

In the Lake of the Woods

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1994

THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

The war was aimless. No targets, no visible enemy. There was nothing to shoot back at. Men were hurt and then more men were hurt and nothing was ever gained by it. The ambushes never worked. The patrols turned up nothing but women and kids and old men.

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"Like that bullshit kid's game," Rusty Calley said one evening. "They hide, we seek, except we're chasin' a bunch of gookish fucking ghosts."

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In the dark someone did witch imitations. Someone else laughed. For Sorcerer, who sat listening at his foxhole, the war had become a state of mind. Not bedlam exactly, but the din was nearby.

"Eyeballs for eyeballs," Calley said. "One of your famous Bible regulations."

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All through February they worked an AO called Pinkville, a chain of dark, sullen hamlets tucked up against the South China Sea. The men hated the place, and feared it. On their maps the sector was shaded a bright shimmering pink to signify a "built-up area," with many hamlets and paddy dikes and fields of rice. But for Charlie Company there was nothing bright about Pinkville. It was spook country. The geography of evil: tunnels and bamboo thickets and mud huts and graves.

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On February 25, 1968, they stumbled into a minefield near a village called Lac Son.

"I'm killed," someone said, and he was.

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A steady gray rain was falling. Thunder advanced from the mountains to the west. After an hour a pair of dustoff choppers settled in. The casualties were piled aboard and the helicopters rose into the rain with three more dead, twelve more wounded.

"Don't mean zip," Calley said. His face was childlike and flaccid. He turned to one of the medics. "What's up, doc?"

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Three weeks later, on March 14, a booby-trapped 155 round blew Sergeant George Cox into several large wet pieces. Dyson lost both legs. Hendrixson lost an arm and a leg.

Two or three men were crying.

Others couldn't remember how.

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"Kill Nam," said Lieutenant Calley. He pointed his weapon at the earth, burned twenty quick rounds. "Kill it," he said. He reloaded and shot the grass and a palm tree and then the earth again. "Crease the place," he said. "Kill it."

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In the late afternoon of March 15 John Wade received a short letter from Kathy. It was composed on light blue stationery with a strip of embossed gold running along the top margin. Her handwriting was dark and confident.

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"What I hope," she wrote him, "is that someday you'll understand that I need things for myself. I need a productive future—a real life. When you get home, John, you'll have to treat me like the human being I am. I've grown up. I'm different now, and you are too, and we'll both have to make adjustments. We have to be looser with each other, not so wound up or something—you can't *squeeze* me so much—I need to feel like I'm not a puppet or something. Anyway, just so you know, I've been going out with a couple of guys. It's nothing serious. Repeat: nothing serious. I love you, and I think we can be wonderful together."

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her letter

Sorcerer wrote back that evening: "What do you get when you breed VC with rats?"

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his answer

He smiled to himself and jotted down the answer on a separate slip of paper.

"Midget rats," he wrote.

60 At 7:22 on the morning of March 16, 1968, the lead elements of Charlie Company boarded a flight of helicopters that climbed into the thin, rosy sunlight, gathered into assault formation, then banked south and skimmed low and fast over scarred, mangled, bombed-out countryside toward a landing zone just west of Pinkville.

Something was wrong.

Maybe it was the sunlight.

65 Sorcerer felt dazed and half asleep, still dreaming wild dawn dreams. All night he'd been caught up in pink rivers and pink paddies; even now, squatting at the rear of the chopper, he couldn't flush away the pink. All that color—it was wrong. The air was wrong. The smells were wrong, and the thin rosy sunlight, and how the men seemed wrapped inside themselves. Meadlo and Mitchell and Thinbill sat with their eyes closed. Sledge fiddled with his radio. 70 Conti was off in some mental whorehouse. PFC Weatherby kept wiping his M-16 with a towel, first the barrel and then his face and then the barrel again. Boyce and Maples and Lieutenant Calley sat side by side in the chopper's open doorway, sharing a cigarette, quietly peering down at the cratered fields and paddies.

75 Pure wrongness, Sorcerer knew.

He could taste the sunlight. It had a rusty, metallic flavor, like nails on his tongue.

80 For a few seconds, Sorcerer shut his eyes and retreated behind the mirrors in his head, pretending to be elsewhere, but even then the landscapes kept coming at him fast and lurid.

85 At 7:30 the choppers banked in a long arc and approached the hamlet of Thuan Yen from the southwest. Below, almost straight ahead, white puffs of smoke opened up in the paddies just outside the village. The artillery barrage swept across the fields and into the western fringes of Thuan Yen, cutting through underbrush and bamboo and banana trees, setting fires here and there, shifting northward as the helicopters skimmed in low over the drop zone. The door gunners were now laying down a steady suppressing fire. They leaned into their big guns, shoulders twitching. The noise made Sorcerer's eyelids go haywire. 90

"Down and dirty!" someone yelled, and the chopper settled into a wide dry paddy.

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Mitchell was first off. Then Boyce and Conti and Meadlo, then Maples, then Sledge, then Thinbill and the stubby lieutenant.

Sorcerer went last.

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He jumped into the sunlight, fell flat, found himself alone in the paddy. The others had vanished. There was gunfire all around, a machine-gun wind, and the wind seemed to pick him up and blow him from place to place. He couldn't get his legs beneath him. For a time he lay pinned down by things unnatural, the wind and heat, the wicked sunlight. He would not remember pushing to his feet. Directly ahead, a pair of stately old coconut trees burst into flame.

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Just inside the village, Sorcerer found a pile of dead goats.

He found a pretty girl with her pants down. She was dead too. She looked at him cross-eyed. Her hair was gone.

He found dead dogs, dead chickens.

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Farther along, he encountered someone's forehead. He found three dead water buffalo. He found a dead monkey. He found ducks pecking at a dead toddler. Events had been channeling this way for a long while, months of terror, months of slaughter, and now in the pale morning sunlight a kind of meltdown was in progress.

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Pigs were squealing.

The morning air was flaming up toward purple.

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He watched a young man hobbling up the trail, one foot torn away at the ankle. He watched Weatherby shoot two little girls in the face. Deeper into the village, in front of a small L-shaped hootch, he came across a GI with a woman's black ponytail flowing from his helmet. The man wiped a hand across his crotch. He gave a little flip to the ponytail and smiled at Sorcerer and blooped an M-79 round into the L-shaped hootch. "Blammo," the man said. He shook his head as if embarrassed. "Yeah, well," he said, then shrugged and fired off another round and said, "Boom." At his feet was a wailing infant. A middle-aged woman lay nearby. She was draped across a bundle of straw, not quite dead, shot in the legs and stomach. The woman gazed at the world with indifference. At one point she made an obscure motion with her head, a kind of bow, inexact, after which she rocked herself away.

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There were dead waterfowl and dead house pets. People were dying loudly inside the L-shaped hootch.

135 Sorcerer uttered meaningless sounds—"No," he said, then after a second he said, "Please!"—and then the sunlight sucked him down a trail toward the center of the village, where he found burning hootches and brightly mobile figures engaged in murder. Simpson was killing children. PFC Weatherby was killing whatever he could kill. A row of corpses lay in the pink-to-purple sunshine along the trail—teenagers and old women and two babies and a young boy. Most were dead, some were almost dead. The dead lay very still. The almost-dead did twitching things until PFC Weatherby had occasion to reload and make them fully dead. The noise was fierce. No one was dying quietly. There were squeakings and chickenhouse sounds.

140 "Please," Sorcerer said again. He felt very stupid. Thirty meters up the trail he came across Conti and Meadlo and Rusty Calley. Meadlo and the lieutenant were spraying gunfire into a crowd of villagers. They stood side by side, taking turns. Meadlo was crying. Conti was watching. The lieutenant shouted something and shot down a dozen women and kids and then reloaded and shot down more and then reloaded and shot down more and then reloaded again. The air was hot and wet. "Jeez, come on," the lieutenant said, "get with it—move—light up these fuckers," but Sorcerer was already sprinting away. He ran past a smoking bamboo schoolhouse. Behind him and in front of him, a brisk machine-gun wind pressed through Thuan Yen. The wind stirred up a powdery red dust that sparkled in the morning sunshine, and the little village had now gone mostly violet. He found someone stabbing people with a big silver knife. Hutto was shooting corpses. T'Souvas was shooting children. Doherty and Terry were finishing off the wounded. This was not madness, Sorcerer understood. This was sin. He felt it winding through his own arteries, something vile and slippery like heavy black oil in a crankcase.

150 Stop, he thought. But it wouldn't stop. Someone shot an old farmer and lifted him up and dumped him in a well and tossed in a grenade.

155 Roschevitz shot people in the head.

160 Hutson and Wright took turns on a machine gun.

17165 The killing was steady and inclusive. The men took frequent smoke breaks; they ate candy bars and exchanged stories.

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A period of dark time went by, maybe an hour, maybe more, then Sorcerer found himself on his hands and knees behind a bamboo fence. A few meters away, in the vicinity of a large wooden turret, fifteen or twenty villagers squatted in the morning sunlight. They were chattering among themselves, their faces tight, and then somebody strolled up and made a waving motion and shot them dead.

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There were flies now—a low droning buzz that swelled up from somewhere deep inside the village.

And then for a while Sorcerer let himself glide away. All he could do was close his eyes and kneel there and wait for whatever was wrong with the world to right itself. At one point it occurred to him that the weight of this day would ultimately prove too much, that sooner or later he would have to lighten the load.

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He looked at the sky.

Later he nodded.

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And then later still, snagged in the sunlight, he gave himself over to forgetfulness. "Go away," he murmured. He waited a moment, then said it again, firmly, much louder, and the little village began to vanish inside its own rosy glow. Here, he reasoned, was the most majestic trick of all. In the months and years ahead, John Wade would remember Thuan Yen the way chemical nightmares are remembered, impossible combinations, impossible events, and over time the impossibility itself would become the richest and deepest and most profound memory.

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This could not have happened. Therefore it did not.

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Already he felt better.

Tracer rounds corkscrewed through the glare, and people were dying in long neat rows. The sunlight was in his blood.

He would both remember and not remember a fleet human movement off to his left.

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He would not remember squealing.

He would not remember raising his weapon, nor rolling away from the bamboo fence, but he would remember forever how he turned and shot down an old man with a wispy beard and wire glasses and what looked to be a rifle. It was not a rifle. It was a small wooden hoe.

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The hoe he would always remember. In the ordinary hours after the

210 war, at the breakfast table or in the babble of some dreary statehouse hearing, John Wade would sometimes look up to see the wooden hoe spinning like a baton in the morning sunlight. He would see the old man shuffling past the bamboo fence, the skinny legs, the erect posture and the wire glasses, the hoe suddenly sailing up high and doing its quick twinkling spin and coming down uncaught. He would feel only the faintest sense of culpability. The forgetting trick mostly worked. On certain late-night occasions, however, John Wade would remember covering his head and screaming and crawling through a hedgerow and out into a wide paddy where helicopters were ferrying in supplies. The paddy was full of colored smoke, lavenders and yellows. There were loud voices, and many explosions, but he couldn't seem to locate anyone. He found a young woman laid open without a chest or lungs. He found dead cattle. All around him there were flies and burning trees and burning hootches.

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220 Later, he found himself at the bottom of an irrigation ditch. There were many bodies present, maybe a hundred. He was caught up in the slime.

PFC Weatherby found him there.

225 "Hey, Sorcerer," Weatherby said. The guy started to smile, but Sorcerer shot him anyway.