out of ammo, struggled with another man hand to hand before stabbing him while locking eyes. This is what he would've been doing in 1953, while I was still a babbling child.

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In that year, my mother still churned butter by hand. Her father had built the butter churn for her mother. It was made of pine, and carved with decorative leaves, flowers, and patterns. My grandma liked old lady shit like that.

"I've gotta use this thing till the legs come off, or your grandmother's gonna drill herself to hell by rolling in her grave too much." My mother said.

Her arm muscles flexed and her face was red as she put in the work to make, what I still consider, the best butter on Earth. My mother had big plans for the butter. She'd be able to bake any dessert, and every meal could have butter on the side. Henry would never have to want for anything. When she wasn't teaching at the school or looking after me, she churned butter. At some point, we had too much butter and she churned butter to give away.

The principal, hyper aware of my father's absence, came by her classroom often every Tuesday, acting as if by chance, and would make the same corny joke.

"I'm swiping this for my bunker."

Principals didn't get paid enough to build a bunker. One day, he came by and asked if she wanted some company over for dinner.

"I know you must be terribly lonely without Henry."

She gave him a tight lipped smile.

"Really, I wanted to stick the butter in his eye, but I couldn't do that, it's not nice. Jimmy, don't ever do that to anyone, I'd hate to have been the one to give you the idea."

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Too late, mom. On the rare occasions of close range combat, I've stuck my knife and even my fingers in an eye or two. More than a few times, actually. I don't think about the gush of the blood or the cries of pain anymore. I think about my mother churning butter, chilling it, serving it, and finally spreading it on toast, or maybe even on an oven roasted turkey. I have a technique down now. I stick and stick and stick until I have a spreadable eyeball jelly.

"Dinner's served!"

"Sick, Jimmy! Where'd the fuck you learn that from?"

"My mother,"

From that day on, Speed called me Chef, and then so did everyone else.

King saw me do it once too.

"And here I thought you were a coward." King said. "You're a damn good fighter when you're scared enough."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?" I said.

"Closest one you'll get from me. Hit a Charlie in the eye from 15 yards, and I'll kneel before you."

"Not gonna happen, you seen this man's aim?" Pork said.

"Shut up."

There was something different about fighting hand to hand, there was more control, and more dignity if you died. You could go down having injured the other party. Being shot by a distance just feels like being kicked when you're down, but there aren't any rules to war. It's not like back alley sprawls between teen boys who can't stand each other's guts. It's not supposed to be a fair fight, it's just self defense.

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"Anyhow," My mother, back in 1953, had said. "I told him 'Oh no, I'm afraid my cooking isn't anything to give company.' He said, 'if it's anything like your butter, I doubt that!'"

From then on, he kept trying to go steady with her. She politely declined. No one knew when the war would end, but my mother knew she would have all her ducks in a row. She spent her afternoons sewing clothes, hoping it would fit him. What would he

look like after all this time? Would he be starved skinny? Would he be nice and muscular, manlier than he had left? They had been children then. Perhaps bigger is better than too small.

After father had a dozen shirts and a dozen pants waiting for him, she began sewing socks and sweaters, gloves for the cold and underpants for days. She made matching scarves, and that brilliant idea inspired matching sweaters. Then she taught me how to sew, so I could make my own sweater. It took many tries, but I had one that came out decent. I gave that one to Penny before I left. Sewing comes in real handy for defacto stitches or torn uniforms.

In '54, with just a letter in the mail, we were notified that Henry was MIA. We didn't dwell.

"Things are looking up, we have to be quick on our toes and follow." My mother told me.

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My mother married the Principal. We became the Watkins. We sold the house, Henry's car, and his hound Lenny, because the principal hated animals. He looked a bit like a dog himself with droopy jowls and a wattle hanging off his chin. Mother never told him that all those clothes in the back of her closet were for Henry, but it must have been obvious anyway. She gave them to me when I could fit them.

I became known as the child of the Principal and Mrs. Watkins, the kindergarten teacher. The other kids were reluctant to become my friend, since they assumed I'd be a natural born killjoy or a snitch. I spent the rest of my childhood proving them wrong,

when given the chance. I was quiet and calm in class, but as soon as I hit the hallways, I'd be cracking jokes at anyone's expense.

"Jimmy, what's gotten into you? You can't keep mocking Mr. Sutpen's lisp to other kids."

"He's a creep."

"Jimmy, the baseline is – it's rude, and puts a bad impression on me. What would your father think?"

"He's dead."

"Jimmy!"

From then on, I was forced to address the principal as my father, that is, until he saw me tap the bladder on his wooden rocking chair. We made a deal that day – he wouldn't be my father, and I would get him a new rocking chair.

Maybe I had needed a father, but did it even matter? Every which way my life could've gone, I'd still end up here, marching to my death day after day.

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I turned to Speed, who was doing a much better job of staying grounded than I was.

"What it's it look like Speed?"

"It's all clear... For now."

I turn my head back to the sky. The past seems to clear to me now that I've gone away from it. If I could go back, I'd make my life a cheesy coming of age – a regular one, where the young adult goes through something mildly inconvenient, like a parents divorce or an athletic injury. Fuck it, my dad can die, that's fine, but preferably not from war.

In this world, I'd become a real bad delinquent and disappoint my parents. Then I'd go on a personal growth journey, and accomplish something impressive like having the fastest marathon time for a 16 year old. My medal would be champagne gold, not too brassy like bullet cases, and engraved with my name on it. In my delinquent phase, I would've been a smartass in school, too smart for his own good.

"The Germans were no match for the Americans. What could've been a total fascist takeover of Europe by Hitler ended up being a huge victory for the Europeans. With the help of the USA through the Marshall plan, Europe was built little by little into the democratic haven it is today." Mr. Sutpen reads from a textbook word for word.

He has no lisp, and also, he's not a creep. He'd be played by John Wayne and be sophisticated, personable in comparison to the fat lard he was in real life.

I would raise my hand, something I never did when I was actually in school.

“Yes Jimmy?”

“Why did we lose the Korean war?” I say it with a mocked innocence.

The kids in the class knew nothing about the Korean war, and it wasn’t funny, but they laughed because in this movie, everyone likes Jimmy. Alain Delon, or someone of that caliber, would play me.

“I don’t know if I would say that we lost. We stopped the further spread of communism, that's a win in my book.” Mr.Sutpen says back.

“Good one, teacher.” A random student says.

“It only took thousands of Americans.” I retort back, leaning back in my chair and crossing my arms over my chest. The perfect strand of hair falls from my slicked back hair, framing my eyes perfectly for the close up of my intense, determined gaze.

A few giggles emerge, but most weren’t sure how to approach such a serious tone from Jimmy. This will be a pivotal moment for these kids, a lesson in humanity.

"It was more like tens of thousands, about 35,000 to be exact." Parker jabbed in.

"Don't be a showoff Parker." Jimmy said. He was still cool even if he was smart.

Like a corny sitcom, everyone erupts into laughter. This is the Jimmy they're used to, but Jimmy wasn't done. I would look at the teacher, who nods at me approvingly, nudging me to go on.

"Besides, it's not about the numbers. Day by day, we take our simple memories for granted. Sure, we have bad days. Many of us have more bad days than not, but what's the threshold?"

I start out calm and collected.

"I would rather have a million bad days at Parkhill High than a bad day in Vietnam. I want to remember the good in my life, shit, I want to remember the boring bits of my life, but once I go out there – none of that matters."

I speak with my hands a bit now, emotions boil in my throat. This one's getting me an Oscar.

"I dare anyone here to stand and tell me that they'd walk out of Vietnam without so much as washing the blood off their dirty ass hands."

I raise my voice even louder, and speak with my hands even stronger.

“And who can forget that their father, their brother, or their son met their fate overseas, away from everything they love? Would you want to be remembered for being shot in the head? I don’t, which is why we should have a walk out, right here, right now while we still can. Before we get those letters in the mail, before our sorry asses board the boats.”

I stand and wipe a singular tear from my cheek. What a performance.

“God so help me, before we give our rights away.”

I’m breathing heavily, overwhelmed by my own moving speech. One by one, the entire class begins to clap and stand. They’re waiting for me to move. I lead everyone into the hallway, and we bang on the doors of other classrooms while chanting, “Hell no, we won’t go! Hell no, we won’t go!”

The whole school is protesting. Mr. Sutpen runs to catch up to me, and hands me a megaphone. The press are here, my mother is here, and even the principal is here.

“Those hypocrites, watching us die on TV while they’re here, enjoying their AC.”

I scrunch my face.

“Enjoying their nice showers, nice homecooked meals, ”

The crowd erupts in a yes.

“I’m crawling in tunnels, sleeping on cots, in tents, or out in the open with only the sky as a blanket. I caught a trench foot a couple times. You all have never even been to Vietnam, did you know there are months when it rains everyday? Vietcong know that, and they don’t care. Here they come, still marching, marching, marching.”

“Don’t our lives matter? Don’t I matter?”

In the middle of a chant, I think I see a VC scutter in the background. Panic surges through me. I freeze. I see another, and another. The whole school, they're all VietCong.

Before I can get off the podium, I'm pushed against the hard floor. Instead of the face of a nameless Charlie, Speed hovers over me.

"Filthy liar. You're no hero. You're a killer."

He lays a punch on me and the smack echos. The school chants, "Eighteen today, dead tomorrow!"

Speed grants no mercy. His fist comes at me again and again. I don't fight back, why bother? Better me than him.

I begin to lose my hearing and eyesight, and I smile.

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I'm shaken awake. It's still fucking dark out. I rub my eyes and groan.
"We've only got an hour left. Come on, don't be a pussy." Speed's pupils are still huge. His eyes are red.

"You got a cigarette?" I ask. He hands me his pack and lighter. "Thanks."

"Dreaming about your girl again?" He raises his eyebrows.

"She's not my girl. Just some girl. And no, I didn't. For once."

"What did you dream about?" Speed only asked me personal questions when the others were asleep or gone. They were men, and they thought we were too.

"It was almost like a memory. I dreamt I was in school. My teacher was talking about World War II, and I gave a great speech about how war sucks, and I started an anti-vietnam protest at school."

"If only those fucking protests would work, we're still fucking here."

I hate dreaming about being Jimmy, because I dream about the things I don't have.

"Who were you before the war?" I ask.

"I was nobody."

"We all were somebody, come on, what were you doing?"

No response. He turns his head the other way.

"Were you in school?"

"What the fuck else?"

"Where'd you go to school?"

"Doesn't matter."

"I'm not saying it does, just curious."

"It's not worth thinking about. My philosophy is, whatever you were doing before, whoever you were, just forget it. Forget your home, forget your name, forget it all."

"Why should we? I mean, I've been out here for damn near a year and I don't know your name. I don't know your age, I don't know anything about you, but I trust you with my life. Don't that mean something to you?"

"No I don't. Now wake Pork and King up, you're tiring me out with all your bitching."

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After a couple hours of sleep, Speed and I are woken up. The four of us catch a ride to the DMZ on a military vehicle. We join tens of thousands of others coming from the jungles, helicopters, tanks, or trucks like ours. The air is thick with smoke. We're close.

"Holy shit," Pork points up. Overhead, there were dozens of aircraft going across the border.

"What the fuck have we walked into." Speed says.

"I don't know, but this isn't what the lieutenant told me." King says. "He said we were gaining ground, that we'd likely be deployed on a risky but otherwise routine search and destroy mission in the North."

"I'm gonna have him for dinner next time I see him." Pork loads his weapon.

Eruptions from bombs vibrate, and I'm grateful that my chattering teeth can't be heard.

"This is as far as I can take ya!"

“Whose the commanding officer here?”

“You’ll find out on the ground. Go, go, go, go!”

We hop off the truck one by one, and dodge behind a sandbag trench. Bullets zip in all directions. Men are falling dead left and right. King radios in, trying to get a response from anyone, but it’s lost in the sea of calls for medics. The broken structure is quickly wearing on him.

“What’s going on, what the hell are we doing?” King calls out to another squad from our platoon in a neighboring trench.

“No protocol here, boss. Just old-fashioned war.” The squad leader does a war cry before shooting at targets ahead.

Pork adjusts just fine, and King seems to be doing better than I am. Speed’s doing speed again.

“Want some?” He asks. I shake my head no.

Fear is like a high in of itself — I can’t think straight anymore, my hands shake and I drop bullets into the tall grass.

“Come on, buddy. This is no time to get nervous before the prom.” Speed picks up my ammo and loads my gun for me. “Stick by me.”

With wide eyes and still hands, I know he'll be the war machine they expect him to be. I need to get Chef out, but I can't stop thinking about Penny. She was a friend of mine. I made her cry once.

"Get down!" Bullets zip by my head. "We've got fucking Stevie Wonder over here!"

I duck down. I peep over the sandbag cover, and I see a young boy shooting at our troops.

"I wasn't made for this, I can't do it. There's gotta be a way to go back, right?"

Fragments of Jimmy showing through still.

"Oh, don't start again, I thought we were over this!" Pork yells at me.

"Come on, Chef! Don't you want to be a hero? Do it for Penny!"

I'm going to kill him. He always uses her name against me. If she could see me now, she would hate me. She was an activist type. She'll never look at me the same. To hell with it.

I raise my gun over the barrier and shoot aimlessly. I'm following, I can. I'm running. I'm shooting, I'm getting shot at. I'm yelling, I'm deaf to all sounds except the sounds of certain death. Booms in the distance, and thumps of men hitting the ground. I'm still afraid, I'm still panicking, but now it's working in my favor. It's me or them. If I shoot and miss so many times, I'll die. Me or them. If I kill ten guys, that's ten less guys that can kill me. Each step is a step closer to home.

Adrenaline's kicking, it's kicking, kicking in real hard now. Engines purr overhead, makes for a nice soundtrack. I can hear a bass in the distance. Speed's dancing, spinning as he shoots here and there. I don't know if we're hitting shit, but it doesn't

really matter. Somethin's grazed my ear, somethin slicks' fallin off my ear. Something's evil in the air, and I've got to stop it.

"Supply points up ahead," King says.

I've gotta get there. I'm out of ammo. I run faster than Pork and King, even faster than Speed.

"Frag incoming!" Speed yells.

I'm pushed violently forward, onto the muddy ground. A blast of debris and dust clouds my sight, and dries my throat. I heave and cough. I look back. All I see are sandbags and smoke.

"Speed?"

I call again. I hear the sound of a gun like Speed's.

"Speed, meet me at the supply point!"

I lose my balance trying to get up. I crawl until I reach the bunker.

"Christ, look at his leg!"

"Doc, get over here quick! He's bleeding out his leg bad."

The personnel look at me bewildered. I look behind me. The skin's hanging off the side of my calf, and my soft tissues are bare to the world. Blood seeps through down into a puddle on the ground. My veins are like tangled, red wires. My bone peaks out in pieces, like stars in a bloody sky.

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"Will write my story for my better self, As when you paint your portrait for a friend,
Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it Long after he has ceased to love you, just

To hold together what he was and is. To hold together what he was and is." Penny read to me from a Victorian poem. Aurora Leigh.

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Stories sure can't hold our men together, not when the VC comes charging with a bomb in hand and the conviction and mannerisms of a rabid animal.

I have many stories to hold Jimmy together. It's the logic behind daydreaming while I'm pulling triggers, and dissociating when I'm crawling in tunnels.

"Stay with us here."

They stick me with a needle. It feels good.

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"When is Daddy coming home?"

I'm a young child again.

"He isn't, and that's okay."

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It's not okay, I want to scream at her, it's not okay.

"Just breathe, okay?" A nurse tells me.

I am breathing.

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"I don't have to take this anymore. I'm an adult, remember?"

I'm a stupid child again.

"Be careful what you wish for, boy."

The principal throws a letter at my feet.

*

"Penny, will you still live here when I come back? It'll only be a year or two."

"I don't know Jimmy. I might want to leave this town. I might not be the person you know anymore."

"Will you at least take this sweater? I want to make sure it's in safe hands."

I hand the folded up periwinkle sweater. It was too girly a color for me to ever wear, but it'd suit Penny just fine. As if from pity or guilt, Penny took it.

"I'll keep in touch with your mother. Give me a call when you're back in town, I'll find a way back."

Dying here would be easier than going home. No one will know Jimmy. There's only Chef.