

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

James L. Davis

1967 – The things they wanted

OUTSIDE AN UNNAMED HAMLET west of Qui Nhon, a platoon of Marines is spread out by squads at the tree line and sitting out a hard rain under a jungle canopy that merely slows the speed but not the rate of its delivery. In the heat of a day so wet there is nothing dry among them but the cigarettes they carry in the two-piece plastic soap carriers you can buy in the PX, the Lieutenant crouches some distance away, reading his plastic map, pretending he knows where they are. He's not at all sure. They know that. He doesn't know they know. It doesn't really matter because a friendly village may not be a friendly village, ultimately, and even the term 'friendly' is in question.

A common greeting, "Who's your Daddy?"

The common answer, "Fuck if I know."

Lance Corporal Jesse Thomas grins, turns to his squad, says, "Yo. If you could have one thing in all the world right now, what is it you really, really want?"

The Gunny: "A Lieutenant that don't look like Baby fuckin' Huey and can maybe read a map."

Pfc David "Lickety Lingus" Cunningham: "A better goddam nickname."

Corporal Tobias "Crackerbox" Miller: "Sweetheart, you gotta earn a nickname. What do I want? I wanna be Miss America ... I want Bert Parks to sing 'Ah, there she is...' while I'm wearing my crown and holding the biggest goddam bouquet of freakin' gardenias ever as I float down that runway, crying, blowing kisses to the crowd. Yeah, Miss America ... and I want world peace."

Jesse (laughing): "That's two things bro'. Just one. You can only have one."

Tobias: "That the case? ... Then, yo' mama will do me jus' fine, bwoy."

HM3 "Doc" Ramirez: "I want me some of that good goddam dope everybody back home says we all smokin' all the time out here. Yeah, some really fine whacky weed. Yow!"

Tobias: "Smoke this."

Pfc Kusak: "Wannabe ... back home in Jersey ... (snaps his fingers, sings falsetto) Under the boardwalk ... down by the sea ... on a blanket with my baby ... where I'll be."

Pfc Brown: "Me? I want alla' you white boys get together, sign a petition, write LBJ. Tell him you prejudiced, you crackers want a' all white Marine Corps fightin' this h'yah war. That's what I want. Tell him you don't need me no more. Tell that T-Texas cracker cowboy redneck Johnson he could win this war if he was t'send my silly black ass home. That's what I want."

Pfc William "WillyBoy" Boyd: "A big, tall, frosty chocolate milk shake

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... no ... strawberry ... no ... butterscotch banana ... no ..."

Jesse: "Ain' got all day, WillyBoy. You gots to choose ... now."

WillyBoy: "What about you, Jesse? What is it you want?"

Before he can answer, the Lieutenant stands, yells, "Saddle up. Fan out. Move in."

Jesse looks up, turns his head toward the village, stands, lifts his rifle, and waves the squad forward into the open.

What do I want? He thinks. Tomorrow for starters. Yeah. Tomorrow would be ducky. He laughs, whispers, "Ducky."

He turns, calls back to the squad. "Lock and load."

Tomorrow, tomorrow, just tomorrow. That's all ... tomorrow ... every goddam, motherfuckin' tomorrow plus one ... for as long as it takes to get my bone home standing up.