



J.T. Ledbetter

One of Our Own (for Mike Doyle)

Melvin Padukas watched the big door swing open and the size twelve wingtips walk toward him. Mr. Haberman, the Boys Vice Principal, was very tall, and very wide. His voice could be heard throughout Inglewood High School when he wanted it to be heard. Melvin cringed and waited. He knew his four years of dreaming were about to end. This was it. He hoped it was it. That's all he really ever wanted.

"Melvin, do you know what happens to trees in the winter?" Melvin looked out the window hoping to find a tree. "They look so good, so green and fine in the spring; then, by late autumn they begin to look a bit care-worn; by winter, Melvin, they drop. The leaves have lost their beauty, their strength to hold tight to the tree. They are dead, Melvin. The tree is bare. Cold. Ruined! Are you listening? Those trees are called DECIDUOUS. They start with promise, but end up on the ground. That's a picture of you, Melvin. Mr. Deciduous! Each year you look like you will make a mark for yourself, but by winter, you are drooping. Grades fall off. You miss classes. You let your leaves fall, Melvin. You are Mr. Deciduous!"

When Melvin graduated he was eighth from the end of 500 students lined up to march into the football stadium. He explained to his parents that because of his sprained ankle from a pick-up basketball game. They let him march on crutches at the end of the line. What only he and seven other students knew was that the graduates lined up according to their G.P.A's. As the band played Pomp and Circumstance, Melvin Padukas received his diploma, tripped on his gown going down the steps of the platform and landed in a heap. Mr. Haberman looked skyward and sighed.

Many odd jobs and short-lived careers later Melvin was drafted into the army and found himself in the Infantry, assigned to an Armored Cavalry Troop smack in the middle of a fire-fight in Xuan Loc province in Viet Nam. Private Padukas carried an M16 and followed tanks through jungles and over bridges, which they promptly burned, only to escort vehicles rebuilding them a month later. Until a fateful day in 1970 the only action he had seen was in a John Wayne western flown in by the Red Cross along with bananas and Twinkies. Melvin

liked Twinkies and bananas and ate all he could get his hands on, got deathly sick, and was about to be sent to a field hospital when all hell broke loose.

The mist hung in the creases of the mountains and dripped from the water palms as the sun tried to break through. Melvin saw the lead tank suddenly veer off line and into a shallow ravine. The other tanks slowed. He knew the Platoon Leader would be wanting to know what the hell was going on up there. Just then the rapid fire of AK 47s broke loose, and his ACAV took a hit from an RPG, throwing him out. Men trying to get away from their disabled vehicles were cut down. As other tanks opened fire into the green smear of trees along the river, Melvin ran to a tank stalled in the road. He scrambled onto the front slope of the hull and onto the turret.

The hatch was open and he tumbled inside, breaking his left arm on the ready rack.

The tank commander and driver were dead. He heard the loader yell to take the wheel, so he dropped down to the driver's compartment, pulled the driver to the side and slid into the seat. He peered through the viewing block and saw the lead tank in the ravine blow up when a 82mm mortar hit exploded the ammunition, followed by a second blast that sent flame high into the air when the cherry juice ignited. Trucks on either side were burning. Men were firing from behind them and from trees and from shallow depressions in the sand by the river. Melvin had never learned to drive a tank, though he was familiar with the controls. He moved the tank toward the tree line where the fire was coming from, put the tank into neutral and pulled himself back into the main compartment, moving the body of the tank commander. He turned the main gun in the direction of the trees and pressed the override trigger, but it misfired. The tank took another hit and lurched into the river.

Melvin grabbed a grease gun and went out the hatch and flopped into the water. He held the weapon over his head and waded into the reeds growing by the shore and fired into the trees, and kept firing until he was empty. A tank close by took a hit and the tank commander was blown out. Melvin inserted another magazine and ran up the bank, firing and jumped onto the tank. The loader was wounded, but was able to load a fleshette round. The guns were already bearing on the trees across the river. Melvin yelled fire, but the driver said the gunner was dead or wounded so Melvin fired, using the trigger on the TC's override and felt the tank shake as the thousands of darts shredded the trees and leaves.

He saw a bridge down river about a hundred yards and told the driver to run the tank in front of the men penned down behind trucks and trees so they could hunker down behind it. When he crossed the bridge he yelled left, and mowed down a stand of bamboo in front of the NVA's position. The loader put in another round, Melvin brought the gun around and fired. The explosion sent trees and dirt into the sky. The loader put in a HEAT round and Melvin fired again setting off a terrific explosion that flattened trees and covered the tank with rock and dirt. Melvin fired the TC's 50 cal machine gun until his head was full of flame and dirt, his ears blasted by the screech of metal,-- when suddenly everything went quiet. He was aware of trees crashing around him and people running past the tank towards the enemy position but he heard nothing.

Some years later, Bruce Stevenson watched a PBS special about POWs receiving preliminary

medical treatment at Clark Air Force Base Hospital in the Philippines. After some narration about the skill of the doctors and the care the people received before they were sent stateside to Walter Reed Hospital to begin rehab, the narrator spoke in hushed tones as the camera focused on Melvin Padukas receiving the Silver Star for leading the attack on the NVA ambush, destroying their ammunition cache, while on a split screen Samuel Barber's haunting Adagio for Strings rose and fell over file footage of dead enemy soldiers, destroyed tanks and vehicles burning as medics attended to the wounded. Bruce watched in disbelief at the face of battle, the surreal green of the mountains behind the slow moving river, and the unfeeling clear blue sky over everything-- the living and the dead, the exhausted troops, the Platoon Sergeant crouched over a dying soldier,--and Melvin in his hospital bed, staring at the ceiling as the citation recounted how he abandoned the burning tank, firing his grease gun as he carried a badly wounded Brigadier General through gunfire to safety.

Bruce Stevenson looked at the hills over his coffee at Java City, where the soft rain, washed the stand of Sycamores at Malibu Creek He was thinking of high school days, wondering what happened to his buddy, Melvin Padukas. He knew he had been in Viet Nam. What would they talk about should they ever meet? The weather and the traffic? Should he ask him how it was over there? But questions seemed weak, unimportant; yet they were important. He needed to know something about the ordeal he missed, nursing his bad back, trying to make a difference with his students who looked at him with sleepy eyes and downcast faces, coffee in front of them, some with sweatshirt hoods over their heads. Still, he thought, there was the girl in the front row who actually took notes; and the one boy in back who watched intently while he lectured on Willa Cather's, MY ANTONIA where there were bitter winter winds, and sod houses with half- mad uncles from Sweden looking at miles and miles of red grass so tall, children had to be tethered to a post to keep from wandering into that grassy sea..

But then, the miracle happened. He saw Melvin standing outside a store next to Java City, staring into a cup of coffee. It was a strange meeting. Bruce ordered coffees and bagels, and suddenly he was telling Melvin about how the area had grown since he took the job at the small college; how this or that politician had promised and reneged on this and that promise; and how the local team had suffered through another season

He reached across the table to take his friend's hand, but Melvin was staring at someone pushing a shopping cart piled high with clothes and odds and ends. Bruce shaded his eyes against the sun and said, "That's Chop Liver Woman. That's what everyone calls her. She's some kind of Indian mix or other. A street person. Walks up and down these streets... sometimes you'll see her pushing that cart clear on the other side of town. You wonder how in the world she gets there without getting run over. Where she sleeps no one knows. In some bushes somewhere I guess. That cart is always piled high with her world..."

The woman had stopped under a big oak and was rifling through the cart. Her long grey hair hung to her waist, her head high as if she were looking for something down the road and didn't want to miss it. She turned her round sun- burned face towards the café and stared at Melvin. The morning sun filtered through the oaks and scattered on the manicured lawn surrounding the cafe where business people talked on their cell phones and bikers admired their new bikes and colorful jerseys.

Melvin finished his coffee and looked up at the mist settling in patches on the green Santa Monica Mountains, mountains that were burned into his memory, beautiful, hiding life, and the stench of death. Two girls watched him and whispered their heads together, balancing their coffee and muffins. He started at the flock of pigeons that rose suddenly from the hillside and circled the café, their wings whirring, beating the warming air on each pass over the coffee shop, the shadow of their wings like chopper blades across the table where Melvin sat, his arms over his head.

He watched her repack her goods, carefully, each item stored with care in the shopping cart, her long hair like a curtain behind her as she packed, and when she was satisfied with her job she pushed her cart past the people with their coffee and bagels, slowly, head erect. When she stopped and looked at him, her face was half in shadow, outlined and framed by the green trees on the hills appearing and disappearing in the mist. Melvin stood up, pushed his ruined left arm further back into its sling and walked across the street to the woman, and with his right hand began pushing the cart down the street, past bikers on their weekly ride, and people hurrying to the coffee shop.

Bruce told about it as friends gathered there on a Sunday morning. "Wasn't he around here for awhile? I could never get a word out of him," one said. And another said, "You'll probably see them come by here if you have enough coffee and bagels. Don't bother talking to them. I don't think either one of them can hear. Maybe even talk. Damndest thing. They just push that shopping cart back and forth from Thousand Oaks to Newbury Park and back again." A man from another table said, "I heard he made a lot of money!" A biker adjusted his mirror. "I heard he saw some action in Nam. Don't know anything about her. Probably from some wonderful reservation in South Dakota. They'll be cold soon though. The trees are losing their leaves."

"Deciduous. They lose their leaves when they feel the cold." The biker looked at him, threw his leg over his bike and locked in his left foot. "Maybe they get tired of carrying them," he said. "I wonder if they know they'll get them back in the spring?" "That's too heavy for me," another said. "If we're going to ride, let's go. They rode off, their yellow jerseys mixing with the sun on the leaves clinging to the ash and pin oaks."

A man with a large dog on a leash said, "Choices. Life is a matter of choices. They must have made theirs a long time ago." He jerked on the leash. "And now they push their stupid cart around. Some people have no idea about what life is all about. Their choice. I knew I wanted to make enough money in the sixties to make sure I wouldn't be pushing no cart around...that's what I did. I wonder what kind of choices that guy with his arm in a sling made then."

He found them one day under the overpass, with some kind of mongrel dog. They sat on the curb, watching the traffic. It was something in the way they sat close together...the way the dog with his head on Melvin's lap. Something. Cross the damned street, he said to himself. Just cross the street.

"Hello, Melvin. How've you been?" He wished he hadn't added that. How the hell do you think he's been? While you've been teaching at the college; worrying about students' essays, this man has been sleeping under overpasses and in ditches.

Bruce sat down on the curb and watched the traffic go by. Now and then someone honked at them. One car raced past and someone gave them the finger. No one stopped to ask if there was a problem. Bruce thought of all the times he had passed people under bridges without stopping. It was hard to stop with cars behind you, he thought. What was he supposed to do, create a traffic jam or maybe an accident just to stop in the slow lane to talk to homeless people with an ugly dog straining to get at them? Rationalizing comes easy, he thought.

Melvin looked at Chop Liver Woman, pointed to Bruce, and put his hand against his heart. She smiled at him and raised her heavy face. He thought her eyes were the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen. They were large, very brown, with chips of green, like autumn he thought. She didn't blink, or talk. Just stared back at him. When he dropped his eyes she busied herself at the cart, arranging and rearranging old shoes, bits of things, and a few parcels wrapped with brown string. The cart was covered by a tarp he knew was a tent for them somewhere in the surrounding hills. Melvin rose, curled the leash tighter around his hand. The woman put the last items in the cart and began pushing it up the street, but he stopped the cart, turned, and looked back, inviting him to follow. And he knew it was time to do it.

Several blocks away and up a cul-de-sac Bruce had never seen, they found a trail leading into a stand of weeping willows, and down into a gully overgrown with weeds where an old couch lay upside down in the water coming from a drainage pipe sticking out of the hillside. The woman pushed back some willow branches and Melvin turned the cart into a small clearing and stopped. This was home.

Bruce looked at the piece of carpet on the ground and the two ratty sleeping bags. A one-burner camp stove was nearby, some magazines, and a three-legged stool with a cracked seat. The woman pumped the stove, put three pieces of bread on a sharp stick and held them over the flame. After they were black, she laid them on a clean piece of wax paper and put a pan of water on the stove. When it boiled, she poured it into three mugs, one with an American flag over the words, "We Will Never Forget." Bruce smelled the creek and the bitter-sweet swamp-locust leaves. Now and then a dog barked as if it had something, or something had him.

Melvin looked at him as if he wanted to say something. There was no smile, no sign of recognition of the old friendship. He leaned over and turned off the Coleman stove and began unfolding the tarp and arranging things in the cart, then stopped, looked long at Bruce, his hand shading his eyes against the setting sun, and laid down with Chop Liver Woman on the blue tarp.

It was the following Fall term, and Bruce was busy getting ready for finals. He was pleased with his writing class for once. Some talent there, he thought, wondering if they'll use it,

continue thinking, writing. A man waited for him in the hall. Bruce noticed his dark glasses tucked into his jacket pocket, the neatly trimmed moustache. He knew something was coming, probably something he was not going to like.

"Dr. Stevenson, I'm Detective Cheesewright from the Police Department in Thousand Oaks. Could we talk a minute?" Melvin led him upstairs to his office and offered him coffee. "No, I'm fine," the man said. "Let's just talk a bit." Bruce settled into his chair by the window overlooking the student park in the center of campus. "OK," he said. "What can I do for you, Detective?"

"I'm told you knew a Melvin Padukas, Dr. Stevenson." Bruce waited. He thought of turning his chair back to the park; he knew he didn't want to hear what he knew was coming. "I'm sorry to tell you that he was found dead a few days ago. Some hikers found his camp. At first they thought he was asleep, but a heavy-set woman with long hair waved her arms and made grunting sounds and pointed to the sleeping bag. One of them had Red Cross training and knelt down and put his hand along the man's neck and knew he was gone.

"Dr. Stevenson, among the various articles in their camp was a shopping cart. It was full of all kinds of things, as you might imagine, and among them was this." He handed Bruce a dirty leather pouch. He looked at the Detective, and untied the draw-strings and felt inside. There was something hard, cold, with a cord or ribbon attached. He drew it out and laid it on his desk. It was the Silver Star Melvin won for bravery in Viet Nam. A piece of paper attached to it said: For Mr. Haberman.

"There's one other thing in there, in the bottom." Bruce put his hand inside the pouch and drew out an old picture of the two of them standing in front of the Inglewood High School gym, Melvin's arm over his shoulder. "My Partner took one look at the picture and said he recognized you right away because his son took your class some time back. I guess you two were pretty close friends. You know, we've had our eye on them two, him and Chop Liver Woman. We watch them come and go from one sleeping place to another. We didn't hassle them, but we watched and did what we could to make sure they didn't get in any trouble from anyone. Oh, yes, another thing you'd like to know: we found some money in a bank account he opened, with a note saying it should be used to provide a home for his, what would you call her, Partner? That doesn't sound exactly right. What do you think she was to him?"

Bruce fingered the medal. What was she to him, he mused. What indeed. "I have no good idea what to call her, Detective Cheesewright, but I know they were close in some way most people probably would not understand...or want to believe. I was with him the day he first saw her pushing her cart. That was it. After that I might see them going down the street as I was driving along, just a passing glance. He never sought me out. One time though, one very special time, we ate dinner together at their camp. There was not much to that either. That was the last time."

When they wheeled him into the reception room, Bruce caught his breath. He expected to see an imposing figure, the person who gave Melvin the nickname, "Mr. Deciduous." Instead he saw a frail old man held in the wheel chair by restraints. His face, mottled and gaunt.

"Mr. Haberman, you have a guest. Can you say hello to Mr. Stevenson? He's come all the way from, from...where did you say you came from, Mr. Stevenson? And would you like some coffee? We can offer you a snack if you're hungry. I know how that freeway can weaken a person after..."

"I want some candy," the old man cried. "Give me some candy. Mr. Make them give me some candy? "

"I'm afraid he doesn't understand who you are or why you're here. He's not himself, if you know what I mean. I'll leave you with him for awhile. Mr. Haberman watched her leave, and licked his lips. "Bad place. This is not where I live, you know. They took me away from my home and put me here. I'm going to leave soon. Going to leave..." His voice trailed off and his eyes closed. His head began to nod.

"Mr. Haberman," Bruce began slowly. "I have something for you. It's a present from a student you knew a long time ago. He wanted you to have it so you would know he did something special, something you would be proud of. I wish he were here so he could tell you. What he did was very, very important. The United States government gave him this." He took the medal out of the pouch and held it by its ribbon.

"What is it? Is it candy? I like candy. They won't give me any here. When I leave I'm going home. There's candy there when I want it. They don't give me any here. Can you get me some. The nurse won't give it to me..."

Bruce closed his hand around the medal and sighed. After all this, he thought. After everything that must have been on Melvin's mind those terrible days and nights in the jungle, through fire-fights and constant fear. Something drove him, gave him strength or motivation to go on. Country... honor...duty? But it was his last wish that this piece of metal go to this man who pronounced him a failure. Some kind of vindication, I suppose. A waive from a former student to someone whose respect he needed, and felt he had earned.

The drive back went easier. Traffic had thinned out, and his mind was clearing. He would take the medal to the high school. He knew they would find a place for it. He vowed to give them a thousand dollars for some trees, trees that would not lose their leaves...firs...evergreen. Maybe a California Redwood!...something huge with lots of green all year round. Melvin would like that.

Lights from fishing boats winked on and off as they rocked on the long swells from tankers, invisible but for their running lights. He opened the sun- roof and breathed in the heavy damp air. What was that the Detective said? "We offered her the money, and she just looked at it, wouldn't take it. Then we got a court order to put her in a nursing home, but she wouldn't stay, walked out every time we brought her back. Walked all the way to the Police Station, waving her arms. I knew what she wanted and gave it to her. She's still pushing it."

The night was warm, with an east wind blowing off the mesquite on the orange hills. Let her

push the damned thing all over town, if that's what she wants!" he said aloud. "What they had was what they had. Whatever it was that got locked up inside after Nam, found its way out. If they ask me who he was, I'll tell them he was my friend. A Californian. One of our own.

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2008 Magnolia Florida Journal

Last Updated April 27, 2009

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