

A SHADOW ON THE WALL

On the long plane ride it struck me, and I knew they were gonna steal my life's work, no matter what I did. It surged over me in a final swoon...and I sobbed 'til I could hardly breathe, oblivious to passengers nearby. Revenge rose in my mind, beyond convincing these unapproachable powers to change their view of some measly plants. But that would take me back to a place I shouldn't allow myself to go...

Should I tell them of the treachery thieves like Alu were exacting at will on a helpless populace? How ridiculous! I had a one-in-a-million chance of even getting an audience, and deep inside I knew the outcome already. I found myself gazing from that place where the killer on the river had slept these thirty some years.

No, I was definitely on a peace mission this time, with trips to the Pentagon, Department of Defense, Justice, congressmen, the Vets Office, and most horrific of all, into the very wellspring of evil...the DEA. I got a room in a roach motel about fifteen blocks from the Mall, and took the bus daily on errands of mercy through halls of uncaring bureaucrats who'd hardly grant me the time of day.

I shouted and raved at one point...discovering that wouldn't work at all. They just called a mob of security guards. On the issue of veteran status, which was secondary to the purloined farm, some progress was made. I discovered a proper venue for such claims, left over from the Merchant Seamen and Women's Air Force of World War Two, in a tiny office named the Civilian Military Review Board. They were civil alright, and gave me an application, probably the first they'd handed out in half a century. But I don't reckon to hear from them in this lifetime.

I only worked on that matter when there was no one to see on the issue of forfeiture. It was hopeless from the start...as much money as that agency was raking in from seizures, such as a million dollar yacht for a marijuana joint in an ashtray, I really had my head up my ass thinking I could turn them around in midstream. Shunted about from office to office, I was finally granted a meeting with the acting chief of the Drug Enforcement Agency on the seventh floor of their headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. It was for Monday, so I had the weekend to explore the Smithsonian.

The Vietnam War Memorial, simply called the Wall, had crossed my mind a few times. As I wandered towards the Lincoln Memorial, by the reflecting pools, an eerie sensation crawled over me near some trees on a small rise. It dawned on me slowly...like I'd stumbled on a battlefield massacre now silent in death's shroud.

There it was, with 58,000 names in cold, black

marble...sole link for those who lived and died in that awful time and place. I didn't move from the trees for a long time, not knowing how to approach such a thing as lay before me in the grass filling my spirit with memories, pain, and a terrifying remorse. I waited for the crowds to thin, thinking I might visit them alone.

It wasn't gonna happen, people stayed all afternoon, some sitting near their missing one's name, and others just walking back and forth, as if dazed by the scope of the massive gravestone. Finally, I went and touched it. From where it began in the grass to its high point in the middle, I watched my reflection in passing, one of the walking wounded, on the marble etched with souls.

No emotion came until I got to the other end, where the wall slipped mutely into the grass again. Then it happened. I thought I was gonna choke the flush was so great...and I broke down hysterically, stumbling back to the trees on the hill for safety. I must've cried for an hour or more 'cause it was dark when I left. Never in my life had I been affected by anything like that. I don't even have words...

My meeting with one of the top DEA agents in that hideous organization went about like I'd expected...they wouldn't rescind the forfeiture without looking into specific allegations of Alu's blackmail, which I didn't tape and couldn't prove. It also didn't matter to them whether one plant or a thousand had been found, as it was no longer their burden to prove funding for the asset came from illegal activities. The laws had been changed to assist the government in this wondrous double-think called "zero tolerance."

Fuck, it reminded me of destroying hamlets in order to save them from the enemy. I wandered outta there in one of the worst depressions ever known. Truly the love and effort of my lifetime was gone.

Where could I go but the Wall? With tears streaming down my face, I touched names of downed men who'd shared with me the agonies of that period in our country's unsavory history, knowing full well they'd given their all for nothing, just like me. I dragged myself back to my refuge on the tree-lined hill and curled in a ball weeping as if the world was ending. I think mine actually was.