

Journal of PFC 68-W Bruce Clarence Havard

Curated by Cathryn Niehaus

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September, 1969

Letters

She writes me letters.

I got no mail in Texas during training. I went to the post before deployment one morning, and I found that they had thrown almost a dozen envelopes in a shoebox for me. I folded them down into half-inch notes and took them all with me. When there's a long spell, or when there's nothing worth sending, I read her letters, over and over again.

Gary Indiano from Gary, Indiana handed me a cigarette and held out his lighter. "We like it when you get letters," he said. "Real spectacle."

I let out a chuckle. Today's sunny and hot, and smoking doesn't help, but we do it anyway. "Oh yeah?"

"Jay was telling me about this glazed over look on your face every time you read your letters. Like you get high or something."

I blew smoke out of my nose. "That's weird."

"It ain't weird," Gary laughed.

I shrugged. I heard Jay shout because Lt. Silva was doing card tricks. The platoon knew I wrote letters, but they didn't know how long the letters got, how I could work on one for three days at a time, and that sometimes I address them to Daisy and I just write "I love you" again and again, pages and pages, until my hand cramps and I drop the pen. Maybe then, I would be weird.

Gary didn't speak until the cigarette was done, and he dropped it on the ground and snuffed it. "Keep it up, Bruce. Don't stop."

Late September, 1969

On Melancholy Hill

We get radioed to climb up this hill. It's thick with foliage, Vietcong's already got a position up top, it's a small hill, but it overlooks a river wide enough for boats. We need it for shipping. It's a stupid idea to charge a hill, because you get tired and you can't see shit, and the people up top can hear you fart and shoot you before it stinks. It's suicide, but they seem to think it'll work if it's nighttime.

Lieutenant Silva hands me the radio and takes black paint and rubs it under my eyes. "Havard, you stay with this until we get to the top. Only move if somebody's in a real jam."

There were lots of jams that night and not one of them wasn't real.

We're almost taking the hill but Morgan's dead and Jay's got a deep graze in his side. The radio tells Silva that there's more coming in, that their reinforcements are enough to take out us and the other platoon, and we need to retreat, so we do. I can't remember where I left Morgan, and I try to find him. I get lost. I'm alone in No Man's Land.

Gary whistles and I find him and we wait. Silva wants to call in a dustoff when we hear that there's no goddamn reinforcements. We need to take the hill.

And so we do, we catch them off guard and we take it, and Silva stops worrying about taking prisoners because every one of them is dead on our arrival.

Gary and I lay bodies in a neat line.

Gary's voice is hoarse from yelling. "You see the view, Bruce?" I do. It's a river that flows silver in the moonlight. "It's beautiful. If only Morgan could see."

But Morgan's dead, and I lost him in the jungle, and the view's fine but it's nothing to write home about.

October, 1969

Bill Morgan

He was the first man I saw die.

The explosion was crystal clear, like a wet thud. The sound's enough to punch you in the gut.

My ears were ringing but there was no mistaking the screaming. At first I was afraid to move. But I took a breath and crept forward until I found Morgan. He was in pieces. Like a cherry pie dropped out of a windowsill. There wasn't much of him left. I put my hands on him and couldn't find a wound in the blood to press. Soon, Morgan was gone.

I can't get the gore out of my head. I've seen dead things, covered in flies, melting. But Morgan was fresh, Morgan was still screaming and bleeding.

Morgan once told me a story about his wife, Nancy. He prefaced his story with how they met in college. Two kids at a party, he said, gliding along the scene in a purple haze. Morgan tells the preface laughing, jumping straight to their marriage, citing that Nancy must have been high to marry him. And then the story begins. It's about their first apartment. I can see myself in my first apartment. Maybe Daisy is there. Maybe we're married, and I carry her over the threshold, like Morgan did for Nancy. Maybe I trip over an extension cord and we both go tumbling into a stack of boxes, like Morgan and Nancy. Morgan said they laughed harder than anybody should be allowed to laugh, he said they laughed so hard it hurt and they cried.

Then I hear Morgan's laugh and I see Morgan's body and I can't separate the two. I just see Morgan, laughing himself to pieces.

It's been a few days since we were on melancholy hill. Sometimes when I close my eyes, I get this image that I'm blown up, but I'm not laughing, I'm crying, and I've never gotten the chance to see my apartment with Daisy.

Late November

On Watch

On watch it's like being dead.

Your senses are gone. Everything's so dark and blinking doesn't matter, the world's just as absent eyes open or eyes closed. That's like being dead. And then there's the hum. I don't even know if it's there or not, but it's this low hum, like a subhuman ears low hum, like I'm not supposed to hear it but I can feel it vibrating in my chest. Maybe when you're dead, you hear and feel the hum, as your body becomes one with the earth, which is spinning and hurling through space.

On watch I cling to my rifle because the jungle is there even though I can't see it, and the enemy is there even though they don't want to be seen. In the silence I think of all the millions of ways I could die sitting here. The easiest would be getting shot in the head by a guy hundreds of feet away. No pain. I would just drop dead, like a sack of rocks.

The sharpshooter could miss, too, and hit me somewhere else, like the neck or the chest. I would choke to death, maybe bleed out first. At least I would go home in one piece.

When I'm done thinking about the ways I can die, that's when it gets really bad. Time's so slow on watch you feel like you could recount every bit of your life in detail. So that's when I think about Daisy and when the letter comes that she's breaking up with me. That's when I think about my dad's second heart attack that would do him in. Out here in the boonies, things are day to day, touch and go, but on watch, you got your whole life ahead of you—or you don't.

When my turn is up I go and wake up the next guy, and I lay down like I'm going to sleep, but it's hard to get off watch after you've been on.

February 1970

Dirty Magazines

Sometimes Azar Majeti could move like a shadow, and he was silent as the sticky air when he came up behind me and grabbed Daisy's photo out of my hand.

"So this is the broad, eh, Harvard?"

I didn't like that word. Daisy was not "broad." He called me "Harvard" because he's an asshole.

Majeti held my picture of Daisy up to look at it. I could see the consideration on his face. He must have been looking at the way her hair, dark blonde, flowed past her shoulders, the way her lips made a perfect circle as she blew bubbles, the picture snapped just after three of them had floated out of the plastic loop.

Majeti whistled. "This is it? This is all she gave you to get you through the long nights in the boonies? Not even a little cleavage, a tiny peek of nipple—"

I punched him in the face. "Fuck you! Fuck you!" I was shouting, I was seeing white. Hands clamped down on my elbows and I was being pulled away from Majeti. Someone was placing the picture back in the palm of my head.

"Hey, come on!" Lieutenant Silva was shouting.

The hands roughly sat me down on the ground. I looked up and saw Jay, who was grinning down on me. "She's pretty," he said, nodding to the picture in my hand.

Delgato was holding Majeti, who was motionless, shit-eating grin on his face. His lower lip was bleeding. "I'm just sayin', Harvard, you got something goin' on there and you best get the goods while you can."

Jay put me in a headlock and I choked as I lunged for Majeti again.

Lieutenant Silva was a tall man, a little wiry, but everybody said he knew kung fu. He didn't get mad often, and when he did, it scared the shit out of us. He got right in Majeti's face and began shouting at him, and even Delgato—Delgato, From the Bronx Delgato—was pissing himself.

Jay let go of me, sat down next to me to watch the show. The rest of the platoon was frozen, only the sounds of Silva's shouting echoing through the trees.

When it was over, Delgato wandered over to us, and Majeti slinked off with his tail between his legs, and Gary sat down too.

"The face that launched a thousand ships," Jay said as he passed Daisy's picture to Gary. I sat with my hands clenched in my lap. They didn't look at Daisy like Majeti did, but I didn't like "showing her off."

Delgato glanced at the picture, then he handed it back to me. "Hey, no fuckin' lie, I knew a guy whose girlfriend posed for Playboy. Real saintly sonuvabitch, hadn't done much with the broad except take her to shows and real nice dinners. One of those dumbasses."

I swallowed. Like me, I thought.

"Listen, she runs off to LA and strips for the mag, and she doesn't tell him until she knows she's got a spread, and she acts like it's a gift." Delgato laughed. "Yeah! Some gift! Showin' off your titties to a million dudes! Jesus. So he breaks up with her over it. I'm serious!" Delgato threw a rock at Jay, who started laughing. "He buys the magazine.

"Yeah, he buys it, it's still got the goddamn wrapper on it and some Latina bitch with a big ass on the cover, and he told me he had it for weeks without opening it. He just had it sitting on his desk like a dirty placemat."

Everybody laughed. I chuckled, but I didn't see what the big deal was. I doubted I could come to terms with anybody looking at Daisy like that.

"Stupid," Gary laughed.

"I don't buy it," said Jay. "I'd have that thing ripped open right at the gas station. I'd show everybody. I'd mail it to her grandma." There was a pause as we stared at Jay, then we all laughed again.

"Happy Easter, grandma! Here's my titties!" Delgato laughed.

I put Daisy's picture in my pocket. I started not to care what kinds of magazines she posed for as long as I lived to see them.

February, 1970

Mistakes

I was sleeping when Majeti kicked me.

The first thing I tasted was blood in my mouth, then the stinging from where his boots scraped the skin on my face. The nauseating pain from the impact followed.

"You don't fucking talk to me anymore." Majeti kicked me in the chest. "Not a goddamn word. You don't look at me, you don't think about me, you fucking leave me alone. And I swear to God, if you tell one goddamn soul about this, I will kill you."

I was curled up in a ball, the sound of my coughing muffled by the tight wince that sealed my mouth shut.

"You ran into a fucking tree when you were leaving to take a dump. Got that?"

The next morning I ignored questions about what happened to my face, mumbling but wholeheartedly believing myself when I told Gary that I ran into a tree. I didn't dare cross Majeti. I felt his eyes on me as Lieutenant Silva stood over me and asked about my face. It would be so easy for him to shoot me, right there, in front of everyone, and I didn't think he would care about dishonorable discharges or court orders or anything. Majeti killed so easily, like it was his job.

I was due for a letter to Daisy before she thought I was dead. I wrote a letter and I told her the war was boring. The mundane routines. Jay described the war to his mother like it was a football game, with lots of starting and stopping. Sometimes we score and sometimes we get sacked on the fourth down in the red-zone. Most of the time there's no scoring, Jay would say, just a lot of walking place to place, and a lot of canned pound cake.

I spent the rest of the letter reminding Daisy that we're well-fed but I'd kill for a double cheeseburger and a Coke with her whenever I get home.