

"The Visit"

by Diane Esteb

The day had arrived, and she couldn't have picked a more appropriate one. The overcast, gloomy day matched her mood perfectly. If only this visit could be postponed one more time. The strong desire to procrastinate had to be overcome, controlled. If only it was tomorrow already and the visit was history. If only, if only-PLEASE-couldn't she get out of the visit? She told herself to grow up, face the visit, handle it and get it over with.

She parked the car and locked it, just going through the motions; habit did not take any conscious thought. Her stomach churned as she dragged her feet out of the parking lot and slowly approached the building. She was consumed with apprehension.

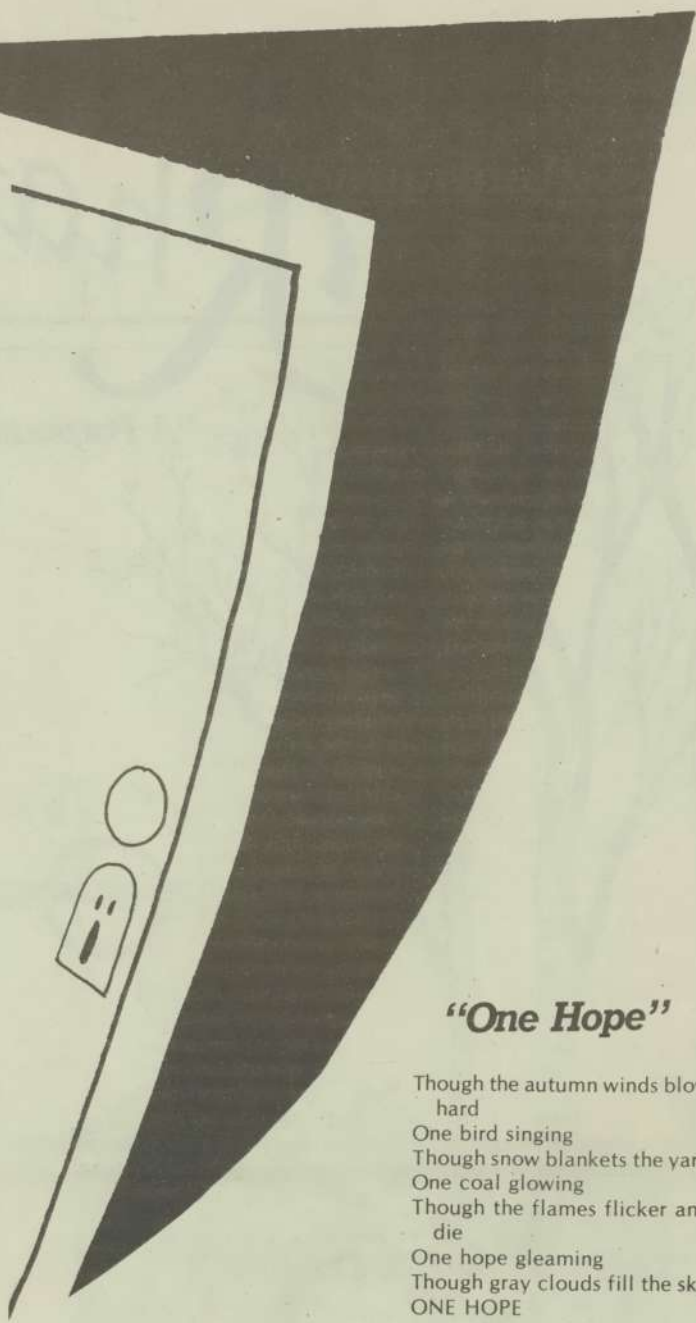
Inside felt cool; the lights were turned down low to produce a calming effect. There was quiet, soothing music in the background. It didn't fool her; she didn't feel calm or soothed. The woman inside greeted her cheerfully. They exchanged pleasantries and talked about the weather—just chit chat. Then the woman left the room, and she was left alone. Actually, she preferred it this way, no one to witness the shaking of her hands or the sweat beading up on her forehead.

She picked up a magazine and flipped through it without really seeing anything in it. If only she could relax! She made herself stretch back, then rotated her head, wrists, and ankles. Maybe deep breathing would help. What could she think of to help her keep control? Please, please, let her have control. Just the thought of crying in front of them brought on spasms of embarrassment, and she could feel what control she had begun to slip.

Hopefully, there would not be the need of another visit for a long time—maybe a year or even two. If all goes well, she would wait two years. That sounded like an eternity right now. Eternity, "God, please get me through this visit with at least the shreds of my dignity. Please, for once, give me control over my tears."

She remembered other visits and reddened from the memories. They must think her a child; surely they must think her unstable. She knew it was unreasonable to be so fearful of these visits, but each time went the same. At some point along the way she would lose control, and then the tears would come. That was the worst part; the tears. It was so embarrassing to cry under stress. Once started, there was no way to turn them off. It was as if her tears had free choice, completely removed from her wants.

She shuddered when she heard the brisk footsteps coming down the hall and suppressed the urge to bolt. The woman was back, all smiles, beckoning her to follow. She was led into a bright, cheerful room and invited to sit down. Now she knew what the fly felt like when invited into the spider's parlor. She was offered the soft, plush chair—the seat of "honor." "Relax, lean back," she heard him say. Her knuckles turned white from the death grip inflicted on the arm of the chair as she heard her dentist say, "open wide!"



"One Hope"

Though the autumn winds blow hard
One bird singing
Though snow blankets the yard
One coal glowing
Though the flames flicker and die
One hope gleaming
Though gray clouds fill the sky
ONE HOPE

by Julia Singer

"Parris Island"

It was February 26, 1956, and I was on a bus not far from Parris Island, South Carolina, the home of boot camp training for the United States Marine Corp. Little did I know at that time, just exactly what that meant, but time was about to bring a seventeen year old rough neck to the unyielding wall of reality.

The trip south had been smooth and uneventful, then we pulled up to the main gates of Parris Island and reality. As the doors of the bus opened, two very big, bulldog-looking men stepped aboard. They were impressive looking with their spit-shinned shoes, dazzling bright brass, and uniforms pressed to perfection with very well defined military creases. They also wore black arm bands with white MP letters, designating them as Military Police. Then suddenly the dead silent air was broken by the raspy voice of one of them, defiantly proclaiming that "we looked and smelled like s—," and the other one interjecting that, "that's because you are s—." They spoke their piece, slowly, deliberately, looked around the interior of the bus at all the "erect t-s" sitting in seats, and then like two proud champions, slowly departed from the bus. As the bus pulled away, we all sat there, silently wondering about what had just taken place, hoping we were dreaming, but knowing we had just entered the first facet of reality.

As the bus drove deeper into the interior of the base, we could see brick buildings with white shutters, standing at attention in long straight rows. These we thought, were to be our living quarters. We realized we were very, very wrong, the bus did not stop there, but stopped in a large parking lot that would become known later as the parade field.

The bus pulled to a stop, opened the doors, and the driver said, "welcome to hell's home, everybody off." Two men, who had been awaiting our arrival, were now screaming at us to fall in as we got off the bus. After we had been pushed and shoved into the formation they wanted, we were told to shut our mouths and quit milling around. The big mouth screamer was introducing himself as Staff Sgt. Hand, and his pushing sidekick, as Sgt. Owens. He went on to explain, "That while you here, I'm your wife, mother, sweetheart, and shackrat, but God help the stupid son of a b— that tries screwing me." Cute, but very effective because everyone knew he damn well meant it. He then told us to turn left and follow him at a double time

pace. We must have looked similar to a flock of obese, flightless geese trying to elude a fox. As we attempted this little feat, we were stepping on and tripping over each other's feet, knocking each other down, getting up and getting knocked back down again, tempers flared and many obscenities lingered in the air, but we did finally make it to our destination—rows

of half circle shaped, metal buildings that we were told were quonset huts and that they were to be our homes for the next three months. We didn't really hear too much about the huts, we had our attentions focused on a man sitting in the middle of the asphalt road crying for his "mommie." I do not know to this day if this was a deliberate scare tactic or if this man was truly in fear of his very life. Our attentions were suddenly broken by Sgt. Hand's command "fall out and get into your huts, lights out at ten o'clock." The huts were about sixty feet long and eighteen feet wide, with bunk beds lining both sides. There were foot lockers under every bunk and a pot belly heating stove in the center of the hut, although I don't know why, as it was never allowed to be used. The windows were small and opened to the inside of the hut only wide enough to allow for ventilation when it was permitted. This was to prevent an attempted escape. At ten o'clock sharp, Sgt. Hand was screaming "lights out," and the eerie feeling of entrapment was felt when we heard the click of padlocks on the doors.

The years have rapidly stripped me of my idealistic youth, and as I regress through the history of that youth and realize the truth of reality, I wonder perhaps, if it may be time to compile these military experiences into writings. The time when six young and very scared men died in the Blue Ribbon March, or when another young man put his mouth over the barrel of an M.1 rifle and blew his brains and skull fragments across the hut because he couldn't take anymore, and still another who put a forty-five pistol to his left ear with no one ever knowing and probably not caring why the act was committed in the first place, and the sickening realization that life is the world's cheapest commodity.

by Joe A. Smith

