

# Tim

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AUTHOR OF *GOING AFTER CACCIATO*

## The Things They Carried

"A marvel of storytelling . . . [*The Things They Carried*] matters not only to the reader interested in Vietnam but to anyone interested in the craft of writing as well." — *New York Times*

## Night Life

A few words about Rat Kiley. I wasn't there when he got hurt, but Mitchell Sanders later told me the essential facts. Apparently he lost his cool.

The platoon had been working an AO out in the foothills west of Quang Ngai City, and for some time they'd been receiving intelligence about an NVA buildup in the area. The usual crazy rumors: massed artillery and Russian tanks and whole divisions of fresh troops. No one took it seriously, including Lieutenant Cross, but as a precaution the platoon moved only at night, staying off the main trails and observing strict field SOPs. For almost two weeks, Sanders said, they lived the night life. That was the phrase everyone used: the night life. A language trick. It made things seem tolerable. How's the Nam treating you? one guy would ask, and some other guy would say, Hey, one big party, just living the night life.

It was a tense time for everybody, Sanders said, but for Rat Kiley it ended up in Japan. The strain was too much for him. He couldn't make the adjustment.

During those two weeks the basic routine was simple. They'd sleep away the daylight hours, or try to sleep, then at dusk they'd put on their gear and move out single file into the dark. Always a heavy cloud cover. No moon and no stars. It was the purest black you could imagine, Sanders said, the kind of clock-stopping black that God must've had in mind when he sat down to invent blackness. It made your eyeballs ache. You'd shake your head and blink, except you couldn't even tell you were blinking, the blackness didn't change. So pretty soon you'd get jumpy. Your nerves would go. You'd start to worry about getting cut off from the rest of the unit—alone, you'd think—and then the real panic would bang in and you'd reach out and try to touch the guy in front of you, groping for his shirt, hoping to Christ he was still there. It made for some bad dreams. Dave Jensen popped special vitamins high in carotene. Lieutenant Cross popped NoDoz. Henry Dobbins and Norman Bowker even rigged up a safety line between them, a long piece of string tied to their belts. The whole platoon felt the impact.

With Rat Kiley, though, it was different. Too many body bags, maybe. Too much gore.

At first Rat just sank inside himself, not saying a word, but then later on, after five or six days, it flipped the other way. He couldn't stop talking. Weird talk, too. Talking about bugs, for instance: how the worst thing in Nam was the goddamn bugs. Big giant killer bugs, he'd say, mutant bugs, bugs with fucked-up DNA, bugs that were chemically altered by napalm and defoliants and tear gas and DDT. He claimed the bugs were personally after his ass. He said he could hear the bastards homing in on him.

Swarms of mutant bugs, billions of them, they had him bracketed. Whispering his name, he said—his actual name—all night long—it was driving him crazy.

Odd stuff, Sanders said, and it wasn't just talk. Rat developed some peculiar habits. Constantly scratching himself. Clawing at the bug bites. He couldn't quit digging at his skin, making big scabs and then ripping off the scabs and scratching the open sores.

It was a sad thing to watch. Definitely not the old Rat Kiley. His whole personality seemed out of kilter.

To an extent, though, everybody was feeling it. The long night marches turned their minds upside down; all the rhythms were wrong. Always a lost sensation. They'd blunder along through the dark, willy-nilly, no sense of place or direction, probing for an enemy that nobody could see. Like a snipe hunt, Sanders said. A bunch of dumb Cub Scouts chasing the phantoms. They'd march north for a time, then east, then north again, skirting the villages, no one talking except in whispers. And it was rugged country, too. Not quite mountains, but rising fast, full of gorges and deep brush and places you could die. Around midnight things always got wild. All around you, everywhere, the whole dark countryside came alive. You'd hear a strange hum in your ears. Nothing specific; nothing you could put a name on. Tree frogs, maybe, or snakes or flying squirrels or who-knew-what. Like the night had its own voice—that hum in your ears—and in the hours after midnight you'd swear you were walking through some kind of soft black protoplasm, Vietnam, the blood and the flesh.

It was no joke, Sanders said. The monkeys chattered death-chatter. The nights got freaky.

Rat Kiley finally hit a wall.

He couldn't sleep during the hot daylight hours; he couldn't cope with the nights.

Late one afternoon, as the platoon prepared for another march, he broke down in front of Mitchell Sanders. Not crying, but up against it. He said he was scared. And it wasn't normal scared. He didn't know *what* it was: too long in-country, probably. Or else he wasn't cut out to be a medic. Always policing up the parts, he said. Always plugging up holes. Sometimes he'd stare at guys who were still okay, the alive guys, and he'd start to picture how they'd look dead. Without arms or legs—that sort of thing. It was ghoulish, he knew that, but he couldn't shut off the pictures. He'd be sitting there talking with Bowker or Dobbins or somebody, just marking time, and then out of nowhere he'd find himself wondering how much the guy's head weighed, like how *heavy* it was, and what it would feel like to pick up the head and carry it over to a chopper and dump it in.

Rat scratched the skin at his elbow, digging in hard. His eyes were red and weary.

"It's not right," he said. "These pictures in my head, they won't quit. I'll see a guy's liver. The actual fucking liver. And the thing is, it doesn't scare me, it doesn't even give me the willies. More like curiosity. The way a doctor feels when he looks at a patient, sort of mechanical, not seeing the real person, just a ruptured appendix or a clogged-up artery."

His voice floated away for a second. He looked at Sanders and tried to smile.

He kept clawing at his elbow.

"Anyway," Rat said, "the days aren't so bad, but at night the pictures get to be a bitch. I start seeing my own body. Chunks of myself. My own heart, my own kidneys. It's like—I don't know—it's like staring into this huge black crystal ball. One of these nights I'll be lying dead out there in the dark and nobody'll find me except the bugs—I can see it—I can see the goddamn bugs chewing tunnels through me—I can see the mongooses munching on my bones. I swear, it's too much. I can't keep seeing myself dead."

Mitchell Sanders nodded. He didn't know what to say. For a time they sat watching the shadows come, then Rat shook his head.

He said he'd done his best. He'd tried to be a decent medic. Win some and lose some, he said, but he'd tried hard. Briefly then, rambling a little, he talked about a few of the guys who were gone now, Curt Lemon and Kiowa and Ted Lavender, and how crazy it was that people who were so incredibly alive could get so incredibly dead.

Then he almost laughed.

"This whole war," he said. "You know what it is? Just one big banquet. Meat, man. You and me. Everybody. Meat for the bugs."

The next morning he shot himself.

He took off his boots and socks, laid out his medical kit, doped himself up, and put a round through his foot.

Nobody blamed him, Sanders said.

Before the chopper came, there was time for good-byes. Lieutenant Cross went over and said he'd vouch

that it was an accident. Henry Dobbins and Azar gave him a stack of comic books for hospital reading. Everybody stood in a little circle, feeling bad about it, trying to cheer him up with bullshit about the great night life in Japan.