Autobiography of a Silent Soldier

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The black bead is the easiest. I don’t have to move it far, but at first I couldn’t even reach the damned thing.

“Some job they did.” Danny, thumping the metal rod, making the six colored beads dance. “I can’t do anything about it, Mitch. It’s bolted on to your chair.”

Danny was still angry then, trapped in the deep gray pocket of a rainy March. He turned away each time I raised my hand to the beads. It was a fine May morning when he came to take me to breakfast and smiled to see the black bead sitting lonesome on the right side of the rod. I’m pretty fast now, as much good as it does me. Danny timed me last week. Eleven and a half seconds to move a bead the size of a golf ball three inches. I imagine the employment possibilities for such a skill are endless out there in the real world. “Find out what you can do, and do it,” Mrs. Carlson says. Right.

She’s not so bad. A little overeager, like she’s the one who lifted the weight or wrote the letter or learned how to spell paraplegic. Her methods are a little transparent, but she’s good with parents. The day she and Dad brought me to Twin Oaks, Mom looked like a thunderstorm about to let loose. Mrs. Carlson took her into the office out front right away. It was strange to see that little tiny woman patting my mother’s shoulder. Mom is a rock. I’d never seen her break down like that, not even when they visited me in the VA hospital in Iowa City the first time.

An orderly took me and Dad on the nickel tour so we could see what a great place Twin Oaks is for rustling hulks of soldiers. When we got back, Mom and Mrs. Carlson were waiting in the room assigned to me. Mom had a big smile on her face, just like Mrs. Carlson.

The next bead is white. I’ve done this so many times, I could move beads in my sleep. I know I do in my dreams.

The exercise seemed pointless last spring. That was before I had the strength to push the switch that operates my wheelchair so I can get away from the day room when Stan starts talking about the Tet Offensive and the fall of Saigon as if he had been there. He wasn’t. He was in Iowa City, down the hall from my room. He can’t let go of it. He waves that cane around like it’s an M-16 and he’s single-handedly facing a black swarm of VC. Sometimes he starts screaming and the orderlies come with a needle. I feel sorry for him, but mostly I wish Mrs. Carlson would send him back to Second Floor so I wouldn’t have to listen to him.

White. The walls are white. The sheets on my bed are white. Angie wore a little white dress that afternoon when she visited. It was August, I don’t remember
what year, and hot, ninety-nine in the shade. She was brown everywhere the dress wasn’t. We had a fight about her clothes the night before I left for Fort Des Moines in the fall of ’67. I was still thinking about the fight when I got to Huế. I thought about her skimpy bikinis and her miniskirts and about all the guys that got to look at her while all I had was her senior picture and a Polaroid I took at the beach.

I have to give her credit. She didn’t have to come all that way to explain. She didn’t have to come at all. My mother gives me details about Angie when her visit is nearly over and there’s nothing else for her to talk about. Angie has a daughter. Angie left her husband. Angie has a new husband. Angie moved to Kansas City.

I always move the green and blue beads at the same time. Technically it’s cheating, but those beads are my parents and they belong together.

They did their best that year after they took me out of the VA hospital. Dad hired a man to help with the farm work so Mom could stay inside with me. Dad was in the field or the barn or the machine shed most of the time, so it was the two of us, plus the physical therapists and the shrinks. In the spring the experts stopped coming. I sat in front of the TV like I did here before Danny came down from Second Floor. It didn’t much matter what was on.

My father used to take me into town on Saturday mornings when the weather was good. That was the worst part about being home. Main Street looked the same. The feed caps were gathered around the coffeepot in the front window of Lars’ Sons Chevy, while the hairnets and frizzy perms hovered over gossip and expensive tomatoes in ByLo down the street.

And everybody had to stop to say hello. They didn’t look at the empty sleeve or the useless legs. They pretended not to see the wheelchair. They wanted to see the kid in the baseball uniform who smiles out of the picture frame in the high school auditorium, the one who drove the West Country bus route safely through the blizzard of 1966. They talked about the Purple Heart and said I was a hero.

I only took that busdriving job so I wouldn’t have to butcher carcasses at ByLo part-time. Being a hero was always the last thing on my mind.

“He doesn’t want to go into town, Paul, can’t you see that?” My mother, trying to keep her voice low in the kitchen one Saturday.

There’s nothing wrong with my hearing. I don’t speak, but I can hear.

“Zeller said we have to keep reminding Mitch that there’s a world outside that shell of his. If we don’t, he’ll withdraw even further.” Dad, trying to reason. They say a man who gets bald from the front first is a thinker. I’ll be bald like him some day.

“Dr. Marshall said we shouldn’t force him to do anything he doesn’t want to do.”
“Marshall also thought that Mitch would be better off at a place like Twin Oaks. Besides, if he doesn’t want to go he can tell me. If you insist on interpreting for him, he’ll never speak.”

It’s not so bad here. You just have to be careful. This business about toes, for example. I didn’t mean for Mrs. Carlson to find out that my toes moved. She started to watch me when the night nurse told her. She waited for a miracle, for me to come back to life from the feet up. The doctors called the movement an anomaly. The nerves were severed, they said. Regeneration is impossible. Mrs. Carlson’s faith is unshakeable. She even had me believing for a while.

“Whoa, look at that,” Rick has to let go of his paint brush to speak. He whistles. A girl with a tray of cookies and legs like Marilyn Monroe backs out of the day room. The air conditioning sends a cool breeze toward me. It smells like carnations and jasmine.

“Hey, be cool,” Dave pokes the brush back into Rick’s mouth. “You know the rules. Don’t hassle the volunteers.”

There aren’t many, at least under the age of fifty, and they almost never wear skirts. Here in the South Wing we’re supposed to be beyond such things. But it’s like the finger my grandfather froze off when he was a boy. Sixty years later that lost finger still hurt when the weather changed. Grandma said that was just foolishness, but Grandpa told her that didn’t make the finger hurt any less.

Rick dabs the tip of the brush in a blob of red and slowly paints the outline of a heart at the bottom of his canvas, the brush clenched in his teeth. His every movement is carefully calculated and executed. He started painting after we saw a paralyzed woman paint Johnny Carson’s picture that way. She was pretty good, but Rick is better. He paints landscapes so real you’d swear you were walking among the trees.

He painted a picture for each of us in the South Wing. He started mine the day after the July 4th parade the town held in honor of ’Nam vets. He worked on it for two weeks, adding little touches here and there. Danny hung it in my room and every time I see it that parade comes back to me. It was your average midwest parade, a string of antique tractors, the county pork queen in a convertible, fifth graders dressed up in Statue of Liberty costumes with tin foil torches, the governor’s car minus the governor, the fire truck pumping fine sprays of water over the sweating crowd, leaky sno-cones and enough cotton candy to make every kid within twenty miles sick for a week. As the honored guests, we were seated close to the street where diesel fumes mingled with a smell of tar melting in the sun. There were the usual long-winded speeches afterwards, followed by a moment of silence for those of us not lucky enough, the mayor said, to come back alive.

We’re in the picture, too, three rows of pale ovals that look remarkably like human faces. And to one side, behind a snow fence and a straggling line of cops in blue and gold, is the group of protestors that marched back and forth with signs.
It wasn't much of a protest, nothing like the sixties, just ten or twelve people. Women with young sons at their sides, eighties men with short haircuts. GRAIN NOT GUNS. REMEMBER THE PAST SO YOUR CHILDREN DON'T DIE REPEATING IT. The priest from St. Sebastian's spoke about sacrifice and gratitude, then left the podium and joined the group behind the snow fence.

After the speeches, one of the women was allowed to hand out literature to the thinning crowd. She told each person that the group's name and phone number were printed on the back of the pamphlet if they were interested in joining up. Most turned away. Some took the pamphlet to be polite, then dropped it on the ground on the way to their cars.

Danny found the pamphlet stuck between my right leg and the side of my chair a week later. "How did that get there?" He pulled it out and wadded it into a ball. "Did they think you'd give them a call? Send them money?" He didn't look at me before he threw the paper away.

"Let's get out of here!" Danny bursts into the day room like a clown at a kid's birthday party. He has been at Group, a long two hours for the bundle of energy he has become since spring. As he comes toward me, the tattered posters on the wall tremble from his passing. "Patience, my ass, I just want to kill something," says a skinny vulture on a bare tree limb over Danny's right shoulder. It's my favorite poster. Mrs. Carlson likes the ones that say things like "If life gives you a lemon, make lemonade," but the day room is our territory.

"Where do you want to go? Outside?" Danny is fluid motion even standing in one spot. His hands slide in and out of the pockets of his jeans, his foot taps, his blue eyes sparkle.

I blink once. One blink is yes, two is no, according to the system Danny devised. It works pretty well as long as I agree. I agree a lot because it's easier. Sometimes Danny doesn't wait to see the second blink.

There were a lot of Dannys in 'Nam. Tough as nails outside, soft as velvet inside, and every one of them looking for someone to take some of the load. I wonder how he would react if I talked?

I used to talk. I talked in San Francisco in the summer of 1967. I didn't talk much to Angie, who was bored with me that last summer of freedom. She spent her graduation money on suntan oil and her days at the beach while I sat in smoky apartments with the hippies I met on the street. I talked and wrote poetry and sang songs about the war and love and peace and flowers and all the other things everyone else sang and wrote and talked about, except Canada. I couldn't talk about Canada, not even when I called home and found out that my draft notice had arrived.

I had it all planned. I put Angie on a plane with an excuse about wanting time to think so I could drive home alone. I was going to slip through town after midnight when my friends and those of my parents were asleep. I'd take a private
little tour of the countryside, the lane where Angie and I used to park, the strip of pavement with its crudely painted marks where I ran the quarter mile against GTOs and Chevelles from nearby towns, the abandoned farmhouse where I smoked my first cigarette.

I was doing okay, drinking coffee and listening to Arlo Guthrie sing "Alice's Restaurant," until I hit Main Street. Two blocks of stores, filled with antiques, bits and pieces of stuff my dad remembered using but I couldn't name. Then there were the pictures, whole families long dead but not forgotten. Norwegian flags draped over ancient trunks, notices of lefse-baking contests and kumla dinners beckoned. I didn't need to stop to know what they said. I had seen them every year in the early autumn, the time of the Norske Celebration.

I couldn't go through with the plan. I might convince my parents of my feeling about the war, but I couldn't leave them to explain it to the town that had one word for resisters — coward.

I went home to the farm. I kept my mouth shut. Eight months later I was in a MEDEVAC chopper with not much left but a voice and nothing left to say.

Danny parks my chair under the trees where the shade is cool and a breeze lift the leaves. He lights a cigarette for each of us and perches on an old dead stump beside me, lulled by nicotine.

It won't be easy when Danny leaves Twin Oaks. The orderlies will start coming around again every two hours with a glass of water and I'll have to drink it whether I want it or not. They won't ask if I like green beans or if I take sugar in my coffee like Danny does.

Rick says Danny is lucky, when Danny's not around to hear. He was the only member of his platoon that survived to get a college education under the GI Bill. He got a good job with the state, married a beautiful blonde, bought a house, had a kid. The American Dream stalled out one foggy morning when his wife Beth found him unconscious in the front seat of his car. The engine was running and the garage door was sealed shut with olive drab rags. I guess Rick is right in a way, though. Danny survived, and Beth still comes to visit every week after two years.

I move the yellow bead to the right to join the others. Danny doesn't notice. The yellow in his mind is the yellow of his wife's hair.

The 'Cuda my parents bought for me my senior year was darker than the yellow bead. The dealer called it mustard.

"Jaundice is more like it," Squaw said the first time he saw it. I couldn't modify the engine by myself, so I had to let him get away with that.

Squaw would have gone with us to California if it hadn't been for Angie's big mouth. "There isn't enough room, Mitch. And, I know he's your friend, but he's an." She didn't have to say anymore. Squaw knew where he wasn't wanted.
He didn’t get angry. Two weeks before we left, he brought me a manifold and a pair of Hooker headers to go with the Holley carburetor I worked two months to buy. He told me he stole them. I found out later that he had spent some of the money he had saved for college.

I should have taken Squaw to San Francisco and left Angie behind.

We could have had some fun. Those golden-skinned women... long sun-streaked hair... all the wine you could drink... no bored Angie to complain... a fire on the beach dying down as the moon disappeared... waking the next morning to see Squaw facing the morning sun... for a moment I wouldn’t know him...

He left for basic a week before I got home from California. I didn’t see him again. His plane was shot down on the wrong side of the DMZ. His mother can’t rest without his remains. She believes he’s alive, an emaciated slave somewhere in the jungle. If he was, if one spark of him remained alive, I would know.

My parents gave the ’Cuda to his little brother.

The only bead on the left side of the rod is the red one. I hadn’t noticed before how alone it looks. I can reach it, but I only move it when no one is looking, then I move it back. Mrs. Carlson keeps track of my progress. I know she’s got something else up her sleeve for me when I’ve mastered the last bead on the rod.

“Steps to the future,” she says each time she sees me moving beads. “Your life didn’t end in that mine field, and I’m going to prove it to you.”

After I was able to move the yellow bead, she dropped by the day room to tell me about her new computer. My mother tells her all kinds of things when she and Dad come to visit. She told Mrs. Carlson how I used to cry out in my sleep those months after I left the hospital, and about the stories I wrote in high school.

Mrs. Carlson says her computer can be used as a word processor. She explained how it worked like a typewriter, only easier, and she wants me to learn to use it when I’m stronger.

Sometimes the words fill me up. I write stories about the war in my head but they don’t stay. I’d like to try Mrs. Carlson’s fancy computer typewriter, but I don’t think she’d like what I’d write about. I’m wise to her tactics, anyway. I know damned well what she wants. She wants me to talk, and she won’t stop until I do. It has been found that a patient communicating in one medium is more likely to reproduce that pattern of behavior in other, perhaps more functional ways. First the red bead, then my life story on a computer disk. Autobiography of a Silent Soldier. If Knopf isn’t interested, Reader’s Digest will buy it. “Phil Donohue called, Mitch. Oprah Winfrey. You can’t be on a talk show if you don’t talk.”

Danny stares at the street, a thin stream of smoke flowing out of his mouth. He’s looking at the place where Beth’s Toyota is parked on Sundays. I look, too, but I can’t see what he does. All I see is a brown Ford with a dent in the side.

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I drop the cigarette butt on the ground. Danny takes one last puff and crushes his out on the stump. He looks for something else to do with his hands. He reaches for a broad green leaf and begins to tear sections from the vein.

"Want to go to assembly tonight?"

I blink once. Assembly is boring, but so is everything else.

"Mrs. Carlson said we're going to have a speaker." Fragments of leaf drift to the earth. Danny looks at me. "The woman that handed out leaflets at the parade in July, remember?"

One blink. Look of curiosity.

"Her group is planning a march on the capitol to protest the National Guard being sent to Honduras for training. She wants volunteers." Danny laughs. "A lot of good that's going to do. The marchers will give speeches, then the governor's press secretary will read a prepared statement, and nothing will change. I can't understand why people waste their time on something that won't do any good, can you?"

One blink. Danny doesn't look up from his shredded leaf.

"Dave and a bunch of the other guys from the North Wing are going to walk out when she asks us to sign up. I told him we'd leave with him. Christ, we did our tour of duty. It's someone else's turn to fight the wars."

Double blink. Pause. Double blink. That's the trouble with blinks. They only count when Danny is looking at me. I close my eyes. Inside they feel as red as that last bead. They hurt. They burn like fire, like napalm on bare skin.

I think of reaching for the switch, of moving away from him across the clipped lawn. Instead, I reach for the red bead. It slides slowly, then a little faster, stopping with a click next to the yellow bead and all the rest, the white, the blue and green, the black. It looks better that way, complete. I think I'll leave it that way.

— Susan Roe