

SMILING MAN

NURIT KARLIN

The man was smiling. It was the Fourth of July. Somewhere else small children were parading in patriotic costumes under American flags.

The man's face was proud and his smile was gentle. Look! He must be Thomas Jefferson! People pointed at a small boy with a powdered wig askew, who laughed shyly at their attention. And that must be George Washington — that little girl just has to be Betsy Ross.

Perhaps his smile was sad. The crowd laughed at another boy who was Abraham Lincoln trying to keep his whiskers from falling. Mothers and fathers affectionately waved to their children parading by.

His friends were not smiling. Great brass bands followed the marching children, crescendoing the air with stirring American songs, the sun shining molten gold on trumpets and bassoons.

The smiling man and his friends did not move. Behind the bands came the veterans, marching to the drums, wearing blue American Legion or VFW caps, some of them with empty sleeves pinned to their shoulders; others stumped by on artificial legs.

There were four of them, counting the smiling man, and they lay on the wet ground of a coconut grove. In the afternoon, after the picnic lunch, some of the men and boys played baseball on the local park diamond while politicians swore their undying patriotism to the crowd sitting on the grass. They threw out such catchwords as "Liberty" and "Freedom for All" as if they were baseballs.

Above his sad smile and wide open eyes, the smiling man's head was neatly cut away, the round lower half almost resembling a child's cereal bowl. His friends laying on the moldy ground had

parts of their bodies missing also. A veteran without an arm, who did not wear an American Legion or VFW cap, attempted to shout down the politicians, calling them "Liars!" and "Murderers!" He remembered the smiling man and his friends, would in fact never forget them, although in the course of almost a year at war he had seen thousands of dead, most of them farmers and their families whose bodies were strewn like rubbish around their burned homes or out in their rice fields. The loss of his arm seemed almost a justifiable penance, but he was more often bitter about it.

He remembered walking over to the bodies in the coconut grove. He had killed them the night before. He had seen them by the light of a flare trying to set up a machine gun and he blew them apart with a hand grenade. It had rained the rest of the night and in the morning the bodies lay leached of blood. The smiling man stared at him with dead eyes. He was transfixed by the smile, the neatly cut away head resembling one of those cornflakes bowls with a comic face his mother had given him when he was a boy. A friend shook him out of it and he walked away into the months ahead until the war took his arm.

Police took his arm and led him away, warning him to not disturb the festivities again or they would lock him up. The smiling man and his friends were left to rot in the grove. The sun set behind tall mountains and night crept over the bodies. Somewhere else great colored starbursts flared in the sky, showering the thrilled crowds with streamers of flaming oranges, reds and yellows. One magnificent burst formed the Stars and Stripes for a few seconds and everyone applauded. Elsewhere also on this night heavy jet bombers shot into a tropical sky and turned toward a jungled coconut grove.

— MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

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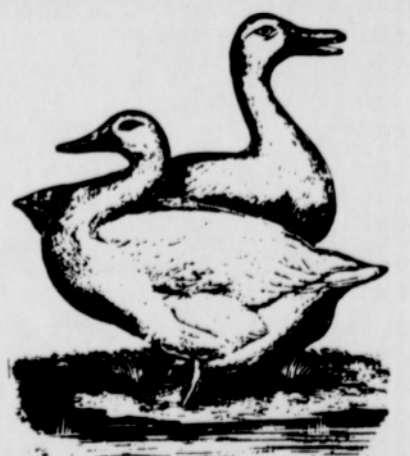
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