

Veterans' Benefits

by Clay Rooks

We missed the name of the town, but the bar was called the Louisiana Gentleman and when we walked in it was too dark to see what it looked like inside. Rich and I just stood by the door for a minute until our eyes adjusted; then we could see. But there wasn't much to see. It was small and dirty as well as dark. The bar was along the wall to the left, barely lit by a single back bar light; there was a worn-out pool table straight ahead with a shaded light above it, but no one was playing; and there was a jukebox halfway down the right wall. It was almost midnight, and the dump was bare. There were only five other customers. We walked down the bar and got a couple of beers anyway because we were a long way from home, and we wanted a beer matter where we had to get it.

Rich sat down on a broken bar stool, but I stayed standing because I wasn't comfortable enough to sit yet. I was still looking around. At the end of the bar were two underage boys, sixteen or seventeen, talking to a girl about twenty years old. They were young and grubby looking, and they didn't say anything to us, though they looked us over while we were getting our beers. Then there were two older men at a far table keeping to themselves. On my left was another guy I guessed to be about our age, in his late twenties, who was sitting alone getting drunk. He'd been talking to the woman behind the bar when we came in, but she'd gone down the bar by the others. She appeared to be about fifty and had dyed black hair. I was pretty sure she owned the place the way she acted, and she was half-drunk on whiskey and Coke.

Rich said something to me about southern hospitality that I didn't quite hear, but he laughed so I made a joke about alligators, and laughed with him, but not too loudly.

"You two from down here?" the guy next to me said suddenly.

I turned to look at him. I didn't know if he'd overheard my joke, but he didn't look angry. All I saw besides his beard were his bloodshot eyes. They didn't say anything to me.

"We just hit town," Rich said.

"You from Baton Rouge?"

"I've lived there," Rich told him. "But I'm from Denver, originally."

"You from up North, too?" he asked me. "I been up there."

"I was in St. Paul," I said.

"That near Chicago?"

What the hell, I thought. "Close enough," I said.

He smiled. "My name's Harper. What's yours?"

We each told him.

"Come in here to tie one on?" he asked.

I shrugged. Rich said: "Not really."

"That's good. This place stinks. And I should know 'cause I come here a lot," Harper said. "This was my hometown before I went to Nam. Now it's nothin'." It was hard to tell if it made him sad the way he said it. "But I don't care no more."

Neither of us said anything. I sat down.

"You know what it's like not to care anymore?" he asked.

I nodded. So did Rich.

"Yeah, then you guys must've went to gook-land, too."

"How long were you there?" I asked him.

"Fourteen months. I was all over that Goddamn country. Was in Cambodia, too."

"Extra bush," Rich said.

"There was no country club there," he said.

"Easy to stray accidentally over the border," I said, and smiled.

"Yeah, just ten or twenty miles," he said. "Were you there?"

"No," I said. "They didn't want me."

"You?" he asked Rich.

"I went to military school," Rich said. "But I broke a knee playing football, and they 4-F'd me."

"Really? That was lucky. If I'd known what it was going to be like, I wouldn't have gone. I'd've hid out in the bayous. They never would've found me." He was being friendly but not convincing.

"What do you do now?" I asked him.

"Drink," he said, taking up his glass. "I work oil rigs offshore, too, but it's lousy work. Two weeks on; two weeks off. And I collect my government checks and get drunk."

"You were wounded?" Rich asked.

"I got my Heart." He yelled down the bar for another drink, and I bought him one. "Had a wife till I come back," he said. "Found she'd been messing around. She has a kid that ain't mine. Should leave the bitch. I like the kid though." He became quieter. "Hell, I left a damn good wife in Nam."

I looked at Rich, then looked past him down the bar. One of the boys and the girl were gone and a different girl was talking to the boy's buddy. I wondered vaguely, without thinking about it, where they'd gone, and where the other girl had come from.

"We should've killed all them gooks," Harper said suddenly. "And bombed their frikking country flat." He took a drink. "But that wouldn't have worked. Goddamn jungle would've growed back by the next day...hell, by the next morning."

We didn't say anything. We were just letting him talk about it. He seemed to need it--like telling someone helped somehow and not too many had listened before--so we didn't mind.

"I guess that war's over now," he said, mostly to himself. Then he was quiet again.

Rich and I ordered a couple more beers. It seemed impolite to walk out on Harper, though I knew I didn't really want to stay much longer.

"I used to be like him, long ago," he said, indicating the boy at the end of the bar. "But I ain't now." He took a long drink. "When I first got back," he said, "I'd come and get real drunk."

Then I'd get in fights. I was always gettin' tossed in the can. Then I'd get outta jail and do it again." He looked at us to see if we understood. "But I didn't like myself for that...so I finally quit fighting. Now I just drink and don't bother no one who don't bother me."

I nodded.

"What I hate most," he continued, "is that I don't feel like doin' anything anymore. I used to be real industrious and friendly. Now..." He didn't finish.

"I think you're real friendly, Harper," Rich said. He smiled without making it look patronizing. "We like talking with you."

"You know a little of what I'm talking about. We can relate. You guys sure you didn't fight anywhere?"

"Maybe a little street fighting," I said. "Nothing like you did. Just cops and protesting and bricks and mace."

"Lots of guys thought that was a bunch of shit. But I didn't. It'd still be goin' on now if someone hadn't tried."

"It didn't help that much," Rich said.

"You don't think so?" Harper said. "I don't know. I didn't see it."

"It was a game," Rich said.

"I should've hid out in the bayous." He was beginning to look drunk, but he held it fairly well. Only his eyes gave it away. They were getting a little glassy. "This is my last night in this stinkin' town," Harper said. He turned to us. "I tell ya I'm leavin' this hole?"

I shook my head.

"I am. Tomorrow."

"Where are you going?" Rich asked.

"I don't know. Maybe Dallas. Maybe farther. See if I can find something."

I heard a laugh from the end of the bar. The girl was laughing at something the boy next to her had said. She saw me and looked back until I turned again to Harper.

"Might go to Africa," he was saying. "Heard they're lookin' for people with my talent. And I've had a lot of on-the-job experience." He emptied his drink. "You guys want to go with me?"

"Sure," Rich said.

"You have to bring your own rifle."

"No problem," Rich said.

Harper looked at his empty glass.

"Hello, handsome."

I felt someone touch my shoulder and turned around. It was the girl who'd been at the end of the bar. She was standing between Rich and me.

"You boys lonely tonight? Want some fun?"

"Get out of here you bitch!" Harper yelled. "Did they ask for ya?" He smacked his fist on the bar. "Keep your damn whores away from us, Betty!" he shouted, lunging to his feet.

The black-haired woman was instantly up the bar. "You shut your mouth, Harper Ray."

"I'll beat the hell outta her!"

The girl retreated quickly.

"You be easy, Harper, or I'll call the cops on ya!" She lifted the telephone receiver.

"Then I'll bash ya!"

"Hey, it's okay," Rich said.

"Damn whores!" Harper yelled.

"Hey, Harper," Rich said. "It's okay. Really."

Harper looked at him. Then he looked at me.

"It's okay," I said.

He saw the girl had left. "Damn fine way to treat my friends," he said, angrily, still on his feet.

The two older men got up and left.

"She's a nice girl," Betty said hotly, setting the receiver back in its cradle. "You had no call to holler at her like that. I ought to slap you good."

"She's a whore," Harper said. "The town's full of whores now. It stinks."

"You never minded it before," Betty spat. "You get too used to slant-eyed girls?"

Harper whipped his glass up. I grabbed his arm. Betty ducked. The glass slipped out of his hand and shattered on the bar.

"You'll pay for that!" Betty shrieked.

"I'll put you in hell first!" Harper yanked his arm away. He snapped up my glass and Rich's, then threw them against the wall.

Betty grabbed a bottle by the neck and snatched up the phone.

"Let's get him outta here," Rich said.

"Hello! Hello!" Betty was screaming into the receiver. "Get me the police!"

"Whore! Whore!" Harper was yelling.

Rich and I got on either side of him. Harper wasn't moving.

"Come on, Harper," I said.

"Time to sky out," Rich said, pulling him toward the door.

"We're going to level this sucker!" Harper shouted. "Get me some frags! Let me go, Goddamn it. This hootch is gone, you whore!"

"Out!" Rich shouted.

I grabbed the door and we were out. Harper was still raging. We hustled him into our car. I got us onto the street and met the police coming the other way. I spun up a side street and turned some corners. Then I was lost. I cruised slowly while Rich tried to calm Harper down.

"My town's full of whores," Harper kept saying. "They're all whores." But his anger was giving way to hurt. His eyes were wet. "I come back and find nothin' but whores."

We drove around on back streets for an hour or so, then we slipped back to the Louisiana Gentlemen. It was nearly three in the morning now. The place was closed. There were no

police around so we pulled up by Harper's car and let him out. He was quite subdued now, but he didn't look well. We talked briefly, then he thanked us, apologized, got into his broken-down pickup and drove away.

"What now?" I asked Rich.

He looked through the windshield at the dark sky, then took out his cigarettes. "You tired?"

"Not really," I said, accepting a smoke.

"Well, Harper said the interstate is a few miles south."

"Okay," I said. "What the hell...."

Then we didn't talk about it anymore. We were gone a hundred miles by dawn. Neither of us wanted to ever go back. It was a town we never cared to see again. But I kept wondering if Harper ever got out; or if it would really make any difference.