

Meeting Bobby Lee

The Saturday before Christmas in 2005, I prowled the halls of the local VA hospital as C. Wolf, bearing bags of salt-free pretzels for veterans who were expected to remain admitted through the remainder of the holiday season. Some were relatively young, about my age at the time, seeking treatment for ailments that lingered after their tours in Iraq and Afghanistan were concluded. Yet others were older, having fought in Vietnam, Korea, and World War II.

One of the administrators led me up and down the corridors with the list of room numbers on her clipboard. Most of the time, the visits were relatively short. I popped in, shook some hands, and lay a bag of pretzels on the bedside trays before continuing on to the next soldier or sailor on the list. Few had visitors, and some simply napped through the entirety of my visit. The whole of the afternoon had been relatively unremarkable; that is until I found myself outside the last door that was on our list.

“I just want to give you a little heads up,” said one of the hospital administrators. She was a well-dressed, middle-aged woman with bottle-blond hair. “He’s been here a while and probably will be until—you know. He’s a little angry about that. Sometimes he takes it out on people.”

I nodded, doing my best to process the information, but I wasn’t sure then why it was so important. None of the other

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patients warranted this sort of sidebar. I wondered why this stop was any different.

She pushed open the door and stepped inside. I hung back behind the curtain, just out of view.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” a hoarse baritone rattled behind the curtain. “What are yinz bothering me with now? More blood? Bunch of goddamned leaches.”

“No, Mr. Lee,” the administrator said in a measured professional tone. “I’m just here because you’ve got a visitor.”

“So excited to get rid of me you had to lead death to me, personally?”

The administrator shook her head and she motioned to me. I straightened up and, while holding a bag of pretzels outstretched in both hands, I walked into the sterile, blue-walled room. There were tubes and machines in there, though none, except the saline drip, seemed to be hooked up. I turned to face a steely-eyed man who glowered at me uncertainly. His face was weathered and unshaven, and with a half-grunt, half-cough, the old man attempted to clear his throat.

“And what is this all about?” the old man said, fumbling for one of the buttons on his hospital bed. The mechanism whirred and his head slowly began to rise.

“It’s C. Wolf,” the administrator introduced me. “He’s here to pay you a little visit.

The old man nodded skeptically.

“Oh. All right,” he said, motioning to the chair at his bedside. “So are you gonna sit down, or what?”

I hesitated and offered a glance toward the administrator. She blinked, seemingly surprised by the invitation, then offered me a half shrug.

I crossed the room, and as I did so, Mr. Lee extended a hand in greeting. I shook it and handed him the bag of salt-free

pretzels. He laid it on the tray table that extended over his lap with his untouched lunch. I settled into the seat beside him. He studied me suspiciously for a moment, then turned back toward the administrator.

“Isn’t there someone else around here for yinz to torture or something?”

The administrator smiled without humor.

“Well?” Mr. Lee growled. “Go on. Get out of here and let me talk to the wolf.”

“I’ll be back in a while to check on you then,” the administrator said, and after I offered her the thumbs-up, she stepped outside the door.”

I turned back to face Mr. Lee, who eyed me suspiciously. It was as if he were trying to decide if I were friend or foe.

“So, Mr. Lee,” I began in C. Wolf’s usual growl. “Name’s Bobby,” he said. “You know. Like that old Confederate general, Bobby Lee. But he died before my time. We were related, you know. Don’t remember exactly how just now. Shit they give us here, messes with your mind.”

“Oh, right. Bobby then. So what service were you with?”

“Army,” he said, “but I spent twenty years working as a Back Country Ranger after that.”

“Back Country Ranger?”

“Yeah,” he said simply. “In the wilderness areas out west—up in the Rockies mostly.”

“What was that like?”

His expression softened. “Amazing. Best job ever.”

Something flashed in his eyes and it seemed to cut through his cold countenance. Through it I gained the glimpse of my own grandfather, the old Army Air Corps soldier who died before I had a chance to really know him. Although I had just met Bobby Lee, there was something about him that piqued my

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curiosity. Everyone has a story, after all. All you need is someone to listen.

“What sort of things did you do out there?”

“Patrolled a lot of the trails to make sure people followed the rules. Had to carry in whatever supplies you need and carry everything out with you when you left. Leave only footprints—that’s the code.”

“I think I’ve heard something about that from my dad,” I said. “When he’s talking about backpacking.”

“Yeah? You like camping? Backpacking?”

I shrugged. “We did a lot of camping, as a kid. My dad liked backpacking, but I never tried it.”

“Ah, you should, especially out west. Does a lot of good. When I got out of the Army, people were hard for me, but out there, I worked the trails, usually with horses or mules. They were one of my favorite bits. People they’ll bite for nothing at all. But horses—they only bite if there’s a reason. There’s always a reason.”

I sat there for over an hour, never removing one bit of C. Wolf. I was simply a giant wolf listening to stories of the wilderness and learning how that mission helped one man to recover from the other missions in Korea—a war that made little sense to the man who had fought twice for the city of Seoul. He tensed up, talking more to himself than to me about combat. He explained how useless the doctors were, telling him to “just act normal and you’ll feel normal.” But when he spoke of the wilderness, something in him came alive again, and he smiled, sharing stories of how he repurposed his military experience to hunt down poachers who dared to defile what he claimed was “God’s last true cathedral.”

When the administrator came back, I stood and shook the hand of Bobby Lee.

“You come back and see me again soon,” he said, and he gripped my hand with a renewed strength that I did not expect from a man of his age and condition.

I assured him I would, and I waved back as I followed the administrator into the hall. She beamed, eyes wide, as she led me back to her office, where my duffle bag was stowed.

“I don’t get it,” she said. “That man has been miserable to everyone since he got here. But you plop a guy in a wolf suit next to him and it’s like he’s just catching up with an old friend.”

I think it was really people that made him lash out like that. By that I don’t mean the well-intentioned doctors and nurses who provided care for soldiers and sailors that Christmas. I think it was most likely the generals who had thrown him into battle all those years ago. Perhaps it was the bootstrap politicians, the generation of post-war psychologists who had urged Mr. Lee to just not think about those things—to ignore them until they went away. Or maybe it was just the fact that the chair for visitors next to his bed had simply remained vacant too long. Maybe when you’re let down by people so often in life, there are things that you can say to a giant wolf that others just wouldn’t understand.

After the new year, I returned to the VA to honor my word to Mr. Lee, but when I arrived, his bed was filled by another. I asked about him at the nurses’ station, by name and room number.

“Oh, Mr. Robert Lee?” a nurse said.

She consulted the computer and took a long pause. Then she clucked her tongue and shook her head.

“I’m afraid that he’s no longer with us,” she said.

The answer struck me as a vague, curious choice of words. At the time I couldn’t tell whether that meant that old Bobby Lee had passed away or whether he had simply gone home, or

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found his way to a hospice or other long-care facility. The nurse refused to provide any further clarification and privacy laws being what they were, I suppose I understood that.

Whatever happened to Bobby Lee after I left, I was glad to have had the chance to meet him, if only to give him an opportunity to remember his time in the backcountry. In some way, as he told me his stories, it was like his mind was freed from that bed. In that retelling, he didn't appear to be a seriously ill patient, nor was I just a second-rate mascot from the local Minor League Baseball team. It was like he was a ranger again, patrolling the trails, and I was a lone wolf that he met along the way. At the VA that Christmas, we traveled that waning wilderness together, reminding each other that—at least in that moment—we both were very much alive.