The Convert

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The middle and ring fingers on my right hand were broken, that was for sure. They were puffy purple and swollen, and trying to bend them—like that new corpsman told me—just killed me. So he taped them to my other fingers and told me I'd get X-rays when the ship pulled into Subic Bay. Guided-missile destroyers don't have X-ray machines, they need the space for guided-missles and guns. If you break something and your ship's at sea, you have to wait until your ship pulls into port. They'll X-ray them there, then tape them to the other fingers. So I sat there in sickbay like an idiot, my hand throbbing like hell, feeling really stupid.

I didn't mean to break my fingers. I meant to break Toolard's face. I knocked him down all right, a good shot to the jaw—like in the movies—but I think he fell more from surprise than anything. He scrambled to his feet madder than hell.

"Ain't no 120 pounds of chicken bone and scrawn going to hurt me!" he screamed, then he chased me through the row of shower stalls in the aft head to the aft passageway where he cornered me against the hoses of the midship fire station. He slapped me in the ribs, but his heart wasn't in it. He got all sheepish and white-faced, mumbled something, and walked away rubbing his jaw.

I couldn't stay mad at him either, I guess. I was pretty much drained by what had happened the day before to Nettles. This story isn't about me or that lardass Toolard, but about this corpsman named Nettles and the things he did.

He caused this whole mess.

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It all began the day after our ship left Bangkok. We were headed full steam through the Gulf of Siam to our PIRAZ station off the coast of North Vietnam. I had just finished "sweepers" after the crew's movie and was headed back to
Operations' compartment to get some rack time. But instead of walking aft through the ship's corridor, I popped open the midship watertight door and walked out onto the main deck.

It was pitch black out there and I could barely see. The salt wind whipped at my face as I shoved the heavy door closed and dogged it tight. I gripped the lifeline with my left hand and shuffled along until my eyes adjusted. The ship was cruising under battle conditions which meant she was under darken ship procedures—no lights anywhere. The sea was black and the sky was too, but a lighter shade, with flimsy clouds just barely there.

I was looking at the sky when I hit my head on the air conditioner. Stars flashed red and white, like in those old Mighty Mouse cartoons. The pain hit so suddenly that I lost my balance.

"Jesus H. Chr. . ." I reeled slightly and felt my feet lift as my left hip pressed against the lifeline. I grabbed the lifeline with both hands and held on for dear life. A little dizzy with the pain, I fought the nauseating rush that flushed through me when I lost my balance. If I'd have fallen overboard I'd have been a dead man for sure. Not only was it dark but it was noisy as hell. The engines were pounding out about 20 knots and I couldn't hear myself think. No way anyone could hear me yell out for help.

I caught my breath and tried to settle my stomach back down. My head throbbed and I felt like I was going to be sick. It was that damn air conditioner in the yeoman's office. You can see it during the day easy, but at night . . . well, it sticks out about two feet and you just gotta know it's there.

I walked even slower along the lifeline. Nearing the aft hatch I saw a figure sitting on the sonar winch. It was Goetzinger having a smoke.

"Hi ya Goat." I kinda had to shout to make myself heard over the engines.

"Howzit Phillips?" Goat never looked at you when he first started talking. He stared out at the black sea and sucked on his ciggy.

"Shitty, really shitty. Gotta lump the size of a marble on my forehead. Hurts like hell."

Goat turned toward me, his coarse blond hair flying away from his face as he looked directly into the wind.

"How'd that happen?"

"Damn yeoman's air conditioner."
“Forget to duck?”

There was a hint of a smile in what he said so I didn’t answer him. Some guys laugh when people hurt themselves; other guys laugh when people do something stupid. Goat liked to laugh at stupid people, but for some reason he didn’t piss me off. He was nice about it—he didn’t rub it in. And anyway he was smart, almost an intellectual. Some days he’d talk your ear off on any subject you could name; then other days he wouldn’t give you the time of day.

Goat finished his ciggy and flipped it over the side, the wind caught the red bud and it made a tight arc into the black. He rustled around for his Kools in his dungaree shirt, then pulled out his lighter.

“Stand in front of me wouldya?—cut the wind.”

I stood up close and he flicked his lighter . . . the yellow light bounced off our faces.

“Christ Phillips, that’s a pretty bad hit you took there. Better wake up the corpsman and have him take a look.”

“No, no, it’s all right.”

“Come on man, it’s bad.”

“I ain’t going to see Nettles, you know how he is. You know what he does.”

Goat blew some smoke out of that pinched nose of his, then I could see it, I swear I could, just that slight grin.

“He been bothering you?” Goat asked.

“Botherin me? He’s goddam hounding me day and night. He sits in that sickbay crouched over that Bible of his and he sees everything. He has his door cracked open and when I stand in line for chow, or pass by with the division’s mail—he grabs me. Why last night I was sittin on the shitter taking a dump and he comes in and stuffs literature in my hand.”

“What does he say?”

“The usual crap. ‘Accept Jesus Christ as your Savior’ and stuff like that.”

“Does he back it up?”

“Sure, says it’s in the Bible, it’s God’s word. He says all you gotta do is believe Jesus is your Savior, give yourself up to him totally and put yourself in his hands, then, according to him, you don’t have a goddam thing to worry about, you’re off to heaven on the first train. Fuckin’ unreal.”

“What do you think of that?” Goat asked.

“How can you believe it? He tells me that the only thing that matters is accepting the Lord. If you live a good life but
don’t accept the Lord, God knows what’s going to happen to you.”

“But that’s it,” Goat said. I could tell he was getting excited now, he leaned closer and tensed his hands in the air, fingers spread.

“God knows, man. It’s Nettle’s belief that God knows what’s best for him. The belief is what’s beautiful, don’t you see. If Nettles believes then it’s truth for him and who are we to question that. Do you really feel comfortable questioning someone else’s truth?”

“No . . . I guess not.” Goat confused me a lot. Religion as truth? I always thought of religion as religion, you know, church on Sunday, communion, confession . . . but as truth? Oh, I believe in God all right, but Jesus.

Goat said something that was lost in the wind.

“What?” I asked.

“Listen to him, you might learn something. And even if you don’t agree with him, gain some strength from his belief. That’s the most important thing.”

“Yeah, well . . . okay.” How could you argue with the man?

Goat turned away and looked at the sea. I could tell that he was finished talking. Sometimes he ran out of gas, just like that.

My head hurt so I didn’t feel like arguing any more anyway. Sometimes talking about religion really got me depressed. Nettles should be the happiest guy in the world. He’s the one going to heaven. He should be trying to cheer me up instead of making me feel guilty for not believing in stuff I should be believing in.

But maybe Goat was right. I never really looked at it from Nettles’ point of view before. I always thought of him as a strict, hardcore bible-thumper, nothing more.

I said goodnight to Goat and headed down to the Operations’ living compartment. Had to hit the rack early because I had to work for Toolard in the morning, back in the aft head. He liked you there early, rarin’ to go. Scrubbing out urinals wasn’t my idea of a good time but I didn’t say much. Toolard didn’t take much sass. And if anybody did any talking, he did it. I could just see Nettles trying to convert ole’ Toolard. Hell, once Toolard started talking Nettles wouldn’t be able to fit a word in edgewise. Nettles would end up
listening to Toolard's gross sea stories. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised to see Toolard convert Nettles. I went to sleep thinking about that and how good that would be.

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I woke up with one hell of a headache. It would not quit. I went back to the aft head and told Toolard I'd be a few minutes late because I had to drop by sickbay and get some aspirin. As usual Toolard was pissed.

"Don't take all goddam morning. The CDO will be sniffing urinals at 1030." Toolard started hosing down the ridged, metal deck.

I hurried down to sickbay, but there was a line. Usually, for aspirin, I'd just butt right up to the front of the line, but I felt a bit uneasy about doing it now. These guys were in pain. There were about seven or eight guys in line, and by the looks on their faces I was sure that almost all of them had the clap. It was that sorry-assed "why me" look; all droopy and hangdog looking. But I didn't feel that sorry for them. Most of these guys had the clap while we were still in port. But they hid it. Knowing that if they reported to sickbay they'd be restricted to ship, these guys bought penicillin pills in town and kept on screwing, spreading it all over town. Nice guys. And people wonder why 40 percent of the ship's crew had VD after we left Bangkok.

I walked up to the front of the line and tapped on the sickbay door. I got some stares, but it was ten minutes before Nettles usually opened and all I needed were some goddam aspirin.

"Open up, wouldya Nettles. I need some aspirin."

I heard a mumble.

"Come on Nettles. It's me, Phillips." I put a slight urgency in my voice that kids use when they want jawbreakers. Nettles cracked open the window in the sickbay door and I caught a glance of his curly-black hair.

"Oh, it's you, come in Phillips," he said, opening the door. I walked into the spotless sickbay behind Nettles.

"I thought you were one of those guys," Nettles mumbled.

"What guys?"

"Those guys. The guys with the gonorrhea. It seems like that line gets longer every day."

Beads of sweat rolled out of Nettles' hair. I wondered whether he always got this upset with a line of guys outside
with the clap. I thought I'd better make it quick and get out of there.

"Look, all I need are a couple of aspirins. Got this bump on the head. . ." Nettles wasn't listening to me at all. I sat down in a green, plastic-covered chair. Nettles took a look at my forehead, then walked over to the counter and opened a drawer. He said something under his breath.

"What?"

"People don't listen."

"I'm listening, Nettles," I said. I get a little defensive about that. I think I'm a pretty good listener.

"No, I'm not talking about you. It's those guys out there. Two days before we got to Bangkok they got the required hygiene lecture—my lecture. They laughed at it. They laughed at me. When I tried to tell them about the risks they took with those bargirls . . . they laughed. If they won't listen to that how can I tell them about the Lord?"

His face was open; eyes stretched wide and forehead all furled up. I'd never seen him so exposed. His worn, leather covered Bible lay closed on the desk next to the examining table.

"Hey Nettles, that's their problem . . ."

"No, it's my problem. It's my duty to spread the word about the Lord. But I'm failing. They just laugh at me."

"They're just sailors, man, they've been cooped. . ."

"No! They're dirty. They don't care about their bodies, about themselves. They don't listen."

It looked like Nettles was coming unhinged. I remembered what Goat said, about listening, and maybe seeing someone else's truth. I tried to soothe Nettles down.

"Hey, I'll listen to you. I've read those pamphlets."

"We've got to talk then," Nettles said, eagerly. "I have some Bible passages I want to read. . ."

The door cracked open. It was Toolard and he saw me sitting there talking to Nettles.

"I sent you down here for aspirin, not a Sunday school lesson." Toolard had those cold, hard creases around his eyes.

"Okay, okay I'll be right there," I said. Nettles gave me a package of aspirin and I started to get up but Toolard just walked in.

"Hey Nettles, would you tell me something about God?" Toolard asked.
“Sure, I’d be glad too, I’ve also got pamphlets explain­ing...”
“No, no. Just answer a couple of questions.”
“Sure.”
Toolard seemed to be licking his chops.
“Can God do everything?” Toolard asked.
“Yes, God is almighty.”
“Okay, then, can God create a rock that he cannot lift? Answer me that.”
That confused Nettles. “Why sure . . . uh . . . no . . .”
Toolard laughed, yelled at me to get my butt in gear, and left slamming the door. I looked at Nettles standing there and for the first time I felt sorry for him.
“I’ll listen to you, man. I’d like to hear what you have to say.” Nettles nodded his head, and I left him to that lengthening line of infected men.
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When I got back to the aft head Toolard was swabbing the deck, grinning up a storm.
“Those bible-thumpers usually have a pat answer for that one, but usually it’s not very good. This time I got a cherry.” Toolard hooted and told me to scrub out the urinals. I got out a long handled brush and rubbed it over the first in the long line of porcelain urinals. After I got most of the hairs and stuff out I taped each one up and attached a sign that said SECURED. I secured all but the last one in the line.
For the next two hours the entire ship would have to fight over that remaining open urinal. Ole’ Toolard would raise hell with any one who ripped the tape off and pissed in a clean urinal before inspection. So there were usually some antsy sailors milling around the aft head in the morning, looking for an opening. It was incredible how one guy could make so many people miserable.
The routine was the same with the shitters. All but the last shitter in the line was wiped clean, taped, and secured. I worked on my knees and the water on the deck soaked through my dungarees. Toolard insisted on washing down the deck before the shitters were scrubbed. It was a prestige job and Toolard enjoyed it.
I was working on the fourth one—a doozy—where someone forgets to flush and the next guy throws in a roll of toilet paper to kill the smell, then it backs up, then guys use it
for an ashtray . . . when Toolard butts in.

“You get a sweet one there Phillips?”

I pulled out the brownish, dripping, pulp of toilet paper and carried it gingerly, with fingertips, to the trash bucket. This was Toolard’s cue for the “turd story.” I’d heard it at least ten times already.

“It must have been 15 inches long and it was sort of torpedo shaped . . .”

Toolard loved to stand there and talk about turds when you were down there cleaning out shitters.

“. . . they charged a nickel to see it . . .”

He had a cup a coffee. He was drinking a cup of coffee.

“. . . had to break it up with a stick . . .”

He stood there and talked, and moved with me when I finished with one shitter and moved to the next, always blabbing, standing there above me. Every so often he’d punctuate his monologue with a scream to some guy hunched over the last shitter.

“Christ Burns, how about a courtesy flush, huh? Jesus.”

After the CDO’s inspection I got the hell out of the aft head and the hell away from Toolard. I was off till 1300 so I decided to relax. I went up to the signal bridge for some fresh air. It was good up there. The wind whipped at you, forcing salt wind under your eyelids. It was a sea that seemed to force the wind at you, trying to push you back to where you started. I walked to the forward part of the signal bridge, just above the pilothouse, and looked out at the sea. It was enormous. It seemed like I could barely see where sea and sky met, a thin thread, rock solid but fluttered slightly with waves. Big waves. The sea was getting rougher and the destroyer bounced through dark blue ridges and troughs.

God had to have something to do with all this. It was magnificent. All of sudden I wanted to talk to Nettles, I knew I could make sense to him. God wasn’t in a pamphlet or in the old leather Bible of his but right here, if he could open his eyes. I’d listen to him too, of course, we could discover each other’s truths just like Goat said.

I went into the signal shack, pushed my way past a couple of signalmen playing cribbage and called down to sickbay for Nettles. He was still busy and couldn’t talk but he sounded really excited. We agreed to meet on the signal bridge after knockoff.
I went to the aft head to get ready for chow. I walked up to the urinals, half of them already de-taped and dirty, and ripped the tape off a clean one. I enjoyed that. I got ready to piss.

Burning, burning, I tried to stop it but it burned and burned. Clenched-teeth burn. It was a burn that makes your eyes water and your hands clutch for something solid. Finally it was over. It still tingled and I could tell I was going to drip. I had the clap. No doubt about it. Goddammit . . . I was so careful . . . I even poured beer on it . . . but now it tingled and soon my skivvies would stick with green ooze. I needed the shots.

Nettles! I would have to go to Nettles. Jesus Christ, now what? He was upset before, now what?

I stood there like an idiot, staring at that line of urinals. Tape hanging off em; some clean, some dirty. Now I'm dirty, dirty as any of them. But goddammit, who is Nettles anyway? I looked at the urinal next to me. All clean and pretty, taped-up and safe.

I zipped up my pants and walked back to sickbay.

"Hey Nettles, open up," I said as I tapped on the door.

"Is that you Phillips?"

"Yeah, yeah, come on, let me in."

Nettles cracked the gray door and let me in. He'd been reading his Bible. I saw it open on the examining table.

"We can talk now," Nettles looked eager, fresh. "I have to go to chow but we could sit together."

"No, that's not it," I said.

"We can still talk tonight then, I have some passages here about our Savior and . . ." He was flipping through that leather Bible of his, worn thin at the binding.

"No man, I came for the shots. I . . . uh got the clap."

Nettles' face was awful to look at. First there was an instant shock, then a solid gray mask covered him. He didn't talk anymore. He just pointed and pushed. He took the specimen and motioned me out the door. I didn't say anything because I knew he wouldn't listen.

I wasn't hungry any more so I went down to the living compartment, snapped off the lights, and lay in the dark thinking about that bastard Nettles. Fine attitude, fine Christian attitude. He'll be a great inspiration to all of us lowly sinners. He treated me like dirt . . . that . . . that bastard
Nettles . . . and that bastard Toolard . . . all the same. I was surrounded by assholes. The loudspeaker shrieked:

"MAN OVERBOARD, MAN OVERBOARD, PORT SIDE, PORT SIDE, THIS IS NOT A DRILL, THIS IS NOT A DRILL, MAN OVERBOARD!!"

I was up and running. I scrambled up the ladder and through the passageway to the main deck. The ship was already turning, banking sharply, almost throwing me off my feet. Sailors poured on deck and lined the side, searching desperately, intently, trying to find someone lost in those enormous waves.


The ship slowed down to a crawl and I looked hard. The sea wasn't flat, it was hard to see . . . I couldn't see, the waves, the swells . . .

"There he is!"

After staring at the pointed finger for ten seconds I finally saw the tiny black-haired head lost in a massive swell. He rose to the peak of a wave, then fell like a rollercoaster down into another swell. His arms were moving. He was swimming. Swimming away from the ship.

"Come back Nettles!" I screamed. "You bastard, come back!"

It took the ship more than an hour to haul Nettles back. We almost lost the rescue launch a couple of times in the waves and Nettles wasn't much help either. He fought with the guys trying to rescue him—bit Crowley on the hand.

They brought him aboard and he looked like a drowned rat; his black hair plastered down his forehead and his face open, exposed, like that time in sickbay this morning. When they took him into sickbay I was there, but he didn't recognize me. I don't think he'll ever recognize me again.

And there was Toolard. I was chipping some rust off a drain pipe in the aft head and he stood there with his cup of coffee talking away.

"You see that Nettles? In all my years in the Navy I've never seen anybody do that."

He sipped on his coffee and watched me chip.

"That nutcase should have kept swimming."

That's when I hit him—just like in the movies.