

DAVE SMEDS

SHORT TIMER

"Their need to express what they went through had become my need to do so," he writes. He turned that need into a short story about life, living, and the persistence of memory.

DEWITT DRAGGED HIS BOOT out of the sucking, red mud. Half a klick to the LZ. Boone was still alive.

Boone. Of all the squad, DeWitt would rather have carried out anybody else, but that didn't matter now. Boone was who was left. So Boone was who he'd try to save.

Boone moaned, wiggling, trying to walk. Dirty but intact skin showed through the rips in his fatigue pants. The rifleman's legs were still good, if he could only stay coherent enough to make them work. But the unfriendly fire was closing in again, so DeWitt carried the man, no matter how much it made him stagger through the elephant grass.

"Perimeter's just past that line of trees," DeWitt whispered, spitting the words out between quick, sharp gulps of air.

The line of trees lay lost somewhere in the vegetation and the dripping wet shadows of the night. DeWitt could not have seen it even if an illumination round had gone off straight overhead. But he knew it was there. He knew Boone needed to hear that it was there.

One guy, DeWitt thought. Dear Jesus, let me bring back at least one guy.

"I'm short," Boone mumbled, his eyes rolling aimlessly in their sockets. "Forty-three days 'til I get my papers. Captain said he might send me back to the rear next week, let me work with the ARVN until my tour's up."

"That's right," DeWitt said, keeping Boone talking. "Think of next week, man. They got refrigerators in the rear, Boone. The beer is cold."

Boone laughed, licking his lips as if he were already tasting the brew.

AK-47s blistered the jungle about five-zero-zero meters to the right. DeWitt adjusted Boone's weight across his shoulders and kept moving. Speed was everything now. Boone was losing too much blood. And if the NVA didn't know exactly where the Americans had run, they'd figure it out soon enough. The two grunts couldn't stick around.

DeWitt wheezed. His knees groaned as the path took an upward turn. The incline slowed them, but its presence was a good sign; it proved they had found the hill. The LZ was at the top. Still secure, said that last transmission, before Welles had stepped on a mine and sent himself and the radio to hell. Still able to bring in the medevacs.

DeWitt had just glimpsed the line of trees in the moonlight when a long, turbulent rattle issued from Boone's throat. DeWitt lowered his burden to the mud. Boone didn't move. His eyes, glassy and pallid, looked at the stars as if some type of salvation waited there.

DeWitt pulled down the rifleman's eyelids. He would be going on alone.

Again.

He fished through the bloody fatigues until he found the laminated photo of Boone's girlfriend. The night turned her portrait into amorphous blotches of white and gray, only vaguely female. On the back was her address, written in Boone's fifth-grade penmanship. DeWitt pocketed the photo and left Boone behind.

With only his own weight to support, DeWitt could have moved quickly. But he merely slogged up the hill. The small arms fire faded to a distant, staccato drumbeat. Mist rose from the ground, hiding the roots and decomposing leaves, muting the edges of the jungle night.

DeWitt sighed. The humid air took on a life of its own, negating the sounds and sensations of Vietnam. Gradually it brightened, picking up a purplish tinge. DeWitt kept plodding forward.

Purple Haze all in my brain. . .

The jungle disappeared within the mist. The air clung like a wet rag, ripe with the taint of ozone. DeWitt's body itched. The veneer of sweat, dirt, and other people's blood evaporated from his skin, taking his clothes as well. One last step, and the haze itself vanished. DeWitt stood naked in the middle of a bathroom in a suburban tract home. On the wall above the toilet hung a calendar that read August, 1983.

His reflection confronted him from the mirror. The image was far from the infantryman he'd once been. Gray dusted the temples of his finely kinked, receding hair. His basketball-player physique carried two dozen extra pounds around the waist. The tattoo he'd acquired in Saigon barely showed anymore against his dark skin.

DeWitt Langdon, Accountant. Age thirty-nine. Vietnam was a million years gone.

But in his hands, he still held the photograph of Boone's girlfriend.

He turned it over, smearing the fingerprints on the back--the blood was that fresh. Reading the address, he wondered how many times the woman had moved in the fourteen years since Boone had written the information down, how many times she'd changed her name.

Cradling the photo in his palms, he threaded through the house to his garage. He pulled a metal storage bin from under his workbench, opened it, and laid Boone's memento inside.

He sighed. With a bone-weary tread, he made his way to the bedroom. Wanda was

awake.

"Trouble sleeping?" she asked.

He tried to relax as she rubbed his shoulders. "I'll be fine."

"You've been so preoccupied lately," she said, worry creating a valley between her eyebrows. "Thinking about the wedding?"

He took her face between his hands and lifted her mouth to his. "Never you worry about that," he said between kisses. "You're the woman for me, no doubt about that. Ain't your fault I can't sleep."

"I thought I'd cured your insomnia," she said impishly, caressing his balls with her fingernails. His scrotum contracted, skin tightening around each hair follicle.

"Maybe I need more therapy," he said. He rolled her onto her back, reached for a breast, and found the nipple already rising to greet him.

"I'm going to Safeway today," Wanda said. "You think a five pound ham is enough? That teenager of yours will probably eat like a horse."

DeWitt tried to update his mental image of his son, but his mind wouldn't accept the revision. The picture would metamorphose back to the diaper-clad toddler he used to bounce on his knee and take to the park. Rudy had truly been his kid at that age, not the barely glimpsed figure seen on certain holidays and for a couple of weeks each summer. His ex-wife claimed she never meant to deny DeWitt his chance to be a father, yet taking Rudy to live nine hundred miles away amounted to the same thing.

But now Etta's second marriage had gone sour. DeWitt was engaged to Wanda and had a steady job. "He needs a father right now," Etta had said -her idea, of all things. And though the boy might be hardly more than a stranger, DeWitt had instantly agreed to take him.

"Better get a ten-pounder," DeWitt told Wanda, with a twinkle in his eye. "My family knows how to eat."

They discussed more details of Rudy's welcome-home party. Only six days to go -- DeWitt could hardly believe it. They talked until it was time for church.

At the services, it seemed every pew held another friend. Never had the Virgin in the stained glass window smiled down more kindly. Yet DeWitt was restless sitting on the polished wood. He kept turning to the wrong pages in the hymnal.

A trace of purplish fog slid by the window. DeWitt would see it out of the corner of his eye. When he'd turn, the view would be clear, but he knew what he'd seen. His breathing deepened, and his palms itched, like a hunter who has a four-point buck in his sights, but hasn't yet pulled the trigger.

Fourteen years he'd lived with that adrenaline kiss. When he'd been too poor to buy food, the Purple Haze had fed him. When he didn't have four walls to call

his own, he'd always had a place to go. Even the morphine he'd taken for his shrapnel wounds hadn't possessed such a siren call.

He didn't know why the haze was appearing so frequently. Usually many days passed, sometimes weeks or even a month. But lately it had been hiding in the background almost everywhere he went, and fight now his gut told him that before the day was over, he'd cross the threshold again.

When it came, he was ready.

The Purple Haze always led DeWitt to the same spot. When the mists cleared, he was standing on a dirt road on the outskirts of a rice paddy. The noon sun hammered on his helmet, turned his gun barrel to a branding iron and his collar to a washrag. Directly in front of him was jungle. Here, ages ago, the original patrol had set out. Here was where the replays had to start. It was one of the rules.

He blended into the elephant grass. Five steps in, a frog croaked, fight on cue. Ten more steps, and he reached the edge of a punji pit, which he avoided. Another twenty meters and the canopy closed overhead. In the shade of a massive teak, he found his buddies.

Grease-painted faces beamed at him. Helmets tilted in salute. And Johnnie, as always, stepped forward, wrapped his thumb around DeWitt's, and said, "Good to see you, brother."

The other bloods had always liked him, but now even the white guys -even Boone -- looked up to him. Without DeWitt, none of them would be there, healthy and whole, their clips full of fresh ammunition, the enemy nowhere in sight or hearing.

The first hour was always the most special. It was their gift from the Purple Haze. The rules didn't require them to head out. They could take a nap, converse, think. The choice was theirs.

Zuniga wrote his usual notes to his family. Smith and Brodie obsessively tried to armor-pad the places where they'd taken wounds on earlier replays. But most, at some point, sat and listened while DeWitt described the changes out in the world where time did not hold still.

"Home video," Johnnie said, sighing wistfully. "I'd never miss another Phillies game."

"Pussy hair in Playboy," added Morgan.

"The Rolling Stones still makin' records? Damn."

They asked him of things DeWitt had told them many times. Like the parent of small children, he patiently repeated item, fact, and anecdote. They clutched at the information, drawing it to their hearts, trying to make it stick. It did so haphazardly, giving them, at best, a fragmentary glimpse of a future that had skipped them by.

DeWitt wanted to think that their inability to remember was merely because they had not directly experienced the events and changes, but he didn't put much faith in the theory. It was the haze toying with them, with him. The haze made the rules. He could bend them about as well as he could throw a hand grenade with his ear.

All too soon, they rose to their feet. The smiles evolved into nervous twitches and stiffly held spines. The men all wanted to stay right where they were.

The Purple Haze wouldn't allow that, either. They had to go forward, toward the LZ. They had to pass through the ville. They had to reach the fire zone before nightfall. And they had to make contact with the enemy. Other details might take a million different tangents, but those basics were set. If DeWitt or any of the squad ignored them, the Purple Haze would come early, pulling DeWitt out and sending the other men back to limbo.

DeWitt sent Morgan forward to serve as point man. The rest assumed patrol formation, lifted their heavy packs to their shoulders, and began the hump to the ville.

The jungle smelled of rot and laterite clay. The humidity drew fluid from the pores of every man in the squad. As they walked, the eyes of DeWitt's buddies lost the knowing depth. He sighed, sad and happy for them at the same time. Soon recall would not be an issue. They were returning to the selves who had originally set out on patrol, back in 1969. They wouldn't remember the replays until the beginning of the next one, though for the rest of the day, they would follow his suggestions with an obedience far more profound than when he had been their plain old squad leader.

If only he could command that sort of obedience at night, when the bullets, mortar rounds, and grenades started to fly.

The route took them across a narrow sliver of jungle and back into cultivated land. Breaking through a bamboo thicket, DeWitt spotted the familiar rows of pepper and rice, with the ville on the far side.

The squad approached the area carefully but openly-- this was theoretically Friendly country. The residents put away their farm implements and gathered between their hootches in plain sight -- women, children, and old men. The headman, hat in hands, bowed and came forward, swallowing visibly at the sight of automatic weapons pointed at his chest. DeWitt gazed at him as one would look at a longtime acquaintance, and uttered several well-rehearsed lines of Vietnamese, a language he'd not known during his original tour.

The headman's eyebrows rose, but without comment, he waved forward a middle-aged woman. She bowed to DeWitt. He explained again what was needed.

The mama-san gave a nod. Her lips drew back, revealing teeth made dark from long years of chewing betel nut. The expression could not have been called a smile, but it denoted consent, however grudging. Business was business. She called out in a raucous voice. A young woman came forward and bowed. The latter was small, her breasts mere bumps beneath the fabric of her pajamalike garments, but her eyes betrayed her worldliness.

DeWitt nodded his approval. At the mama-san's burst of orders, the young woman disappeared into a hootch.

"Reggs." DeWitt waved one of his men forward. "Got a job for you."

Reggs had barely arrived In Country. His nostrils twitched nervously as he strode up, obviously concerned that his sergeant had singled him out.

DeWitt whispered in his ear.

"You want me to do what?" Reggs's eyes went wide.

DeWitt took Reggs's weapon, and tilted his helmet toward the drape over the doorway. "You got fifteen minutes. You think you can figure out the details?"

Reggs gaped like a fish. DeWitt waited calmly. The older man already knew the outcome. No doubt on the original patrol, Reggs would have been too much of a Fucking New Guy to realize the stakes. But it was early in the replay. Some part of the greenhorn private knew what he was being offered. This was not an opportunity to waste.

"The girl will help you out," DeWitt said. "Go do America proud, boy."

The squad spread throughout the ville, glances roving swiftly from here to there, fingers inside trigger guards, safeties off. If any of them found the circumstances odd, they didn't reveal their doubts. DeWitt gave the mama-san the money and leaned back against a stack of woven baskets, just outside the hootch containing Reggs and the whore.

The villagers dispersed, pretending to return to their tasks. DeWitt kept his glance down, preferring not to think of what these conservative rural folk must think of the intrusion on their morality. It was one thing to look the other way when the mama-san took a selected few of the village's young women to work the shantytown near the military base. It was a different thing entirely to have a transaction occur in their midst, at gunpoint. Though they didn't show it, he knew an anger was burning behind their placid eyes, fuel for the Viet Cong cause. Had this been the original patrol, DeWitt would never have provoked them so.

But no shots would be fired inside the community. The villagers might all be VC. Snipers might have every last grunt in the crosshairs of their scopes right now. But both sides would save the bullets. Later, out Beyond in the jungle, after night extinguished the sun, there would be plenty of time for gunpowder, for lead, for principles.

Sounds leaked through the thatch of the hootch -- little sighs of feigned female pleasure, amazed grunts from Reggs, and slapping, wet echoes of flesh meeting flesh at a frantic pace. Slowly, the tense lines in DeWitt's forehead faded to smoothness.

The noises were a balm. For five years, through countless replays, DeWitt had seen Reggs die too young. Finally, DeWitt had realized what kind of bargains

could be made with mama-san. Though he had yet to learn how to save Reggs completely, at least now when the mortars or the grenades or the punji pits took him out, the rifleman died a man.

"Hey, G.I.," said the mama-san, startling DeWitt. "Numbah one girl you? Ownnee two dollah."

She gestured at another of her charges. The woman was a nut-brown beauty, slightly older than the nymph currently seeing to Reggs's needs, with hips wide enough to handle a big man like DeWitt. She shyly turned away when she realized he was watching her-- a cultivated but effective bashfulness.

DeWitt frowned. What was happening here? He'd never been offered a gift of his own before. That hadn't occurred in 1969, and it was not something he'd tried to make happen on any replay. If he had, he would have staged it differently -- the offer would not have been made in unrefined, pidgin English, for one thing.

"No," he told the mama-san. He willed the goodtime girl to vanish. But she remained, rich with the aroma of female sweat and betel-nut on the breath. He could hear her murmuring to the mama-san, and though his command of Vietnamese was inexact, he could have sworn they were discussing ways to make him linger.

Reggs's voice rose in a huff-puff-ahhh and trailed away. DeWitt tapped his foot on the hard-packed clay until the beaming young man lifted the drape and stepped outside. "Move out!" DeWitt announced instantly.

The jungle waited, as threatening as ever. That hadn't changed.

NIGHT CAME, and so did the NVA. The trees were suddenly full of them--just like the first time. The skinny devils had bunkers dug and claymores wired, they had mortars set up, catwalks strung in the upper canopy. They were ready, and no squad of American grunts, no matter how well led, stood much chance against them.

DeWitt chose the strategy that had worked the best in the recent past. He divided the squad into three groups, and sent the other two into areas he knew would draw the worst fire. With four men, he traced a long circuitous route toward the LZ. He gave them one absolute rule -- don't shoot, no matter what. Gunfire always drew the wrong kind of attention. By silent running they could avoid contact for many clicks. One of these times, they'd make it far enough.

Sometimes the men resisted. Sometimes DeWitt had to wait until the shit started coming in from all sides before he could gain their cooperation, and by then it was too late. Little of what he ordered them to do followed regulations. He had learned the words to convince them only through long, bitter trial and error. Once night fell, they remembered nothing at all of the other replays.

This time, it worked. He, Johnnie, Zuniga, Boone, and Smith glided through the bush, packs left far behind, listening to the firelights where their buddies had become pinned down. The only time they entered battle themselves was when DeWitt took out a sentry with his bayonet.

He had never chosen this exact combination of companions. He always kept Johnnie

with him if he could, but seldom brought Boone -- only the memory of the last replay prompted him to do it now. Most of all, he regretted the absence of Welles. He hated being without an RTO. But more than once, the noise of the radio had betrayed the plan, and humping the equipment slowed the entire group down.

He realized his mistake when the rumble of aircraft began to shake the trees. Someone had called for air support.

"Down!" DeWitt shouted.

The rumble became a roar. Abruptly, branches evaporated off the trees behind them. Soil fountained. Hot lead cut a track through the jungle and right through the small knot of soldiers, like a giant's scythe, come to harvest. Puff the Magic Dragon breathed.

The ringing in DeWitt's ears drowned all other sound. Spitting grit, he lifted his head from the mulch.

The top half of Johnnie's body lay near him. Near the gory remnant lay Boone's head and possibly one of his arms. DeWitt choked and rolled to his feet, turning away. He staggered to the other two bodies. They were more intact, but just as dead.

His face contorted into a painful rictus, but he didn't cry. After all these years, he had no tears left. The channels in his heart that carried his frustration, his anger and sense of loss, were so deep now that the emotions poured like a flashflood through him. He shook his fist at the sky, kicked the ground, and it was done. The familiar stench of despair rose up in a viscous mass, entered him, and dissolved all real feeling.

He stumbled off into the jungle. He didn't bother choosing a direction. Any route he took led to the same place.

At some point, as he plodded along, eyes half-closed and mind numb, the surface beneath his feet changed. He looked down. Linoleum. He was standing on his kitchen floor.

Three muddy footprints lay between the refrigerator and the sink. The tread marks were distinctive -- the characteristic spoor of combat boots. They came from nowhere. They led nowhere. Yet there they were.

DeWitt lifted his foot. The bottoms of his shoes contained not a speck of mud. And he was wearing his Sunday loafers, not boots. His gun was gone, too. And his fatigues. And the leeches.

He sighed. Moistening a sponge, he cleaned the floor. Wanda wouldn't want a mess waiting when she got back from the pizza parlor.

As he rinsed out the sponge, he noticed a tiny silver of bamboo. This he kept, taking it to the bin under his work bench. He put it beside the photograph of Boone's girlfriend,



The bin contained a melange of strange objects: The chain from a set of dog tags. Four spent cartridges from an M-16. Several tins of C-rations. Leaves from a number of tropical plants. A rabbit's foot. An annotated copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. A locket containing an ersatz daguerreotype of Smith's girlfriend.

Sometimes, DeWitt would open the bin and sit for hours, stroking the rabbit's foot -- that had been Johnnie's -- or sifting through hand-written notes, memorizing the addresses, imagining that he might make use of them again.

Excuse me, ma'am, I have a message from your son.

My son died in Vietnam.

I know, but he gave me a message for you.

Sometimes they believed the communication really was from their son. Sometimes they shouted into the phone that DeWitt had better never call again or they'd tell the cops. He never tried to explain how the duty had fallen to him. If they asked, he said he'd carried the word for years and neglected to pass it along.

He especially remembered Johnnie's mother, crying in relief to hear that Johnnie knew who his real father was, a secret that she had always been ashamed she had never told him before he left for Vietnam.

The Purple Haze had done good things. Knowledge, mementoes-- he'd brought these things back. He could do that if he stepped in the right places, took the right turns, and made it as far as the LZ. How else had he survived the first time, if not for the luck of a step here, a turn there? One of these days, his buddies would be as lucky as he. They'd cross the threshold, alive. All he had to do was keep going back for them. Jesus Almighty had given him a gift. He meant to use it.

His daddy had taught him, when he was young, a man doesn't abandon his people.

THE HAZE clung to the horizon as he rode to work day morning. DeWitt saw a violet plume in his rear mirror, rising from a factory smokestack. But there no smell of ozone, no sense of shadows walking. DeWitt's fingers drummed on the steering wheel, anticipating the cold kiss of a trigger guard against the calluses.

He worked that day listening for the whine of malarial mosquitoes. That night, Wanda's body against him pressed with the heat of a Southeast Asian noon. The orgasm she gave him brought only partial relief. A summons stretched like a tripwire across his path, waiting for his blundering foot.

By midday Tuesday, he jumped when his supervisor suddenly appeared around the partition of his work cubicle.

"Langdon, could you come in for a minute?"

DeWitt set down a sheaf of invoices and stood up. As always, his boss didn't wait. DeWitt caught up with him at the threshold of the executive suite.

"Close the door behind you." The older man took his seat behind the desk, and waved for his employee to sit in the guest chair.

A trickle of sweat stained the back of DeWitt's starched Cotton shirt. If this were about daily business, his boss would have had him lean over the desk, to view whatever material he was working on.

"Can you guess why you're here?"

DeWitt swallowed. "Sorry, Mr. Sawyer. I'm afraid I have no idea."

Sawyer pulled a linen handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his bifocals. The pale puffiness under his eyes exaggerated his owlish, half-blind stare. His stem look was so at odds with the words that followed that DeWitt had to repeat them in his head:

"I've decided to give you a promotion."

DeWitt blinked twice. "Wh-what?"

Sawyer coughed. "I must say no one was more surprised than I at your good work, young man." His voice squeezed the last two words out; as if sensing too late that to call a man near forty young was unnecessarily dismissive.

DeWitt said nothing.

"I'm not the sort who likes to admit he's wrong, DeWitt, but I thought I ought to be straight with you." Sawyer tapped his pen against his desk blotter. "I only hired you because of affirmative action. Oh, you were qualified, yes, but so were ten other guys. You got the job because you were black."

One of DeWitt's scars itched. Not any of the ones from 'Nam. The old scar, from childhood.

"You knew that, didn't you?" Sawyer stated.

DeWitt flushed. "Yes." The only surprise was that the man was saying it out loud.

"I thought you might. I know I must not have been friendly, at first. It was never anything personal. I just don't like regulations telling me who I can and cannot hire."

"I understand," DeWitt mumbled.

"You wouldn't have lasted ninety days here if you hadn't done your job. I thought you should know that. Maybe you'll understand how much thought I put into this promotion. It's strictly my idea. You've worked hard for me for two years, DeWitt. That's what counts. Not some quota bullshit." Finally, a smile blossomed on Sawyer's face, bringing into view bright teeth and grandfather smile lines. "I'd meant to do this at the end of the quarter, but I decided to move it up a bit. Your new salary is effective with this paycheck. Call it a wedding present."

The acid in DeWitt's stomach slowly changed to alcohol, as he realized the man was not joking. "Th-thank you, Mr. Sawyer," DeWitt whispered.

He said other, inane things, but registered none of them in memory. The next he knew, he was back in his office. His heartbeat was just returning to normal. He sagged back in his chair.

And guffawed -- deeply, from the diaphragm. Was it his imagination, or had the weather turned less muggy? He sighed, unable to wipe the smile from his lips. Too bad Wanda wouldn't be back until evening. He wanted to call her.

He pulled a cigar out of his desk drawer-- saved ever since Tony down the hall had become a father last winter. He lit it, and let the smoke drift lazily toward the ceiling panels.

The smoke took on a purplish tinge.

Abruptly DeWitt was on his feet. To his surprise, the smoke changed back to blue gray and fled up into the ceiling vents.

Not until Friday did the haze call him. There it was, hung like a shower curtain across the office foyer, as he reached for his keys to lock up--he was the last to leave, having worked late in an effort to show how seriously he regarded his new responsibilities.

He viewed the threshold with slumped shoulders. On Tuesday, he had been fresh, prepared. By now, he was beaten down not only by the wait, but by the rigors of a long work week. But he made his feet cross the carpet. He strode through, tasting the ozone.

The road, the rice paddy, the blazing sun greeted him as always. Then his eyes narrowed in surprise. The path had shrunk to a mere fold in the elephant grass. Not that it had ever been a prominent trail--soldiers learned not to leave such traces. But this time the way looked neglected, almost as if feet had never trod upon it.

DeWitt reconnoitered. Instantly he ducked into the elephant grass and flicked off the safety of his M- 16. To his left, in the distance, he saw someone.

The figure was a teenage Vietnamese girl. Wearing a pair of Guess jeans and a white T-shirt, she sat at a tiny stand marked LEMONADE.

DeWitt's scowl deepened. This was not normal. This should be against the rules. The Purple Haze had shown him many sides of unpredictability, but they had always made some sort of sense in context.

His head ached fiercely. Lifting the helmet, he rubbed his forehead, all the way up to his receding hairline.

Con/used, DeWitt pulled his hand away, as if stung. In 1969, he hadn't been the least bit bald. He stared at his palm-- the creases were deeper than they should be. Closing his eyes, he shook his head, and when he looked again, his hands

were smooth and youthful. He touched his head. The hairline was where it was supposed to be.

"Sarge? Sarge?" whispered a voice.

DeWitt jerked his head up, recognized Boone's whiny, nasal tone, and said, "On my way."

Boone was at the far side of the punji pit, with Zuniga. DeWitt gestured for them to move ahead of him, and soon they came to the shade of the huge teak, its trunk looped with vines. The rest of the squad waited in the usual places.

Johnnie came forward, thumb offered. "Good to see you. . .brother," he said, with an odd hesitation. "Tell us about the world."

He sounded as tired as DeWitt. In fact, he and the others had been sounding tired for many replays now, DeWitt realized. It seemed normal now, yet there had been a time when the whole squad had brimmed with hope and vitality each and every time they set out.

DeWitt sat and talked for the one precious hour the Purple Haze allowed. This time the squad sat in a circle, to the last man, listening carefully, offering little or no comment. The words poured out of DeWitt's mouth, so fast he didn't even take time for his usual half dozen cigarettes.

And again, the hour expired. Again, all too soon. As he stood up, his knees afflicted with a strange, rheumatoid stiffness, he knew this replay was going to end early, far short of the LZ. The men all had death peeking through the membranes of their thousand yard stares.

But he led them on -- through the bush, to the bamboo thicket, to the pepper field, to the ville, to the fire zone.

DeWitt tumbled across the floor of the foyer and slammed into the glass door. Fortunately it was tempered glass, reinforced with wire -- it did not break. DeWitt sagged to the carpet.

Shit. He hadn't ended a replay that way in years. The grenade had landed among them, leaving him and the other two surviving men -- Morgan and Ramos, this time -- barely time to recognize it for what it was. Then the explosion hit and that was that. Instantly, he was back in 1983. The receptionist's clock rotated another digit. As always, he'd been gone no more than a few seconds, as far as the present-day world was concerned.

Shaking he retrieved his keys from the floor, locked the offices behind him, and made his way to the parking garage. His hands were still unsteady as the attendant waved him out and he rolled out onto the street.

A few blocks later, as he entered a residential zone, he saw a lemonade stand on a corner. A slim Vietnamese girl in Guess jeans and a white T-shirt was just closing up shop for the night.

DeWitt's relatives began to arrive Saturday morning. Not that there were many,

but it didn't take large numbers to fill DeWitt's modest living room. DeWitt planned to find a bigger home once the wedding was over and Rudy had settled in at his new school.

Wanda wouldn't let him go to the bus station to pick up Rudy. She insisted that father and son's reunion should be complete with all the bells and whistles: audience, applause, a cake and balloons, good food -- a real party. DeWitt let her have her way.

And he was glad. It unnerved him to stand eye-to-eye with his own offspring, who scarcely had a right to be so tall so soon. The celebration and the company filled in what would have been awkward silences.

Rudy liked chocolate cake. He didn't like coconut. Just like DeWitt. He liked baseball, was indifferent to football. Just like DeWitt. By the end of the meal, it was no stranger seated across the table.

"Care to sit with me for a while on the porch?" DeWitt asked his son while the dishes were being cleared.

"Sure."

It was August. It was muggy. But to DeWitt, no place in the whole of the United States had as miserable a climate as what he was used to, and he settled comfortably on the step.

"Like it here so far?" DeWitt said. He wasn't usually so direct, but God knows, he'd had few chances to talk with own flesh and blood.

"I guess so," Rudy said, shrugging with a teenage boy's classic indifference.

"Your mother used to say you'd hate to live with me."

"Mom used to say you were crazy," Rudy said bluntly.

DeWitt coughed. "Hell. She might've been right."

"She said you were never the same after you came back from the war. Is it true that you were the only survivor of a patrol?"

DeWitt wiped the smooth crest of his forehead, lips pursed. "I was."

He'd never told anyone the details of that night. But somehow, it felt right to speak now. Slowly, with precision, rendering the graphic parts with a steady voice and just the right sprinkling of euphemism, he told how the squad had been isolated from the rest of the platoon. He described how unexpected the sheer number of enemy in the vicinity had been. He told how, one by one or in pairs, the men with him had died, and how he, peppered by shrapnel, had crawled to the landing zone and been loaded onto a medevac chopper.

He told the real story. He mentioned that Johnnie had tripped a claymore, that Smith had been caught in friendly crossfire because DeWitt was too confused to give good orders, how Boone had died cursing him for a dumb nigger for going out

instead of waiting out the day and night in the elephant grass beside the road. Their mission had been search-and-destroy. Well, they'd searched, and they'd been destroyed.

Not once did he offer an alternate picture. In many of the replays, most of the squad had survived three-quarters of the way to the LZ. In others, Johnnie had died a hero. And in just about all of them, DeWitt hadn't been such a stupid fuck, because repetition had taught him strategy and erased his personal disorientation. Rudy heard none of that, because DeWitt told only the truth.

Finally, mouth cottony from the long talk, he picked up a lady bug that had crawled onto the porch and pretended to be absorbed examining its markings. "But all that was a long time ago. "He didn't want to turn, for fear he'd see the glazed look he'd seen so often on people back home whenever anybody mentioned Vietnam.

"I've been wanting to hear about it," Rudy said. The boy's voice was full of interest, not boredom.

DeWitt clapped his hand down on his son's shoulder. "Then. . .we'll talk about it again. We ought to have lots of opportunity, now that you're here."

Rudy nodded. "That's for sure."

DeWitt's uncle, Hosea, limped onto the porch, aided by his hickory cane. How DeWitt had respected that cane, once upon a time. "Rutherford, your grandma wants to chat with you a spell before she leaves," Hosea announced.

Rudy went inside, waved on by DeWitt. Hosea lingered by the doorway. The screen door clattered shut, muffling the babble of the family dinner.

Hosea cocked an eyebrow, a knowing look on his grizzled, former mechanic's features. "He's going to stay."

DeWitt nodded. His glance rose to a cloud formation up near the zenith, just visible under the eave.

Hosea chuckled. But then, instead of returning to the party, he sat down on the edge of the porch with his nephew. "You know, if I don't miss my guess, I'd say your life's doing about the best it's ever done for you, right here this summer."

"That's the truth," DeWitt said.

"Then why ain't you acting happy?"

DeWitt looked down, and saw that his uncle was making a joke. The old man didn't realize how startling the question had been. Because that cloud up there is turning purple, he might have answered, had it been a serious remark.

The cloud waited for him all that night. He heard it breathing up in the sky long after Wanda had fallen asleep beside him. He saw it out the window as he, Rudy, and Wanda sat at the breakfast table the next morning. Though the sun had

long risen, the billows retained the hue of earliest dawn.

"I'm going for a walk," he said at noon, while Rudy was gone to fetch a new headlight for the car.

The cloud descended as he ambled down the street, as DeWitt knew it would. The mist slid into an alley and waited, reeking of ozone. When DeWitt reached the alley's mouth, it oozed forward. Two steps later, the cement beneath him turned to hard-packed clay, red and wet and steaming in the heat. He kept walking.

The path's beginning was gone. He knew the spot only by the surrounding landmarks. He stopped. The equatorial glare flashed from his bayonet to the glossy green leaves and back. The jungle hummed with its familiar, welcoming sounds. He did not attempt to move forward.

He searched for the Lemonade girl, but she was gone. Near the same spot, however, he saw a clearly defined trail, marked with whitewashed cobblestones. A sign beside it read, R&R.

His stomach felt as if fire ants had taken up residence within it. He sat down in the center of the road, drew a deep breath, and waited. He nearly drained his canteen, enduring the open sun, before the elephant grass swayed and parted. DeWitt's best buddy emerged, deep shadows under his helmet.

"Hey, DeWitt," Johnnie said. "What's keeping you, brother?"

The words formed a mass in DeWitt's throat. He had to speak them, or swallow them, one or the other. If he didn't, they'd choke him.

"I got my papers. I'm going back to the World."

Johnnie nodded. The shadows would not clear from under the helmet. DeWitt could see only darkness -- black skin against a fuliginous canvas. His buddy had no eyes to make contact with. "We know," Johnnie said, with the voice of a man who has seen the bullet with his name on it. "We been feeling this day coming for a while now. Congratulations, Sarge."

DeWitt lost his grip on his rifle. It fell onto the rutted mud of the road. "I'm sorry, Johnnie. I've got things to do now, other places to be."

"Forget us, motherfucker," Johnnie said with conviction. "You should have erased us from your brain a long time ago. You think it's easy, dyin' a thousand times?"

A thousand times, a thousand times. "Shit," DeWitt said, his tongue tasting as if it had been dusted with iron filings. "Johnnie, I never --"

"Don't sweat it, man. We all wanted you to try. At first. But there's only so much tryin' a man can do."

Johnnie stepped back, and with the grace of a well-trained soldier, faded into the elephant grass as if he'd never been-- a ghost in its element. He left behind only a cloud of gnats and the dank odor of the rice paddy. And a cool

draft of something very much like forgiveness.

DeWitt turned, kicked the clay from the soles of his boots, and took the new path-- the only path left visible. Around the first stand of trees, he came to a ville. Around the first bamboo hut, he entered a city of stucco, wood-frame houses, and lawns. In a few more steps he was once more striding along a sidewalk of his neighborhood.

He stopped and looked back. A last wisp of Purple Haze climbed toward the sun and evaporated.

Wanda met him on the steps. They went inside, and talked about where to send Rudy to school. That night, DeWitt Langdon slept deeply. Fourteen years behind schedule, his tour had ended.