

They Say the War Is Over

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“Sir?” says the bus driver, a bald-headed, old-school looking Black man in his 50s. “Sir, I’m going to have to ask you again to keep your voice down. You’re distracting me and disturbing everyone else.”

The young Black man he is talking to rises out of his seat and walks forward until he is standing right next to the driver. His hair is disheveled, and his green army surplus jacket is several sizes too big for him.

“You think I’m scared of *you*?” he shouts, with his hands waving wildly in the air. “I’ve been to fucking ‘Nam and you think I’m scared of *you*?”

“Go ahead,” he says to the driver and begins to chant in an unnaturally slow, steady cadence: “Shoot. Me. Motherfucker. Shoot. Me. Motherfucker. Shoot. Me. Motherfucker. Shoot. Me. Motherfucker.”

It is early morning in the fall of 1970 and the bus is nearly full with people of all ages and colors – some wearing work uniforms that suggest that they are janitors or clerks or waitresses going to work, plus a few old people clutching a purse or shopping bag, and

a couple of hippies who smell like dope and look like they haven't been to sleep since sometime yesterday.

And me. I am going this morning from the tiny house where my girlfriend Evy and I live near Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley to the Army Induction Center in Oakland, where I have been called to take my physical as the last step in being drafted by the army for the Vietnam War.

As the young man continues to scream at the driver, I can see on passengers' faces that they are as scared as I am. None of us moves or speaks. We don't know if he has a gun. Or if he is about to assault the driver. Maybe we should be thinking about what we can do to help the situation, but it seems we're all mostly just hoping we get to our destination alive.

Suddenly, the driver pulls over to the curb, the brakes screech, the door opens, he exits slowly down to the sidewalk, and invites the man to join him so they can talk. The man is so caught off guard by this that he steps out too. I can't hear their conversation, but somehow, now that there is no audience, the man calms down and walks away, talking to himself but no longer focused on the bus or the driver.

The driver limps back up the steps and gets back behind the wheel as if nothing unusual just happened, passengers return to their own thoughts, and we are moving again through streets I know well. I am 19 and from a middle class white family and

should be in my third year as a college student at Harvard, but I dropped out, and now I am paying my \$25 a month share of our rent by delivering the Berkeley Gazette before dawn six days a week. I borrow my friend David's old Volvo each morning so I can cover more customers by throwing papers out the car window onto stoops and into yards.

Now the bus is passing a bank that I drive by on my paper route. Recently, there was an explosion there while I was delivering papers. I was a dozen blocks away at the time but had a hunch it was a bomb, though I didn't know where. When the blast was followed by sirens, I was afraid that since I was one of the few people out and about at that hour the cops who came to investigate might decide that I'd make a convenient scapegoat. But I finished my route, returned David's car, and made it home without encountering any police. From what I read in the Gazette, no one ever was caught. It could have been set off by some group like the Weathermen, fed up that marches and rallies and voting for anti-war candidates wasn't stopping the war fast enough. Or it could have been the FBI, which I knew had infiltrated the anti-war movement on my campus and in many other places to provoke actions that would give protesters a bad name.

Soon the bus is leaving the area where I have my paper route and is passing through parts of town I'm not familiar with, and I turn to thinking about what the war did to that screaming veteran, and about the day ahead of me.

The 1-A notice I got in the mail, telling me I was being drafted and needed to come for a physical, was no surprise. I knew when I dropped out of college that I would lose the student deferment that protected middle- and upper-class kids like me. I had applied for conscientious objector status, which would mean doing alternative social service instead of fighting a war I didn't believe in, but my local draft board, made up of old conservative white men, had turned that down. My options now are to be sent to Vietnam or accept a prison term of up to five years if I refuse.

When I think about going to Vietnam, I think about Jake, a white kid only a few years older than I am, who stayed with Evy and me for four or five nights a few weeks ago. He met Evy at a park where she had gone to paint with watercolors as there was no room for her to do that at home. He told her he was a veteran and that he had no place to crash. We took him in without hesitation, even though the kitchen floor was the only space for him to lie down, and encouraged him to use our shower, which he badly needed.

Jake's father is an auto mechanic. His mother works at a bar. He told us he figured he'd get drafted eventually anyway so he signed up. We stayed up late listening to his stories about being deployed across Vietnam's border into Cambodia – "Nixon says we're not in Cambodia, man, but that's a fucking lie."

In all Jake's stories, it was other people in his unit who shot at villagers without knowing who they were or which side they were on – it was never Jake himself. But no matter

who actually did what, the one thing that was definitely true was that Jake was a wreck. I would go out to drive my paper route and come home to find him wearing a pair of my pants or my favorite old corduroy shirt even though I didn't have a lot more clothes than he did. It was like he was subconsciously trying to trade in his body and his mind. No matter what time of day or night, he was constantly on edge unless he smoked a joint or two.

Since it was obvious it would not work for him to stay with us very long, Evy asked him one morning if he wanted her to find him a veteran's support center to help him out. That afternoon, she and I went to buy some brown rice and vegetables for dinner, and when we came home he was gone without a trace.

As the bus heads toward downtown Oakland, I find myself humming Arlo Guthrie's song, Alice's Restaurant, about how he was disqualified at his draft physical because he had once been arrested for littering. Too bad that won't work for me, although I still think about the time I too was arrested before I dropped out of college.

I was charged with trespassing for participating in an occupation of the university's administration building in a protest against the war. I was just a freshman at the time and was supposed to look up to the crusty old professors who taught political science and history – some of whom were consultants to the Pentagon and the State Department. But the real role models my friends and I were attracted to were the older students who held teach-ins and forums outside of class. I remember one speech in

particular by a woman who was a senior. She was so short she had trouble bending the microphone down far enough to talk into. But when she began speaking she pulled together everything I had been learning from organizers like her. The U.S. was fighting on the side of rich landowners and corrupt generals in Vietnam who kept the rest of the population in poverty. Big companies were profiting from the war while villages were destroyed by bombing and millions were maimed or killed. The politicians and commentators who propagandized for the war were making sure their own sons didn't have to go – “chicken hawks,” she called them.

When teach-ins and other protests weren't getting action, that woman and some other students took over the administration building, and hundreds of others like me decided to join them. I supported the protest's modest goals -- to get the university to stop hosting an army officers' training program, to establish a Black Studies department, and to stop driving up the cost of working class housing as the university expanded into surrounding communities. Like other students, I was also excited to be directly confronting the power of the establishment, even if only for a short time.

After holding the building all night, we were alerted that hundreds of cops were arriving outside at dawn. Along with the other protesters around me, I stood up, facing the front doors, which were made of glass and were chained shut from the inside. We locked arms or held hands, mainly to try to stay calm as we heard the sound of billy clubs shattering glass and the screams of students in front of us. Dozens of people were

injured, but I only felt a few whacks on the back as the cops herded us out to police vans that would take us to jail.

It still amazes me that the administration overreacted like that, setting in motion a week-long student strike that forced the university to give ground on all three demands. And I still smile at the memory of how a bunch of us, thanks to a skillful lawyer, beat the trespassing charge on a technicality – though that is why I don't have an arrest record that would get me out of the draft now.

I have read about guys in my situation who are going to prison in hopes that will encourage others to resist the draft, and I respect that. But letting the government lock you up and put you away seems like just letting them win. I will move to Canada to live before I will do that, though I don't know what that would mean for Evy and me. I love her like I have never loved another human being, but she is her own independent person – that's part of what attracted me to her – and I can't imagine her just cutting off her ties to the U.S. to follow me to another country.

But before I worry too much about Canada, I need to see if I can fail the physical today. My friend David has hardly eaten a thing for a month now after he read that the army won't take you if you weigh less than a certain amount for your height. That's another strategy that is not an option for me. I am not that thin to begin with. I have to have another plan.

After I got my 1-A notice, I went to see a Quaker draft counselor who gave me the phone number of a psychiatrist I might want to see. I got an appointment within a few days. The psychiatrist had a desk and a couple of chairs in the basement of his house on the San Francisco side of the bay. He kept the space dark – just one lamp on his desk – and his manner was all business. No small talk. No joking. Just answer his questions and that's it.

“Have you ever had a homosexual relationship?” he asked like he was reading from a checklist.

I told him about the time when I was traveling with my best friend and we had to share a bed and ended up sleeping together. The psychiatrist's pen scribbled faster but his face didn't change expression. He knew and I knew that homosexuality is grounds for disqualification from the military, but neither of us acknowledged that out loud. After a few more questions, he abruptly stood up, said he would be sending a letter to my hometown draft board, took my \$50 in cash, wished me luck, and showed me to the door.

After a few weeks, I asked my father to go to the draft board in my hometown to make sure the letter was there. My father had been in the infantry in Europe in World War II, slogging through the freezing winters in the trenches, earning a Purple Heart medal after being wounded in the leg. It's been 25 years since he came home and went to work as a salesman, yet he still won't talk about what happened over there. While he

too is against the war in Vietnam, he has also told me that there are good things about being in the military – that it “makes a man out of you.” While I knew he wouldn’t be thrilled if he saw the psychiatrist’s letter, I had no one else to ask.

Since Evy and I couldn’t afford a phone, I had to call my father from a pay phone to find out what he had seen at the draft board. As soon as he and my mother heard it was me calling, they let me know they were beside themselves with anger and frustration. Didn’t I realize that a psychological deferment – especially based on homosexuality -- would be part of my permanent record and follow me around for the rest of my life whenever I applied for a job? They had had such hopes for me, they had worked so hard to give me opportunities in life, and then I threw it all away by dropping out of college, and now this!

I understand how they feel. I know they love me. But I feel so strongly about the war that I would not have the letter withdrawn even if I could. And anyway, society is changing. I know other boys who have slept with boys, and girls with girls – sometimes as a one-time experiment, as it was with me, and sometimes as a first step in discovering who they really are. It is not the big deal to me that it is to my parents.

The bus finally drops me within walking distance of the Induction Center on Clay Street. I know it has been the site of multiple protests that resulted in arrests and police riots, but since I only moved to the area recently, I have never seen it. It’s a very institutional, multi-story building, and for hours I am sitting and waiting, completing one test, being sent to another floor, and then sitting and waiting again for the next measurement or set

of questions to answer. There are a few other white boys like me with hair down to our shoulders and long beards, but most of the guys, no matter their race, are more clean cut. For long periods we are forced to stand around naked – even when we are just waiting and could be clothed. It's as though the process of breaking our spirit has already begun, and the army wants us to know that we are under its complete control.

At last, I'm told that I have completed every step except to go see the army psychiatrist, which will be my last stop for the day. He's in a small room, so we are sitting closer than I would like in my very nervous state. He is skinny and bookish looking – the first army person I have seen all day who doesn't look like a soldier.

"I have in your file a letter from a doctor in San Francisco who says that you have had a homosexual relationship. Is that correct?" he asks.

"Yes," I say. I figure this is like a courtroom scene you see on TV, where it is better to say as little as possible to avoid saying the wrong thing.

The army shrink doesn't ask me to tell him more about what exactly happened between my friend and me. I don't know if he finds the details distasteful or whether it's just not important for him to know. Instead, he cuts right to the chase with what sounds like a prepared statement he always uses in situations like this.

“I want you to know,” he says, “that many young men who have had homosexual relationships serve in the armed forces anyway and, as long as they keep it to themselves until they return to civilian life, they have no problem.”

I stare straight at him, without expression, and let him continue.

“I tell you this because this kind of deferment is a very serious thing and I want you to know that I have the discretion if you so choose to allow you to pass the physical anyway.”

I act like I am giving his offer the serious consideration he thinks it deserves, and then, continuing to say as little as possible, I tell him, “It would not be my choice for you to ignore the letter.”

“All right,” he says, quickly turning his attention to the forms in front of him and signaling that our interview is over. “I will report that you should be given a psychological deferment. You will be classified as 4-F.”

After some final paperwork on another floor, I leave the Induction Center and go down the street to a place to eat that I noticed on my way in. I’m eager to get home to share my relief with Evy, but after so many hours under stress without food I have to get something to keep me going before I get back on a bus.

The place is packed with other young guys who are there for the same reason so there are no completely free tables – only a few empty chairs next to people who are already eating. I scan the room and see a table for two that has one empty seat and a young Mexican-American just starting to wolf down a grilled cheese sandwich. I ask if I can join him, and he says it's fine, so I sit down to eat a tuna sandwich and a banana to tide me over.

We introduce ourselves. He says his name is Rafael, but a lot of people find it easier to just call him Ralph. He is medium height like I am but stockier. He says it took him a few hours by bus to get to the Induction Center from the Central Valley where his father and mother work in the fields.

He asks me if I was over at the Induction Center too and how did it go. "Fine," I say. "No problems." I don't reveal more because I don't know what he would think.

"What about you?" I ask.

"It went great!" he says, and breaks into a huge grin. "I have flat feet, and I was so afraid they weren't going to take me. They saw my feet, but they decided to just let it go. My brother is in the army, and really I don't know what I would do if they didn't take me."