

*In memory of Larry Craig Higginson,  
K.I.A. September 15, 1968, Thua Thien, South Vietnam*

**S**ix thirty," he muttered tumbling down the stairs and out the door. For thirty-one years it was always the last thing she asked him when he was on his way to work. Bruce often worked late and Maggie never knew just when he would be home. But, for thirty-one years Bruce always came home exactly when he said he would. Today was just another day.

At the end of the driveway, Bruce put the flag down and opened the mailbox door. "What have you got for me today old girl?" At the sight of the letters in the mailbox Bruce shook his head and let out a little huff; then he grinned, "Dad." The salmon colored envelope came every year at the same time.

"You're a day early."

Bruce opened the envelope with rehearsed proficiency. He has opened this same letter every year for 53 years. He already knew what he would find inside: a two-dollar bill tucked inside a birthday card with a short scribbled note and the words 'Happy Birthday, Love Dad.'

"One hundred and six dollars," Bruce chuckled to himself.

"You're right, Dad, it adds up over time."

When he had earned thirty-six dollars, Shannon went into labor. High school lovers and soon to be parents they rushed to the hospital.

"I'm scared," she said.

"It's okay baby," Bruce said. "We're almost there. Doctor Jacobs will be there and—"

"No, Bruce something's not right."

Shannon Mayne Howard died on September 20th, 1963; Bruce Howard Jr. went with her.

When he had earned forty dollars, Bruce was standing on the skid of a Huey whipping over the canopy of Vietnam. No one in the 228th airborne 'Rat Pack' could see his tears in the heavy rains. So, that was the only time Bruce let himself cry.

"Hey Howie! Howie!" SP4 Morris Ephram yelled at the top of his lungs.

"What?" Bruce shouted back over the relentless chop and whistle of the Huey.

“Last run for homeward-bound-Howie,” bellowed Morris. “You get the honor. Gook and a water buffalo ten o’clock.”

O’Meara, the pilot, banked the Huey into an orbit around the target.

“Consider it my going away present.”

Bruce Howard threw the bolt on the action and aimed for the conical hat of the farmer. Bruce could feel his tears on his face. Even in the drenching rain his warm tears lingered on his cheek.

“What the fuck cowboy?” shouted Morris.

Bruce took his sights off of the farmer and shouted back, “I’m through killing.”

“Holy shit! Hear that fella’s?” Morris wailed. “Keep an eye starboard cap’n Private Howard doesn’t feel like killing today!”

The whistle and chop of the Huey drown out all other sound and the pilots and Morris convulsed with silent laughter as the Huey banked hard left into another attack orbit around the small meadow in the jungle. The farmer was in a flat sprint towards the edge of the clearing when he went down. Morris pumped a few rounds in the water buffalo and hooted in his ridiculous Vietnamese accent, “Buffaro steak dinna at Charries five nine-y nine.”

On the way back to the slick Bruce took time to examine each of his flight companions. So many memories were attached to each of their faces. In the fourteen months they spent together, Bruce had seen all of them age twenty years: except Morris. He was still a boy. Morris, in his child-like innocence, was impermeable. Even Vietnam didn’t change him. From the day that Bruce arrived in this shit hole of a country there was Morris—pulling pranks and laughing so hard you thought that he would swallow his tongue.

In a half-grinning-reminiscent-gaze Bruce thought back to the first day he set foot on Vietnamese soil. He arrived in Qui Nohn on a perfect summer day in 1964. From the sky the Qui Nohn Delta Four LZ looked peaceful. Green dots bustling back and forth from green bungalows and green Huey helicopters buzzing just above the busy little dots. All surrounded by a sea of green jungle.

He was told that he would be met by SP4 Morris Ephram and be shown to his UH-1M Huey gun-ship. Bruce was one of three replacement gunners sent to Qui Nohn on this flight. As soon as the plane touched down on the clay-like runway the aircraft shuddered and rattled as if it were going to fall apart. It was the end of silence for fourteen months. Next to the chop of Huey blades, Morris’ voice would take the majority of the responsibility for that.

Between the take-off’s and landings of the twenty-three gun-ships stationed at Qui Nohn, Bruce heard only quips and pieces of what Morris was saying to him.

“SP4 Morris Ephram, welcome to Qui Nohn colon of the conflict... barracks and mess...Stick with me I’ll inject you into the social fabric...three days

leave, every other two weeks...tastes like shit but there is a lot of it...Warm, well I'll be honest HOT! beer...supplies on Thursday's...pretty good weed...tail in the city...shit-for-brains-asshole but he doesn't come around much."

Morris' words seemed to be background noise and everything else was center stage and bellowing incessantly.

The two men walked westward across the base. And the green dots from the sky were now swarming all around Bruce in a teeming drone. They passed countless shirtless men sitting around on conifer boxes of supplies each next to their gunship. It looked more like a car show than an Army Base. But, the cars were big deadly dragonflies capable of killing many more men than they were capable of saving.

Morris and Bruce staggered up to Slick-7 where his gunship was set down for three days and there was the 228th airborne sitting around on wooden conifer boxes drinking beer and huffing government issued smokes. After Morris' brief introductions Bruce settled in to where he ended up. The guys seemed all right and after two hours and four beers Bruce felt at ease and welcome among the crew. They sat in a circle and Bruce heard stories learned names and release dates.

Suddenly, there was a loud clang. It sounded like something hit the top of their helicopter. The clang was followed by a thud in the middle of their seated circle. A grenade rested in the dirt dead center in the middle of the circle of men. Scattering. Taking Cover.

O'Meara started chuckling from behind a crate and in unison O'Meara, and Banyon started cracking up. O'Meara stood up and stopped laughing immediately when he saw Morris' face. Morris was staring down at where the grenade landed. And sprawled out lying on top of the grenade was Bruce. The others stopped laughing and just stared.

Bruce could feel the firm lump of the grenade under his chest. He lay there with his eyes closed peacefully. Relieved. Waiting. He had hoped it would come this quick. It was why he was here and he was waiting patiently for it.

Morris' quivering voice broke the perceived silence.

"It's a...it's a joke Howard...it's a dud...joke."

Bruce opened his eyes stood up and walked off. O'Meara sat back down on his box and lit a cigarette. "Jesus Christ," he said.

"Kinda takes the humor out of that doesn't it."

Everyone that came to Qui Nohn got the same prank pulled on them. The old "pissmaker." Usually, they shrieked and ran frantically. Sometimes screaming something blindingly embarrassing. When Morris was "pissmakered" he physically pissed himself—hence the name. People still laugh about that. Everyone knew that this would be the last time the prank was pulled on anyone. It just wasn't funny anymore.

O'Meara, Banyon, and Morris had all been briefed by Lt. Pullen the previous day about new recruits with uncertain trigger fingers. A new recruit can endanger a crew by freezing up the first time they get into the shit. The boys had no doubts about Bruce Howard. He proved to them in a simple act that they would never have to question Bruce's willingness to lay down his life for them.

His tears were no longer warmer than the rest of his rain drenched face. The Huey was on its last trip back to the LZ. SP4 Bruce Howard was relieved of his duties in Vietnam. The papers in his shirt pocket said so, and that is why he was so scared. What now?

After the mess hall Bruce walked back to where his gunship was stationed. The boys were going through the routine flight tests. Something they did every night. Bruce was done and they went right on without him. Someone would come tomorrow. Be barked at for a while, and someone else would have to get lost in the days and nights of noise.

I'm done.

Bruce decided that in the morning he would pissmaker the new guy. And then hop on that big freedom bird and get the fuck out.

He stood and watched his former crew go through all of the motions of the flight tests. He was mouthing the words at each stage of the test. He could do it in his sleep.

Rotor good. Oil pressure is up.

Morris jumped in the side bay of the Huey and sat down, just like always.

Lift engage.

The last stage of testing was the flight phase. The Huey would lift up about five feet, be set back down and then the Dragonfly would sleep the night, rouse in the morning and carry the boys out over the canopy and bring them back. Day after day.

The Huey's whistle wasn't right. There was a scrubbing noise. The Big Dragonfly lurched forward and dragged a skid-nose down on the ground. Shuddering and hissing she just keeled over on top of some conifer boxes.

Vietnam was silent. There was a hot fire. Wood chips everywhere. He was far enough away that he was only scraped and pelted with debris, but his body ached. The blast was so loud it slapped his whole body. It clapped his ears. God it was silent now.

It was so quiet.

Screaming faces and the green blurs of men running by were slowly associated with their proper sounds. Bruce could hear again. Sirens and stretchers. Engines and Jeeps. Orders and Officers.

*Incident Accident Case*

*Total loss or fatality Accident*

*Unit: 228th*

*Number killed in accident = 3*

*Crew Members:*

*P CW3 DANIEL O'MEARA KIA*

*CE SP4 LEONARD BANYON KIA*

*CE SP4 MORRIS EPHRAIM KIA*

Bruce came home exactly when he said he would. Maggie was watching TV. Bruce kissed her cheek and went upstairs to the bedroom.

He pulled down the shoebox from the top shelf of the closet, set it on the bed and opened the top. There they were. Fifty-three salmon colored envelopes. Bruce sat on the edge of the bed and went through every one of the envelopes removed all fifty three \$2 bills and laid them out on top of the black comforter evenly spaced, orderly. He looked at them. Just sat and looked. A half smile crossed his lips.

The Pissmaker.

He thought about the boys. He thought about Morris and his tongue swallowing laughter. He thought about lying on the grenade hopeless and prepared to just give up: ready to die. He thought about all of their faces. Forever young. He thought about his kids, Maggie, all of the 'extra days.'

"It adds up over time."

Maggie's voice was always so calm and soothing.

"Yep," Bruce said still looking at the bills on the bed.

"How much you think all of that's worth, money bags?" Maggie said slipping an arm around his chest.

Bruce hugged Maggie's arm to his chest and kissed her hand.

"Every damn penny of it."

