Dust To Dust

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A few more drops of the moldy smelling water fell from the wide draping leaves. They dropped and disappeared into the reddish mire surrounding his feet. The short, daily jungle rain was over again, right on schedule. His heavy, mud-caked boots made sucking "schlurps" as he stepped into the open-air portion of his bunker. He watched the brackish ooze puff around his boots. It seemed as if the jungle soil were turning into a bottomless mire inside his dark home. The sun was already poking through the thick canopy of foliage. With the sun's heat, faint traces of steam were beginning to swim into the musty air. Soon the whole sweep of his sector of deserted beach would be lost in the lingering haze.

He opened the canvas bag, brought out an oiled khaki rag, and began wiping the pimples of water from the machine gun. With practiced efficiency, he cleaned all the moving parts of his quiet hinge to the lonely war. The low-slung, air-cooled, thirty-caliber weapon looked ugly and very deadly on the wide-spread tripod. He slipped the last piece back into place and slid his hand along the slippery barrel.
It was a daily routine, drummed into him constantly during the months of training. "All things die quickly in the jungle. A weapon will begin to rust and corrode in twenty-four hours unless properly cleaned." The instructor had said it in a very matter-of-fact way. But now, looking out through the teeming jungle, he could see the weighted air lurking in unsuspected places, ready to slip out and deal a swift decaying blow. But his lieutenant had methodically placed him here, without even the slightest qualm. "Watch that lonely line of white beach." It couldn't be that important. No one, friend or foe, had happened by here in the two days since he had dug in. He was alone with the heavy jungle air.

As he snapped the bag shut once again, he noticed a trace of the material parting around the fastener. The unsuspected air. Steam swimming back into sky. A moldy, musty smell of decay. "Things die quickly in the jungle."

The thick threads of the bag being eaten away reminded him of a pair of crusty boots his father had shown him. "I didn't take these off for forty days at Argonne. Yep," he said with a far-away gleam in his eyes, "they almost became a part of me." A great-grandfather had fallen among the peach blossoms at Shiloh. A grandfather had run screaming to the top of San Juan Hill. And Father, well he had worn one pair of boots for forty days at Meuse-Argonne. The soles had been clinging to the leather by a few stubborn threads when his father had last shown them to him in 1927 when he was five. They still had a sweaty, salty odor, and a crackly, dry, dirty hue. But ever since he had poked admiring fingers through the brittle leather, he had known that someday he would be cleaning a black shiny machine gun.

Ah, but like that gleam in his father's eyes, it was glorious, right up to the squish his feet had made in soggy boots as he wandered past the arms and legs of dismembered marines from the first wave. Glorious, right up to the bits of flesh bobbing in the red curdy water as it washed onto the scarred beach. Right up to the lifeless humps of dozens of dark green uniforms littering the once white sand. It seemed like a long time since he had wandered onto Red Beach, nearly a mile from his embattled platoon on Blue Beach. In a daze he had lasted through the hell of two weeks. And now,
scratching the parting threads of a dying canvas bag, he realized the glories he had seen.

Off to his right he heard a foreign rustle and instinctively whipped the machine gun around. A hand rammed the bolt back and another slipped about the handle. A fraction of a wink later his finger could have directed a crashing burst of lead into the draping plants. It would have been so unflinching, so easy, to kill again. But instead he caught a hissed “Philadelphia,” and his finger relaxed the nervous squeeze. “Toledo,” he answered and watched the hunched figure of his lieutenant dart towards him.

“Anything?” the officer asked as he settled onto one knee and braced himself on the light carbine.

“Just like a graveyard,” he mumbled.

“Jesus, don’t say that too loud. Jones and ‘Tex’ bought it last night. Those near-sighted yellow bastards are still around. Sniped ’em, right between the eyes.”

“The sons-a-bitches!” There was a long pause as he waited for his heart to settle on a constant beat once again. “What’s the word? Keep watching?”

“Yeah. The Nips don’t have enough for a counter. But they may be snooping for a spot where their marines can land or be picked up. Just depends if they want this damned mound of dirt bad enough. Supposed to get a buddy for you in two days. Least then you’ll have company.”

“Sounds better than this.”

“If this hide-and-seek gets lively, use your set.”

A blackened hand patted him on the helmet and the lieutenant disappeared into the greenery. A far-away rustle died and once again the whispering sound of steam and the energetic clicking of insects took over.

“Jones and ‘Tex’ bought it. Sniped ’em right between the eyes.” It sounded so simple. Like a doctor rattling off a timetable for medicine.

They all had made it sound so simple. As if everything could be evaluated according to a science. . . “A fragmentary grenade will throw a flat cone of shrapnel over a radius of five yards.” He had watched the instructor heave the steel pineapple casually over his head with a straight-armed arc. The instructor never said a word about the twisted, dangling red
mass of shredded skin and ligaments that one whistling chunk could do to a chest. . . "I pulled the bolt back, slammed in a fresh shell, took a good bead, and shot the Kraut clean through his belly." He had grinned admiringly at his father. That was before he had seen the three-inch hole that that same 303 Springfield had made in the belly of a deer. It would do the same to a human. . . "Every shell costs about thirteen cents by the time it reaches the firing pin of your machine gun." The bare-chested marine had hitched his dungarees up one more notch and settled behind the weapon. The gun gave a loud jump and three spent shells snapped from the ejection slot. A wooden target thirty-five yards away disintegrated in a hail of splinters. That made the human-shaped target worth about thirty-nine cents.

A far-away jabbering suddenly reached his ears. As he peered through the thick foliage and dancing vapor, he saw, off to his right, two brownish-green clad figures walking along the beach. The in-coming waves lapped and foamed around their boots. Like the faint traces of their lives at home, they left soft depressions in the sand which were almost immediately washed away. Nobody would ever know they had walked here. Nobody would really care.

As he gazed toward the figures, he began to notice the delicate folds on the broad-stemmed jungle grass. The grass swayed lightly in the little gusts of breeze that could reach it. It reminded him of the tall grass growing along the creek on his father's Midwestern farm. On quiet, lazy summer days, when it was precious just to be living, he would enjoy lolling in the weeds, listening to the babble of the water. Maybe the two men walking along the beach had such a treasured spot at their home. Maybe, just as he could now appreciate the lory bird, nipping with its hooked beak at the available insects, they could appreciate the whirring of silk worms in their gardens. The sun's rays, poking through the prisms left open by the heavy covering of trees, cast starlike patterns on the ground. They gleamed and jumped in the white translucent haze, playing a kind of happy game with the jungle's green. And now, only ten yards away, two enemy soldiers were reaching into the bubbling salt water. They let the water rush down their arms and jabbered in that foreign
tongue. He could almost imagine that they were saying how cool and fresh the water felt against their sweaty uniforms. How shiny the deserted beach looked against the dark of the jungle.

The soldiers meant nothing to him, except that, like him, they could enjoy the very simplest gifts of a grace-given world. And someone sent them to blot out each other’s pleasure. Fathers and instructors had valued them in worn-through shoes and thirteen-cent bullets.

The crash and jolt of the machine gun shattered the easy whisper of steam and the gentle foaming of sea water. They jerked convulsively and groped for those last handfuls of precious air. He watched the last pitiful squirms as they thrashed in the coolness of the water. Faint traces of crimson etched the white sand and disappeared in the timeless green of the ocean.

“Good shot! Good shot!” He could feel the proud squeeze of his father’s palm on his shoulder. The rabbit stopped jerking, shoved a last futile tension into its legs, and suddenly fell limp. “Go on, pick it up. We’ll stuff it and set it on the mantle. Five years old and already you handle that 22 like a pro.” He could still feel the proud smile that flushed his face. But he must have tasted a salty tang and felt the trickle of tears on his swelled cheeks.

Already the bodies were beginning to bloat in the heavy air. Brownish-green uniforms were desperately swelling to keep above the sand that was building around the glory-filled lumps. In an hour only a couple of crusty boots might be protruding from the shifty beach. Steam swimming back into sky. Sweaty uniforms no longer appreciating the cool freshness of salt water. Unsuspected air slipping out to break the stubborn threads in the caked boots. Puffed bodies covered by shifting white sand. “Even thirty-nine cent targets die quickly in the jungle.”

And if you’ll blow the dust from that black book on the shelf, you’ll read in the third chapter of Genesis:

“Dust thou art,
And to dust
Thou shalt return.”