

SQUAD D

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Billy Clewson died all at once, with nine of the ten other members of D Squad on April 8, 1974. It took his mother two years, but she got started right away on the afternoon the telegram announcing her son's death came, in fact. Dale Clewson simply sat on the bench in the front hall for five minutes, the sheet of yellow flimsy paper dangling from his fingers, not sure if he was going to faint or puke or scream or what. When he was able to get up, he went into the living room. He was in time to observe Andrea down the last swallow of the first drink and pour the post-Billy era's second drink. A good many more drinks followed - it was really amazing, how many drinks that small and seemingly frail woman had been able to pack into a two-year period. The written cause - that which appeared on her death certificate - was liver dysfunction and renal failure. Both Dale and the family doctor knew that was formalistic icing on an extremely alcoholic cake - baba au rum, perhaps. But only Dale knew there was a third level. The Viet Cons had killed their son in a place called Ky Doe, and Billy's death had killed his mother.

It was three years - three years almost to the day - after Billy's death on the bridge that Dale Clewson began to believe that he must be going mad.

Nine, he thought. There were nine. There were always nine. Until now.

Were there? His mind replied to itself. Are you sure? Maybe you really counted - the lieutenant's letter said there were nine, and Bortman's letter said there were nine. So just how can you be so sure? Maybe you just assumed.

But he hadn't just assumed, and he could be sure because he knew how many nine was, and there had been nine boys in the D Squad photograph which had come in the mail, along with Lieutenant Anderson's letter.

You could be wrong, his mind insisted with an assurance that was slightly hysterical. You're been through a lot these last couple of

years, what with losing first Billy and then Andrea. You could be wrong.

It was really surprising, he thought, to what insane lengths the human mind would go to protect its own sanity.

He put his finger down on the new figure - a boy of Billy's age, but with blonde crewcut hair, looking no more than sixteen, surely too young to be on the killing ground. He was sitting cross-legged in front of Gibson, who had, according to Billy's letters, played the guitar, and Kimberley, who told lots of dirty Jokes. The boy with the blonde hair was squinting slightly into the sun - so were several of the others, but they had always been there before. The new boy's fatigue shirt was open, his dog tags lying against his hairless chest.

Dale went into the kitchen, sorted through what he and Andrea had always called "the jumble drawers," and came up with an old, scratched magnifying glass. He took it and the picture over the living room window, tilted the picture so there was no glare, and held the glass over the new boy's dog-tags. He couldn't read them. Thought, in fact, that the tags were both turned over and lying face down against the skin.

And yet, a suspicion had dawned in his mind - it ticked there like the clock on the mantle. He had been about to wind that clock when he had noticed the change in the picture. Now he put the picture back in its accustomed place, between a photograph of Andrea and Billy's graduation picture, found the key to the clock. And wound it.

Lieutenant's Anderson's letter had been simple enough. Now Dale found it in his study desk and read it again. Typed lines on Army stationary. The prescribed follow-up to the telegram, Dale had supposed. First: Telegram. Second: Letter of Condolence from Lieutenant. Third: Coffin, One Boy Enclosed. He had noticed then and noticed again now that the typewriter Anderson used had a Flying "o". Clewson kept coming out Clewson.

Andrea had wanted to tear the letter up. Dale insisted that they keep it. Now he was glad.

Billy's squad and two others had been involved in a flank sweep of a jungle quadrant of which Ky Doe was the only village. Enemy contact had been anticipated, Anderson's letter said, but there hadn't been any. The Cong which had been reliably reported to be in the area had simply melted away into the jungle - it was a trick with which the American soldiers had become very familiar over the previous ten years or so.

Dale could imagine them heading back to their base at Homan, happy, relieved. Squads A and C had waded across the Ky River, which was almost dry. Squad D used the bridge. Halfway across, it blew up. Perhaps it had been detonated from downstream. More likely, someone - perhaps even Billy himself - had stepped on the wrong board. All nine of them had been killed. Not a single survivor.

God - if there really is such a being - is usually kinder than that, Dale thought. He put Lieutenant Anderson's letter back and took out Josh Bortman's letter. It had been written on blue-lined paper from what looked like a child's tablet. Bortman's handwriting was nearly illegible, the scrawl made worse by the writing implement - a soft-lead pencil. Obviously blunt to start with, it must have been no more than a nub by the time Bortman signed his name at the bottom. In several places Bortman had borne down hard enough with his instrument to tear the paper.

It had been Bortman, the tenth man, who sent Dale and Andrea the squad picture, already framed, the glass over the photo miraculously unbroken in its long trip from Homan to Saigon to San Francisco and finally to Binghamton, New York.

Bortman's letter was anguished. He called the other nine "the best friends I ever had in my life, I loved them all like they was my brothers."

Dale held the blue-lined paper in his hand and looked blankly through his study door and toward the sound of the ticking clock on the mantelpieces. When the letter came, in early May of 1974, he had been too full of his own anguish to really consider Bortman's. Now he supposed he could understand it - a little, anyway. Bortman had been feeling a deep and inarticulate guilt. Nine letters from his hospital bed on the Homan base, all in that pained scrawl, all probably written with that same soft-lead pencil. The expense of having nine enlargements of the Squad D photograph made, and framed, and mailed off. Rites Of atonement with a soft-lead pencil, Dale thought, folding the letter again and putting it back in the drawer with Anderson's. As if he had killed them by taking their picture. That's really what was between the lines, wasn't it? "Please don't hate me, Mr. Clewson, please don't think I killed your son and the other's by—"

In the other room the mantelpiece clock softly began to chime the hour of five.

Dale went back into the living room, and took the picture down again.

What you're talking about is madness.

Looked at the boy with the short blonde hair again.

I loved them all like they was my brothers.

Turned the picture over.

Please don't think I killed your son - all of your sons - by taking their picture. Please don't hate me because I was in the Homan base hospital with bleeding haemorrhoids instead of on the Ky Doe bridge with the best friends I ever had in my life. Please don't hate me, because I finally caught up, it took me ten years of trying, but I finally caught up.

Written on the back, in the same soft-lead pencil, was this notation:

Jack Bradley Omaha, Neb.

Billy Clewson Binghamton, NY.

Rider Dotson Oneonta, NY

Charlie Gibson Payson, ND

Bobby Kale Henderson, IA

Jack Kimberley Truth or Consequences. NM

Andy Moulton Faraday, LA Staff Sgt. I

Jimmy Oliphant Beson, Del.

Asley St. Thomas Anderson, Ind.

*Josh Bortman Castle Rock, Me.

He had put his own name last, Dale saw - he had seen all of this before, or course, and had noticed it... but had never really noticed it until now, perhaps. He had put his name last, out of alphabetical order, and with an asterisk.

The asterisk means "still alive." The asterisk means "don't hate me."

Ah, but what you're thinking is madness, and you damned well know it.

Nevertheless, he went to the telephone, dialed 0, and ascertained that the area code for Maine was 207. He dialed Maine directory assistance, and ascertained that there was a single Bortman family in Castle Rock.

He thanked the operator, wrote the number down, and looked at the telephone.

You don't really intend to call those people, do you?

No answer - only the sound of the ticking clock. He had put the picture on the sofa and now he looked at it - looked first at his own son, his hair pulled back behind his head, a bravo little moustache trying to grow on his upper lip, frozen forever at the age of twenty-one, and then at the new boy in that old picture, the boy with the short blonds hair, the boy whose dog-tags were twisted so they lay face-down and unreadable against his chest. He thought of the way Josh Bortman had carefully segregated himself from the others, thought of the asterisk, and suddenly his eyes filled with warm tears.

I never hated you, son, he thought. Nor did Andrea, for all her grief. Maybe I should have picked up a pen and dropped you a note saying so, but honest to Christ, the thought never crossed my mind.

He picked up the phone now and dialed the Bortman number in Castle Rock, Maine.

Busy.

He hung up and sat for five minutes, looking out at the street where Billy had learned to ride first a trike, then a bike with trainer wheels, then a two-wheeler. At eighteen he had brought home the final improvement - a Yamaha 500. For just a moment he could see Billy with paralyzing clarity, as if he might walk through the door and sit down.

He dialed the Bortman number again. This time it rang. The voice on the other end managed to convey an unmistakable impression of wariness in just two syllables. "Hello?" At that same moment, Dale's eyes fell on the dial of his wristwatch and read the date - not for the first time that day, but it was the first time it really sunk in. It was April 9th. Billy and the others had died eleven years ago yesterday. They -

"Hello?" the voice repeated sharply. "Answer me, or I'm hanging up! Which one are you?"

Which one are you? He stood in the ticking living room, cold, listening to words croak out of him mouth.

“My name is Dale Clewson, Mr. Bortman. My son—”

“Clewson. Billy Clewson’s father.” Now the voice was flat, inflectionless.

“Yes, that’s—”

“So you say.”

Dale could find no reply. For the first time in his life, he really was tongue-tied.

“And has your picture of Squad D changed, too?”

“Yes.” It came out in a strangled little gasp.

Bortman’s voice remained inflectionless, but it was nonetheless filled with savagery. “You listen to me, and tell the others. There’s going to be tracer equipment on my phone by this afternoon. If it’s some kind of joke, you fellows are going to be laughing all the way to jail, I can assure you.”

“Mr. Bortman—”

“Shut up! First someone calling himself Peter Moulton calls, supposedly from Louisiana, and tells my wife that our boy has suddenly showed up in a picture Josh sent them of Squad D. She’s still having hysterics over that when a woman purporting to be Bobby Kale’s mother calls with the same insane story. Next, Oliphant! Five minutes ago, Rider Dotson’s brother! He says. Now you.”

“But Mr. Bortman—”

“My wife is Upstairs sedated, and if all of this is a case or ‘Have you got Prince Albert in a can,’ I swear to God -”

“You know it isn’t a joke,” Dale whispered. His fingers felt cold and numb - ice cream fingers. He looked across the room at the photograph. At the blonde boy. Smiling, squinting into the camera.

Silence from the other end.

“You know it isn’t a joke, so what happened?”

“My son killed himself yesterday evening,” Bortman said evenly.

“If you didn’t know it.”

“I didn’t. I swear.”

Bortman sighed. “And you really are calling from long distance, aren’t you?”

“From Binghamton, New York.”

“Yes. You can tell the difference—local from long distance, I mean. Long distance has a sound...a...a hum...”

Dale realized, belatedly, that expression had finally crept into that voice. Bortman was crying.

“He was depressed off and on, ever since he got back from Nam, in late 1974,” Bortman said. “it always got worse in the spring, it always peaked around the 8th of April when the other boys ... and your son...”

“Yes,” Dale said.

“This year, it just didn’t ... didn’t peak.”

There was a muffled honk-Bortman using his handkerchief.

“He hung himself in the garage, Mr. Clewson.”

“Christ Jesus,” Dale muttered. He shut his eyes very tightly, trying to ward off the image. He got one which was arguably even worse - that smiling face, the open fatigue shirt, the twisted dog-tags. “I’m sorry.”

“He didn’t want people to know why he wasn’t with the others that day, but of course the story got out.” A long, meditative pause from Bortman’s end. “Stories like that always do.”

“Yes. I suppose they do.”

“Joshua didn’t have many friends when he was growing up, Mr. Clewson. I don’t think he had any real friends until he got to Nam. He loved your son, and the others.”

Now it’s him. comforting me.

“I’m sorry for your loss;” Dale said. “And sorry to have bothered you at a time like this. But you’ll understand ... I had to.”

“Yes. Is he smiling, Mr. Clewson? The others ... they said he was smiling.”

Dale looked toward the picture beside the ticking clock. “He’s smiling.”

“Of course he is. Josh finally caught up with them.”

Dale looked out the window toward the sidewalk where Billy had once ridden a bike with training wheels. He supposed he should say something, but he couldn’t seem to think of a thing. His stomach hurt. His bones were cold.

“I ought to go, Mr. Clewson. In case my wife wakes up.” He paused. “I think I’ll take the phone off the hook.”

“That might not be a bad idea.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Clewson.”

“Goodbye. Once again, my sympathies.”

“And mine, too.”

Click.

Dale crossed the room and picked up the photograph of Squad D. He looked at the smiling blonde boy, who was sitting cross-legged in front of Kimberley and Gibson, sitting casually and comfortably on the ground as if he had never had a haemorrhoid in his life, as if he had never stood atop a stepladder in a shadowy garage and slipped a noose around his neck.

Josh finally caught up with them.

He stood looking fixedly at the photograph for a long time before realizing that the depth of silence in the room had deepened. The clock had stopped.