

The Redemption Weed

A Novel

By

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As the grey Spring light came in through the hospital windows, Read was thinking that it was like a dishrag draping itself over his soul. A Veterans Hospital is not the kind of place where souls are given much consideration. Flesh, yes, but the soul is left to fend for itself, among the smells and sounds of illness and death. Late at night Read tried to close his mind to the cries and moans of men who thought they were on torpedoed ships, or in burning tanks.

The fact that these ships and tanks had long ago disappeared meant nothing to these poor men's damaged minds. They knew not where they were. Read knew. His own burning plane, "The Upstairs Maid", was long ago made part of the German countryside and small fragments of it were still being found by young German boys out on hikes. Some of them saw a glittering piece of aluminum shining amongst the ferns and bent to pick it up to

examine. It may have been a part of the instrument panel that he had taken a last glance at as he clipped on his chute, preparing to launch his lanky frame out of the pilots compartment, where he had occupied the left seat. The pilot's seat. The crew of "The Upstairs Maid" had all been lucky that day. The piece of flak that pierced the left wing tank and caused the fire had left the B-17 enough time for all to get out, and survive to live what turned out to be remarkably long lives.

Of course Read felt that life in a VA hospital could hardly be called living, in the true sense. No daily paper, no current magazines, no library, not even the History Channel on the meager selection of channels on the Goddamn TV over the bed. Read wondered why no History Channel, in a place where most of the unwilling inhabitants had been part of much of what showed on the History Channel. Namely, the many wars that the Benevolent Country had engaged in. {t almost seemed as if they were being punished for being there costing the Gov money}. Money that should have been spent on worthier visions, like Congressional Investigation trips, large road and dam building projects, and, of course, the never-ending War on Drugs. Read also wondered at the thought that though the War on Drugs had been going on for years no casualties ever showed up at the VA. Perhaps, he thought idly, all the casualties were in prison instead. Sort of like a war where you arrested the opponents as well as killing them.

Read lay there in the four bed room, wondering who his next three roommates would be. Occasionally he would be,

as he now was, the only occupant of the room, its three other beds immaculately made up, waiting for new sufferers. In his long experience they would usually fill up with elderly patients suffering a variety of dignity-robbing debilitating, many times terminal ailments the older vets Suffered from. Incontinent ones were the worst, bringing the reek of shit and rot that made him forced to breathe through his mouth. He also lay there, waiting for one of the two bright spots of the day to occur. Suddenly one of those bright spots appeared, pushing a new patient into the room to be put in one of the empty beds waiting.

Her name was nurse LaBerge, Mimmy LaBerge in fact. She was slim and dark-haired with long straight hair and bangs, She had a lovely smile that reminded him of the tennis player Steffie Graf. She was smallbreasted with a flat tummy, which he also liked. But, the best part of what he liked about her though was her broadminded sensuality and bizarre sense of humor, which he felt was like his. Read was now an old guy, though he actually didn't feel old, except he no longer felt sexual interest in the female form per se. Oh, he loved to look, but felt no actual stirrings in his groin at all any more. He felt that this was probably just as well. Nature's way of keeping old men from making fools of themselves.

Nurse LaBerge and a dough-faced male nurse named Alfred, wheeled the new patient over to the window bed on the far side of the room and prepared to give him the one-two-three into his bed from the gurney.

“What the fucka you tryin ta do, break my dick off?” the voice rang out, muffled by a sheet.

The new guy was swung onto his bed, and after a few adjustments warning him to “Be nice” the nurses departed, with a wink to Read from Nurse LaBerge, who patted a breast without the male nurse seeing, and said to Read. “Honey, these await”

It was their little joke, as Read never, ever tried to touch them, but loved their small pertness.

“Um, you like those tiny Hogans?” the scratchy voice came from the occupant of the window bed. Read looked and saw a ruddy, bewhiskered face smiling from the edge of a pulled up blanket. “I’m a painter, and I always love those small ones, they last” The whiskers vibrated as he laughed. “By the way, I’m Lewis, as in the machinegun, who the Hell are you, you look too old to be alive” The chuckle dissolved into a wheezing cough.

Read suddenly felt an odd kinship with this raucous soul, whomever he may be. He decided to see who this was. “I’m Read, and I’m older than shit left in a dead donkey’s ass since World War two, I flew a B-17, what’s your claim to fame, and how did you arrive in this shithole?”

Lewis seemed to take no offense, “Well, I was in Southeast Asia, before it got called Vietnam, as a fuckin’ advisor to their shitty artillery, and I gotta mortar round to my fuckin’ foot, which is why I keep comin’ back here, it just don’t wanna heal right.” He raised a foot above the end

of the covers, and Read saw it was wrapped with a thick roll of white gauze.

Lewis cackled, “Man, it doesn’t hurt my paintin ‘, but it does interrupt the flow ta keep comin in here so much.””If it wasn’t for somea the nurses I’d just walk out. I’d love ta paint that one that just wheeled me in, ya know her?”

“Yep”Read said,”Shes called Mimmy, an maybe on night shift she might pose for you.” Read wondered if indeed she actually might do something like that. He thought maybe she might.

Read was rather curious now. “What kind of painting you do, Lewis?

Lewis laughed, “Well, I do nudes, Social Surrealism, an sometimes Erotic Art, ya know, tasteful porn” He cackled softly. “Ya know some people actually come to me an want Painted makin love.” He shook his head in apparent wonder.”Takes all kinds, believe me ,brother.” “Just plain ole nudes’re easy , they stay still, ya play good music, an that’s it, but them sex maniacs even wanna draw ya in with ‘em” His eyes assumed a faraway look. “An, ya know, sometimies it aint bad”

Suddenly two new nurses came in ,pushing a new bed, with a draped form under a sheet, hiding the face. The female nurse was alo a looker, with a cute, chiselled face And blonde hair in a bob. She was shorter than Mimmy, but even slimmer, but also with a conspiratorial smile, as if you had a gang, and she was in it. She and the Tall, rawboned male nurse proceeded to slip the silent form into the other bed across the room,next to Lewis.

“He’s sleeping, so go easy,” the Blonde nurse softly admonished them, “dinners almost ready”
She and the tall nurse left, pushing the gurney, and Read and Lewis lay quietly each turning their own tv’s to the local news that was just coming on, with it’s usual load of inept car crashes, rabies warnings, and incessant insipid health warnings. Sometimes Read thought the stations were owned by the drug companies. He had realised awhile ago that the people had slowly allowed themselves to be enslaved into a state of perpetual anxiety, allowing themselves to be sold any nostrum, however trivial, and any so-called cure, political or medical or social, just to feel the cashmere blanket of ”security”.

“Ya know, this shit is bullshit” came from the bed of the supposedly sleeping man, with the sheet still over his head. “As a matter of fact” the bed said, ”it is simply fuckin taken’ away our freedom ta just risk our asses just for fun!”
Everybody’s just creatin’ a risin’ tide of fuckin mildness ,that’s chockin us in the goo from the do-gooders asses..damn straight.”

The sheet slipped down to reveal a skinny deeply tanned young face, complete with handlebar moustache and an unkempt shock of long dark straight hair, plus the serious need of a shave. Dark eyes blazed with raw indignation. “I fought, if you can call it that, in Desert Storm, guys, and here I am in this spaceship ‘cause they think I got a nerve disorder from that goddam smoke we drove through, an they won’t lemme out. Keep testin an testin till im so sicka this joint I could puke, gas or not.”

Lewis reacted first, he laughed uproarously, “ Hah!, another piece a meat for the system! Shit, amn, join tha club!” “We’re all stuck here, I’m Lewis, an that ole fart over there’s Read, he’s fuckin ancient, who’re you?”

The tanned face smiled, “J. Worthington Hollister, just call me Fazool,” he laughed.

“Fazool?” Lewis seemed concerned, “What kinda name ‘s that?”

Fazool laughed, “Well, I eseta race sportscars, you know, life fer a hobby, an my motto on my car was Team Fazool, an when people asked why Fazool I jus said...ys can’t passdafazool...get it, I’m a Guinea, so ,I’m pazzo, that means nuts in Eytalian.”

Read and Lewis looked at each other and smiled.

Just then a monstrously overweight young black man wheeled a cart up outside their door, and brought in three covered polystyrene trays. And put one on each Formica bedside table.

“Bouregard, thank you for this lovely dinner”, Read intoned, bring a blazinly white grin from the young man, plus a deep rumble of laughter.

“You all skuzzy sodacrackers enjoy the mutherfuckin bounty of Uncle Sammy” he roared like an ogre that loved dtrty jokes and left.

All three lifted the covers on their foodtray, releasing an odour faintly reminiscent og the galvanised garbage cans they all recalled cleaning in their various bootcamps. The food had resided in steamtrays half the afternoon after being defrosted like giant unwholesome TV Dinners/

Tonite's fare was a small grey patty of material they all called "mystery meat" topped by a gelatinous grey piece of Something meant to be cheese, but, was like tasting a wound pad. "veggies" were canned greenbeans ,steamed untill they were like thick, tasteless insect legs. The "mashed potatoes" were a grainy, gluey glob. There was one old slice of standard 1950's white american bread, enclosed in an individual sealed plastic baggy. A tiny ,ice cold, unspreadable margarine pat, and half a canned pear, with watery "lite" juice. And a cup of lukewarm ,bus station machine-tasting coffee.

All three men looked with horror and dispair at the last "food" they would receive untill the small boxes of Luckycharm cereal they would have at "breakfast" Lewis spoke,"Do not worry Gentlemen, I am going to treat tonight, everybody like charbroiled bacon cheeseburgers, with a real, olfashioned milkshake, and Keylime Pie.? Why? Because I do artwork for a famous BarB Que restaurant, and they do appreciate me." "Pass me the phone"

The food arrived amazingly fast, including a rack of ribs for the night nurses at the station, who if treated right allowed dope smoking in the bathrooms after midnight. A homey calm settled in after eating, and it grew dark outside. Belly full, Lewis spoke to Read, "Hey don't you ever get visitors, ole guy?..you know, food-bringers?"

Read answered slowly, "Well, I have only a son left, and I haven't seen him since he left that old San Feansico hippy

colony, you know, they called it the Haight Ashbury. He hung out and sorta studied with a guy called Owlsley who made acid, you know, LSD, and then mySon left when things got hot, and moved to South America somewhere,... he said to experiment on somethin' Haven't heard from him in lotsa years. Wish I would tho''

Little did he know.

Chapter Two.....The Arrival