

Garden Tomb

Spencer Ellsworth

THE WATER WAS BLACK AROUND OUR KNEES. Bamboo surrounded and overlooked us. It was so quiet in the mist and the dark green stalks that the sound of our legs moving was an intrusion.

Water sopping out of his boot, Hyde lifted a leg and placed his foot on a piece of bamboo. His foot slipped and he plunged backward into the swamp, butt first, rolling back onto his pack. Water closed momentarily over his face and the hand holding his M-16. He came up, spluttered, looked at the bamboo for a moment as if trying to hold something back, then burst out: "Dammit! Piece of shit!"

"Keep it down!" Watts yelled from ahead of us.

Hyde stood up, and looked at me. I put my hand to my mouth to cover the laughs.

"What?" Hyde asked.

"You sound like a retard when you swear."

"Shut up," Hyde muttered, and held his M-16 by the tip of the handle, trying to drain the water out. He moved forward, stepped over the clump of bamboo he had managed to bend a little. "Stupid bamboo." I tried not to laugh, but I couldn't stop.

We struggled through another thicket and our boots sank into soft, squelching mud. I followed close behind Hyde. After a moment, Watts's deep voice called back, "Sarge says take a break in place."

"Are we behind everyone again?" Hyde asked. "How did we get behind everyone?"

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"You smoke too much," I said.

"Shut up," Hyde replied half-heartedly and slapped my stomach. He slid down against the bamboo. I sank down next to him. Hyde kicked his foot into the mud. "I cannot wait to get out of here," he said. "I will get off that plane and kiss the sweet American blacktop, and I will do a little dance. And eat a big hamburger. A big old cheeseburger with extra pickles and mayonnaise. What's your favorite hamburger place, Lister?"

"They have good hamburgers at the Creamery," I said. "Good ice cream, too. When someone burns BYU, they should save the Creamery."

Hyde looked over at me. "What does your dad teach again?" he asked.

"Religion," I said. "Didn't we already have this conversation?"

"Is this the one where you tell me your dad is a paid preacher for the Church, and I tell you that I still want to go to BYU, and then you go off into that whole thing about the hypocrites at BYU, and then . . ."

"And then we kiss and make up," I finished. "And then you get upset with me, because I touch you in inappropriate ways."

"Lister," he said, holding his hands out, "a guy's gotta have some standards."

I laughed and took a drink of water. "Why can't all Mormons be funny like you, Hyde? You're the first one I ever met who would laugh at that."

"Well, most Mormons can't swear like me, for one thing."

"That's right. Nobody I ever met can swear like that. Sounds like my grandma swearing."

"You never swear," Hyde pointed out.

I laughed.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"I don't swear around you. Because I respect your standards, even if I don't follow them."

Hyde looked down at the ground. "I didn't mean to . . ."

"No, man, it's cool," I said. "Everyone slips now and then." He looked back up at me. "You can add it to your list of sins, next to the angry thoughts about the VC."

"Ha ha." He looked away, and his eyes began to glaze over, as if he saw something I couldn't. "When we get back to the States—and out of this place," Hyde said, "you will come visit me in Eugene and we will go to church." I nearly choked on my water. "You and I, we will go and sit down

in the front pew, and a nice Mormon girl will come sit beside you and ask, 'Are you new here?' And you will say, 'I'm John Hyde's war buddy.' Then she will ask you to tell your heroic stories. And you will say, one time I saved Hyde's life in a patch of bamboo, a patch of bamboo just like this one—"

"Where did this come from?" I asked, cutting him off. "When did you become my reactivation committee? At least in Vietnam, I should be able to escape this kind of talk."

"Oh, come on, at least let me finish the story," Hyde said. "It was just me . . . you know, imagining something."

I finished off my water. "This is turning into a very long day."

"Hey," Hyde said, "I'm just making small talk." I stood up, looked down at him, and raised an eyebrow. "You know. I get my celestial points in wherever I can," he said.

"You don't even have enough yet to make up for your potty mouth," I said, lifting him up.

"Seriously, Lister," he said as he came up to my eye level, "why aren't you active?"

"This is a great time, Hyde."

"I want to know. Now's as good a time as any."

"I told you. They're all hypocrites."

"You told me they were all hypocrites at BYU. You never said anything about the entire church."

I paused for a moment, looked in the eyes of this kid. He was smiling big. He had big blue eyes and a big Mormon smile. If he made it through Vietnam, he was going to go on a mission, baptize dozens, marry the prettiest girl at BYU, and spend the rest of his days trying to get his kids to stay quiet in sacrament meeting. We were the same age. He looked five years younger. We were from totally different families: his mother poor as dirt, his father a deadbeat drunk; my parents rich, religious, and living on the hill, educated to their eyebrows. And he was Mormon, despite all that, and I was not, by my own choice.

"Well?" he asked.

Shots burst through the mist, shattering the bamboo next to us with a loud *crack*. I hit the mud, Hyde dropping next to me. "Charlie."

"They probably can't see us," I said. Bullets cut the air and shattered bamboo, stalks snapping and splintering loudly. Water burst from the bamboo next to me and soaked my head. "Just keep your head down."

Someone moaned from nearby. "They hit someone," Hyde said. He poked his head up.

"Hyde," I said, pushing him down again, "shut up!"

"Lister, man, they're shooting at the others. If I could get a good view over the bamboo, I could pick them off."

The fire had moved away from us. Hyde began slowly moving up. "I'll kneel on your back. Gimme your gun and I'll get 'em."

"What the—No, Hyde! Keep your head down!"

"Hurry up, Lister!" Hyde said, and grabbed my M-16. Someone else screamed. The firing redoubled, this time to the side of us. I looked around, as if I could somehow see who was getting hit and why.

"Come on, man," Hyde said urgently. "They won't expect it."

"You going for the Medal of Honor or something?"

"Do it, Lister," he said. "Or I'll just stand on you without your consent."

"This is stupid," I said.

"Okay, let's get shot instead, once the gooks clear the bamboo. Don't be scared. I know what I'm doing."

"I . . ." I tried to think of a reason not to. I couldn't. I slung my backpack to the ground and got on my hands and knees. Hyde clambered onto my back, where he crouched, feet digging into my spine. My hands were driven into the mud, cold and sucking.

"Hurry up, fatty," I muttered. I could feel Hyde shift, the increased pain as he stood, and then the loud bursts as he fired off a few dozen rounds. Shots thundered in my ears. A bamboo stalk snapped suddenly and blinded me with water. Hyde's body moved, pushing me down against the ground. "I can't—Hyde!" Return fire burst bamboo stalks around us, one after another shattering and spraying water. "Hyde! I'm moving!"

I rolled out from under Hyde, pulling my hands out of the mud. I expected him to roll with me, to jump down. He fell like a wet sack of sand.

"Hyde?" I crawled through the mud. He was twitching. His back was toward me, and his head was hidden by a piece of bamboo. I turned him over. Where his face had been was a thick mass of red, scattered with white.

The firing died down.

I stared at the red face forever. His big Mormon grin was gone, teeth

knocked out with his nose. His dreaming blue eyes were blank and bloody above the blood.

I stared until I heard footsteps coming toward me, someone thrashing their way through the bamboo. I was clutching Hyde's hand, I realized, around the M-16, and I pulled the gun away from him.

I turned, with the M-16 in my hand, and saw a gook in black pajamas standing there. I didn't realize I had shot the gook until he fell backwards, blood spurting from his chest into the air like a splash of water.

"AaaaaAAAAH!" I leapt up and fired into the bamboo, fired all around me, fired in the direction the gook had come. I heard screams. I fired until my arm was shaking and my gun was clicking, until the clip had run out. I heard more wails, heard gooks shouting and moaning. Lucky shots. I had hit them. I dropped the gun. I muttered, "Die! Die, you—" I could not help looking at Hyde's corpse. "—bastards."

* * *

The base smelled like old rubber and wet GI boots. I had been there for about three days when I heard Carrón, talking to some other poor GI who was trying to get away. "So my dad says to me—do you know what he says, man? He says, Nephi, you've got to . . ." It faded into the distance.

I walked after him. There was a GI there with a cigarette, blowing smoke into Carrón's face as the beaner talked. As soon as Carrón saw me, his face lit up. He had a smile like a fluorescent light, too bright and uncomfortable.

"Hey! Hey, man! I know you! You were with that other guy, that guy from Oregon!"

"Hyde?" I asked.

"Yeah, man, Hyde! We talked in Saigon. We talked about church and stuff! He was a good guy, man. He still around?"

"No," I said. "He bought it last week."

"Oh," Carrón's fluorescent smile faded for a second. "Sorry about that, man. What's your name again?"

"Lister."

"Lister, man! I hear about you! Somebody told me, they said there's a guy named Lister here and his whole platoon got caught coming through the bamboo! All of them dead, except him! And then he pops up and shoots all the gooks that did it! Guy's gonna get Medal of Honor or something! Man, is that you?"

"That was me."

"Oh, man, Lister, I thought it might be you, and I thought, maybe, maybe, that quiet guy who doesn't like Mormons, maybe he did it. I wasn't sure, you know, though."

I was beginning to wonder why I had wanted to talk to this beaner. The other GI was walking away quickly.

"I guess it's different for everyone, you know? Now, with me, man, I was never really brave. My dad says, Nephi, you're going to war and I don't want you to go. But you be a man and make your own decision. And you know what I did?"

I had heard this story the first time I met the guy. "You hid in the closet until the Gestapo came?"

"Man, did I already tell you this?"

"Possibly."

"Anyway, the next day I tell my dad that I gotta go. Some things you know you have to do. I never killed no squad of gooks, man, but coming here was the bravest thing I ever did." He was looking at me now as if he realized that he was rambling. "So, when you ship out again?"

"Don't know," I said. "My tour's almost up. I'm hoping they might keep me here until then." I saw Hyde's face, smiling, talking about me and him at church. "W—what are you doing tomorrow?" I asked.

"Sunday, man? The day of rest? I'm actually getting together with some other Mormon boys on base. Maybe only three of us, but we are gonna have our own little church service."

I looked down at my dog tags, began fumbling with the black rubber edge as if trying to pop it off. "Can I—can I come?"

Carrón's eyes went wide, and he smiled even bigger. "Sure, man!"

"Good. What time?"

"Early, man! I'll be by early! Oh, man, Lister, you're gonna be at church, man! That's great!"

"Yeah."

"Oh, man, it's gonna be good, man! Lister at church! So far nobody wanted to come, man! I told everybody in my unit. They all think it's some kind of weird cult, you know?"

"I've been thinking about it a lot."

"Maybe we get some nurses there too, you know? Good little Mormon girls in white! Right on, man! Right on!"

"Yeah."

* * *

I had a new uniform. It still felt strange, the greens and brown too bright, the fabric clean and soft-smelling. The boots actually hurt my feet, not in the cramped, damp, and pinched-from-shrinking-way, but from a few stubborn stitches rubbing up against my heels that I hadn't worn down yet. I looked at myself in the mirror. My face looked young. I always thought it would look older, dirtier, every time I looked in the mirror.

I washed my hands, dried them off. There was black dirt etched into the cracks on my hands that nothing could scrub out. In one of his fantasies, Hyde had gone on and on about how he could stop the war and bring of all Southeast Asia if he could come up with a soap that could unblacken the hands of GI and gook alike. He was going to have a peace mission flown in to Hanoi, where the American ambassadors would wash the gooks' hands with the soap, and they would fall at each others' feet crying. I looked at my hands, still black. Hyde had a lot of fantasies.

A knock sounded at the door. "Lister, man!"

I opened it. Carrón was there, and another GI who looked a lot like Hyde, except that he was taller, his eyes a little more alert. "This is Robinson. He's from L.A. Robinson, this is Lister."

"Hi." I shut my door behind me. "Are we ready?" I asked. Robinson and Carrón started walking.

"Where you from, Lister?" Robinson asked.

"Provo."

"Happy Valley itself, huh? My sister goes to BYU. How do you like it?"

"It's all right," I said. Carrón burst out laughing. "What?" I asked.

"Lister, man, did you say something good about Provo? Check this out, Robinson. When I first met this guy I say, 'Good place, man, I liked BYU a lot,' and he says, 'Man, everybody at BYU's a hypocrite. They think they're more righteous than the rest of the world. They sit there and read and memorize these obscure Church doctrines and ignore what's really going on. Then they treat the different people like crap because we smoke a little grass.'"

"I . . . said that?" I asked. He had remembered my standard speech almost verbatim.

"Yeah, man." There was a long, awkward silence. Carrón finally

said, "But, you know, everyone has different opinions, man. I think BYU, it's all right . . . you know, everybody's different."

We reached another door, and a GI opened it. He had a kind face, a smooth and smiling Mormon face, except for a large bloody sore just under his hairline. "Hey," he said. "I'm Fairchild, from Salt Lake."

"Hey," I said, and didn't add anything. We sat down. Fairchild had taped white paper over posters on the walls above the bunks, and had a set of military scriptures just like Hyde's sitting on the bed. He sat on one bed with Carrón while Robinson and I sat on the other.

"I would like to call this meeting to order," Fairchild said. "Any ward business?"

"The football game with the Victor Charlie First Ward has been called, on account of weather," Robinson said.

They all laughed. We sang, "I Stand All Amazed." I couldn't remember more than the first line.

Robinson gave the opening prayer. Fairchild stood up and took two tin cups from under his bed, one filled with crackers and one filled with water. He began praying.

Hyde had once told me how he used to save the sacrament cups and pretend they were spaceships. My mother always let me take a few toys to church. Hyde was jealous. He was never allowed to take anything. His mother, he said, got mad if he talked at all during sacrament meeting, even if he had to pee.

I didn't take the crackers or the water. When it was over, Fairchild stood up. "I guess since this is my bunk, then I'm conducting."

"Yay, Bishop Fairchild," Robinson said.

"Out of order. Go into the lobby," Fairchild pointed, and laughed. His face grew serious again. "Um, well, my testimony . . . I guess I had an interesting experience with my testimony the other day. There were two guys in my platoon that were Baptist. Cool guys. Sometimes we would do Bible readings together. And anyway, one of them, he was a really strong Baptist, read his Bible every night, prayed that he and all of us would get home safely. The other guy was not so strong. He—the other guy—told me that back home he would go to church because it made his dad happy, but he didn't really believe it."

Fairchild took a deep breath. "Well, the other day we got ambushed and the gooks gunned down about half of our guys—including the good Baptist. And the bad Baptist comes to me afterwards, after we got dust-off,

and he says, 'What's it all about?' and I said, 'What?' and he said, 'Why am I still here?' I guess he really wanted to know why I believed. So I told him. I told him God had guided my life and made a difference, and I had prayed and felt comforted . . ."

Fairchild paused. He was struggling with his words. This story bugged me. I knew there was going to be a moral. And crying. There was always crying and a moral. They were all paying attention. Fairchild took another deep breath and launched into his story. "—and I didn't do a bit of good. He told me he was convinced now that there was no God. God had not saved the good Baptist, with a girl at home, a family that loved him, and a lot going for him. The bad one told me there was no way God could look down at His children and say that someone so faithful to Him needed to die in a, um, 'crap-hole' country away from everything the guy loved."

Fairchild paused. "You know what? I didn't know what to say to him. We all believe and pray and read and everything—but sometimes, it's really hard. I don't know how often I believe it sometimes." He paused. "I know God loves me. I know He will do what is best for me. Even though it is really hard to do His will and really hard to understand His will, I know He is there." He paused. "I wish I understood more, but I know He is there. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen."

The other two said Amen. Fairchild's eyes haunted me. The other two bore their testimonies; simple and brief, though Carrón went on for a while about his parents coming over from Mexico and how the missionaries were nice to him. After another prayer, I got up. "Thanks," I said. Fairchild was still looking down at the ground.

As I walked out, I heard one of them get up and come after me. I didn't want to look back. I walked out of the bunk and into the steamy Sunday morning. There were several GIs smoking against a wall.

"Can I bum a smoke?" I asked.

"Only the first time." One of them, with olive skin and sagging eyes, handed me a cigarette and lit a match. I took a deep drag. I turned around and Carrón stood behind me. "Lister, man, you left too fast! We weren't done!"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I lied. I didn't really want to come today."

Carrón looked confused. "It's all right, man. I don't think you lied."

I laughed, and sent a stream of smoke out with it. "I lied, man. I lied

worse than any VC-loving, two-faced gook. I almost made myself believe it.”

“Believe what?”

“That I could be Mormon, beaner. Hyde—everyone always tells me to go get myself redeemed someday. Sometimes I start to believe them. But it never lasts. Sorry you got your hopes up.”

“I don’t get it, man.”

I started to turn around. Then I turned back. “Look, Carrón, some of us, no matter how we were born or grew up, aren’t Mormon. It’s the way the world works. There are gooks and there are Americans and we’re at war because we’re too damn different to get along. And there’s me, and there’s you.” I took a drag off the cigarette. “You—Hyde—that guy in there—you can still believe, even after all this shit around you. Me, I never could believe in the first place.”

Carrón looked down at the ground. His mouth for once was not smiling, nor even hovering on the brink of a smile. “You understand?” I asked.

“Lister, man,” Carrón said, “maybe I tell you one thing, then I let you go.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“I’ll tell you my favorite scripture. I read it over and over, my whole life. Even carried it around—even taped it to my rifle, man, while I was humping. Really tiny note I made.” He drew a steamy breath. “It says that when we come to God, he shows us how weak we are. We come to him all proud, saying, Here I am, man! I am a good guy and I want to follow you! And then he tells us, no, man, no, because you are weak with this—maybe you have trouble with girls, maybe you have trouble with smokes, maybe you’re just a guy with too much pride. And you realize, hey, man, I am in trouble. I do have lots of problems. I ain’t much at all, man!” He said it with almost a laugh, though he didn’t smile. “And then He—He says that if you stick with Him, if you let Him be your guide—he promises you something.”

“What?”

“He promises to take your weaknesses, man, and make strengths.” He looked up, his face serious, his eyes shining. “And it happens, man, it does.”

Carrón stood there looking at me in the steamy morning. I looked

away from his eyes, and I said, "So if we never come to Him, we never see weakness, right?"

"Man, then we're not living. And nothing—not the war, not our families—nothing makes sense then."

He stood there staring at me and I met his eyes. They softened a bit. "Coming back ain't so bad, man. Only the first time."

"Maybe later."

He stood there for a long time before he finally left. I lifted the cigarette to my mouth to take a long drag. It had gone out. I still held it in my teeth, sucking in and out like the smoke was my only hope.