

THE NEW LIEUTENANT'S RAP

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“The New Lieutenant’s Rap” is from *Hearts in Atlantis*, to be published by Scribner’s in the fall of 1999. This version, which differs considerably from the one which will appear in the book (it’s longer, for one thing), is offered as a little keepsake—my way of marking twenty-five fruitful (a little too fruitful, some critics would say) years as a novelist and freelance writer. It is limited to no more than 500 copies, each of which has been signed by me and numbered or lettered by Michael Alpert, who has so brilliantly executed all the Philtrum Press books, from *The Plant* to *The Ideal Genuine Man*. The printing is my own. So are the mistakes and scratch-outs.

I hope what follows makes you as uncomfortable as it does me.

Can I have one of those?" Sully asked the new lieutenant once they were safely out of the funeral parlor and down the alley which ran along the side. Here was a bench and a couple of sand-filled ashtrays. The new lieutenant had taken his cigarettes out as soon as they were around the corner. Dunhills. How Spiff. Sully had never had a Dunhill.

"Whatever floats your boat." Dieffenbaker sounded amused... but he hadn't been amused on the day old mamasan died. That day he had been shit scared. They had all been shit scared.

And today the new lieutenant smoked Dunhills, sold computers, and looked as if he had never been shit scared in his life. Say goddam. But Dieffenbaker had stood tall on that day in Dong Ha Province. He had done what needed doing, had given the order that needed giving. Sully thought if it had come down to him, Clemson and Malenfant and those other fuckheads would have killed until their ammo ran out—wasn't that pretty much what the men under Calley and Medina had done? But Dieffenbaker was no William Calley, give him that. Dieffenbaker had given the little nod. Slocum nodded back, then raised his rifle—goddam, I say goddam—

and blew off the back of Ralph Clemson's head.

Now Deef—the new lieutenant—was

Dieffenbaker, a bald computer salesman who had quit going to the reunions. He gave Sully a light with his Zippo, then watched as Sully drew back the smoke deep and coughed it back out.

"Been a while, hasn't it?" Dieffenbaker asked.

"Two years, give or take."

"You want to know the scary thing? How fast you get back into practice."

Sully took another drag and reflected that that was true of a lot of things, none of them good. Pagano, dead inside the funeral parlor, lying there in a wash of canned hymns—that wasn't a good thing, either. Pags's dead, fucking Pags, he thought. Can you say goddam, my brothers?

“Why is it that a fairly decent guy like Pagano—no angel but a fairly decent guy—

goes down with cancer of the pancreas and a guy like Ronnie Malenfant gets a second chance? What do you thing, loot?”

Dieffenbaker voiced a sour laugh. “A good question, and original as hell. Why don't you jot it down on a postcard and send it to Paul Harvey? He can answer it on the radio, after Page Three and before Today's Bumper Snicker.

Me, I just build computers.”

“And smoke Dunhills.”

“Smoke Dunhills, that's affirmative.”

They sat without talking much for awhile.

Sully asked Dieffenbaker for another cigarette and Dieffenbaker gave him one, also another flick of that old Zippo. From around the corner came tangles of conversation and some low laughter. Pags's funeral was over. Another one bites the dust.

“Why were we in Vietnam to begin with?”

Sully asked. “Not to get all philosophical or anything, but have you ever figured that out?”

“Who said, ‘He who does not learn from the past is condemned to repeat it?’”

“Richard Dawson, the host of Family

Feud.”

“Fuck you, Sullivan.”

“Well... maybe it was Kasey Kasem.”

“And fuck your mother.”

“I don’t know who said it. Does it matter?”

“Fuckin yeah, it matters,” Dieffenbaker said. “Because we never got out. We never got out of the green. Our generation died there.”

“That sounds a little—”

“A little what? Pretentious? You bet. A little silly? Yes sir. A little self-regarding? That’s affirmative. But that’s us. That’s us back to front and right up the gut. What have we done since Nam, Sully? Those of us who went, those of us who ran north to Toronto, those of us who marched and protested, those of us who just sat at home watching the Dallas Cowboys and drinking beer and farting into the sofa cushions?”

Color was seeping into the new lieutenant’s cheeks. He had the look of a man who has found his hobby-horse and is now climbing on, helpless to do anything but ride. He held up his hands and began popping his fingers to emphasize his points. To Sully he looked like a maniacal carpet salesman on high-number cable TV.

“Well, let’s see. We’re the generation that pioneered the videogaming revolution, voyaging bravely from Pong to Myst in a mere twenty-five years. We invented the ATV, the Feva-Strip, laser missile-guidance systems, Super-8 video cameras, and crack cocaine. We discovered Richard Simmons, Scott Peck, and Martha Stewart Living. Our idea of history was to reinvent Kiss and go to Bob Dylan shows and put Greatful Dead stickers on our Japanese cars and our Beemers. Our idea of a major lifestyle change is buying a dog. We gave up Eldridge Cleaver for Eddie Murphy and Lenny

Bruce for Andrew Dice Clay. The girls who burned their bras in 1969 now buy their lingerie from Victoria's Secret and the boys who fucked fearlessly for peace are now fat men who sit in front of their computer screens late at night, spanking the monkey while looking at pictures of naked eighteen-year-olds on the Internet.

That's us, Sully—we like to watch. Movies, video games, live car-chase footage from the WJKL Sky-Cam Chopper, fistfights on The Jerry Springer Show, Mark McGwire, John Elway, World Federation Wrestling. We're the Weather Channel generation, Sully. We can accept the idea that God is dead just as long as we know what travel conditions are going to be like on I-80 this weekend. We finally got a guy from our generation in the White House and the best he could do was stick a panatella up some needy little girl's twat. Talk about dirty deeds done dirt cheap—say goddam!”

“Deef—”

“Don't call me that, nobody calls me that now, I told you. We're a joke, Sully our generation is a joke. Every name they put on us ends in -ie, like a kid's nickname—yuppie, yippie, buppie, Butchie, Petie, Patty come in, it's time for supper. But there was a time... don't laugh, but there was a time when it was all in our hands. Do you know that?”

Sully nodded, thinking of Carol. Not the version of her sitting on the sofa with him and her wine-smelling mother, not the one flipping the peace-sign at the camera while the blood ran down the side of her face—at the peace-march in Bridgeport, that had been, just before he went into the service—that one was already too late and too crazy, you could see it in her smile, read it in the sigh, where screaming words forbade all discussion. Rather he thought of Carol on the day her mother had taken a whole bunch of them to Savin Rock Amusement Park. 1960, that would have been. Carol had worn her blue bathing suit and sometimes she'd give Sully's friend Bobby that look, the one that said Bobby was killing her and death was sweet. It had been in their hands then, he was quite sure of it. But

kids lose everything, kids have slippery fingers and holes in their pockets and they lose everything.

Meanwhile, the new lieutenant went on.

The new lieutenant was rapping—he was full out and pumped, can you say oh yeah.

“We filled up our wallets on the stock market and we went to the gym and booked therapy sessions to get in touch with ourselves.

We bought sneakers made by uneducated, malnourished twelve-year-olds and put them on our feet and never thought twice about it because Michael Jordan said we should, and we want to be like Mike. South America is burning, Malaysia’s burning, fucking Vietnam is burning, but we finally got past that self-hating thing, we got the appointment for the liposuction and the reservations at Palms of the Sea, so fuck the rest of the world, I’m okay, you’re okay, John Glenn got back okay, and none of the credit-cards are currently maxed out, so what the fuck? As for the future we all used to talk about... that’s in the past.”

Dieffenbaker’s fingers were held up in front of his face and poked out, to Sully he looked like Al Jolson getting ready to sing

“Mammy.” Dieffenbaker seemed to become aware of this at the same moment Sully did, and lowered his hands. He looked tired and distracted and unhappy.

“I like lots of people our age where they’re one by one,” he said. “Some I actually admire.

But I loathe and despise my generation, Sully.

We had an opportunity to change everything.

We actually did.”

“If you’re talking about selling out—”

“Shit, every generation sells out, it’s part of growing up. But we had it in our hands, man, we had it in our fucking hands, and we never sold it at all. We gave it away, like that Bible guy that gave up his birthright for a mess of pottage. Our mess of potage was designer jeans, tickets to see Mariah Carey, and Celine Dion at Radio City Music Hall, premium cable, frequent flier miles, James Cameron’s Titanic, and those all-important Retirement Portfolios.

The only generation even close to us in pure, selfish self-indulgence is the so-called Lost Generation of the twenties, and at least most of them had the decency to stay drunk. We, on the other hand, have made a self-congratulatory fetish of staying sober, helped along by some vague, non-punishing deity who seems to have no other purpose. A Tupperware God for a Tupperware generation. Basically, Sully, we suck.”

“Hey, man—”

“You know the price of selling out the future, Sully-John? You never really leave the past. You can never get over. My Thesis is that you’re not really in New York City at all. You’re in the Delta, leaning back against a tree, stoned and rubbing bug-dope on the back of your neck.

Packer’s still C.O. because it’s still 1969. The big tune on ASR is still ‘Willie and the Poorboys’ by Creedence. Everything you think of as ‘your later life’ is nothing but a pot-bubble.

And it’s better that way. Vietnam is better. The later life of a sellout isn’t pleasant.”

“Vietnam is better.”

“That’s affirmative, soldier.” Dieffenbaker lit a fresh cigarette with his Zippo. “That’s why we stay there. We don’t love out Tupperware God, but we love Vietnam.”

“You think?”

“Absolutely.” Dieffenbaker looked at his watch. “Like the old Wolfman used to say—too hip, gotta split.”

“Me too.”

Dieffenbaker started toward the front of the building, then turned back to Sully. “I’m sorry.” He said. “I guess it was the shock of seeing Pags in a box. He was too young, you know?”

“I know.” Sully said, but what he knew was that none of them were too young. Not anymore.

“Hang in a little bit. We’ll go for a drink. I promise not to preach.” But his eyes shifted from Sully’s when he said this, as if they knew this was a promise he couldn’t keep.

“Thanks, loot, but I really ought to get back. Another time, huh?”

They looked at each other across the

years—it felt like years, not space, and Sully thought: ‘Willy and the Poorboys’ is still on the ASR. It’s still clicks instead of miles and Dieffenbaker is still the new lieutenant. We stay because it’s better. He’s right. We stay.

“You bet, Sully, that’s affirmative.

Another time.”