

One Hand Clapping

a novel

T. KEITH LIGGETT

“They say you should not suffer through the past. You should be able to wear it like a loose garment, take it off and let it drop.”

EVE JESSYE

Born January 20, 1895

(MAY 1970, MEKONG RIVER DELTA, VIET NAM.)

I'd been out too long.

The sun hit the edge of the paddy next to me.

I was sprinting. On the dike. Half crouched. Abruptly, I was thrown back and twisted to the right. Then something else grabbed my hip, twisting me back, folding me in half, around to the left.

I heard the shots after I was hit in the hip. A short thumping burst from a heavy AK. I remember thinking, "At least the guys at the perimeter will come looking for what's left." Then I hit the water. Warm. Like a womb. Surrounding. I lay on my right side and half on my stomach, twisted into the water and the dark mud and soft green stalks of the rice. I felt for my Browning and couldn't find it. I tried to crawl, but my legs wouldn't work and only my left arm moved. I knew I was bleeding. I was getting weaker. Fast.

The pain began. First dull, then coming as sharp bursting stabs. I started falling in and out. I came in and heard some guys talking. Sing song talking. Talking Viet. They were laughing, too. Boasting. They finally got the Night Man.

I went out.

I came in again. Flying. Soaring.

I was back in Colorado, Aspen, moving over the Highlands and into Maroon Creek towards the Bells. It was fall. The aspens stood full spent gold all at once, throughout the basin. Deeper, richer than any year I remembered. They stood, barely moving in a late afternoon breeze. I felt the last heat of the late afternoon wind and marveled at the deep greens of the evergreens against the gold of the aspen leaves. The air carried the hard sharpness of moving toward night and the moldy odor of fallen leaves lying wet on the trails.

As I soared up the basin, the air changed. The higher I went, the cooler it became. And it was noisy. And I was so cold. Shaking to the beat of the noise.

I was out.

In. Still flying

Over Santa Cruz, right over Steamer's Lane, Chris and Doug hung down below waiting for a set. The only ones out. Doug rode the board I'd sold him before leaving, the Hobie. I waved and shouted to them. I wasn't very high. The wind was offshore. As the waves stood up in the shallow water, the spray lifted off the crests and drove sheets of white smoke across the blue of the fall swells. Chris and Doug kept watching for the set. Waiting. They didn't see or hear me.

I wondered if I was dead.

I went out.

In.

I hurt, but not so bad. A muted comfortable hurt. I couldn't move. Something held me down. Kept me on my back. I pushed. I tried to sit up. I couldn't.

It was dark, really more dusk like. I was inside. I slowly realized I was in a big room. A low humming permeated air. Windows ran along both sides the length of the room. I lay next to one of the windows. In the half-light, I saw others in the room. They looked like puppets in storage. All held up by struts and sticks.

And I had strings. They came out of my left arm, just like a marionette. My right arm was strapped to my chest. Tight. Real tight. I still couldn't move my legs. And a string came out of my crotch. Another came out of my stomach, on the left, just above my hip. I couldn't figure out what they'd move. All I could move on my own was my left arm. A little. I wondered if the strings made the rest of me move.

I was in a hospital, but whose hospital? There was a palm tree outside. That didn't help.

I remembered the talking about the Night Man. They'd thought I was dead.

The guys must have found me.

For a little over three months, I recovered in Okinawa. The first round entered below my right collar bone, passed through just above the lung and exited below my shoulder blade. They put that together fairly easily. The second round entered just above my left hip taking a bunch of intestine, clipping a kidney and then headed out. That was a bad one.

In a month, I was sort of up. My legs didn't work all that well. The doctors kept mentioning things like trauma and shock and I'd be fine in a bit.

"How long?"

"Oh, a while yet."

After three months and a couple days, they figured they'd fixed all they were able and sent me back across the pond. The Marines were generous enough to grant me a 45 day leave. A band played as we walked to the homebound 707. Played for the guys in chairs, on gurneys and in boxes, too. I'd almost finished two complete in-country tours and then added some time in the hospital. I wasn't sure I wanted to go home. Or even remembered the location or meaning of "home."

I wanted to be away from people. Men. Women. Children.

Away.

Leaving the plane in Hawaii, I told the Duty Sergeant at the gate I'd finish the ride stateside space available when I felt like it.

In an airport shop, I bought a Hawaiian shirt and a pair of bleached white cotton pants with a string tie waist. After changing, I stashed the uniform and my satchel in a locker. Walking out of the terminal, I hailed a cab, still looking like a jar head, but not quite feeling like one.

I asked the cabbie to drop me at a good local travel agency. Seven dollars and some odd change later, he left me at the door of a little storefront four blocks off the beach. In the windows, the posters were faded from months in the tropic sun. With the reds almost totally gone, so blue, they looked like surreal underwater shots.

Walking in, I immediately started shaking from the cold. An ancient air-conditioner banged away in a back wall window sounding more like a Huey gunship than a machine making cold air. At one of the two desks an older Japanese lady sat. The other was empty. I walked over and sat in the single chair in front of her desk.

She looked me over. "Good morning."

"Good morning. I'm looking to go somewhere a little different."

"Yes?" She figured me in the service. No doubt she saw enough R & R guys walking in looking for something a "little different." Clearly, she was not interested.

"I just spent a couple tours in Nam and the last few months in a hospital. I want to be away from people. I don't care about booze, dope, or girls. I want a bungalow on the beach, warm water, occasional good waves and no people to deal with."

She smiled, nodding her head. "I think I understand. Do you wish to stay on this island or would you travel to another?"

"Makes no difference."

"Perhaps I know of the place. Please, let me make a telephone call."

A couple hours later, I watched the waves pass below the pontoon of a seaplane heading I really didn't know where.

Chapter One

(LATE MARCH, WYETH, OREGON)

Every morning I sit or walk.

I seek the day.

The present.

That day, I walked.

Carefully, dis-engaging my arm and legs from Carole, I rolled from beneath the down quilt and tucked it back around her. Pulling on a pair of fleece pants, a heavy long sleeved t-shirt from the District 12 Star Championships and fuzzy pullover, I headed out for the walk.

The clouds hung low, loose across the mountains. The upper slopes lost in a flat gray, devoid of fine detail. The bottoms sat rich with the spring sharpened greens of vine maples and white bloomed dogwoods scattered among the orange brown basalt cliffs. The pines stood still in the morning calm, holding summer's green in these last of winter's dark days.

The grasses on the path to the river dripped with dew. It wasn't raining, but brushing through, my shins quickly became wet and chilled. Without a breeze, the morning air parted thick with moisture and the smells

of spring growth. Winter's broken end carried in the air.

The path drops from my house across a small meadow then into a narrow draw leading to from the river. The Interstate bridges the draw and the wildlife of the valley pass freely below the road. Tracks of deer, a doe and a couple fawn, a raccoon, a large cat passed leaving tracks in the sandy soil since the rains early the night before.

The Columbia River's water level changes depending on the Corp's whims. Overnight, they decided to lose a couple feet. Walking across the slippery cobble of the exposed river bottom, reaching the water, I dipped my hands. The cold numbed my hands to the wrist. Cupping a little, I wet my forehead and cheeks, moved back to the shore and began my walking.

I walked. I listened to the birds, the muffled traffic on the highway, the lap of the water on the shore. I watched greens change from blade to leaf. The buds ready to burst, rust brown on the branch, tomorrow or the next day leaping into the air with a new green that almost fluoresces. Finding the practiced pace on the path I'd worn in the months and years of my time at the river, I connected with the day.

Back at the house, I ground coffee and started a pot dripping. Noticing a message on the phone, I punched in the code to replay the messages from our time out the night before.

There was only the one. Joey's.

"Hey, Charlie. How ya doin'? And how's the Gorge these days? I need a handball partner the day after tomorrow. It's a hot, hot game. How 'bout it? No? Come on. At least think about it. It would be good to play again.

"Seriously, this is Joey, Joey R up in Seattle. You're a hard one to find these days. I've had a guy looking for you the last couple days. All he's found is your bar, a new batch of micro brews and a hangover. Do you

work any more?

“I have a bit of biz I need taken care of. No ob’s on your part. I’m not calling any markers on this one. I need some outside, straight on help. Should be simple. Maybe not. Just give me a listen and walk if you don’t feel good about it.

“Call me at the Blu. No area code. Bump the numbers 5 and above by one. I’ll figure you’re in the Gorge.

“Be talkin’ to you.”

I called the Blu Flamingo in Seattle leaving a simple message, without my name, “I’ll be out until noon or so, Joey can reach me after that” and my slightly altered phone number.

Then wondering what Joey was up to, I walked back into the bedroom with a couple mugs of coffee. I stripped and climbed back into bed. Carole turned to me, with a low humming threw an arm and a leg across my still dew dampened cold body.

“How was your walking?”

“I sat.”

She poked my ribs. “No you didn’t, you’re too cold.”

First tousling her short blond hair, I dropped my hand to her hip and pulled her closer. Yoga. One day, not yet, I’d give in to her entreaties to join her in that practice.

“It was good. There were some big cat tracks in the draw. Maybe a bobcat.”

“Hmmm.”

I lay there with the taste of coffee in my mouth wondering what Joey wanted. What was the “biz”? We’d not been in the biz for a long time. All social for years.

Beach Image