

Phil's Birthday

Unlike the balmy sweat of August, the tropical cool of February cuddles Florida into its wintry comfort. It's just the opposite in Australia where February blazes and August chills. On this Florida February night in Key West, images of Phil flash on and off the screen in celebration of sixty years of his own life events. His wife, Carol, has orchestrated the surprise. Guests occupy different standing positions around the bar and beside the table abundant with seafood and salads at one end and fruity desserts on the other. They sip a martini, a wine, a beer or a cocktail and enjoy the opportunity to see their friend in the years before they knew him. Smiles, chuckles and other expressions of admiration fill the air while preservations of times past show Phil as a wide-eyed baby, a curious child and a teenager on the verge of the next episode. The screen occupies a corner framed by palm trees planted at ground level. The open-air bar, when not in use for social events, doubles as a conference room.

A still confronts the party gatherers. Phil appears in his protective military armor, left hand draped over his door mounted M-60 machine gun. The ammunition belt is loaded. He's about to go on another mission. The resignation on his face and his loose stance reveal to the camera and to those in the room that this is not the first time he's flown through the jungle canopies and over the fields and rice paddies of Vietnam. All present are aware, as the result of varying degrees of information shared, just what this picture represents.

February 9, 1967, Bien Hoa, Vietnam.

I'm hunkered down in my bunker guarding the perimeter on my first day in country. Because I'm a Spec 4, Military Operation Specialty, Crew Chief, they've put me in charge of the ammo dump at the replacement depot while I wait for them to process my orders to the 1st Aviation Brigade. Out of nowhere the sky lights up with mortars from VC rockets. People grab their helmets and guns and run to their positions screaming because their sleep is interrupted again. It doesn't seem real. The tracers make a spectacular display. I'm having my own party with the best fireworks for miles. I'm twenty-one today. Tomorrow morning I'll still be singing Happy Birthday. When they do

their rounds, they'll think I've lost it but if I'm going to see my twenty-second birthday I'm gonna have to find a way to make the most of it.

February 9, 2006, Key West, Florida

Now Phil wears a gray suit and matching tie. A Christmas tree dangling with handmade ornaments stands behind him and has replaced the helicopter in the background of the previous shot. His blond hair parts on the left and falls comfortably to the other side. His eyes sparkle brilliant blue and he smiles with the shyness of adolescence not yet explored. A girl stands beside him in a navy blue, velveteen A-line dress. The hem stops just above the knee and the sleeves fan out to conceal slender wrists. The nuns would be proud of her as a recent graduate from Domremy Ladies' College, a Catholic school for girls of good breeding. The girl's mother has taken the picture in the living room of their house in Sydney, Australia. It is Christmas Eve, 1967. The girl is me. I am seventeen.

A series of events triggered by a phone call nine years ago has led me here tonight.

"Yes, of course I remember you. Wow."

"I used your letters in a narrative research master's thesis. I wondered what happened to you and typed your name into a people finder. When your address and number came up I thought about it for a few days. Finally I decided to silence the voice that told me not to be so stupid and phone anyway. I hope you don't mind."

"No, of course not, I'm really glad you did."

"I don't know why I only have two letters from you."

"I sent you some newspapers from my hometown, St. Petersburg, but never heard from you again."

"I don't think I received them. I don't remember. Do you have the letters I wrote to you?"

"Not with me but they could be in a trunk at my mother's. That afternoon I came into your record shop I was in rough shape. I'd spent the morning in the bathtub with a bottle of bourbon. I told you I flew on a helicopter but I didn't tell you I was a door

gunner. I was shot down three times. The last time I was the only survivor. Somewhere in all of that I received a Dear John. Just before I got to Sydney I'd decided to extend for another year. But meeting you and your family reminded me what life was like before the war and I changed my mind. The day I left Vietnam, the guy who took my seat was killed. Every Memorial Day I go back to the bottle of bourbon and toast each of the friends I lost and each of the friends who kept me alive, including you."

February 16, 1967, Vietnam

One week in country and I hate this place. I already feel like I've been here a year. Today we fly the slick into Hobo Woods. I've lost count of how many times but I could check the log. Our job is to resupply the troops on the ground with ammo but because the medivacs can't keep up we bring back the wounded as well as the body bags. We explode our machine guns on the ground as we hit the jungle canopy where the thunder of the rotor blades reverberates through the trees and foliage in a roaring howl. Our tracers bounce off the ground. Charlie's tracers come back at us. As we unload metal and load flesh in a hot LZ, the guys on the ground yell all kinds of shit we can't make out in the thick of machines, guns and people moaning and crying, twisted and silent. Finally we have done all we can. No more missions today. As crew chief, I clean up the slick and prepare it for tomorrow while my gunner cleans and checks the weapons for worn springs, broken parts and any other unusual wear. I haul bucket after bucket of water to the slick and throw it in but the blood won't come out. I scrub and scrub but the blood still won't come out. What I can get rid of are pieces of bloodied skin, bone, muscle tissue and flesh. The remnants of battle punch me in the stomach. I scramble out before I fall and throw up as if it'll never stop. Three hundred and fifty eight days to go.

Sunday morning, Christmas Eve, 1967, Sydney, Australia

"Get out the Christmas tablecloth for me Dearest, and set the table, will you? We'll use the good cutlery. Have a look under the sideboard. I think that's where I put the box last time I moved things around. Oh, and set out the wineglasses. Are the matching serviettes there? Do they need an iron?" Granny calls from the kitchen.

She dollops the leg of lamb with the lard she keeps in a ridged silver tin that once contained raspberry jam. Drippings, she calls it, collected from previous roasts. She sprinkles generous amounts of salt, scooped up in all her fingers, over the fatty meat. Her taste buds, desensitized by sixty years of nicotine assault, crave a more than usual amount.

“I wonder if he lost the address,” I say when Phil, at six thirty, is half an hour late.

“Can you get hold of him? What’s his phone number?” Mum asks sipping on her third glass of wine.

“I don’t know where he’s staying. I forgot to ask.”

Three generations of women drift into the lounge room and sit by the Christmas tree, mesmerized by the green, red, yellow and blue Christmas lights while we wait for our guest to arrive.

“What do you know about this bloke anyway, Jan?”

“Not much. Just that he’s a really nice guy. He’s fun. He’s...”

“He’s late is what he is. You can’t trust these blokes. They’re here today, gone tomorrow. You’d better start watching yourself or you’ll end up in all sorts of trouble. I spoke to Mollie yesterday and she’s not happy with that new record shop you’re supposed to be running. She’s closing it at the end of January. What are you going to do then? I think you’re spending too much time talking to these American fellas when they come in and not putting enough effort into your work. You are damn lucky I got that job for you! And now you’re going to lose it. You’ve got to work. I can’t do it all by myself anymore! And I think you’d better get out of the Cross. You seem to be distracted up there.”

“It’s fine, Mum. I’ve already lined up another job. And, I kind of like it at the Cross. It’s interesting.”

“Another job? Doing what?”

“Waitressing at...”

“Waitressing up there! No bloody way! I won’t have it!” She gulps down the remainder of her glass and stands to get a refill

“Well, let’s eat,” Granny says. There’s a perfectly good dinner getting ruined out here. I think he’d be here by now if he were coming, don’t you? We’ll go ahead and have ours. I’ll do up an extra plate and keep it in the oven in case he turns up later.”

“A taxi just pulled up out the front.” Mum interrupts her trip to the kitchen and rushes to the bathroom where she checks her hair. “Someone’s getting out.”

Granny serves the roast and vegetables. There is enough wine left for each of them to have a sip. I fill my glass with water from the tap. After the main course I cut the cake that has become my Christmas contribution. We drink tea. Granny deals the cards for a game of Five Hundred. At eleven thirty we walk to St Joseph’s Catholic Church to attend Midnight Mass. I ask Phil if he wants to go to confession, only because everyone else is.

Back home Granny slices homemade potted meat and serves it on warm toast. We sip more black tea tempered with milk, slow to make the next move as the inevitability of separation closes in around us.

“I’ve got a second wind. I’ll drive you back to your hotel, Phil,” Mum announces.

Granny eases herself out of the chair and makes a dash to the kitchen with the help of chairs and a wall along the way. She fills a tin with Anzac biscuits she has especially made with coconut and oats for Phil to take back to the war.

Mum insists that Phil occupy the privileged position beside her in the green Morris Minor, which relegates me to the backseat.

We grab a few last words about life and what’s important as though we have forever to figure it out. Mum listens, or is lost in her own world of unrequited thoughts. We drop him off at the Crest. He waits at the curb while I scramble out of the back to take up the seat of privilege. A final hug and then we are gone. He is gone.

“Well, he was a nice enough fella. Did he tell you why he was late?”

I shake my head and turn to the blurred parade of houses darkened in anticipation of the joyful morning the seasonal hymns proclaim. In the early hours of a different Christmas Day we weave through almost deserted main roads. The noise of the car’s engine dulls the awkward roar of silence.

Granny's two sons, their wives and my cousins come for dinner in the late afternoon. Friends drop in to celebrate the birth with food and drink. I wonder how Granny can prepare oven-cooked meals in a cramped kitchen when outside it is a hundred and one degrees Fahrenheit.

When the bustle of Christmas day subsides, Mum passes out on the couch. Granny and I finish the last of the dishes.

"Can I borrow some of that fancy writing paper I gave you for your birthday?" I ask.

"Check the right, top draw of the sideboard. I think you'll find it there."

Now the house is quiet, I sit at the kitchen table where it is familiar. The place where Granny tells her stories and carries out her nurturing duties like preparing vegetables for the hearty meals we eat. The place where cards are dealt and gossip shared. Pen in hand, I stare at the pale, green wall above the fake pink and white marble tiles that run the length of the bench on the opposite side.

January 5, 1968, Vietnam

Everyone's picking up a lot of movement. The VC and the North Vietnamese are all over the place. Every single one of the outposts are getting hit. Something big is about to happen. A mortar just went off and blew a pen and notepad right out of my hands. I'm supposed to leave in a week but they've decided no one is going home until this thing is over. It looks like the NVA has planned this to coincide with Tet, the New Year celebration, so now they're calling it the Tet Offensive. We're flying almost twenty-four hours a day resupplying ammo, carrying troops and evacuating wounded. I'm so short now I just hope and pray I make it out of here alive.

January 6, 1968

Dear Jan

I received a very pleasant surprise. Your letter was lying on my bunk. Yesterday I wrote you a nice long letter but it flew out the window as we were flying along so I'll try again.

I hope that you had a very merry Christmas and the happiest New Years'. I must say again how much I enjoyed being with you and your family Christmas Eve. Even though I nearly didn't make it. You and your folks certainly made my Christmas one that I shall never forget as long as I may live. I hope that if there is ever anything that I can do to help you in anything please feel free to call on me. I would consider it a pleasure to be able to serve you. Please don't hesitate to call on me, because I feel that I owe you a great deal and also think that you folk are a great bunch of people.

I hope your folks don't think too bad of me for being so late. I know how I hate for anyone to be late when I have an appointment with them. I realize it was very bad manners. I would love to return and do it all over again. Only this time I'd be on time. Besides, I am anxious to sample some more of your cooking.

Perhaps I could make up for it by inviting you and your family to have tea with me and my family in America.

In your letter it seemed that you might think that you might have upset me about confession. Please don't worry Jan, because you didn't upset me. I would have liked to have been able to explain my reasons for not going to you only we didn't get any time together to talk. I guess you found out one thing about me that night and that was just how stubborn I am.

When we went to Mass my mind was filled with all sorts of emotions. I felt sad, glad, good, bad, lonely, and yet I felt that I was with dear, close friends because you were there. You could never imagine all the things that were going through my mind that night.

I would like to take a few more minutes of your time to comment on something you said on the way back to my hotel. You said that you thought that a person shouldn't waste their whole life trying to amass Money. I was glad to hear you felt that way about that particular subject. I am a strong believer that a person should above all get a job that he enjoys or a job that he finds rewarding. My psychology of life is that money is only as good as the enjoyment and pleasure it can bring to a man and his family. I personally hope to be able to provide a good living for my wife and family and still have plenty of time to be with them. I

feel that too many men today are spending most of their time at their job and therefore are not devoting enough time to their families. I would like to hear how you feel about this subject. I am sure from what you said in the car that you are started on the right track. I would have liked very much to have had the time to have talked to you about this subject in detail.

I am on guard duty now at the heliport and I have a little time between shifts and they have a typewriter in the guard shack so I'm going to try to type this letter out. As I am looking back at the things I have typed so far I can see that I have made many mistakes. I only hope that you will forgive the mistakes. It has been almost two years since I have touched a typewriter. Even with the mistakes that I am making I am sure that this will be much better than trying to make out my terrible handwriting.

It is getting close to the time when I will have to take my turn at guarding the perimeter so I will have to bring this to an end. I imagine that you will be very glad to see this letter come to an end.

I am writing this letter between flights so there are a couple of hours between paragraphs. I am trying to do my best to keep it coherent but I find it hard to keep one chain of thought.

I hope that this letter finds you all happy and healthy, "May God Bless and Keep You All."

Your American Friend

Phil

PS. I had two hours in Saigon the other day and I stopped by the little chapel they have at the heliport and said a prayer for you and your folks. I am sure a family as nice as yours is well watched over by God but I just thought I would put my two cents worth in.

February 9, 2006, Key West, Florida

Consequent birthday images tell of Phil's marriage, his role as a protective father to his daughter and his love of a risk whether it's in sport or business. The screen goes

blank. The guests are satisfied. They know more of Phil now than they did before. Their imaginations will continue to process and fill in the blanks for as long as they need. The palm tree fronds on either side of the screen dance in both obedience to and, defiance of the cold front beginning its passage over the island. Spotlights shearing from their roots to their tips put them clearly on stage. Palm trees are the common denominator in the three points of reference, Key West, Vietnam, Sydney, that have connected time and place this evening.

Phil spends the rest of the night pushing around a rusty old walker frame my husband, Tom, has found on the street. It is decorated with red, white and blue streamers and a horn that he squeezes for entertainment.

As fun and laughter slide into good-bye and thank you, Phil and Carol work their way through a parade of guests. As usual I find myself at the end of the line.

“It was a great party, Carol. Thank you for including the slide my mother took.” I cannot adequately express what her gesture has meant and deal with it by turning to Phil.

“I don’t think I wished you a happy twenty second birthday.”

“I probably didn’t tell you when it was.” The years turn back again like pages in a book.

“Do you realize that if you hadn’t walked into the record shop thirty nine years ago I wouldn’t be living in Key West?”

“It works both ways. If you hadn’t been there when I walked into the record shop, I wouldn’t be here either.”

On the occasion of Phil’s sixtieth birthday party, time and place have reinvented themselves. Friends we have met through Phil and Carol move in to say their goodnight and invite Tom and me to their home for a nightcap. Key West has orchestrated another evening at the end of the road where possibility has no boundaries.

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