

THEN I CAME HOME

Written by

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Based on the memoir by Sam Gaylord

FADE IN:

INT. SOUTHWESTERN HIGH SCHOOL - LUNCHROOM - DAY

Almost summer, 1967, in Hanover, Indiana.

An expanse of worn linoleum covers the large floor filled with regulation tables and chairs. It's well used but clean.

A group of neatly dressed STUDENTS queues up for the Monday lunch line, MURMURING amongst themselves as they wait to buy their weekly tickets from the CASHIER, whose face looks as tight as her hair net.

Shifting his weight nervously from foot to foot, senior SAM GAYLORD (17), half Irish, half American Indian, skinny as a rail and with the worst haircut in the whole state of Indiana, stands near the front of the line dreading his turn. His clothes are patched and one or two sizes too big but he holds himself well.

To take his mind off the coming confrontation, Sam tunes in to the conversations around him.

SELF-IMPORTANT BOY

...it's only a police action in Vietnam, that's what my dad said...

NASALLY BOY

...said he can avoid the draft by going to college...

GUSHING GIRL

...went right up to Canada without saying nothing to my folks, can you believe it?

Sam's thoughts stray from the conversations as his eyes focus. He stares deep into the black depths of the Cashier's unblinking orbs. She's obviously asked him something.

SAM

(mumbling)  
Uh, free lunch.

CASHIER

Excuse me, young man?

SAM

(a bit louder)  
I said I'm free lunch.

The Cashier's eyes crystallize into pebbles.

CASHIER  
Name?

SAM  
Uh, Sam... Gaylord?

He looks at her, expecting her to recognize him, but he only gets a beady stare.

A couple of students have started to watch the exchange.

SAM (CONT'D)  
I'm the one that sweeps up after  
school.

He sees a flash of irritated recognition, then-

CASHIER  
Gaylord, Sam.

She hunts for his name on the list, seeming to take forever as Sam pulls in a belly full of air.

The Cashier looks up expectantly.

CASHIER (CONT'D)  
Your money?

SAM  
Uh, free lunch.

CASHIER  
(biting out each word)  
Free lunch.

Sam flinches as she thrusts a ticket in his direction. He quickly grabs it.

SAM  
Thank you, ma'am.

Sam blows out his belly full of air as he hurries away.

INT. SOUTHWESTERN HIGH SCHOOL - LUNCHROOM - DAY

The sun makes the room glow with mid-afternoon light.

Sam sweeps the floor, his stomach gurgling loud enough to make him grimace and rub it in consternation.

The janitor PETE sees Sam's pause in his work.

PETE

Looks like you moved most of it  
from one side of the room to the  
other.

Startled, Sam looks chagrined as he surveys his work.

SAM

Guess I got my mind on other  
things.

PETE

Let me guess: college or girls.

Sam nods, he wishes either one of these was true.

SAM

Oh, I don't know about college.

PETE

You kids are lucky today, got that  
G.I. Bill. Wish we had that in my  
day.

Pete waves at the floor.

PETE (CONT'D)

You go on. I'll take care of the  
rest.

Sam doesn't need a second invitation to leave.

SAM

Thanks, Pete. I'll see you  
tomorrow.

PETE

That you will; that you will.

Sam tucks his broom in a storage locker then heads out of the  
lunchroom, nodding at Pete on his way and whistling to  
himself.

I/E. BOY'S GYM - DAY

Still whistling, Sam keeps to the edge of the room as the  
COACH leads the PLAYERS in warm-up calisthenics before they  
head out the open doorway and to the outside basketball  
hoops.

They pay Sam no mind as he slips into the-

## INT. BOY'S LOCKER ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Sam grabs another broom from another closet and starts sweeping the floor.

He finds a sock on a bench and opens the nearest locker to tuck it inside. While the locker is open, Sam reaches into a pair of pants that hang from a hook.

After glancing around, Sam pulls out a wallet and takes only one dollar, ignoring the quantity of bills inside. He places the wallet back in the pants and continues sweeping.

Then Sam finds a pair of briefs. He gingerly places them in a locker, and again pulls out a wallet and extracts a dollar.

## EXT. SOUTHWESTERN HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

Sam whistles as he trots away from the nearby basketball courts, but waits until he's some distance from the coach and players before counting the cash he's managed to retrieve.

After figuring out the amount, he looks relieved, the corners of his mouth turning up, and then he runs a little faster away from school.

## I/E. MAUDE'S SUMMER RESTAURANT - DAY

Sam hunches over a stool at the counter, the wide windows behind him providing an excellent view of the street and the small town behind him.

MAUDE (60s), the proprietress, smiles sweetly at Sam and he grins back at her, his mouth full of hamburger and fries.

He swallows as he places his money on the counter.

SAM

You need any help with the trash  
when I'm done here?

MAUDE

Why, Sam, you are the sweetest,  
kindest, most hardworking boy.  
That'd be nice.

Maude swoops the money up.

Sam takes another bite to hide the guilty flush creeping up his neck at her compliment, which he isn't sure is true.

EXT. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD - DAY

The clapboard has seen better days, as most of the paint has washed away over the years and the boards show rot in places. An outhouse stands in the back, with a well-worn path to and fro, and a shed completes the trio of buildings.

Sam trots up the gravel drive in time to see his FATHER dragging a small, dead cow toward the side of the house. His MOTHER watches from the front porch, several of Sam's younger BROTHERS and SISTERS around her.

FATHER

Give us a hand. We need her in the shed.

Sam rushes over to oblige, seeing the bullet hole in the animal's head.

SAM

What's this?

MOTHER (O.S.)

Dinner.

Sam glances up at the set look on his mother's face.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

And something to serve for your sister's wedding.

Sam nods quickly so his mother doesn't see his embarrassment.

FATHER

Mr. Goldstein comes by, you know nothing about any of his cows.

SAM

Yes, sir.

Sam eyes the dead animal, now realizing where the family has gotten the meat.

SAM (CONT'D)

I was gonna go fishing.

FATHER

Well, today you won't need to. We got plenty for a while.

SAM

When's Bill gonna be home?

FATHER

That's up to the Navy. With all the trouble brewing, he might not get any leave for a time.

He catches Sam's disappointed look.

FATHER (CONT'D)

They'll make a man of him. Mark my words.

SAM

Yes, sir.

Father takes in Sam's scrawny frame, displeased.

FATHER

Get a better grip on those hind quarters and help me out here.

Sam follows directions and lifts.

FATHER (CONT'D)

That'll do it.

The pair then makes short work of getting the cow around back to the shed.

INT. SOUTHWESTERN HIGH SCHOOL - CLASSROOM - DAY

Sam and the rest of his history class stand with their hands over their hearts as they look toward the flag.

Like the TEACHER, Sam's face is serious, almost reverent, as he finishes the Pledge of Allegiance with the rest.

CLASS

*One nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.*

Sam takes one last look at the flag before sitting like the rest of his classmates.

TEACHER

Today we'll finish our look at General Patton and the Battle of the Bulge.

A few classmates crack a smile or giggle at the name. Not Sam, this is serious business to him.

As the teacher moves to the chalkboard for his lecture, Sam's eyes go back to the flag.

INT. MARINE RECRUITMENT CENTER - MADISON - DAY

Sam's eyes are on the flag, which is mounted on a staff set on a raised platform.

MARINE RECRUITER (O.S.)  
You'll leave for boot camp in San Diego, California in a week. You get that, son?

Sam's eyes dart to the MARINE RECRUITER (40s), who studies him levelly. Sam knows this is going to make a man out of him.

SAM  
Then I'll be a Marine?

The Marine Recruiter maintains his serious demeanor, though he'd like to roll his eyes at the rookie.

MARINE RECRUITER  
You'll spend a night at the Brown Hotel in Louisville first. Get your physical. Then you will be inducted.

Sam nods.

SAM  
On the G.I. Bill.

MARINE RECRUITER  
After your discharge, you'll get four years of college paid for by the United States Marine Corp.

SAM  
That means it's free?

MARINE RECRUITER  
Yes, son, that means it's free.

Sam tries to return the Recruiter's level stare, though he's jittery with excitement.

SAM  
Where do I sign?

EXT. BROWN HOTEL - LOUISVILLE, KY - DAY

Tall, stately, and recognizable by the signature clock out front.

INT. BROWN HOTEL - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

Sam stands in his skivvies with other RECRUITS for his physical. He's too enthralled by the crown molding and gilt wallpaper to mind the holes in his underwear and socks.

Some of the other guys are talking and laughing. Sam notices THREE GUYS right behind him, but he's too shy to say anything to them.

I/E. PLANE - DAY

Newly inducted, Sam and the three guys sit on the military flight to San Diego.

Sam is torn between their bursts of laughter and the blue of the sky outside.

EXT. PLANE - NIGHT

It's 3:30 a.m. as Sam and the three jokey guys make their way to a bus, escorted by two MARINE SERGEANTS.

I/E. BUS - DAWN

The Marine Sergeants stare forward as the three guys continue to crack jokes. Even Sam is laughing at this point, amidst the 30-some other RECRUITS on board.

The bus slows as Sam turns toward the window and sees the gate up ahead.

EXT. MARINE CORP DEPOT - SAN DIEGO - SAME

With one more burst of laughter from the boys, the bus pulls through the gate.

MARINE SERGEANT 1 (O.S.)  
Listen up, you asshole pieces of  
shit! In about two seconds this bus  
is gonna stop!

The bus stops.

I/E. BUS - CONTINUOUS

MARINE SERGEANT 2  
We want your mother-fucking asses  
off our bus!

Eyes round as moons, Sam and the other guys on board race for the door, which isn't open as the DRIVER has stopped to light a cigarette.

MARINE SERGEANT 1  
You fuckers see those yellow  
footprints outside?!

All the recruits turn their heads toward the windows.

EXT. MARINE CORP DEPOT - SAN DIEGO - CONTINUOUS

On the pavement, pairs of footprints have been painted in yellow.

MARINE SERGEANT 1 (O.S.)  
Find a pair to land on and don't  
you so much as let us see you  
blink!

The door to the bus slides open and all the recruits tumble out and then beeline for a set of prints.

Afraid to close his eyes or even breath too big, the light fades from Sam's eyes as he wishes like anything he was home in Indiana.

EXT. MARINE CORP DEPOT - SAN DIEGO - DAY

It's three hours later.

Sam and the other recruits stand on the same yellow footprints, sun beating down on them.

Two DRILL SERGEANTS approach.

As a group, the boys stiffen, already terrified.

DRILL SERGEANT 1  
We. Own. You.

He smiles, almost delighted, but it doesn't meet his eyes.

DRILL SERGEANT 2  
(conversational)  
I was just asking Sergeant Hastings  
if he thought there were any mama's  
boys, fags, or queers among you.

The pair moves among the recruits like they're trying to find the source of a bad smell.

Sam feels Drill Sergeant 1 come up to stand behind him. He holds his breath.

DRILL SERGEANT 2 (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
Bunch of hippies and faggots.

DRILL SERGEANT 1  
(in Sam's ear)  
And at least one Mama's boy.

It's all Sam can do not to lean away or tremble.

Drill Sergeant 1 moves off and consults a clipboard.

DRILL SERGEANT 2  
Lucky for us, these boys think they  
can be Marines.

DRILL SERGEANT 1  
My paperwork says the U.S.  
Government already thinks they are.

DRILL SERGEANT 2  
These turds?

DRILL SERGEANT 1  
Pretty stinking bunch. Might be  
time to clean 'em up.

DRILL SERGEANT 2  
You heard him, you pansies, MARCH!

The recruits step forward instantly, a mass of chaos.

DRILL SERGEANT 1  
LEFT!

Everyone turns toward a gray steel building and attempts to march forward.

BEGIN MONTAGE:

--Sam sits in a chair as a BARBER shaves his head.

--Sam grabs the equipment he's handed: boots, a pack, helmet, rifle, clothes, bedding.

--Sam places his new belongings on an empty bed in a dormitory.

--Dressed in his new gear, Sam marches and marches and marches with the other recruits.

--Sunburned and sweaty, Sam sits at his place at a cafeteria table. He's exhausted, numb. Then he gets a good look at the food on his plate. His eyes light up with delight as he digs in.

END MONTAGE

DRILL SERGEANT 1 (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
You will eat all of that and then  
drink this.

EXT. MARINE CORP DEPOT - SAN DIEGO - DAY

A PRIVATE holds a pack of cigarettes, including one he has lit and stubbed out into the ground. Drill Sergeant 1 points at the private's canteen.

PRIVATE  
Sir, yes, sir!

As Sam and the rest of his platoon watch, the private eats the cigarettes then chugs at the canteen.

Everyone looks green at this point.

Then the private heaves into a steel barrel.

DRILL SERGEANT 1  
(over the retching)  
The rest of you numbskulls need to  
write home and let mommy know how  
much fun you are having at camp.  
Make sure she knows her little  
candy ass boy is fine.

The private heaves once more then sinks to the ground beside the barrel.

A SERIES OF SHOTS over the coming weeks, in each Sam appears fitter:

--Sam writes a letter home, he finishes the last of the names of his family members in the salutation, he blinks to keep himself from crying.

--Sam and his platoon march in full gear.

--The platoon runs up and down hills.

--Each boy carefully makes his bed while the Drill Sergeants look on.

--Sam and several other privates use the hot showers. Although always in good shape, Sam's filled out from the regular food and exercise. He can't hide the pleasure on his face as the hot water rushes over his skin.

INT. DORMITORY - MARINE CORP DEPOT - DAY

The Drill Sergeants watch as the privates open their mail. Sam reads one from his older sister Dora.

Next to him, a BLUSHING PRIVATE opens a letter. Sam can smell the perfume floating in waves off it. So can the Drill Sergeants.

The Blushing Private gets a THWACK upside the head.

DRILL SERGEANT 2  
Private, stand up you turd.

The Blushing Private stands.

DRILL SERGEANT 2 (CONT'D)  
We'd all like to hear what your mommy has to say. We can sure smell it.

BLUSHING PRIVATE  
It isn't from my mother, sir.

DRILL SERGEANT 2  
That's good. The rest of us was thinking your mother was a two-bit whore.

No one has the bravery to laugh.

DRILL SERGEANT 2 (CONT'D)  
Now, read.

BLUSHING PRIVATE  
Sir, yes, sir!

His hands shake as he holds the letter in front of him.

BLUSHING PRIVATE (CONT'D)  
Dear Boo,...

He flushes even more scarlet as the rest of the recruits stare straight ahead, hoping not to be next.

EXT. MARINE CORP DEPOT - SAN DIEGO - DAY

On the far field graduation ceremonies have just finished as Sam and his platoon leave a weapons class and move to parade rest in front of Drill Sergeant 1.

A number of CIVILIANS mill about, hugging recruits and snapping pictures.

Two PRETTY GIRLS wearing short shorts cross in front of Sam's platoon. They giggle as they admire the marines, leaning into one another and creating even more of a show.

Sam's eyes dart to them then back. He flinches when he sees a smoky the bear hat rim at the edge of his right eye. He doesn't need to move his eyes to know it's Drill Sergeant 1.

DRILL SERGEANT 1

What are you looking at, turd? What are you looking at?!

SAM

Nothing, sir!

DRILL SERGEANT 1

Come see me when we return to our area.

Sam feels his knees weaken.

SAM

Yes, sir!

EXT. DUTY HUT - LATER

His rifle trembling in his hands, Sam RAPS on the door. The other recruits stand at parade rest nearby.

DRILL SERGEANT 1 (V.O.)

I can't hear you! I can't hear you!

Sam RAPS as hard as he can, scrapping the skin on his knuckles.

DRILL SERGEANT 1 (V.O.)

Get your ass in here, you fucking turd!

A FEW MINUTES LATER

The recruits wait alone, like stone statues, as they pretend to ignore the BANGING that comes from inside the duty hut.

DRILL SERGEANT 1 (V.O.)  
What are you doing in my house,  
turd?! What do you want, turd?!

A SLAM!

DRILL SERGEANT 1 (V.O.)  
Why the fuck are you bothering me?!

More SLAMS!

DRILL SERGEANT 1 (V.O.)  
Now get the fuck out of here!

The door flies open, and Sam stumbles out before he falls face down in the dirt.

His rifle falls beside him. The butt glistens with Sam's blood.

Grasping for it, Sam's fingers close over the rifle and he stumbles away, spitting up blood as he goes.

INT. MESS HALL - DAY

Sam sits elbow to elbow with his platoon as they all shovel the evening meal into their mouths. None of them look at the food as they put fork to mouth as fast as they can.

Sam's having some trouble swallowing, but he keeps his eyes ahead, as do the other members of his platoon.

Through his peripheral vision, he observes them all. They are all tense from the day's encounter, and Sam brought this on them all. He feels remorse for a second then swallows that along with his next mouthful.

The corners of Sam's eyes crinkle as a part of him grows a little tougher.

EXT. GRADUATION FIELD - DAY

Sam's eyes remain hard and uncompromising as he parades in dress uniform with the rest of his platoon while a BAND plays. Sam is clean and sharp, so unlike the Sam who arrived weeks before.

They near the COMMANDANT in the bleachers.

DRILL SERGEANT 2  
Eyes right!

Every head in Sam's platoon snaps right. As Sam turns his head, he feels the wetness streaming down his cheeks.

EXT. CAMP PENDLETON - DAY

Now through with the rest of his training, Sam sits on benches with his platoon as they receive their orders.

SAM  
Thank you, Sir.

Sam takes the packet a PLATOON SERGEANT hands him and opens it. One word catches his eye: "Wes-Pac."

A PRIVATE leans over to look at Sam's orders.

PRIVATE  
I'm going to Vietnam.

SAM  
Yeah, me too.

PRIVATE  
Guess the good news is we get to go home on leave first.

Sam mulls this over, wondering what a trip home will be like.

PRIVATE (CONT'D)  
Is your mom a good cook?

SAM  
Yeah, sure.

PRIVATE  
My mom's the best. Her mashed potatoes put the ones here to shame.

INT. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD - NIGHT

Sam, in uniform and sitting up straight as a board, watches Mother place a bowl of mashed potatoes on the table. Before anyone can blink, one of his siblings KENNY grabs it and takes a big spoonful.

MOTHER  
Make sure your brother gets some.

Kenny smirks and hands the bowl to JAMES, the next youngest down the line. This earns him a THWACK on the head from Mother.

Nervous about getting the same treatment, James hands the bowl to Sam.

Sam serves himself, but the mashed potatoes look like wallboard paste and not what he's used to now.

Father reaches for the bowl.

FATHER  
Save some for the rest of us.

He looks at Sam's uniform.

FATHER (CONT'D)  
Still not so sure you're going to amount to shit. Bill's seeing some real action.

SAM  
I'll see some too, sir, once I get to Vietnam.

Father doesn't look like he believes this.

FATHER  
It's a police action, not like World War II.

SAM  
The sergeants call it the Vietnam War.

Father practically snorts.

FATHER  
We'll see about that.

He takes the meatloaf Mother brings to the table.

FATHER (CONT'D)  
Let's have the man start this one.

Sam ignores the barb as he looks around the table in the worn kitchen. It's just the same as always.

He glances down at himself, neat as a pin, realizing only he looks different.

I/E. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD - DAY

Although 5 a.m., Mother is already up and folding tea towels in the kitchen.

Sam bounces down the steps in his sweatshirt, shorts, and sneakers.

MOTHER

What are you doing up so early?

SAM

I gotta run.

MOTHER

There are two inches of fresh snow.  
And it's still snowing.

Sam looks outside the kitchen window. The flakes are large and gentle as they land on the few inches on the ground.

Sam frowns and shrugs, then he pulls open the back door.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

You're nuts.

Sam waves over his shoulder before he disappears outside.

EXT. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD

As he runs away from the house, his body heating up from his vigorous stride, Sam smiles.

Behind him, the house disappears in the falling whiteness.

INT. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD - NIGHT

The rest of the family has gone to bed, and only Sam and his father remain downstairs by the cook stove. Sam's father is just finishing a story.

FATHER

But the Japs didn't find us, not  
that day.

Father peers at Sam shrewdly.

FATHER (CONT'D)

I hear those Vietnamese can be  
pretty crafty.

Sam shrugs.

SAM

At Camp Pendleton we did extensive training in jungle warfare, even had our own fake villages with missions to hunt down the enemy.

Father nods but he doesn't look impressed.

Sam, though, is lost in his memories of boot camp.

SAM (CONT'D)

The thought of killing somebody bugs me some, but I have a job to do.

Sam looks up and sees a funny look on his father's face. It's almost as if he thinks there may be some worth to his boy.

I/E. TRANSPORT PLANE - NIGHT

Sam watches as they descend, the cloud cover disappearing to reveal the January winter over Da Nang, Vietnam. The soft shapes below look peaceful.

A BIG BURST OF SPARKS flies up from the ground below, followed by more SPARKS.

SERGEANT

Airstrip's under attack.

Sam sees more BURSTS OF SPARKS, and faintly hears the BOOMS.

SERGEANT (CONT'D)

They're bringing us in fast. Get off the plane as fast as possible. We're sitting ducks in this thing.

Sam and the other MARINES grab their gear. Sam feels the adrenaline and fear shoot through him.

The plane comes in hard, causing all to reach for support, then men are unbuckling and moving for the door. Sam follows suit.

The EXPLOSIONS are louder, some sounding just outside the plane.

SERGEANT (CONT'D)

Let's go, marines!

As soon as the door opens, men rush through and out into the inky night.

Without thinking, Sam races after them.

MARINE (V.O.)  
Holy shit!

EXT. DA NANG AIRPORT - CONTINUOUS

People run everywhere, yelling and screaming.

CORPORAL (O.S.)  
The Vietcong have broken through  
the perimeter! They're on the  
airstrip.

Sam runs toward the CORPORAL who motions the men toward a bunker. The Corporal throws helmets and M-16 rifles toward the men as they run by.

INT. BUNKER - CONTINUOUS

Sam bursts into the space then hunkers down. He checks the rifle. It's empty.

He leans his head back, wondering what the hell he's supposed to do with an unloaded gun.

Blinking in the acrid smoke, Sam peeks up over the bunker and looks out as dawn lights the sky. Big holes and DEAD BODIES litter the airstrip.

CORPORAL (O.S.)  
You're going to need these.

Sam looks back and sees the Corporal tossing flak jackets and ammo to men around him. He catches a jacket and then a box of ammo.

CORPORAL (CONT'D)  
You men are off to Phu Bai tomorrow  
morning, joining the first  
Division, Second Battalion, 5th  
Marines Golf Company.

Sam breathes a sigh of relief, having survived his first encounter with war.

CORPORAL (CONT'D)  
They're involved in the battle of  
Hue. That'll make today seem like a  
Sunday walk in the park.

Then the Corporal begins passing out hand grenades. These he doesn't throw.

CORPORAL (CONT'D)

Good news is you're going by chopper. The Vietcong have been ambushing the truck convoys, and we've lost too many Marines already.

Sam takes a couple of grenades, making sure the Corporal doesn't see the fear in his eyes. Then he gets busy loading his weapon.

EXT. DA NANG AIRPORT - DAY

The morning haze shimmers over the ground as MEDICS unload WOUNDED from a transport helicopter and carry them toward the hospital.

Sam, geared up and looking like John Wayne as he walks into battle, watches the men rush back and forth and then realizes that chopper is for him.

He sees some men are taken off and placed to the side. They're dead, or nearly so, though Sam can hear a few of them moaning. He turns his eyes away, sickened.

SERGEANT (O.S.)

Let's move out!

Sam and his platoon follow the direction of the sergeant and run for the helicopter.

I/E. TRANSPORT HELICOPTER - CONTINUOUS

Sam climbs up into a seat then looks down onto the floor and sees blood. His eyes trace it up to where it's splashed onto the walls.

Sam's jaw works as he looks away, noticing the eyes of the men around him as they also notice the blood.

The engine ROARS as the blades pick up speed.

Then they're off, the beauty of the jungle below drawing their attention.

Sam is momentarily taken with the South China Sea, the beaches. Then he sees bomb craters and huge brown areas.

MARINE  
(leaning over to Sam to be  
heard over the chopper)  
The brown places! That's agent  
orange!

Sam nods even as he tightens his grip on his rifle.

A SHORT TIME LATER

Hue City comes into view. Smoke and flares of light indicate fighting in one area.

As the chopper nears, Sam hears GUNFIRE and EXPLOSIONS. His eyes move to the Sergeant.

SERGEANT  
(to everyone)  
This is probably a hot zone!

The chopper comes in to land, and Sam sees RED SMOKE.

SERGEANT (CONT'D)  
Definitely a hot zone! They'll be  
shooting at us! Keep your heads  
down!

PINGS inside the chopper send SPARKS everywhere.

SERGEANT (CONT'D)  
Jump!

Still ten feet from the ground, Sam and the other men jump out, firing their weapons as they run for cover.

Sam has no idea which way to shoot, the whites of his eyes bulging in his fear.

Behind him, a GROUP OF MEN and a PILOT leap out of another transport helicopter just before it EXPLODES!

SERGEANT (CONT'D)  
Secure the area! Medi-vacs are on  
their way!

Zeroing in on the enemy line, Sam aims and FIRES!

EXT. HUE CITY STREET - DAY

The area now secure, Sam stands guard with a number of men as the Medi-vac helicopters come in to land.

At a wave from his sergeant, Sam rushes over to help them unload. He's shocked to see the DEAD and WOUNDED up close.

After placing a wounded marine on the Medi-vac chopper, Sam notices blood on his hand. He wipes it on his pant leg, then says a silent prayer as the Medi-vac choppers lift up and fly away.

SERGEANT (O.S.)  
Third platoon, third squad!

Sam trots over to join the sergeant of his unit and the other guys, most of whom he hasn't even met.

As they wait for instructions, Sam scans the group. His eyes land on a little Italian guy named DONNIE.

SAM  
Donnie?

DONNIE  
Huh?

SAM  
I'm Sam. Pendleton?

Sam waits for some sign of recognition.

SAM (CONT'D)  
We were there at the same time.

DONNIE  
Huh.

Donnie breathes out.

DONNIE (CONT'D)  
So that's what they call a hot zone.

He looks dazed.

SAM  
(muttering)  
No shit.

Donnie looks surprised then almost amused at Sam's observation.

SAM (CONT'D)  
Next time...

Donnie nods. They'll have each other's back. Then they both turn their heads toward the sergeant.

SERGEANT

From now on you can think of yourselves as the FNG.

A few brows go up in question.

SERGEANT (CONT'D)

Fucking New Guys. It's time to get acquainted. We'll be doing nightly patrols of the city, beginning tonight.

EXT. HUE CITY - NIGHT

As darkness falls, Sam and his unit move through the city house to house, street to street, block to block.

Sam and Donnie patrol together, distinguishable because Sam is a head taller than Donnie.

SNIPER FIRE sends them both back against a wall, looking in different directions.

SAM

From the roof.

DONNIE

I think it's from that alley. Hard to tell in this godforsaken hell hole.

The hum of a PLANE ENGINE gets louder before a flare floats to the street and makes the area glow.

SAM

There!

He aims and fires into the alley Donnie mentioned before but the SNIPER has vanished.

EXT. BUILDING - NIGHT

Later on, Sam and Donnie check the perimeter of a business. Another soldier approaches. This is LIMEY.

LIMEY

We're got orders to bed down here tonight.

Sam and Donnie nod then push open the door.

INT. BUILDING - NIGHT

Quickly, Sam, Donnie, and Limey search the premises then bed down near the back door, where they can see into the backyard.

DONNIE

You get any today, Limey?

Limey shakes his head.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

Then why don't you take first shift.

Limey rolls his eyes.

LIMEY

Guess you picked off several.

DONNIE

A gentleman doesn't shoot and tell.

Sam snorts at this. Limey looks from one to the other and realizes Donnie is kidding around.

LIMEY

Fine. I take first shift, but you get second.

Donnie makes snoring noises, causing Sam to smile as he readies for some shut-eye.

EXT. BUILDING - BACKYARD - NIGHT

It's the wee hours. Three NORTH VIETNAMESE flit like shadows toward the back door.

LIMEY (V.O.)

(a squelched whisper)

Sam. Sam!

INT. BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

Limey leans over Sam as he tries to wake him. Sam groans.

SAM

I'm not second shift.

LIMEY

I know! I know! There are Vietcong. Three of 'em.

Sam's eyes open, alert.

SAM  
Where?

LIMEY  
In the backyard. What should I do?

SAM  
Shoot 'em, of course.

Limey nods vigorously as he turns toward the back door and eases it open.

DONNIE  
(waking)  
Holy shit!

He takes in the situation and grabs his handset.

DONNIE (CONT'D)  
(whispering)  
Golf three golf three, this is  
three Charlie over.

Sam grabs the handset.

SAM  
We got fucking gooks all around us.  
We need some fucking help!

Then Limey FIRES!

SAM (CONT'D)  
Did you get 'em?

Sam holds his rifle and crawls over to have a look.

LIMEY  
One's down! I got one! The others  
disappeared.

Limey hops up and down, excited and frightened at the same time.

SAM  
You done good, Limey.

DONNIE  
Yeah, good. Now let me get some  
sleep.

Donnie lies back down while Sam sees the shaken look on Limey's face.

SAM  
I'll take second shift, starting  
now.

DONNIE  
(rolling over)  
We thought you'd never ask.

Sam rolls his eyes at Limey, knowing that Donnie kids to lighten things for all of them.

Limey moves to his bed roll and places his rifle down nearby. His hands are shaking.

EXT. BRIDGE - DAY

Sam's squad, including Donnie and Limey, hunker down as they approach a bridge over a canal. ROUNDS are flying everywhere. The GUN TEAM, including APACHE, struggles to get their gun on the side of the canal to provide cover.

CRIES up ahead alert Sam, Donnie, and Limey that some of their buddies have been hit.

SAM  
That's our guys!

DONNIE  
How many?

SAM  
I can't tell!

Then the cries stop.

Volleys still coming in their direction, Sam turns around and sees the gun team already just about in position to fire.

SAM (CONT'D)  
Come on, Apache, give us some  
cover!

Then he feels something warm and wet on his back.

SAM (CONT'D)  
Shit!

Sam reaches back, trying to figure out where he's been hit.

Apache and the crew get into action, providing the needed cover.

DONNIE

Come on!

Donnie and Limey run ahead, so Sam follows, sure that his wounds are bad.

They grab two WOUNDED GUYS, one between Sam and Limey and Donnie carrying the second, and sprint like hell, ROUNDS flying all around them.

Sam dives behind a wall, sets down the wounded man he's carrying, and yanks off his pack. Limey's right there with him.

SAM

I've been hit.

LIMEY

Jesus. Where?

Sam feels his back as Limey looks for blood.

Then Sam pulls out a sticky hand. It's not blood, it's a clear liquid.

SAM

What the hell...

He grabs his pack and sees two bullets holes on the outside. Then he reaches inside and pulls out a dented can.

LIMEY

That's...fruit cocktail.

DONNIE (O.S.)

They killed your fruit cocktail?

Donnie has just run up, out of breath. He places the wounded man on the ground.

Limey grins while Sam about passes out.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

That's a smart use for rations.

Sam closes his eyes with relief.

SAM

Thank god.

DONNIE

You thought you were shot.

LIMEY  
I thought he was, too.

DONNIE  
Fucking New Guys.

Donnie grins.

DONNIE (CONT'D)  
Let's not let these men rot here.

He picks up his wounded as Sam and Limey go for the one they carried over.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

It's morning.

Sam and Donnie leave the place where they spent the night and advance into the street.

They squat down near the front porch to wait for the other members of their unit.

SAM  
This'll be tougher than the last bridge.

DONNIE  
If it's still standing.

SAM  
It must be or they wouldn't send us there. Shh!

They hear the WHISTLE of an artillery round then both men are blown into the bushes. Donnie is a far distance back from Sam.

DONNIE  
(mouthing)  
You okay.

SAM  
(mouthing back)  
Yeah.

A HAIL of AK-47 GUNFIRE rains down on the porch, and both men duck then Donnie runs around the side of the house.

Sam crouches into the bushes as he sees a SQUAD OF NORTH VIETNAMESE shooting in his direction but oblivious to the marine so close by.

Sam's eyes widen on a pair of boots that stop right in front of him. He lowers his gun, knowing if he fires he'll give his position away.

Scared shitless, Sam reaches for a grenade, pulls the pin, and throws it over the bushes.

It EXPLODES!

Instantly, Sam is off like a jack rabbit, around the house and straight to where his unit waits behind the house.

EXT. PURFUME RIVER - DAY

Of the two bridges that span it, only one is still standing.

Sam, still shaken from his morning adventure, lies next to Donnie near the bridge. Above their heads, SNIPERS from both sides try to peg each other off.

SAM

Where's the fucking Navy?

DONNIE

Hell if I know.

NAVAL GUN FIRE flies in over their heads. The first salvo hits the middle of the river and shoots up a plume of dead fish.

All the men in Sam's unit bury their heads and pray the next one doesn't kill them.

Then a salvo hits the far shore.

Donnie and Sam lift their heads to check the crater left behind.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

Well, that ought to do it.

SAM

I'm gonna wait til we're sure.

DONNIE

Yeah, me, too.

Sam reaches a hand to his backside. There's that wetness again.

SAM

Shit. I got hit.

DONNIE  
Canned beans this time?

SAM  
No. My ass.

Sam tries to stand up. Donnie moves over to help but can see it doesn't look serious.

DONNIE  
Let me at least help you to the  
medic.

AN HOUR LATER

Half-dressed marines jump and play in the river, ignoring the dead fish that float everywhere. A few VIETNAMESE gather the fish from boats.

Bandaged, Sam gingerly makes his way to the water's edge.

DONNIE  
(calling over)  
You coming in?

SAM  
You bet!

DONNIE  
What about your ass?

SAM  
I'll live.

DONNIE  
Good thing. Word is we're headed  
into the jungle next.

Sam dives in the water, a look of pure joy on his face as he surfaces.

EXT. FIELD - NIGHT

Sam and his unit inch through the vegetation. The group is tired. They've been at it all night through the mud and wet.

Sam squints in the inky blackness just beginning to lighten with the coming dawn.

Then he sees them on the other side of a hill: the VIETCONG, set up and waiting for them.

THUMPING SOUNDS indicate that mortars are on the way.

The whole unit hits the dirt and puts their helmets over the back of their heads.

Mortars pummel the ground around them, then the THUMPS of more mortars leaving the tubes.

Sam flinches when he feels shrapnel hit his ass.

A CORPSMAN runs up to dig the mortar out of Sam's back end as the Vietcong pack up and go before returning artillery comes in.

DONNIE (V.O.)  
Commander says you're point on  
this.

EXT. JUNGLE - DAY

Sam looks sick.

SAM  
Got it.

He moves into the lead position, gives the signal, and the rest of the men follow.

Sam's thumb is on the selector of his M-16 as he strains his ears for any noise, his eyes looking for signs of Vietcong or booby traps. He notices a bent twig, part of a boot print. Sam's heart pounds.

The plants and trees are so thick, Sam nearly vibrates with anticipation. He knows the enemy is close.

SCRAPE!

It's faint but Sam thinks he hears something.

SCRAPE!

Sam holds up a hand to stop the men behind him.

He steps into a clearing and stops.

Forty feet away, three VIETCONG surround a machine gun they are readying to fire.

Sam and the Vietcong stare, frozen, for a split second.

As the Vietcong lift their AK-47's to shoot, Sam hits the ground and starts firing.

PLATOON COMMANDER (V.O.)  
What's happening?!

Sam empties the clip and jams in another.

PLATOON COMMANDER (V.O.)  
Gaylord!

A whole bunch of VIETCONG appear at the treeline.

SAM  
Fuck!

Sam feels himself grabbed by the ankles and pulled back as AK-47 FIRE shreds the foliage above his head.

Scrambling to his feet, Sam keeps low as he and the men get the hell out of there.

PLATOON COMMANDER (V.O.)  
Are you trying to be a goddamn  
hero?

EXT. JUNGLE CAMP - DAY

Sam looks into the PLATOON COMMANDER's stern countenance.

SAM  
No, sir. I was trying to take care  
of myself and the rest of the guys.

The Platoon Commander grins.

PLATOON COMMANDER  
You did one hell of a job.

Sam shrugs.

SAM (V.O.)  
I'm no fucking hero.

EXT. JUNGLE CAMP - NIGHT

Sam sits with Donnie and Limey as night falls.

SAM  
I just want to get out of here  
alive.

DONNIE  
Us too, brother, us too.

Limey nods, his eyes on the surrounding vegetation.

REPORTER (V.O.)  
I understand you have confirmed  
enemy kills.

EXT. BASE CAMP - PHU BAI - DAY

Sam sits at a table finishing his meal of grilled steak and cold beer. Most of the other men have wandered off to read mail.

He glances up at the REPORTER hovering over him.

REPORTER  
Sam Gaylord? Your platoon commander  
said I could talk to you.

SAM  
Okay.

REPORTER  
I write for *Stars and Stripes*. You  
heard of it?

SAM  
I guess so.

The reporter sits at the table.

REPORTER  
I'm here to get the story, from the  
real fighting men.

Sam chews his lip as he mulls this over.

REPORTER (CONT'D)  
I'm curious what you think about  
the negative opinion of the war  
back home.

Sam drinks his beer, squinting at the reporter as he tries to figure out what the man really wants from him.

REPORTER (CONT'D)  
Most folks aren't too pleased we're  
over here. You might say they're  
having a bad reaction to the  
conflict.

Sam puts the beer down.

SAM

I'm glad me and my buddies are alive. We put our asses on the line every day for our country. That's the only story I got to share.

Sam stands and picks up his plate and utensils, then he leaves the reporter there to mull over what he had to say.

EXT. MOUNTAIN NORTH OF PHU BAI - DAY

Sweat dripping from them in the heat and humidity, Sam and his unit trudge up, nearing the Ho-Chi-Minh Trail.

DONNIE

(huffing)

Base of the mountain isn't far away.

SAM

(huffing)

Yeah, and I'm a Marine, not a fucking mountain goat.

Despite the fact it's killing him too, Donnie just laughs.

LATER

They reach an area of rice paddies, and their new, GUNG-HO COMMANDER, turns to give orders.

GUNG-HO COMMANDER

Not too much further, men. Make sure you use your iodine if you plan to drink any of this.

Knee-deep in the water, Sam waves mosquitoes out of his face then he drips his hand in the bath warm wetness.

When he pulls the hand up, two leeches have attached themselves to his skin. Disgusted, he pulls them out and tries not to think about how many of them are attached to his legs.

As they continue to climb, several MARINES carry a WOUNDED MARINE downhill to a place a Medi-vac chopper can land. He's lost part of a leg, which reminds them all to watch for booby traps.

They continue to walk past:

--DEAD VIETCONG in shallow graves,

--abandoned ammo,  
 --bags of rice,  
 --underground bunkers,  
 --and no sign of the enemy.

They stop, and the Gung-Ho Commander nods his head to a hill a short distance away.

GUNG-HO COMMANDER (CONT'D)  
 That, men, is Cambodia. No military personnel are allowed to cross the border, so you can bet that's where these gooks are hiding.

He snorts.

GUNG-HO COMMANDER (CONT'D)  
 Okay, enough of that. Let's see how fast you can set up base camp.

EXT. BASE CAMP - NIGHT

It's not too late.

Sam, Donnie, and Limey sit in a bunker together, relaxing. Donnie's flipping through the newspapers.

DONNIE  
 Seems to be more protesting back home.

SAM  
 I don't know why you read that shit. We're putting our asses on the line, and they're protesting against us.

LIMEY  
 Half of 'em are rich sissy ass mutherfuckers.

SAM  
 The other half are draft dodging, chicken shit mutherfuckers.

DONNIE  
 Glad you both are clear on your opinions.

SAM

If they don't like the country our fathers and grandfathers fought and died for, then they should get the hell out.

Donnie nods, considering.

DONNIE

Can't argue with that.

He hands one of the newspapers over.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

Care to take a look?

SAM

Nah, it's pissing me off. Think I better give up stateside papers.

Donnie retracts the paper. He holds out a picture instead.

Limey leans over with interest.

LIMEY

Who's that?

DONNIE

My sister Linda.

CLOSE ON: Picture of LINDA, dark-haired and quite pretty with a beautiful smile.

LIMEY

She's a looker.

DONNIE

She is and I was showing her to Sam.

Sam's taken by the picture.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

You can write her if you want. That's one person stateside who thinks we're doing a good job.

Sam nods but isn't sure he could write anybody that pretty.

EXT. BASE CAMP - DAY

The men rise in the morning sun. No one has slept too well.

Sam looks around at the mortar holes around camp, Donnie standing beside him.

SAM

That was one hell of a night.

DONNIE

Yeah, sneaky bastards. Thank god they didn't have good aim.

SAM

No joke.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Sam and his unit follow the Gung-ho Commander. Everyone's itching for a fight after days of seeing signs of the enemy but no actual targets.

Donnie trots up beside Sam and Limey.

DONNIE

Careful. I hear this village may have caused last night's mortar fire.

Sam and Limey join Donnie in surveying the area.

YOUNG VIETNAMESE BOYS, nine or ten years old, run up with Cokes, beer and French bread.

VIETNAMESE BOYS

You buy, yes?

They run around, approaching the marines, make a few sales, though everyone checks over the merchandise carefully.

Sam picks one TALLER BOY and moves over to him.

SAM

Have any Vietcong come to your village?

TALLER BOY

Here? Vietcong? No, sir. No, sir.

Sam nods, not sure he believes him.

ANOTHER VIETNAMESE BOY drags a VIETNAMESE GIRL by the hand up to Sam, Donnie, and Limey.

ANOTHER VIETNAMESE BOY

You buy? You buy, yes?

DONNIE  
What, for sex?

ANOTHER VIETNAMESE BOY  
You want?

DONNIE  
Nah, I don't want.

The boy and girl run off to others.

DONNIE (CONT'D)  
Sick little kid.

Sam shakes his head.

SAM  
Yeah. Pretty sad.

Sam continues to look around. He locks eyes with a pair of VIETNAMESE MEN. They quickly look away, making Sam sure they are Vietcong.

He nods to Donnie.

DONNIE  
Yeah, I know. But we got no reason  
to blow 'em way right now.

Limey looks over at the men, his hand tightening on his gun.

SAM  
No reason to start anything, Limey.  
Not unless they run.

The tension in Limey's hands loosens slightly, but he's ready if the men give him any cause.

PRIVATE (V.O.)  
Mail call!

EXT. BASE CAMP - DAY

The heat is out of the sun for the day as a PRIVATE hands out the mail. Donnie gets a good sized package from home while Sam gets a letter.

He's surprised as he accepts it.

DONNIE  
You get something?

SAM  
A letter from my sister Noticka.

DONNIE  
That's nice.

SAM  
I got a birthday coming up.

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER

Sam sits beside the opened letter and writes back.

The sight of a jet plane overhead grabs his attention, and Sam's heart swells.

SAM (V.O.)  
(writing)  
*Just saw a Freedom bird. That's  
what we call the TWA jets flying  
military personnel home.*

Sam stops writing for a moment to watch the silver jet fade out of view.

SAM (V.O.)  
(writing)  
*I can't wait to take my seat on  
one.*

Sam stops again, blinks. Then he wipes the wetness from his eyes and continues his letter home.

EXT. BASE CAMP - DAY

It's still early morning as Sam and Donnie come in off patrol.

An EXPLOSION ahead in camp causes them to race forward.

They find a BROKEN BODY lying face down on the ground and radio man, KEN, nearby.

Donnie kneels over the broken body.

DONNIE  
Damn.

SAM  
Who is it?

DONNIE

I'm trying to figure that out. Ken?

Sam sees the serious wound in Ken's rib. He gets right in his face so Ken can't look at the damage to his body.

SAM

Stay calm, Ken. I'm here. You need to lie still.

A MEDIC runs up with bandages and starts to put a battle dressing on Ken's rib cage.

Ken manages to get his head up enough to look at his wound. Then his head slowly falls back as he dies.

DONNIE (O.S.)

Ken?

Sam shakes his head.

SAM

No, he's gone.

DONNIE

Damn. They got two of our good ones.

SAM

Who else?

DONNIE

Apache.

SAM

Damn. He saved my ass on the bridge in Hue City.

DONNIE

He saved all our asses, many times.

SAM

Apache was always, I mean ALWAYS there for us!

Sam sits back in the dirt and grabs his head like that will make it hurt less.

DONNIE

You okay?

SAM

Yeah.

But he's not.

Sam's eyes settle back on Ken's body.

SAM (CONT'D)

He showed me a picture of his baby daughter once. He was so proud of her.

Donnie holds out a hand and helps haul Sam to his feet.

SAM (CONT'D)

I hate this fucking war. A guy like that is supposed to go home, raise his family.

Donnie nods, seeing the sense in this.

DONNIE

If I ever get hauled out of here on a stretcher, make sure they play me a little rock 'n roll while they're operating.

SAM

Sure, Donnie.

DONNIE

I'll see that you get country, though the doctors and nurses will probably hate you for that.

SAM

You're a pal.

Donnie grins.

DONNIE

Is today your birthday?

SAM

Yeah.

DONNIE

And now you're the ripe old age of...?

SAM

Nineteen.

Donnie chews on this.

DONNIE

Any plans?

Donnie means it as a joke but Sam is too keyed up to understand.

SAM

We can't go here. We can't go there. We can't do this. We can't do that. This is one big God damn cluster fuck.

The men stand in silence for a moment.

DONNIE

I'm gonna go get my hair cut. Wanna come along?

SAM

Where to?

DONNIE

A village up the way has a papa-san who gives haircuts.

Sam breathes out a lot of pent up air.

SAM

Okay, yeah, sure.

They leave Apache and Ken in the hands of the medics as they head over to their bunker to drop their stuff.

DONNIE

Good. You could use a trim.

SAM

Really? I was thinking of becoming a hippie.

DONNIE

That, or a girl.

Sam shoots Donnie an irritated look.

Donnie ignores it and ruffles the back of Sam's head then pushes him away at the shoulder.

This doesn't get the response he's hoping for, so Donnie starts clowning around like an ape.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

Oo-ee-ee-ah!

Still upset, Sam can't help a wry smile at his friend's antics.

EXT. BARBER VILLAGE - DAY

Sam, Donnie, and a few other Marines from their unit walk through the smattering of huts. Donnie's still loping around like an ape, which draws many VILLAGERS over to them, laughing.

Sam isn't smiling as he keeps an eye on them. They're close, and he watches their hands for grenades, especially close to his own pockets.

Donnie and Sam head for the hut where an old PAPA-SAN stands outside, using his hand to shade his eyes from the sun as he watches the marines in his village.

DONNIE  
(calling over to Papa-san)  
Shave and a hair cut?

SAM  
Two bits.

Donnie looks over at Sam.

DONNIE  
You better leave the jokes to me.

Over at his hut, Papa-san gestures toward his door, smiling.

Sam cracks a smile as he follows Donnie inside, but his eyes watch the Vietnamese that follow, looking for trouble.

A BURST of laughter.

I/E. PAPA-SAN'S HUT - DAY

Donnie sits in the barber chair as Papa-san finishes his haircut, chortling. Kids and other village people crowd the room and stand outside the door, all laughing at Donnie's jokes and antics.

Sam continues to be nervous as he keeps an eye on the crowd.

Satisfied, Pap-san sets the scissors down and lathers Donnie's face.

Then he reaches over for a straight razor.

In a split second, Sam pulls out his .45 handgun and sticks it in Papa-san's chest.

The laughter stops and the crowd backs up.

Pap-san throws his hands up.

PAPA-SAN

I just give him shave, mister.

Sam starts to belly laugh.

Donnie gives him a dirty look.

DONNIE

(a fierce whisper)

You trying to get my throat slit?

Sheepish, Sam shrugs and puts the gun away.

DONNIE (CONT'D)

(barely mollified)

I told you to leave the jokes to me.

He glares at Sam while Pap-san carefully, very carefully, shaves off the lather.

EXT. PATH - DAY

Newly shorn, Sam and Donnie make their way back to base camp. The other marines follow a short distance back.

DONNIE

Limey's probably having the time of his life in Hawaii. When I get R & R, I'm going to go there, too.

SAM

I stopped in Hawaii on my way over.

DONNIE

Yeah?

SAM

It's beautiful, with lots of pretty girls.

(suddenly bitter)

Hope you have a good time, Donnie.

DONNIE

You'll get R & R soon. Think of all the fun you'll have before returning to all this shit.

SAM

Yep. I'm going to check into a hotel and sit in a bath tub all day.

DONNIE

And wipe your ass with real toilet paper.

Sam smiles.

SAM

We take a lot of things for granted.

DONNIE

Once we get back to normal, no way in hell we'll want to come back.

A shadow passes over Sam's face. He checks behind them to see if they have privacy.

We see them from behind as they walk, close together so the others don't overhear them.

SAM (V.O.)

Truth is, I'm not planning on coming back. When I get to Hawaii, I'm going AWOL. I'll grow my hair long, get a job. Maybe make enough money to get to San Francisco.

Sam kicks a rock then turns his head toward Donnie as we come back around to the front of them.

SAM

I'm sorry, Donnie, but I won't be able to have your back.

Donnie looks at Sam, surprised.

DONNIE

Well, hell, it's just for a short time. You know they won't give us leave together. We're the most experienced men left in our unit.

It's Sam's turn to look surprised. He realizes he didn't say his plans for Hawaii out loud.

SAM

Yeah, someone has to watch out for the Fucking New Guys.

DONNIE

Pretty soon, we'll both be done  
with R & R and looking out for each  
other again.

Sam nods.

SAM

Sure, Donnie. You have a real good  
time while you're gone.

EXT. JUNGLE - DAY

A POINT MAN cuts through vegetation with a machete while Sam  
and Donnie follow. Behind them, three FNGS (Fucking New Guys)  
sweat profusely, looking sicker with each step.

All three of them guzzle more water. Sam slows to be in step  
with them.

SAM

You're drinking too much water.  
You'll want it much more later on.

FNG 1

How much further we gonna go?

SAM

Mission is to destroy a Vietcong  
field hospital. We're done when we  
finish doing that.

FNG 2

We won't stop for the night?

SAM

Depends.

FNG 3

How do you deal with this heat?

SAM

You get used to it. Eat your salt  
tablets.

Sam backs up even further in the line until he reaches the  
DOC, who's just finished talking into his radio.

SAM (CONT'D)

Those guys don't look too good.

DOC  
I heard. I just finished calling  
for a Medi-vac. Better to fly them  
out before they get dehydrated.  
Landing zone isn't too far ahead.

The Doc looks shaken.

SAM  
What is it?

DOC  
Bobby Kennedy was assassinated.

SAM  
Shit, when?

DOC  
Couple of days ago, according to  
base. I'm ready time to camp for  
the night.

SAM  
Yeah, let's get these guys out  
first.

EXT. LANDING ZONE - DAY

Dusk is coming as the group nears a clearing where the Medi-vac helicopter can land. Everyone is hot, tired, and sweaty.

Sam surveys the perimeter as he walks from the others who wait for the transport.

A TREMENDOUS EXPLOSION rips up the edge of the clearing.

Sam flies through the air and lands a distance away, numb.

He wakes seconds later, unable to hear.

Dust and smoke are everywhere.

Sam sees another MARINE down.

ONE MARINE staggers around with half his face gone.

Blood is everywhere, and Sam can't figure out why. It comes to him slowly that the blood is his.

Sam rolls over onto his back, getting sleepy, the jungle around him becomes fuzzy.

He reaches a hand up and feels a wound on his forehead and the blood running down his face.

Sam raises his head and sees his left boot, his left foot still inside, laying to the left of his body.

His right leg is a mass of blood and mangled tissue from the knee down.

Sam's head falls back. His lips move, but barely any sound comes out.

SAM

I'm sorry, Mom. I won't be coming home.

His fingers reach over to touch the New Testament Bible in the front pocket of his flak jacket.

SAM (CONT'D)

God, be with me.

Sam's eyes close, a feeling of warmth spreading over him, his lips turn up at the corners.

INT. FROM BEHIND SAM'S EYES - CONTINUOUS

A soft bright light glows in front of him, so close that Sam could touch it.

It moves closer, going through his eyes and body, consuming him.

He jerks.

DONNIE (V.O.)

You're okay, you're okay.

EXT. JUNGLE - CONTINUOUS

Sam opens his eyes and focuses on Donnie, kneeling above him.

DONNIE

You're going home, buddy.

Sam can see he's in serious trouble from the look on Donnie's face.

He also hears the Medi-vac chopper as it lands.

He wants to thank Donnie; Sam knows it's over, but he can't speak.

I/E. MEDI-VAC HELICOPTER - NIGHT

As they fly toward a field hospital, Sam keeps nodding off and Donnie keeps slapping him awake.

When he opens his eyes, Sam sees the blood on Donnie. It's a lot of blood.

Seeing the worry and shock on Sam's face, Donnie cradles Sam's head in his arms.

DONNIE

You'll be okay.

Gently he pours water on Sam's face to rinse off the blood.

Sam watches him, sleepy, disengaged, sure he's going to die. He falls back to sleep to the vibrations of the engines until Donnie slaps him awake one more time.

EXT. NAVY FIELD HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Sam is carried off the helicopter on a stretcher while Donnie follows behind.

A DOCTOR runs up to check Sam's wounds. He glances over at Donnie.

DOCTOR

Get on inside.

Donnie moves away, his eyes still on Sam while the doctor examines him.

The doctor stands and motions for the two orderlies to carry Sam over to where INJURED MEN wait outside the hospital doorway.

Sam glances around. The men here look like hopeless cases. He realizes the doctor has given him up for dead.

As other DOCTORS and NURSES rush back and forth, Sam stares up at the sky.

His eyes widen with fear as he realizes he doesn't want to die.

LATER

Sam still stares up, but his vision is suddenly blocked by Donnie, bandaged from the waist up and hovering over him.

DONNIE  
Hey, buddy.

Sam looks at the bandages, suddenly aware that Donnie has been hurt, too.

DONNIE (CONT'D)  
I'm fine.

A couple of ORDERLIES move in behind him.

DONNIE (CONT'D)  
They're going to take you inside.

Disbelief and relief pass over Sam's face. He wants to thank Donnie again.

Donnie reaches down and squeezes Sam's hand. It feels like a goodbye.

DONNIE (CONT'D)  
(choked up)  
I'm going to miss you, buddy.

Sleep pulls Sam down under before he can reply.

INT. NAVY FIELD HOSPITAL - DAY

Country music plays as Sam wakes.

A NURSE hovers over him.

NURSE  
Just want to make sure you're comfortable.

SAM  
(barely audible)  
Where's Donnie?

NURSE  
He said you'd want country music.

Sam looks around, no one is operating. No one is saving him. The music is for him because they know he's going to die.

As the music washes over him, Sam closes his eyes, ready for that to happen.

A KNOCK on a door.

EXT. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD - DAY

The SHERIFF and a MARINE OFFICER stand outside the front door and KNOCK again.

INT. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD - CONTINUOUS

Mother and the younger siblings, including NOTICKA, stand inside out of view of the outside window. The siblings all stare at Mother in concern.

MOTHER

We're not answering that.

Another KNOCK.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

I seen who it is, and we're not.

All the eyes move away from her as the siblings prepare to wait.

SHERIFF (V.O.)

(calling through the door)

He's still alive, Mrs. Gaylord!

Mother wipes her hands on a tea towel to cover her need to pull herself together.

MOTHER

You heard him, Noticka. Sam is fine. Now open the door.

INT. 106TH NAVAL HOSPITAL - YOKOHAMA, JAPAN - DAY

Everything is clean and the place is air conditioned.

Sam wakes in a hospital bed. A NURSE is holding his hand.

NURSE

Sam? Do you know where you are?

Sam looks around then his eyes settle on the nurse.

SAM

(slowly and softly)

I think I'm in Japan.

She smiles, a gesture Sam would return if he could.

NURSE

Do you know what happened to you?

He nods, then looks down at his bandaged legs. His feet are gone.

Tears start sliding out of the corners of his eyes and onto the white linens of the bed. Then he gasps out the first sob.

Gently, the nurse leans over to hold him.

DAYS LATER

The nurse arrives with a DOCTOR.

DOCTOR  
Hello, Marine. How are you feeling?

Sam's so fuzzy from drugs he's not sure how to answer at first.

SAM  
Okay.

DOCTOR  
Good. I'm going to give it to you straight. You ready for that?

Sam nods.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)  
You're going to need surgery to repair your right leg. The back of it's been blown off.

Sam grits his teeth at the image.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)  
Muscles and nerves are exposed, so you'll need several skin grafts.

Sam closes his eyes. There's nothing he can think of to say.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)  
Just wanted to warn you of that before I cut in here.

Sam looks perplexed.

NURSE  
We're going to do your first bandage change.

Sam nods. At least this makes sense.

The doctor gets right to work on Sam's right leg.

Sam's nose twitches at the awful smell but the doctor seems unconcerned as he works.

Then maggots roll out of the wound and onto the sheets.

The nurse clamps a hand over her mouth.

SAM

My mom used to put urine in my ear  
when I had an earache.

The nurse's eyes lock on Sam.

SAM (CONT'D)

What the hell are a few maggots?

Both look down as the maggots fall onto Sam's sheets and squiggle for hiding places, then the nurse runs away and Sam passes out.

In a SERIES OF SHOTS over the coming weeks:

--Sam wakes and sleeps and wakes again.

--Sam grits his teeth against the pain as the nurse administers more medication.

--an ORDERLY brings in a wheelchair. Sam watches it, the light fading from his eyes.

--a NURSE leans over to wipe Sam's ass after he's gone to the bathroom.

--a PRIEST comes to sit by another man in Sam's ward. When he stands, Sam turns his eyes away. Still, the man leaves a copy of the New Testament on Sam's bedside table.

--Sam looks out the window at a freedom bird, flying soldiers home. He watches it wistfully before falling asleep again.

INT. NAVAL HOSPITAL - NIGHT

It's in the wee hours, and the ward is quiet.

Sam reaches over for the New Testament. He flips through it, finding no comfort there.

He leans back and looks up at the ceiling.

SAM

Why didn't you take me? I tried so  
hard to get out of poverty, to make  
something of my life.

He blinks as the tears trickle out of the corners of his eyes.

SAM (CONT'D)

I have nothing to live for.  
Everything I wanted, a girl,  
college, none of it's gonna happen  
now. Hell, I can't even take a girl  
on a date. No one would want to be  
with me, no one.

Sam is crying so hard he can hardly speak.

SAM (CONT'D)

I just turned nineteen and my life  
is over.

He hurls the New Testament across the room where it THUMPS  
against the wall.

None of the other WOUNDED move, all lost in their own hell or  
the cradle of sleep.

DOCTOR (V.O.)

We're moving you to the Great lakes  
Naval Hospital.

WEEKS LATER.

DOCTOR

That's in Illinois, so not too far  
from home.

Sam looks depressed. He barely pays attention as the doctor  
and nurse again change his bandages.

The doctor cuts the bandage free.

Sam watches him dispassionately.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

You're on the highest dose of  
antibiotics but you still have a  
serious infection.

Again, Sam doesn't react.

NURSE

(trying to cheer him up)  
Maggots are a good thing. They help  
to keep the infection down.

Sam shrugs.

The nurse glances at the doctor, worried at Sam's reaction, but the doctor is already at work on the second leg.

EXT. GREAT LAKES NAVAL HOSPITAL - DAY

The American flag flutters in the breeze outside the multi-story brick building.

I/E. GREAT LAKES NAVAL HOSPITAL - WARD - CONTINUOUS

Sam glances out at the flag as he's lifted out of his wheelchair and into a bed in the ward.

NURSE (O.S.)  
Welcome home, son.

Sam turns his eyes to the NURSE, who is making an effort to see that Sam is comfortably situated in bed.

Then a GUNNERY SERGEANT in the neighboring bed throws something Sam's way.

The nurse picks it up and hands it to Sam. Then she's horrified to see it's foot powder.

Sam's brow furrows as he glares at the foot powder and then at the gunnery sergeant.

GUNNERY SERGEANT  
Ah, come on, it's funny.

SAM  
Real fucking funny.

The nurse rolls her eyes and leaves.

Sam looks over and sees the gunnery sergeant also has a wrapped up leg.

GUNNERY SERGEANT  
Gonna be me next if this wound  
doesn't heal.

Sam softens. He tosses the foot powder back.

SAM  
Better use this while you can.

This time they both grin slightly.

GUNNERY SERGEANT  
You got any family nearby?

SAM

In Indiana.

GUNNERY SERGEANT

Close enough for a visit.

SAM

Ah, I don't think they'll be able to do that.

GUNNERY SERGEANT

Why not?

Sam doesn't want to say why. The family poverty is none of this guy's business.

The gunnery sergeant studies Sam for a moment.

GUNNERY SERGEANT (CONT'D)

Well, I hope you're wrong about that.

A WEEK LATER

The gunnery sergeant grins at the shocked look on Sam's face when his mother and oldest sister DORA arrive for a visit, led in by Sam's doctor on his way to check patients in the ward.

DOCTOR

He was in critical condition for over two weeks. He still has some surgeries we'll need to perform but Sam's recovery has been remarkable. He's lucky.

He nods to the pair before leaving them at Sam's bedside and moving off to attend to others in the ward.

MOTHER

Sam.

She gives Sam a brief hug while Dora leans in for a longer embrace. Both women look down where Sam's feet should be, embarrassed about staring but unable to help themselves.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Looks like the doctor is right. You were lucky.

SAM

Yeah, I guess so. I didn't think you'd be able to make it here.

DORA

We were lucky, too. A radio station in Madison held a fund drive to collect the money for us to come. We're here to cheer you up and make sure they're taking good care of you.

She smiles, reassuringly.

Sam tries to look optimistic and almost pulls it off.

AS THE WEEKS PASS:

--Mother and Dora push Sam in his wheelchair around the halls of the hospital.

--Sam is wheeled in and out of surgery by an ORDERLY.

--a NURSE administers pain medication.

NURSE

We're going to try a smaller dose.

--Sam eats with gusto as he laughs with the gunnery sergeant. They both hide apples under their bedding.

--Sam gets into the wheelchair by himself.

--a NURSE gets halfway down the ward for bed check.

Sam and the others reach under their bedding for apples and oranges.

ALL THE MEN

Incoming!

They all lob their fruit at the nurse, who SQUEALS and runs for cover, much to the men's delight.

A MALE NURSE stands at the door.

MALE NURSE

Why don't you sick mutherfucking psychos grow up?

The men reach under their bedding again and then lob fruit at him, grinning all the while.

WEEKS LATER

Sam wakes to see three strangers and the male nurse beside his bed. They are Donnie's parents, HANK and EVELYN, and LINDA.

MALE NURSE

You've got visitors.

Sam stares at Linda in recognition. She's more beautiful than her picture.

Linda smiles back.

SAM

You're Donnie's kin.

LINDA

That's right. Linda. And these are my parents Hank and Evelyn.

Sam nods, awed that they would visit him.

EVELYN

Before you ask, Donnie is fine. He recovered from his shrapnel and is back with your unit.

LINDA

In the bush.

Sam sees the pain, hurt, and worry in all of their eyes.

SAM

He can't have many days left, and then he'll be home.

EVELYN

We can't help but worry.

SAM

He loves your care packages.

Sam looks sheepish.

SAM (CONT'D)

In fact, so did I. Donnie always wanted to share.

Evelyn nods, her eyes glistening with moisture.

EVELYN

That's my boy.

Sam feels a sudden urge to lighten the mood.

SAM

Donnie had a way of making even war funny.

HANK

That sounds like him.

Linda perches on the edge of the bed.

LINDA

Tell us about him. What kinds of things did he do?

SAM

Well, I hope you'll understand if I say Donnie made a better ape than some of the real ones out there.

As Sam continues, Donnie's family smiles and then laughs, charmed by Sam and his stories.

Sam, though, can hardly keep his eyes from Linda.

LATER

Donnie's family prepares to go.

HANK

We hope you don't mind if we come again. Being with you reminds us...makes us feel like Donnie's...

Hank pauses as he collects his thoughts and battles his own moist eyes.

SAM

Donnie's tough. He'll find a way to make it through.

INT. GREAT LAKES NAVAL HOSPITAL - PHYSICAL THERAPY

His skin grafts complete, Sam works with a PHYSICAL THERAPIST as he tries to strengthen his upper body.

PHYSICAL THERAPIST

That's good, Sam, got to get you back early today.

Sam looks relieved as the work was hard.

SAM  
What's going on?

PHYSICAL THERAPIST  
Some higher ups visiting the  
troops. You're going to get a  
Purple Heart.

The inquisitive look on Sam's face turns to irritation.

SAM  
I don't mind finishing up here.

PHYSICAL THERAPIST  
Come on, Sam. You don't want to  
miss your big day.

INT. GREAT LAKES NAVAL HOSPITAL - WARD - DAY

The physical therapist helps Sam into his bed as a NAVY OFFICER briefs the men about the ceremony. Nobody looks too happy.

NAVY OFFICER  
He's here to tell you what a great  
job you've done serving your  
country.

GUNNERY SERGEANT  
Has the man even seen any action?

Several of the others, including Sam, look like they have the same question.

NAVY OFFICER  
When General Westmoreland arrives,  
I expect you men to keep your  
mouths shut.

A SHORT TIME LATER

GENERAL WESTMORELAND arrives with a contingent of REPORTERS and CAMERAMEN.

Everyone stands at attention or sits up as straight as possible in bed.

Sam's eyes go to General Westmoreland's feet.

TEN MINUTES LATER

Sam still looks down at the General's feet as he pins a Purple Heart on him.

Cameras FLASH.

GENERAL WESTMORELAND

You've done a mighty fine job  
serving your country, son.

Sam's eyes go from the general's good feet to his missing ones, but he says nothing.

INT. GREAT LAKES NAVAL HOSPITAL - DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Sam sits before his doctor who writes notes as he asks Sam questions.

DOCTOR

I spoke with your mother about your diet as a child. Your body is healing extremely fast. Even given that you are nineteen, I've never seen wounds heal so fast.

Sam looks down at his feet.

SAM

Too bad my feet won't heal.

DOCTOR

It will take some time, but you'll get used to the artificial ones.

Sam looks up in surprise.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)

You'll leave for the Philadelphia Naval Hospital soon. All the amputees go there for artificial limbs.

SAM

I'm going to walk?

DOCTOR

Well, that's dependent on you and how hard you work at it, but I would say so.

Joy floods Sam's face as he stares in awe at the doctor.

INT. GREAT LAKES NAVAL HOSPITAL - HALLWAY - DAY

Sam practically does wheelies as he zooms back toward the ward on cloud nine.

INT. GREAT LAKES NAVAL HOSPITAL - WARD - DAY

Sam hops out of his wheelchair and into bed, still hyped up.

He sees the sober look on the gunnery sergeant's face.

The gunnery sergeant turns a newspaper in Sam's direction.

GUNNERY SERGEANT

You see this?

ON PAPER: The headline reads, "Returning Veterans spat on in San Francisco."

Sam's face clouds.

SAM

Stupid war protestors. But fuck that. Guess what?

GUNNERY SERGEANT

What?

SAM

I'm going to walk again.

DAYS LATER

Linda again sits on the edge of Sam's bed. Hank and Evelyn stand nearby.

SAM

Donnie's lucky to have you for parents.

EVELYN

You take care of yourself, Sam, and enjoy Philadelphia.

SAM

They're going to help me walk again. I'm going to love it.

Evelyn kisses Sam's cheek then Hank shakes his hand.

HANK

Good to get to know you, son.

Hank and Evelyn move toward the door, leaving Linda behind for a moment.

Sam is suddenly shy.

SAM  
Goodbye, Linda.

LINDA  
Goodbye, Sam. You'll write to me?

He's surprised.

SAM  
Sure.

LINDA  
You promise?

Sam could get lost in the depths of her eyes.

SAM  
I promise.

INT. PHILADELPHIA NAVAL HOSPITAL - DAY

Newly arrived, Sam takes a tour in his wheelchair. He finds:

--wider halls to accommodate the wheelchairs.

--a great place to buy food.

--a bigger, nicer physical therapy room with much more equipment for working out.

--a basketball court where PATIENTS play wheelchair basketball.

--and many other AMPUTEES, like him, enjoying the laid back atmosphere.

INT. PHILADELPHIA NAVAL HOSPITAL - DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Sam lies on a table while the his NEW DOCTOR examines his legs. He has completely healed though the back of his right leg has a huge scar.

NEW DOCTOR  
It looks like the swelling is under control. We'll be able to fit you with artificial feet soon.

INT. PHILADELPHIA NAVAL HOSPITAL - PHYSICAL THERAPY - DAY

A few weeks later, Sam watches as the new doctor attaches artificial feet to his legs.

NEW DOCTOR  
How do they look?

SAM  
Strange.

The new doctor's surprised.

NEW DOCTOR  
But they feel alright? We got the  
measurements correct?

Sam nods but he isn't sure. The feet feel strange, too.

SAM  
How long until I can walk out of  
here?

NEW DOCTOR  
Well, that's up to you.

Sam pushes himself up, ready to get moving.

The PHYSICAL THERAPIST reaches out to steady him then nods toward equipment against one wall.

PHYSICAL THERAPIST  
Would you like a cane or crutches?

SAM  
Neither.

PHYSICAL THERAPIST  
They're to help you learn how to  
walk again.

SAM  
I'll figure it out.

The physical therapist moves in to help Sam stand as he pushes up onto his new feet.

Sam expects to feel joy in this moment, but he takes five or six steps and falls down. He tries to rise, dizzy and in pain.

The physical therapist shoots a nervous look at the new doctor.

## PHYSICAL THERAPIST

It's okay, Marine. Let's just get you back to your bed this first time out.

With the physical therapist's help, Sam heads for the hall.

## INT. PHILADELPHIA NAVAL HOSPITAL - WARD - DAY

On his own, Sam lifts the sheets to examine his new feet. His legs have turned a dark blue.

## SAM

Nurse?!

Sam feels the pulse pounding in his legs.

A NURSE arrives and checks Sam's legs.

## NURSE

Sam! What'd you think you'd walk on out of here your first day? Let me get the doctor.

A cloud forms on Sam's face. He did think he'd walk out. Now. Today. He turns his face to the wall as he fights back angry tears.

## OVER THE NEXT WEEKS

Sam, with a new set of feet attached, walks around the hospital, first clinging to every object he can find.

Then he takes baby steps between support objects.

Until finally he's walking on his own. No cane.

Sam takes one last pass down the wide hallways, waving goodbye to the staff and patients on his floor.

## EXT. INDIANAPOLIS AIRPORT - DAY

In pain, Sam grits his teeth as he makes his way down the steps off the plane and onto the tarmac.

He sees his family waiting a short distance away.

His face set Sam works his way across the distance between them, determined they will see him walking.

As he finally gets to them, his father nods and his mother's eyes shine with relief. He's made it.

INT. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD - KITCHEN - DAY

In the morning Sam enters the kitchen where his mother has just finished brewing the coffee.

She sees the stiff look of pain on his face.

MOTHER  
No running today?

Sam shakes his head as he accepts a cup. Then he sits and props his legs up onto a dining table chair.

Mother sees his black and blue ankles.

MOTHER (CONT'D)  
We found you an old wheelchair.

She nods to the corner where it rests, folded in half.

SAM  
Thanks, Mom.

MOTHER  
A lot of folks have called in,  
wondering how you was doing.

SAM  
Tell 'em I'm fine.

MOTHER  
I will. They wanted me to know they  
were sorry my boy got hurt over  
there.

Sam lifts his head, a stern look in his eye his mother has never seen before.

SAM  
Mom, I don't want to hear the word  
sorry from you or anyone else.

He's shocked her.

SAM (CONT'D)  
I chose to go into the Marines. I'm  
the one who has to fucking live  
with that decision.

Mother bristles.

MOTHER

Don't use the F word in my house.

Sam fights back the urge to argue.

SAM

Yes, ma'am.

Mother turns to the stove to get breakfast together.

Sam looks at the peeling wallpaper, feeling like a fish out of water. He's grown up, but that doesn't seem to matter here.

I/E. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD - DAY

As the seasons change outside, Sam sits in the used wheelchair and stares out the side window toward the lawn.

The trees go from green to violent arrays of color which fall until the leafy branches are bare.

As it all changes, Sam sinks lower and lower in his chair as he stares outside.

JAMES (O.S.)

Do you wanna go into town?

Sam turns his head to his younger brother JAMES.

SAM

What the hell can I do in a wheelchair?

JAMES

I don't know.

SAM

Everyone's gonna look at me like I'm some sort of fucking freak.

James looks down at Sam's feet.

SAM (CONT'D)

Go get me a rum and Coke.

Embarrassed, James eagerly scoots out of the room.

MOTHER (O.S.)

Sam, I told you not to use the F word here.

Sam doesn't even turn around.

SAM

I heard you.

Mother sighs.

MOTHER

A letter came for you.

She hands it to Sam who takes it with only mild interest.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Might be your disability benefits.

Sam places the envelope on his lap.

SAM

Yeah.

Irritated, Mother reaches over and takes the envelope. She opens it.

MOTHER

Five hundred a month?

Sam jerks his head in her direction as happiness flares in his eyes.

SAM

Really?

MOTHER

Doesn't seem like much when you  
won't be able to have a job.

Sam takes the envelope and reads the amount. As it sinks in, his face falls.

SAM

What a crock of shit! I lost both  
of my feet serving my country for  
\$500 a month? Shit!

Mother glares at Sam before shaking her head and moving away.

He goes back to staring at the trees outside, his depression worsening, unaware that his brother comes in with his drink and sets it on the table beside him.

Sam notices one lone leaf he didn't see before as it falls from a tree.

JAMES (O.S.)

At least Christmas is coming soon.

SAM  
Yeah. Merry fucking Christmas.

MOTHER (V.O.)  
(calling from other room)  
Sam!

SAM  
(calling back)  
If I'm going to be disabled for the  
rest of my fucking life, I have  
reason to say the word FUCK!

A rattling of pans is the only reply.

I/E. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD - DAY

Sam's already well into a Jim Beam and Coke as he stares out at the afternoon sunshine. It's dreary winter outside, which suits Sam's mood.

In his lap he holds his revolver. He closes his eyes.

INT. FROM BEHIND SAM'S EYES - DAYDREAM

Sam pictures his hand slipping into the revolver before he raises it to his head.

His eyes on his favorite tree outside, he pulls the trigger then falls soundlessly to the ground, the force of the bullet knocking Sam and the wheelchair over.

His younger sisters, including Noticka, run into the room.

Sam stares at their faces, covered with shock and fear.

He opens his eyes.

I/E. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD - DAY

Sam looks at his tree outside.

He sets the revolver aside and takes another sip of his drink.

As he turns, his eyes catch sight of his cane, propped against the wall nearby.

He narrows his eyes and then closes them, thinking, before he goes into-

EXT. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD - DAYDREAM

Despite the cold, Sam makes his way across the yard.

When he gets to a small hill, he tosses the cane aside and crawls up, hampered by the gun in his hand.

When he reaches the top of the rise, he places the gun to his temple, then under his chin, then between the eyes.

He lowers the gun and looks down at a stream below.

He tosses the gun aside and rolls down toward the water, feeling its icy coldness wash over him, but the water's not deep enough for him to submerge.

He opens his eyes to-

I/E. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD - DAY

Sam pours more Jim Beam into his glass, trembling.

The sun pours through the glass of the window before him and onto Sam's face.

Sam turns toward it, drinking it in.

SAM

God, forgive me for being such an asshole.

He sighs.

SAM (CONT'D)

Why didn't you let me die in Vietnam? Why didn't you take me that day?

Sam clenches and unclenches his hands then looks straight into the light.

SAM (CONT'D)

I promise I will stop bitching if you will help me. Lead me out of this mess, and I will shut up and follow.

Sam doesn't notice the tears streaming down his face. He just continues to absorb the sun's heat.

From the doorway his mother watches. Then she blinks before wiping her hands on a towel and slipping back into the kitchen.

EXT. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD - DAY

It's early morning and smoke rises from the chimney.

Snowdrops push up out of the ground, the first sign of spring.

INT. GAYLORD HOMESTEAD - DAY

Mother pours coffee for herself and Father, who sits at the table.

They both hear shuffling, then Sam enters the room using his cane.

Without asking, Mother pours him a cup.

SAM  
Thanks, Mom.

MOTHER  
You're up early.

SAM  
I smelled the coffee.

He smiles and Mother smiles back.

MOTHER  
You're in a good mood.

SAM  
I am.

He turns to Father.

SAM (CONT'D)  
Are you going fishing today?

FATHER  
I'm headed into town.

SAM  
Oh. I'm going to work out, get more used to having feet.

Mother gives Father an encouraging look. He studies her blankly then-

FATHER  
That seems like a good idea.

SAM

I thought I might get back to fishing if I could get up and about more.

MOTHER

That's good, Sam. That's real good.

Sam settles his eyes on her back where she works at the stove.

SAM

No reason to sit in a chair all day. Life isn't fair. It's time to accept that.

Mother nods, more to hide the emotion she feels at her son's words.

MOTHER

I'm glad to hear it.

She shovels eggs on to a plate and places it in front of Father.

FATHER

Your mother and I know you been having a tough time...

He pauses to study his son.

FATHER (CONT'D)

But there was nothing we could do about it.

Sam nods.

SAM

As a Marine, I know attitude is everything. I might need some help setting up for my workout.

He nods his thanks as Mother places food before him.

SAM (CONT'D)

I got a new set of feet in the mail. They'll take some getting used to.

Mother joins the other two at the table and they eat a moment.

FATHER

Whatever you need, son.

SAM  
Thanks, Dad.

In a SERIES OF SHOTS over the next few weeks:

--Sam struggles to lift weights, pushing himself to complete reps.

--Sam logs his progress on a wall chart.

--Sam puts on the new feet and tries to walk around, aided by his brother James.

--James, holding two fishing poles, leads Sam to the Ohio River.

--Sam walks away from the house without his cane, his stride smoother with each step.

I/E. FAMILY TRUCK - DAY

Sam rides into Madison with his mother.

MOTHER  
I'm not so sure about this.

SAM  
I'm a grown man. I can't live at home forever.

MOTHER  
I know that.

They both stare out in silence as she nears their destination.

MOTHER (CONT'D)  
Mrs. Jenkins said she can keep the rent reasonable as long as you pay on time.

She stops in front of a four-unit apartment building.

SAM  
That shouldn't be a problem. Disability payments been coming like clockwork.

They both stare up at the building.

MOTHER  
She says it's on the first floor. Key's in the mail box.

Sam opens the passenger door.

SAM  
Let's go take a look.

EXT. VOLZ CHEVROLET - DAY

Using his cane, Sam moves around the used car lot with the owner, Mr. HORACE VOLZ.

MR. VOLZ  
Is stick shift going to be okay?

SAM  
Yes, sir.

Mr. Volz sees the determined look in Sam's eye then casts a look over the lot.

MR. VOLZ  
These two are in your price range.

He points at two cars.

Sam eyes the two choices. He particularly likes the 1970 454 Chevelle.

SAM  
Shall we take this one for a spin  
and see?

MR. VOLZ  
You gonna drive?

SAM  
I'm gonna let you drive this one  
time then we'll see.

Mr. Volz laughs.

MR. VOLZ  
Alright, then, let me grab the  
keys.

INT. BANK - DAY

The BANK OFFICER reviews Sam's loan application.

BANK OFFICER  
Do you have any other income  
besides your disability payments?

SAM

No, sir.

The Bank Officer grimaces and writes something down. Then he stamps the paperwork, "Rejected."

Sam's eyes go wide.

I/E. VOLZ CHEVROLET - DAY

Sam stands at the front desk, his dream car still on the lot outside.

Mr. Volz looks confused as Sam tries to explain.

MR. VOLZ

But you're a war hero.

SAM

Well...

MR. VOLZ

Did you tell him that? Nevermind. I will.

Mr. Volz picks up the phone and dials.

SECONDS LATER

MR. VOLZ

(into the phone)

Yes, William, he was a combat Marine in Vietnam. I'm going to send him back over there and I want you to give him a check for his car. Make it out to *Mister Sam Gaylord*.

Mr. Volz replaces the receiver.

MR. VOLZ (CONT'D)

You heard me. Get over there while I start the other paperwork.

Sam grins from ear to ear.

SAM

You got it. Thanks, Mr. Volz.

MR. VOLZ

I think from here on out you call me Horace.

I/E. 1970 454 CHEVELLE - DAY

Sam drives through town.

As he passes Maude's Summer Restaurant, a PRETTY GIRL steps outside. She smiles shyly when she sees Sam looking. He smiles back before pulling in to park.

He gets out and stares up at the establishment, memories clouding his thoughts.

He sees the pretty girl notice his legs, but she's still smiling. Sam winks at her before heading inside.

INT. MAUDE'S SUMMER RESTAURANT - DAY

Sam chows down on a burger and fries as Maude hovers nearby with more coffee.

MAUDE

You look good, Sam.

He nods his thanks and swallows.

SAM

You want me to help with the trash when I'm done here?

She hesitates a fraction of a second.

SAM (CONT'D)

I'm fine, Maude. I'll be angry at my country for the rest of my life, but I'm fine.

MAUDE

Guess you got a right to be.

SAM

I'll get that trash then.

MAUDE

I would appreciate it. I always thought you were the kindest boy, Sam.

He smiles, wryly.

SAM

Not always. But I got plenty of time to work on that.

She smiles at his humility.

MAUDE

You going to college soon?

SAM

Next semester.

MAUDE

What are your plans?

SAM

I thought I might have a career helping other people.

Maude pours more coffee.

MAUDE

And that's what I mean. Always the kindest boy.

Feeling like she won the point, Maude moves off.

Sam gives her an affectionate look before going back to his burger.

I/E. 1970 454 CHEVELLE - DAY

It's late afternoon.

Sam drives toward the riverbank along the Ohio.

He parks then steps out of the car and walks toward the river before sitting down on the grassy bank to watch the water slide by before him.

SAM

I used to fish here, but you know that.

Sam looks up at the sky for a moment then back at the river.

SAM (CONT'D)

I'll never forgive the government for what they did. I served because I loved my country, but I don't love it anymore.

He picks up a stone and skips it across the water.

SAM (CONT'D)

I wanted to thank you, God, for helping me when I needed it. It was time to move on. Thank you for helping me see that.

Sam closes his eyes as a cool breeze caresses his cheek. He smiles slightly, then opens his eyes in the gathering darkness.

SAM (CONT'D)

Until next time.

Sam gets up and ambles toward his car. He's filled out since the old days, a man now instead of a boy.

He takes one last look at the river and then gets into his vehicle.

The engine RUMBLES to life.

The strains of a country music song flow out the open windows.

After a flash of brake lights, Sam pulls out onto the road and heads for home.

FADE OUT.