

New Fiction from Terry Sanville: “The Metallic Sound of Rain”

Just about every afternoon the wind came up suddenly, stirring the dust that blew through the screens of our company’s orderly room.

“Get moving, Gorski,” the First Sergeant commanded.

“Got it, Top.”

I jumped up from my desk and ran outside. Metal awnings protected each of the screened openings into our building from Vietnam’s roasting sun. Metal supports propped up each awning. I ran along the outside walls and knocked out the supports. One by one the awnings crashed down onto the sides of the building, sounding like metal dumpster lids being slammed shut. Similar sounds came from throughout the battalion as other company clerks did the same.

I barely made it back inside before the rain came. It thundered against the roof and protected window openings, insistent, wanting to get in, to invade our sticky-hot refuge.



Before I could close the front door, a jeep with two mud-spattered MPs and a third man pulled up. The MPs got out and hauled Private Kelly into the front of our office. He wore leg irons and handcuffs.

The First Sergeant came forward as the MPs unshackled their charge. One of them handed Top a sheaf of papers. "First Sergeant, we're returning Private Kelly to your unit."

"Why? I thought he's supposed to stay in LBJ until the end of September?"

"They've had a bit of a problem at the jail," the MP said and grinned. "The prisoners rioted and started beating up whites and torching the place."

"I'm supposed to feel bad about that?" Top said, a scowl creasing his Black face.

"Well, First Sergeant, no disrespect but it seems like it was a race thing."

"That's not what I heard. So what has Private Kelly been doing for the past two months?"

The second MP grinned. "The guards said he's been making concrete tire stops."

"That explains his burnt skin. And they wonder why they riot." Top scribbled his signature on the papers then turned to me.

"Put him back with Sergeant Johnson's ship platoon."

"You sure, Top? Remember what happened?"

"Just do it."

"Got it, Top."

I made a note on my desk pad to make the appropriate entry in the next day's Morning Report, and set off with Kelly to hit supply then get him situated in his hooch.

Small with tight features, Kelly walked with a limp that I didn't remember him having before he got thrown into Long Binh Jail, or "LBJ" as we called it.

"You okay, Kelly?" I asked.

"I've been better." He fingered dark bruises that covered his sun-crisped forearms.

"You've gotta stop messing up, man. You're racking up so much bad time in the stockade they may never let you leave Nam . . . or the Army."

Kelly looked at me, a grin splitting his face below impish eyes. "Ah Gorski, you know me. What fun is it to color inside the lines?"

"It's gotta be more fun than making concrete tire stops in the blistering sun."

"You would think . . ."

I tried getting serious. "Now look, Sergeant Johnson is not

gonna be pleased to see you back after you busted up Simmons.”

“That cracker had it comin’. Honestly, I didn’t know a bar stool could do so much damage. But he got an early out because of it, right?”

“Yeah, they sent him back to the world to piece his face back together.”

“There ya go . . . a happy ending.”

Yeah, a happy ending. I couldn’t imagine Kelly having one. But then he always seemed to bounce back, find some new way to stick it to the Army, to rail against authority, our very own Cool Hand Luke. Kelly was an artist who could paint and draw just about anything. I still have a pencil drawing he did of me sitting at my desk pounding out Morning Reports.

One day our Commanding Officer had told him to paint a three-foot-tall color portrait of the cartoon Little Devil, our company’s mascot, on the bulletin board outside the orderly room. Kelly did a beautiful job of capturing the character’s mischievous nature, but with a couple added features: the devil’s hand that grasped the pitchfork had its middle finger extended; and a huge boner stretched the little guy’s shorts. The GIs loved it. The CO, a non-lifer Lieutenant from Boston, laughed when he saw it. Top was not amused.

From the supply hooch we retrieved Private Kelly’s personal belongings that had been stored there during his latest incarceration. His hooch stood empty since Johnson’s ship platoon was finishing up its 12-hour shift, unloading freighters at Newport on the Saigon River. I wasn’t sure what was worse, unloading ships in the broiling sun or making concrete tire stops.

Kelly stretched out on his bunk and pulled his cap over his eyes.

"Now look," I said, "just lay off the booze and relax for a while. Johnson is gonna be really pissed. And Simmons' friends will want to beat the shit out of you."

"Don't worry, Gorski. I'll stay out of their way. I think I'm ready to go home, had enough of this place."

"Good, that's good."

We all had enough of that place.

For a while, Kelly seemed to toe the line, worked as a stevedore during the day and occupied a corner of the dayroom at night, sketching and painting from snapshots he took with his battered Polaroid camera.

"My Mama gave me this camera when I went away to art school," he told me. "New York City felt like heaven to this country boy . . . the clubs, the chicks, and the music. One night I even caught Dylan in Greenwich Village singin' *A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall*. I started drinkin' heavy and poppin' ludes. But it didn't hurt my art and I seemed to fit in."

"Yeah, well you definitely don't fit in here," I said. "There's no room in Nam for real art."

"You got that straight."

Slashes of rain hit the dayroom's metal siding, sounding like someone flinging handfuls of buckshot at us. I thought about Kelly's first fuck-up with our company. He'd just arrived in-country and Top gave him the job of manning the arms room that held all of our Army-issued weapons and the officers' personal ones. On a rainy afternoon, Kelly sipped booze from his pocket flask while messing around with the CO's chrome-plated Thompson machinegun. He laid a finger on its trigger and promptly put a neat row of bullet holes through the armory's roof. Top thought we were under attack. He would have beaten the crap out of Kelly if the CO hadn't intervened.

But this time weeks passed without incident. Then Sgt. Johnson reported Kelly AWOL after he failed to return to duty from lunch.

“That mother fucker’s probably downtown Saigon, screwing his brains out and shootin’ up on Tudu Street.”

“Don’t think so,” I replied. “Kelly’s afraid of needles. But the screwing part I can believe. Typical messed-up Irish Catholic.”

“I don’t give a crap how messed-up he is. I want him out of my platoon.”

“You’ll have to talk with Top and the CO about that.”

Sgt. Johnson scowled and joined the rest of his crew outside the mailroom, lined up and waiting for Gibbons to open the window and start passing out letters and packages from back in the world.

Kelly returned after three days, his neck covered in hickeys, and made a beeline for the first aid station and a shot of penicillin. The CO gave him an Article 15, a minor form of court martial, for going AWOL. He docked Kelly’s pay for two months and extended his time in Vietnam by two weeks, that latter punishment being the worst.

But Kelly stayed in Johnson’s platoon, kept a low profile, and gradually became a short-timer like me.

“So, what are you gonna do when you go back to the world?” I asked Kelly about two weeks before his scheduled departure.

His eyes sort of glazed over and he shook his head. “Don’t know. I hate the way Nam has wore me down. New York seems like some faded dream, and Tennessee and the folks’ place might as well be on another planet.”

“You could go back to school on the GI Bill?”

"Can't see myself sittin' in a classroom, or even an artist's studio."

Kelly seemed to fold in on himself and I shut up, not wanting to worsen his downer. Most of the GIs, including myself, just focused on getting the hell out of Nam. But poor Kelly felt tortured thinking beyond that, with few answers in sight.

About a week before his scheduled freedom bird flight out, Kelly went AWOL, or missing in action, or something I didn't know how to code for the Morning Report. A monsoon had hit the company area and the rain sound on the orderly room's metal roof felt like living inside a snare drum. Outside, a deuce-and-a-half squished to a stop and Sgt. Johnson's platoon off-loaded.

Johnson entered the office, rainwater streaming off his poncho, and pushed through the half door in the front counter. "I need to see Top." His whole body trembled and his face had a grayish, almost ghostly tinge to it.

"He's in his office. Go on back."

After a minute, Top yelled, "Gorski, get in here, and bring a note pad."

When I entered the office, Johnson sat staring at the floor, a puddle forming at his feet.

"Sgt. Johnson, tell me what happened . . . and do it clearly 'cause Gorski's gonna write it down."

"Sure, Top. Well it was a couple of hours before end of shift and the crew was topside, takin' a smoke break. But Kelly wasn't with 'em."

"Had you seen him earlier?" Top asked.

"Yeah, right after lunch he was down in the hold with the rest of 'em, hookin' cables to cargo pallets."

"Did he normally go off by himself?"

"Yeah, sometimes. But he's so damn short that I didn't figure he'd go AWOL again."

"No, that doesn't make sense. So what happened next?"

"Well, I checked the hold where the crew was workin', figgerin' he might be in the shadows down there. But I couldn't spot him, so I started to move forward."

"And? Come on Johnson, spit it out."

The sergeant shook himself and sucked in a deep breath. "Found Kelly sittin' on the bow rail, just starin' upriver. I yelled at him and he turned and grinned at me. That son of a bitch even waved."

"Come on, Johnson. This is the last time. Get on with it."

"Sorry, Top. I heard loud voices from where the crew was hanging out, like somebody arguing. I turned toward them, just for a moment, not even a moment. When I turned back, Kelly was gone."

"What do you mean, gone?"

"He wasn't there, Top. Nobody was there."

"What did you do?"

"I ran forward and looked over the rail. It must be forty or fifty feet to the water. Nothin' . . . no ripples, no bubbles coming up. Ya know, the river is like coffee with cream; ya can't see shit below the surface."

"So what did you do?"

"I hollered at the crew and we hauled ass off the ship and down to the launch ramp. We yelled at a couple of Vietnamese boatmen paddlin' their canoes, gave them a few piasters and

commandeered their boats. Jenkins and I took off upriver and Corporal Lynch and Days headed downriver. We checked everything along the banks, both sides for hundreds of yards. Nothin'.

"When we got back I notified the Port Command and clued them in on what happened. They said Kelly was probably tangled up in crap on the river bottom and would never be found."

"Is that it?"

"Yeah, Top. That's it."

The three of us sat there for a few minutes, not speaking. My mind drifted to images of that freighter and the mocha-brown Saigon River, its mud concealing the wreckage of conflict over the decades, and now maybe one Irish Catholic body. That night in the dayroom, the guys talked about Kelly, with many of them guessing that he got away and had a girlfriend or maybe even a wife and family in Saigon that would hide him from the MPs.

The next day I cleared out his wall and footlockers and stowed the personal belongings in the supply hooch. But I kept a half dozen of his paintings, rolled them up and shoved them into a cardboard tube I got from the mail clerk. They're framed now and hang on the walls of my writing studio, my man-cave where not even my wife ventures. And every time I hear the loud bang of a dumpster cover, I think of the assault of rain on the roof, that metallic rattle that takes me back to Long Binh Army Base and the misfit artist who stayed behind.