

The Visitor

Retired Air Force Colonel Jim Dowd rose from a deep slumber and checked his digital alarm clock. 3:03 a.m. Early morning. December 18. As if his body clock was tuned to the yearly anniversary when he took off from Guam in 1972, his B-52 headed to Hanoi to bomb the hell out of the enemy. Big bombs. Five hundred pounds and larger. Nixon and Kissinger, hoping to move along negotiations between the North Vietnamese and the U.S., thought the VC needed a little friendly push. Mass destruction the precursor to world peace.

Disturbed by his movements, Jim's wife, Margorie, also woke up, lifted her sleepy head, and stared at him as he sat at the bedside.

"Is it that time?" she asked.

"Yeah," said Jim.

"All right. Have a nice chat."

She laid down and went back to sleep.

Jim waited for several minutes. He was not anxious to go through this again. Each year grew a little harder for him. The memories were always a little more painful, like a progressive disease. Alzheimer's. Lou Gehrig's. Multiple Sclerosis. But avoidance was not an option. Milt was waiting for him, and Jim feared that if he didn't go down, Milt would come up and stand by his bed. That option was even more unpleasant to think about.

Standing up, he stretched his lean, 75-year-old frame and performed some early morning exercises. His close-cropped snow-white hair was still within military specs. His face and physique were tight, like a recruit just out of boot camp. His grey eyes were intent on the task at hand. He lifted his arms to the right, then left. He bent his knees. A full tilt of his body reached for the floor, or at least came close. Not as close as 50 years ago, but still, it was a worthy effort for an elderly man.

Pulling a robe from his closet, he dressed, slipped into a comfortable pair of moccasins, and worked his way down the stairs of his house. Jim, retired from the Air Force, had settled in Pittsburgh, PA, and become a general contractor. Dowd Building Services specializing for the last twenty years in constructing housing tracts across the greater Pittsburgh area.

As he slipped through the living room, he murmured, "Milt?"

A gravelly voice from the kitchen replied. "Yeah?"

Right on time. Milt was there.

Sergeant Milton Kramer, the gunner on their BUFF (big ugly fat fellas). Jim had served as the co-pilot on their last flight together. Taking off from Guam, their B-52 had been shot down over Hanoi. Jim had ejected from the cockpit and was taken prisoner by the VC. He survived at the Hanoi Hilton for the last four months of the war. Milt had not been so lucky. Mortally wounded by shrapnel from a missile to the belly of the plane, he went down with the ship fully engulfed in flames.

That should have been the end of their relationship. Yet tonight, Milt sat in Jim's kitchen. As real as the table he sat next to. Why? A question Jim had asked for almost fifty years. Every December 18, he could count on Milt's visit.

"I'm turning on the lights," Jim announced.

"Suit yourself," said Milt.

The kitchen lights were bright, warm, and inviting unless you had a visitor like Milt sitting at your kitchen table. Then, they seemed to glare. Jim covered his eyes for a moment to adapt to the brightness.

Milt was still in his flight clothes. Bomber jacket. Khakis. Boots. Short and squat, he reminded Jim of a rodeo rider. His chest squeezed against his shirt. His hands were massive. Even stranger, he hadn't aged a day. When he died, he was twenty-five and attractive enough to gain attention from the girls in the Subic Bay red-light district where Jim and Milt had caroused together on leave.

"What the hell, man?" Jim protested. "Shouldn't you be moving along? I swear, you're starting to smell like dead fish."

"I would if I could," Milt smirked. "But it's not up to me."

"Well, who then?" Jim argued.

"Good question. But you know the military. Everything takes a while. My transfer seems to have gotten lost somewhere in St. Peter's Pentagon."

Jim sat down at the table and stared at his comrade.

"Goddamn," he muttered. "How long we gonna keep doing this? It's been fifty years. Every year the same. It's not the kind of reunion I look forward to. No offense to you, Milt, but you should get a life . . . elsewhere."

"I asked the same damn thing after our plane went down," Milt replied. "Again. The same answer from command and control. The situation is under review. I don't move without the orders."

Jim thought about this. The memory of the flaming behemoth hurtling toward the outskirts of Hanoi was disturbing enough, but seeing Milt here just bothered him to no end.

"So, why come here?" he asked. "It's not like we were married."

"Like I got someplace better to be?"

"Well, I would hope so. I mean, you served your time, and now it's over. Aren't you happy to be mustered out?"

"Happy doesn't apply to me. I don't think like that anymore."

"So, no pearly gates yet?"

"You know me, man. I wasn't a saint. But, you know, that whole life thing kind of got cut short for me. All things considered, I guess God just isn't ready for me . . . yet."

"And so . . ."

"Here I am. Like always. Ready for duty, sir."

"Ah, cut it out, now. We're a long way past that shit."

Milt smiled. "Sorry, Jim. Force of habit."

"Well, you keep coming back. Good Lord. I just need to know why you're here."

"You think I have a choice?"

"I don't know. Do you? When you're not here, where are you?"

"I'm not consciously anywhere. It's like being in limbo and asleep at the same time."

Jim frowned. "So someone sends you here? Every year? Like clockwork. Someone's got it out for me. For whatever reason."

Milt stirred his fingers on the table. "Apparently so."

"For fifty years and counting?"

"Eh. Time is irrelevant to me and whoever sent me."

"Well, it's not to me. One of these days, I'm gonna die, and I hope I don't end up in someone's kitchen once a year badgering them about . . . whatever."

Milt sat back in his chair, his face thoughtful.

"You're wondering if there's a flight plan?"

Jim was surprised by the question. "Well, I guess that's one way to put it."

"You think I want to come here every Christmas?"

Slumping over the table, Jim rubbed his head. He stood up, went to a cabinet, pulled out a whiskey glass, shifted to another cabinet, and poured himself a healthy dose. Then he sat down and slowly sipped.

"You make it sound like I'm blaming you. I'm not. I just don't understand what's going on. I haven't understood for the last fifty years. This year, I seem to be even more curious. Also, I'm kind of tired of going through this. I'm old. The war is long past. Nixon. Vietnam. All that '70s bullshit. I don't want to think about it anymore. You showing up just keeps reminding me."

"Some things we do, we can't escape," Milt observed.

"Like?" Again, Jim frowned.

Milt paused. His eyes grew intense. "Well, one thing I know from all this. You take a life. It's on you. Forever. I think God was pretty serious when he said, 'Thou shalt not kill.'"

Jim was impacted. He thought of all the bombing missions he ran. Bombings of villages, civilians, children, mothers, fathers, grandparents, mixed among Viet Cong soldiers. If God was keeping a record,, his personal body count would be off the charts.

"So, all those sorties we ran? You're saying their blood is on our hands?"

"I'm saying for me, I know that's true. You. You have to decide for yourself."

Jim chuckled. "You mean I need a priest?"

"No, man. A priest cannot help you. You and me, we're way past priests."

Jim sat quietly, the words soaking into his weary brain. He was Presbyterian. They didn't have priests. Even so, what Milt implied was not good news. As if personal confession was a lost cause.

"I did my duty," he argued.

"You did what you were told. It's not the same."

Jim placed his right hand under his chin and leaned his elbow on the table. "What?!"

"Your duty. Your orders. They're not the same."

"Oh, now you've crossed a line. I'm proud of my service to my country. I served honorably."

"No one's questioning that, Jim. But that's not all we did, now, is it?"

"Other than . . ."

"Food for thought, my friend."

"So you're like an angry ghost come to point a finger at me? Come to steal my redemption? You've never done this before, Milt. Why now?"

"Am I pointing a finger? Sorry, Jim. There's nothing to point at that I don't point at myself. We were in this together. If there's any finger-pointing, it's at me *and* you. We ran those sorties together. We're both on the hook."

"That doesn't answer my question."

Milt looked at him, puzzled.

Jim leaned forward. "Why bring this up now, Milt? 50 years after the fact?"

The room went quiet. There was occasional ticking from the shifting house. The sound of the refrigerator hummed. A car passed down the street.

"I don't like the sound of this, Milt," Jim protested. "Those people killed my brothers in arms. They killed you. We carried out orders from our superiors. That's what soldiers do. I repeat. I was a good soldier. So why am I on the hook?"

Milt's eyes turned toward the entrance to the dining room.

"I have a guest," said Milt.

"What?"

"Come on out, Tran."

A man stepped through the door. Slight. Dark hair and eyes. A round race. He wore the standard black uniform of the Viet Cong soldier. The same age as Milt. Jim guessed this was another visitor. Viet Cong.

Jim did not speak. He couldn't speak. A surge of anger ran through his body. Milt had brought the enemy into his house.

"What the hell, man?"

Milt turned slowly and looked Jim in the eyes. "You don't like him?"

Jim flexed his fists under the table. "No. I sure don't like him in my house. What's going on?"

Milt nodded. "I believe we call it reconciliation."

"Ah, no way. Get that man out of my house."

"He goes, I go."

Jim slammed his hand on the table. "Well, there you have it then. In that case, you can both fuck off."

"If only it were that easy, Jim."

Jim's rage glared through his eyes and simmered across his face.

"Remember, Jim. Tran and I. We don't choose where to go. We just go where we're told. Like good soldiers. Which means . . ."

Jim paused. "You were sent?"

"Apparently so."

"Who is this man?" Jim demanded.

"Tran? Oh. He fired the missile that downed our plane. He killed me and sent you off to Hotel Hanoi."

Jim stared at Tran. Tran stared back, then smiled. If Jim was close to his rifle, he might have picked it up and fired. Then he realized. Tran and Milt were the same. Death had already claimed them. Their sins were long done. They were both far past his reach.

"It's a big circle, Jim. We dropped the bombs that killed his family. Wife. Daughter. Grandparents. All blown to pieces by the good ol' U.S. of A."

"And he killed us."

"Following orders just like you and me. Oh, by the way. He died in the bombings as well. The same fate as me. Just a different side of the fence."

"And . . . so . . ." Jim rubbed his head.

"Here we are. Cozy and snug. Talking about the war. Sharing blood and death. Good times."

"And reconciliation?"

"Well. I've already made my peace with him. He's waiting to make his peace with you. What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Still holding grudges?"

"Against him? Hell, yeah."

Milt turned to Tran and nodded. Tran finally spoke in broken English.

"I'm sorry for . . . killing . . . your friend . . . killing your plane. I was following orders. But I'm still sorry. So many people die by what I did. Blood . . . on my hands. Family gone. I die . . . not understanding . . . war. But now . . ."

Tran folded his hands and bowed. He stayed that way for a good length of time.

Jim was stunned. For decades, he had assumed the Viet Cong hated Americans and would do anything to kill them. That thought had buried itself into his heart.

"What do you say, Jim?" Milt asked. "The dead have spoken. From the grave, no less. The pain of it all goes beyond life itself. I had to die to understand this. But now . . . does reconciliation equal release? Maybe that's why we came. Maybe this time is the last . . ."

Milt's voice trailed off. His body flickered. The lights in the kitchen dimmed.

Jim sat quietly. Tran raised up and stepped back into the dark. For all Jim knew, he had gone back to his spirit world. Reconciled? Jim would have to think about this. "What about you, Milt? Have you been reconciled?"

"I don't know," said Milt. "I said a priest couldn't help us, but maybe soon, I'll find out if there's another option. Maybe I'm proof the soul lives on, even when the body's gone. As for being reconciled, we shall see. Tran and me, we're giving it the old college try. Maybe you should think about it."

"And you're here to what, warn me?"

"Enlighten, I think, is the better word."

"Like the ghost of Jacob Marley?"

Milt smiled. "Yeah. That's good. The ghost of Milt Kramer. Without all the chains and spooky stuff. I'm just your routine . . . ghost."

Jim did not answer. Even though Milt was a ghost, he wasn't routine. For a moment, Jim didn't move. It took him several minutes to wake up and realize. Milt had disappeared. He was alone in the kitchen, and yet . . . not. The presence of Milt continued to seep through the walls.

"Huh," he exclaimed as he returned to his bedroom.

When he sat on the bed, his wife woke again.

"Good chat?" she asked.

Jim sat quietly, then turned to face her.

"I think we need to take a trip," he stated.

Margorie leaned on an elbow and watched him.

"Really? Where to?"

"Hanoi," he said quietly and crawled into bed.