

Babies

by Terence Cannon

The Colonel at Firebase Mordant wanted the banyan tree down NOW because an armored regiment of North Vietnamese could camp under, around, and inside it. Since the night the NVA rolled over the Lan Vei Green Beret camp using tanks for the first time in the war, everyone saw tanks. Artillery was tanks, thunder was tanks, falling rocks were tanks, our tanks were their tanks. The Rome Plow knocked out the first two flying buttress roots easy, but got wedged like an axe in the third, tilted. Willy rocked the Plow, twisted the Plow, churned up a houseful of muck, bushes, leaves, gave it one last slam into reverse and knocked a soldier out of the tree onto the engine hood.

Willy scrambled for the .45 somewhere under his feet, jumped up with it, hit his head, yelled Freeze in a wavery voice, saw it was an American soldier, put the gun down, saw he was all in black, laid the gun on him again. The soldier shook off the impact, screamed, raised his hands, jumped off the hood, which was redhot, said

“American. American.”

“Where's your gun?”

“Fell.” The soldier pointed to the ground with one finger of an upraised hand.

Willy crawled out of the cab, gun out, saw an M-16 in the leafchewed mud.

“You on patrol?” he asked. “In a tree?”

“No.”

“What then?” Willy picked up the 16, tossed it in his cab. “Sit on that root. Put your hands down.” The soldier complied. The black on him was mud. He'd covered himself with mud. Saved him from a bad burn. Willy put the automatic in his belt. “What're you doing here?”

The soldier gave him a that's-a-long-story look.

"Where's your men?"
Same look.
"What's your unit?" He began to feel sorry instead of
scared.

"2-Bravo"

Willy sat on the running board, contemplated.

"That don't mean nothing to you," said the soldier.

"Not really."

"I'm sort of a leftover."

"Shipped out?"

"Yeah." As in *no*.

They were shouting over the noise of the diesel. Willy
turned off the ignition. Jungle hum and cackle poured in.

"What're you doing here?" said Willy. Under the caked
mud, the soldier was Latino of some kind.

"Surviving."

"In a banyan?"

"Around."

"You deserted?"

"Not the way I see it."

Willy tried to figure whether this qualified as weird or not,
if he reported it and they would say, *oh yeah, banyan trees, happens
all the time*.

"What's the story?"

"You got a minute?" said the soldier, recovered from the
shock enough to use irony.

"Plow's stuck," said Willy. "And we're out of sight." He
wished he hadn't said that. "How come you're not with your unit?"

"My unit. How come I'm not with my unit." As if that were
the stupidist question about a profound subject he had ever heard,
like *How does Virgin Birth work, anyway?* "My unit is probably
spread out south of here like peanut butter."

Spread out. Meaning "to occupy a broad territory." Or as
in smeared, squashed?

"Just tell me what happened," said Willy. "So I can understand."

"Telling you won't help."

"I got some C-rats."

"I'd kill for C-rats," said the soldier. Willy flinched. "I mean die for."

Willy dug in his pack, pulled out two, tossed them to the soldier. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Obregon. José."

"Where you from?"

José ripped open the rations, shoved them in his mouth. "El Paso."

"Cigarette?"

"You kidding?"

Willy tossed him the open pack. José finished off the rations, put the other box inside his shirt; he wasn't coming back to base. Willy thought to toss him matches.

"You didn't hear nothing about 2-Bravo?" said José. Willy bit his lips, shook his head no.

"That fits. Like a dick in pussy."

Willy figured he'd wait.

"Ok. You won't believe it. *Somebody* did." José lit a cigarette, relished it. "Somebody outside S-5 should know. You're not one of them?"

S-5 as far as Willy could remember was either cooks helpers or Army Intelligence or a Russian surface-to-air missile, so he said no.

"Ok. This happened up there." He gestured sort of north and east. "Thousand miles from here. Way in country. Way in fuckin neck high elephant grass, which was, if you're a tall guy it would be shoulder high, and a real short guy, it would be over. Uhhuh."

He went away for a moment.

"Hundred yards from the tree line. I don't know why Charlie don't just put a bunch of guys in the grass with machine guns and shoot us under where our heads and shoulders are, but they don't. Maybe

fifty calibre bounces off the grass, or they'd be stuck in the open when we call in air support or what, but they don't. They stayed in the tree line. This time they didn't, they. Shit."

José looked as if he were trying to remember whether what he was remembering was true or not or whether if it was true it had happened to him or not. Willy wondered whether José had arrived at the point in the story he was not supposed to believe.

"Wind came up," said José, "which made the grass squeak, and walking through it hurts, and it rustles, and we made a bunch of noise anyway. Which maybe explains why we didn't know we were being shot. Well, it doesn't, but that's the point. Then Fatburger went down in front of me and I still didn't think he'd been shot, just stumbled and shit. I grabbed him. He didn't come up. The right side of his face had all these little holes in it like bee stings only holes. Miniature wounds. And there's a crackling, not like shots, very much not like AKs. Uhhuh."

He disappeared again.

"Your brain, your brain tries to make sense of things like this, specially life-threatening weird shit, so in my mind the grass was on fire and driving out swarms of invisible bees that were stinging us to death. Invisible killer bees. You don't shoot bees."

I still believe this story, sort of, thought Willy.

"The crackling was all from the right, so we turned right, and then it was coming from the right again which used to be behind us, and it was whanging against my gun, and my hand, my right hand had needle holes through it one side and out the other."

He held up his right hand to show Willy. It was caked with mud.

"So we opened up 360 degrees, capping from the hip, raking back and forth. At nothing. You can usually tell if you're hitting something. Grunts or screams or splats or something. Sergeant told us to hold our fire. It was real quiet and we heard tiny clicks. Your mind is going wild trying to figure. Tiny metal locusts. Trip wires. Some new fucked up guerrilla device, a rain of clicks. Then it opened up on us again, wacking the helmets, bouncing off,

going through where we didn't have protection. Razor metal hail. *Upward*. We weren't shooting. Your mind can't deal with that shit. Two, three more guys went down, and we fucking panicked big time. Right before we started running, we heard running, scurrying feet, monkeys, rats, dogs, we didn't know, but it set us off. We ran forty, fifty yards. Sarge yelled us to stop. Blood was poppin out all over his face. I'm not devout Catholic, ordinary Cholo-American Catholic, you know? But this put me in the mind of *stigmata*. The martyrdom of St whatsisname, with all the little arrows. You get what I'm driving at?"

Willy had an indefinite sense that there might be something in this for him, an award of some kind.

"Whatever it was wasn't attacking us anymore. We scrunched down. We had this thing where we couldn't count how many of us was missing. We kept getting different numbers each time we counted ourselves. That put us in mind that we gotta get our wounded. Sergeant argued it was something *local*, limited to that part of the grass, and we should send three or four guys, run in quick, pull our men out and split. Nobody volunteered, so he says you you you and you.

"It was easy going back. Not in our minds easy, easy cause we trampled the damn grass down getting out. I had a hole in this cheek and a tooth splintered, we're going back in and at the same time doing inventory of ourselves. We were quiet. But we didn't know what it was that made whatever it was attack us the first time so we tried to do nothing much. Keep our heads below grass level. That's how we surprised them. They were in the open, policing up."

He drew on the cigarette.

"I was one of the four, all right? I was there. I didn't hear this from nobody else. Con mis ojos I saw em."

"Ok," said Willy.

"Babies."

"Babies," said Willy. "Babies what?"

"Cong babies, VC babies, little fucking black pajama, black diapers, kids, nah, not kids, not fuckin eight year olds, *three* years old, *four* years old. Rorros, niños, man."

"They're *all little*," said Willy.

"Little. They're all *short*. These were tiny."

"Dwarfs."

"Dwarfs are with the wrong proportions, man. We SAW em. We SHOT em."

"Shot em."

"Wasted them. We could see them. They weren't invisible. A platoon of VC babies."

Willy could not now pinpoint when he stopped believing the story. There must have been a point but it had vanished.

"I got to go," said Willy. "My Plow's stuck and uh."

"Ok," said Jose. "Gimme my 16."

"I don't think so." On the long list of ways to die, this was at or near the bottom.

"Ha. Ha." said Jose, shaking his left arm, "I got a AK up my sleeve."

Which he did. Willy thought of Lionel trains. This was bigger than an O-gauge AK-47. If it was a toy model of an AK-47 the proportional ratio of model to original was 1:3, maybe 1:4. It seemed reasonable to Willy that kids in Hanoi would get toy AKs for Christmas or whatever communists celebrated, Khrushchev's birthday.

"You don't think we took their weapons?" said Jose.

Willy, proceeding along one level of reality, pulled his .45 from his belt. José shot him in the hand. The bullet went in, out, hit the grip, knocked it loose. Blood jetted from Willy's palm, a stigmata fountain.

"Works," said José. "Whadja think? We knew nobody was going to believe us. Kick the gun over here."

Willy did.

"This was not my intention," said Jose.

"Please don't kill me," Willy pleaded. Tears bulged at his eyes.

"Chinga! I'm dead. You're the only asshole around I can tell my sorry tale to, and I'm gonna kill you? Look at this, mofo." He

thrust the ludicrously small AK in Willy's face. "Look. Don't touch. It works, right? Drilled a hole in your sorry hand. Who makes fake guns in a real war? Nobody. Who's it for? VC babies. Ok? Go get your hand fixed up. Your fucking army wants to kill me, their fuckin army wants to kill me. I'm gone."

"What do you mean my army?" Willy was good to cry.

"Sergeant made the report. Next morning a Chinook lands. They tell us we're being transferred, *chop chop, don't bring your shit or your guns we'll forward them to you, get on the chopper.* I'm last in line, thinking who ever gets transferred without their weapons, the guys saying *move move onto the chopper* are civilians and they are carrying AK-47s, here goes 2-Bravo on its last ride. It was still dark, I faded, got my shit and split. You got that, fool?"

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Wednesday, they sent a tank to unhook the Plow from the tree. Willy worked the banyan with care while considering his options. He decided to self-medicate his hand on codeine and beer and to purchase a blackmarket .45 the next time he got to town, which he discreetly learned was a simple deal.

Thursday, his wound began to fester, and the guy to whom he discreetly inquired told half the camp the Fuckin New Guy on the fuckin Plow lost his fuckin piece whilst getting stuck in a fuckin tree. The medic to whom Willy presented his hand had apparently treated certain U.S. soldiers with similar odd wounds, because he freaked, told Willy to report to Lt. Fruitless at S-5, which *did* mean Military Intelligence, to whom he the medic would forward a full description of the wound. The lieutenant took copious notes, referring to a clipboard of papers at certain points in the narrative, for example, when Willy mentioned José's name.

"Did you hallucinate this man?" asked the lieutenant.

"No, sir."

"Did you believe this man's wildly concocted story?"

Willy, who now believed every detail of Obregon's story, said no.

"It is not unusual, Private Pickett, under the intense pressure of unconventional war, for entire squads or platoons to manifest extreme psychotic symptoms, hallucinations, paranoia, religious sightings. A squad in the 101st, for example, claimed to have spent its entire arsenal blowing away the Virgin Mary. Ours is a bitter struggle. A young man raised in an ideal middle class family in, say, Minneapolis, may undergo paradigm shock when forced to kill attractive young women. Squads who engage in what some back home might consider bloodthirsty atrocities may engage in retroactive psychopathic rationalization, inventing a reality that justifies what they have been required by war to do. Let me show you something."

He opened a small refrigerator by his desk, pushed aside a six-pack of Coors, produced a transparent plastic bag of medium sized shelled shrimp.

"Take a look."

Willy started to open the bag of shrimp, realized he was only supposed to look at it, smoothed the plastic down and studied the

Tiny ears.

Some more raggedly severed than others.

Willy desperately wanted to go fishing with his Uncle Dunk. He stood and set off for Whiskeytown Lake.

"Clearly," Lt. Fruitless said, "Bravo 2-Squad either engaged in or witnessed the slaughter, probably carried out by Viet Cong, of a nursery school. Unable to fit what they had done, or witnessed, into the framework of the rational world, they created a *folie a squad*, a simple explanatory frame in which their encounter made absolute sense, historically traditional: they were attacked and forced to defend themselves. How far gone they were is demonstrated by their presentation to me of this bag of ears as *evidence*, unaware that it is absurd. Evidence of a crime, yes, but not the crime they claimed. The crime they were attempting to avoid. *Mens rea*. Evidence of a guilty mind. Also *Actus rea*, a wrongful deed, for certainly a bag of severed infant ears is evidence

of some wrongdoing, whether by 2 squad or parties unknown. Perhaps they were severed for medical reasons related to post-natal care. We don't know. But the presentation of them to an intelligence officer as evidence of ambush in the elephant grass is *prima facie* madness, sufficient to require treatment."

If Willy's hand had not throbbed at that moment he might have resumed his walk home.

"What about the guns?" he asked. "The baby AK-47s."

The lieutenant glanced again at Willy's folder. "Have you mentioned them to anyone?"

"No, sir."

"If you did, we'd have to, Thank you very much for your cooperation, kill you. Dismissed."

Friday, the CO organized a Mad Minute, during which everyone on base fired on automatic outward into the surrounding trees and vines for 60 seconds. Then he called in napalm strikes along the perimeter. That was followed by two C-123 defoliation planes which sprayed Agent Orange in a circle around the base to the depth of one mile. Willy wasn't sure whether that was sufficient to deal with José Obregon but it sure solved their banyan problem.

