

1969

I remember when time happened.

It was either yesterday or years ago; of that, I'm no longer certain. But I remember it; it was a part of my life.

I wonder what the rest are doing? I wonder if they ever got back from that place and time, and how they found life again, or if they even knew what it was, or what it was supposed to be like? Reality might have changed for some; now no longer able to distinguish between then and now, between time happening and time vanishing.

The first blast startled us all. We'd been sitting on the edge of some rocks, trying

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to keep comfortable, trying to keep a good view and absolutely needing to keep our excitement low. We'd been expecting it, or something like it, for days. Others had told us all the gory stories, so we thought we were prepared. We were wrong.

I hit the ground first, Chuck and Two-eye followed, Davey and C.J. started to go down, but instead changed their minds and stood back up. The rest of the squad I couldn't see -- nor did I care about.

The blasts started coming in steadily; it sounded as though they were ripping through the trees above us. I inched my head up to look around realizing that we probably weren't in any immediate danger; we were very far away from the action.

Nevertheless, I inched it up slowly. Davey was looking straight down at me, his machine gun poised and ready in his hands, its hard plastic handle slightly cracked and already wet with the day's moisture.

"What are you doing down there, you idiots! You should see this; it's great!" he squawked at us.

Before I had time to respond, another explosion sounded. Again my head went to the ground. From the side I could see C.J. holding his gun by the barrel and tip toeing to get a better view over the bushes. Two-eye had gotten up already and Davey was laughing at him and calling him an idiot to his face. An elbow nudged me from the left. "Come on, it's okay," Chuck said to me as he made his way to his knees. "This is what we came here for, right?" Yeah, I had guessed so, but I couldn't help remembering all of the news footage and the body bags, and remembering the people I knew, and remembering how they hadn't come home, how they'd never come home. I didn't want to get up; I didn't want to see it.

"Man! Look at those blasts! How cool!" C.J. yelled. They were mortars; I recognized the sound. "This is just like my dad

said it was for him. It's incredible!" C J. said as he turned around to see if we'd gotten up.

Mortars didn't matter to me; grenades didn't matter to me; machine gun fire didn't matter to me. My dad told me no stories; he'd never said a word. Yet I knew that if I stood up, I'd see something that would clue me in on what his time spent in some far off land was like. My time would then be able to relate to his time. I realized then that I didn't know what I was doing there; I should have been back doing KP or goofing off playing football or reading a book. My time would probably happen sooner or later, there was no need to rush it.

Again I inched myself up. Peering through the bushes I could see the flames rise and the dirt scatter every time an explosion shook the ground. These were the vibrations we'd been feeling all along, the constant thumping that went on in the distance.

Joining the others I now had a clear view of the entire scene. A group of figures had been pinned down on one side with mortar fire hitting only a short distance away. They were men; I could see them. They were living, breathing, moving like real human beings. These were not targets to be shot at a range; these were not stiff bodies to be filmed for the news; these were not numbers. These were reality; these were bone, flesh, blood. "Would you be scared?" Chuck whispered to me.

"Yeah, of course. Won't you be?"

Chuck looked puzzled, "No, um...well, I guess so," he said softly. Yeah, I'd guessed so too, but it didn't matter because that day it was only a game for us, as far as we were concerned the next day it could be real.

The mortar barrage subsided and the squad of soldiers who had been doing the firing got up and advanced. I could see them crouching and running, moving from tree to tree, head-

ing towards what looked to be a rice paddy, always their M-16's set and ready, locked and loaded.

I could almost hear the squad leaders yelling out the orders, "Let's go! Move it!" or, "Come on men, let's get them!" This was their chance to prove themselves, their chance to learn something, their chance to learn how to survive. I remembered the games we'd played back in the world before we got here. Chuck and I had ambushed the enemy so beautifully. We cut them down without a thought, laughing hysterically the entire time. Then later, we got caught and shot at ourselves. The torn knees of my fatigues being the only scars of my heroic death fall.

Again an explosion sounded. The men who had previously been pinned down by mortars had advanced and were now out of sight having reached a tree line which stretched out in both directions about twenty meters in front of the rice paddy. An ambush was about to unfold.

"Do you see that? They're going to get blown away!" Davey yelled. "We should help them!" came from Two-eye. I couldn't understand them. Most of their dads had probably seen things like this and told them about it's reality; some, no doubt, were still seeing it. Davey and C.J. both knew Suzie Hollander and Joey Fernandez back in the real world. Both of them knew what happened to their dads, yet this was all still a game for them. Time here could not be matched with time there; the connection was unavailable to them.

Machine gun fire suddenly filled the air, overpowering every movement and sound. Trip flares were sprung, claymore mines exploded. The surprise had been unleashed just as the entire group had entered the rice paddy. As I looked across I saw bodies hitting the ground. Men were twisting, turning, yelling in pain, yelling in disappointment. Some were better at it than others, as if this was the part they'd practiced for. Their arms would fly back in surprise, their backs would arch up, as they

were pulled onto their tiptoes, their helmets flying off into the air. Then they would twist their bodies and go limp falling onto their sides into the soft leaves or dirt; M-16's bouncing left and right.

"I think I've had enough," I said to Chuck. "We should have been back hours ago as it is." I was lying, but I needed an excuse.

"Yeah, I'll go too. I've got some things to do," he said in a hushed voice.

With the ground still vibrating, machine guns still firing, and men still falling and screaming, we turned to sneak away from our squad.

"Hey, where are you jerks going?"

It was Davey; we'd been caught. "Ah...we gotta get back, um, Chuck has KP to do," I said while we continued to walk away.

"Yeah, right! Well, go ahead! We don't need you guys anyway!" As Davey said this, his machine gun slowly became angled straight at us; then the rest of the squad followed. Davey's yellow hair was sticking out the side of his helmet, his cheeks were red and blushed, a small mist was coming from his mouth, and his eyes had turned ice cold. He'd seen something that he thought looked like fun and it'd brought out the worst in him. Time for us, the time we had known in our old world, then stopped. "Come on men, let's get them!" he yelled.

As Chuck and I turned and ran down the dirt path, the sound of their mis-aimed gunfire could barely be deciphered from the real battle in the background. Feeling that our lives depended on it, we ran full tilt, leaping over rocks and logs, smashing through piles of leaves, hurdling bushes, our hearts overbeating the entire time.

“What’s wrong with those guys?” “Why did they open up on us?” “Why did I go up there anyhow?” “Is it my fault I couldn’t take that sight?” And other thoughts blurred in and out of my consciousness. Then, catching up with me from the back of my thoughts, time remembered to switched itself back on. I knew that I couldn’t help what I was doing; here and there, I had just learned, could mean the same thing.

The squad gave up on us shortly; they didn’t want to miss too much of the real show they’d left behind. Then, when we knew we were in the clear, Chuck and I slowed down our pace. After a while the fence came in sight, and then the road and the town beyond it. I could see the smoke coming from the chimneys, and the smell of fireplaces now filled the crisp autumn air. We slowed down and walked now, finding our way to the hole that would take us through the fence and back into the safety of our neighborhood world.

“So...my dad goes over there in January. What about yours?” Chuck asked me while climbing through the hole.

“Um, January too... He goes over there again in January,” I responded. After making it through the fence and down to the road, the ground again shaking with the sounds of the distant explosions, I turned around and saw the familiar sign which I had been passing each morning on my bus ride to third grade. “Combat Training Center - West Point, New York,” it read. “January,” I thought to myself, “He goes back again in January.”