

Character Guidance

1967

Specialist Turner told me to hurry up. "It's Wednesday, you know the line will already be long. It is Cheeseburger Wednesday." The scene was a huge mess hall with young men vying to see how many cheeseburgers they could eat. The room was three colors: blue pajamas for the patients, whites for the enlisted medics and dress Class A jackets for a small group. I was in the small group.

I sat with a mix of men and women from the psych unit where I worked. The stories flew fast.

"Did you see what he did today?"

"Yeah, I saw it in the ward courtyard."

"What happened? I wasn't there?"

"I walked by and did a double take. He took all the outdoor furniture and built a tower up to the top of the enclosure. He made it to the barbed wire."

"I told him to come down and he did."

"That is the same guy that hit Colonel Keim with his cast."

"I bet they shock him."

"Yeah, they'll shock him for sure."

"You know we all have to go to Character Guidance at 1:00 pm."

It was in the hospital auditorium.

We all filed in after lunch. We filled every seat and men stood around the edges. No fire code for this auditorium. The room was dark, and a podium waited under a spotlight on the small stage.

Captain Smitham came out and began to prattle. We expected a talk about avoiding venereal disease. This talk often had pictures of ghastly illness. Or it could be a talk about dental hygiene. We tried desperately to stay awake. This would go on for an hour and then we would file out and go back to our various jobs around the hospital. The room had about 800 enlisted men and women.

Suddenly, or at least I remember it as suddenly, Smitham stopped his drone.

"Bring up the lights." Holding up a copy of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He showed banner headlines about US troops massacring women and children at the Vietnamese village of Mi Lai. "I read here that all of us in the Army are killers. We

are the worst people.” Everyone in the auditorium had seen this paper. It featured a nude burned child running from exploding napalm. Smitham paused and put the paper down on the podium.

“Specialist Gorodezky. Stand up so I can see where you are.” I stood. Around me faces and bodies twisted to see me. I was in the middle of the auditorium.

“Specialist Gorodezky, what do you think? Are we all monsters? Are we bad people?”

This was unprecedented. Smitham never called on anyone. We just listened to him lecture us about this and that. We listened. We did not speak. I had settled into a drowsy half-awake yet erect persona, but I clearly heard the command to stand up and then the captain’s question.

I stood. I put my hat under my left arm and thought. I knew what I should say. I should have said the paper is full of lies and that our soldiers were heroic. But I faltered. I had a few seconds to think. I needed to actually say what I thought.

“Since I have been in the Army, I have met some of the best and the worst people I have ever know.” I sat down.

That was it. Nothing more. The lights were again dimmed, and the captain continued without any comment.

As we filed out of the auditorium, strangers came up to me. “Good answer,” they said.

“Why did he call on you? Did you fuck up?”

“Yeah, you must have pissed him off!”

I moved through the crowd and ignored the comments. I said nothing.

A year earlier, when I first arrived at the hospital, I had stood before Captain Smitham, saluted and reported for duty.

He said: “Gorodezky, I hope this is the last time we meet. You don’t want me to ever know your name.” I understood and set about making sure he never encountered me. Until that day in the auditorium, I thought I had been a great success at remaining an anonymous Specialist 4th class. I did my job. I made no waves.