

THE FEEDLOT

Jeffrey L Minch

Ten miles west of Lubbock, Texas
11:19 AM, 17 October 1970

The two worst smelling places I've ever been are downwind from a Lubbock feedlot and Vietnam. On the firebase, we pulled the aromatic half-barrels of human waste out from beneath the latrines—the shitters—mixed in a few gallons of diesel, and lit them up. One of the old timers told you the first time you did it the secret of getting that cocktail to take a flame—douse toilet paper in gasoline, light it, and throw the burning wad onto the diesel. You tend the barrels—usually six of them—stirring the shit and diesel to make sure it all burns. It took half a day to do it right. You tried to stay out of the stench, but you had a better chance of winning the Irish Sweepstakes. The damn smoke followed you whichever side you stirred from. When you finished, the stank clung to you for a week. Even your memory stunk.

I came home by descending modes of transport—leaving Tan Son Nhut and hopping over the Pacific on a jet, landing at Travis Airbase (via Japan and Alaska) to board an east bound train from San Francisco, a Greyhound from Dallas to Lubbock (with a stop in Abilene), a thumbed pickup from the bus station to my house, a saddled horse to the pasture east of the feedlot, and my feet to the only shade tree in the entire fifteen hundred acres from where I'd left a year earlier.

The pasture, with its one sorry tree, was downwind from the feedlot and smelled like Hell. Our house—empty with my mother working in town and Dad somewhere tending to some belligerent cow—sat on the west side, upwind of the feedlot. Our ranch wrapped it on three sides, it being the Holmes Feedlot, which opened onto the highway.

The Feedlot, Page 2

The last night before we left for where they burnt shit and diesel, Jimmy Holmes and I got modestly beer-drunk under that tree. We planned the rest of our lives that night on the premise we were both coming home in one piece. Offered the chance to skip the war and live for the rest of our lives downwind from a Lubbock feedlot, we would have taken it, but there were others who demanded our service, so, like good Texans, we went.

* * *

Old man Holmes spotted me. I saw him looking this way, holding his once-white hat to block the sun, his hand shading his eyes. The horse gave me away. Jimmy's dad went back into the house, threw a cooler in the back of his rusty, wheezing, paid-for pickup, drove through the cattle-guarded break in our adjoining fence, and parked on the edge of the precious shade.

He flung the beat up ice chest at my feet, opened it, and handed me a beer. Wordless, he matched it, touched his bottle's neck to mine, and we drank. We leaned against the tree, sparing ourselves the burden of looking at each other.

Second beer gone, I got up, fished something from my horse's saddlebag—a cardboard tube and a padded, blue, clamshell box with gilt lettering. I handed them to Mr. Holmes.

He put his beer down, crushed his cigarette, and unrolled the paper in the tube with his hard workman's hands. He studied—memorized—the Silver Star citation. Finished, he rolled the citation up tight, jammed it back into the tube, and let the tube rest on his lap as he opened the box slowly, and looked at the medal. Even in the shade, it sparkled.

He rose, carried them like they were Communion, put them both in his truck, covering them with his jacket.

When he returned, he fetched us another beer.

“You there when it happened, Chase?” he asked, in that hard, tired voice of his.

The Feedlot, Page 3

“Yes, sir.”

One beer later, he asked, “Tell me?”

“We got into a firefight with some gooks. Jimmy was on a machinegun. Lieutenant always put the best men on the guns.”

I paused a second to turn and look at him. His eyes were closed, his hat shading his face. I could feel the power of his listening. He betrayed his wanting to know—absorbing and stealing every word to hide in the part of his brain reserved for the harshest life sorrows, the ones that never got better.

“The gooks jumped us, kicked our asses, dumbass on point walked us right into them. Jimmy was the first to react, lit them up with his gun while we sorted things out. Nobody had to tell Jimmy what to do. Made that gun sing.”

I took a swallow, the scene playing in my head on an endless loop.

“Platoon sergeant screamed to withdraw across a rice paddy. Jimmy covered us for ten minutes ‘til we were safe on the other side of the paddy dike. He threw grenades at them when they tried to surround him.”

I took a second to sip my beer so I wouldn’t start crying. The image of Jimmy throwing those grenades stuck in my mind. He had an arm on him.

“When he ran to join us, got hit, both him and his assistant gunner. They lay there for an hour in the middle of that shithole rice paddy, playing dead while our lieutenant called artillery on the gooks. When the medic finally got to him, he was dead, said he bled to death.”

“Nobody try to get him?”

“Yes, sir. I did. Got hit in the legs when I was halfway there. Couldn’t move. I got medevaced on the same chopper as his body. I flew back with him to the firebase.”

The Feedlot, Page 4

“You going to be alright?” Mr. Holmes asked.

He faced me. There were wet paths through the dust on his face. He turned back, leaning into the tree’s cloak of anonymity.

“Yes, sir. Still tender, but I was back in the field in a month. I’ll be fine.”

“What they say in the paperwork about my boy, that Silver Star paperwork, it true?”

“Yes, sir. Every damn word of it. Jimmy didn’t hold that position with his machinegun, twenty or thirty of us die. It was magnificent to watch. He sprayed those gooks from end to end, so we could make our escape.”

Mr. Holmes lit another cigarette. His face looked half a century older than when Jimmy and I left from the Greyhound station. I remember him and my Dad standing there smoking, watching us watching them as we pulled out, leaving our youth behind. They’d both fought in Europe in World War II. They lived secrets we hadn’t learned yet. Today, Mr. Holmes looked old, defeated, tired, gray. I felt how he looked.

“Gave him a damn nice funeral, the Catholic Church downtown did,” he said. “Could have been buried in Arlington Cemetery, but we wanted him here in Lubbock, so we could see him. He was only nineteen, too young to be that far from home.”

“Yes, sir, it’s a long way from here.”

“What do you remember about it, the war? The most important memory?”

I laughed and instantly regretted it. He seemed startled by it.

“Vietnam, all of it, smells like shit, Mr. Holmes. Smells worse than a fucking Lubbock feedlot.”

THE END