



MISSING IN AMERICA

George Eyre Masters

I'm driving. Jack, my copilot, sleeps in the passenger seat. His chin rests on my leg. The car in front of us wears two *Support Our Troops* ribbons. One is yellow, the other red, white and blue. Both are made in China. On the right rear bumper is a faded MIA sticker. The driver probably means well, but by now I've seen too many ribbons. While the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq kill and maim, I can't help but think how they are also shaping the future of returning vets. Many of these men and women will come home, go missing and you won't even know it. *Combat changes a person.* It changed me.

I'm driving angry.

I want to tell the guy in front of me: you want to support the troops? Get them the hell out of the line of fire. Or—if you think this war is such a necessary enterprise, haul your ass on over there. If

you're too old, pull your kids and grandchildren out of college and send them.

I'm driving sad.

If you want to support our troops? Give the man some

space when he gets home. Give the woman a job. Don't tell either of them how you would have been there if you could have. He may be more quiet than you're used to

and keep to himself. She might be missing an arm: he could be in a wheelchair knowing he'll never chase his kids again. Both may drink a bit. She may smoke pot, dress wild and date too many guys. She might like to play her music too loud and dance alone in her room. He could go to the movies for hours and come home and cry for no reason. Don't lecture them. Don't tell him to forget about the war—he can't. Don't tell her she's escaping reality. She's had all the reality she can stomach. He may carry what you call an attitude. If you touch her when she doesn't want to be touched she could very well turn around and bust you in the chops. Listen up: If you've never hunted humans, if you've never been hunted; if you haven't been shot at on a regular basis, one thing you could try is to appreciate what this person has been through. Then get down on your knees and pray, and thank your lucky stars it wasn't you.

I'm driving lost.

It's Vietnam, 1968, Quang Nam province.

I work up a spit of bleeding gums, saliva and bug juice and launch it into the dry grass to my

left. Keeping Valdez in sight, I wonder about the skeletons we passed. No way to tell who they were or how it happened. Three sets of bones, picked and blanched, partly clothed in



faded, rain-flattened tatters of black and white. Sprawled outside four fighting holes, two of the skeletons lay mostly intact, arms reaching, legs cocked as if trying to crawl back to their open graves. The third had no skull and no sense of direction. Couldn't make up his mind which way to go. Bones everywhere in the parched grass.

Concentrating on the ground, I breathe in, shallow drafts. Turning my head I scan the hot, windless valley. Alone under my helmet, wet under my flak jacket, the sweat rolls down the inside of my legs. I follow Valdez, the radio man, 10 meters to my front. Valdez, with his antennas tied down, shifts his rifle. Where Valdez steps, I step. I feel more than see the forward progress of Koster, the point man. Then Frenchy, Davis, Stillman, Billy Mac and Valdez. Hearing Barberra behind me, I'm aware of Duke and Ski like a snake knows his tail.

Packed inside myself I'm jammed in and scared. The rifle angles down to the left. On full auto my finger's hooked outside the trigger guard. Feeling the sun

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steam through the damp towel around my neck I want to turn a canteen upside down behind my helmet and empty it. Not enough water left for that. We cross an open field of cracked earth and yellowed grass that crunches beneath my boots.

Toes cracked and bleeding heels aching, my feet fester in the canvas and leather. Twin belts of gun ammo cross my chest, triple canteens hang off the back of my belt. An M-16 bandolier is slung over my shoulder and its magazines clink lightly. Two grenades, like giant steel eggs, hang smooth and round off my flak jacket pockets. C-ration cans clunk against the sticks of C-4 explosive in my trouser kangaroo pockets. *I hate being in the open like this.*

Fear pulses the big leg artery; my crotch is laced up tighter than the jungle boots. My eyes sting as I scan the valley. One foot in front of the other.

Too scared to let my mind wander, I do anyway. I remember a girl back in the World—her face, the way she looked at me when we ate ice cream. Heat and water loss scramble my thinking, make my tongue thick and cave in my cheeks. Don't drift, I tell



myself. Shake it off, bite your lip. I do and taste how the bitter bug juice mixes with the sweet copper of bleeding gums and the salt that drips off my nose. I mumble silently to myself. Watch where you put your feet, look for movement, for a wire, a vine, stick and stone signs, a slight depression, for what doesn't belong. Don't stare, you're get hypnotized, scan. Repeating the movements like an endless rosary, my Marine squad stretches 100 meters single file along the floor of Happy Valley.

I'm driving home.

The car with the ribbons turns off. I go straight. Rolling down the windows, I crank up Rod Stewart on the radio and scratch Jack between his ears. He likes his window all the way open. He moves there to put his face in the breeze. You want to do something for our troops—bring them home.

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**I'm driving angry.
I'm driving sad.
I'm driving lost
I'm driving home.**