

## **Last Stand**

*JC's Forest Grave; Samaritan's Diary (Soliloquy)*

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Our lives' were never our own; not really our own.  
Sons of the greatest generation...  
Destined for a slice of Vietnam War...  
365 days of up close and personal, etched in a twisted-helix as something more.

Did fate summon me to hunt these woods and find your weathered-plank cabin held together with cobwebs and settled dust, binding all that happened here in layers of time, like pages in an unread book.

I found a sunken unmarked grave. A shovel booted down at the head of the grave, its gray-aged wooden handle nail scratched initials—*JC*. Not the big man in the sky unless he was born in 1943.

An old weathered-gray wooden cabin was nearby. Remains of a timber-door lay time-tossed like a child's tiddlywinks; hand sawn planks scattered. My carpenter's eye easily reassembles and hangs the pieces to torn leather strips—tough as petrified jerky—once greased with animal fat to keep it flexible as makeshift hinges.

Inside, a corner pile of what likely was long cured skins and hand woven quilts for winter's sharp biting nights. An old newspaper dated April 29, 1975, laid on a shelf with the faded headline: *Saigon Falls*. Is that what pushed you to hermit-ville? I wondered. A dark brown leather-binder lay open as if inviting reading and drew my attention. I puffed heavy dust away, filling the cabin with rays of sparkling swirling-light, and began to read ...

*"While hunting I found him dead on the cabin floor...decayed to bones and strands of skin and hair. No mail, name, or anything but a diary written in fair hand, every page then turned upside down and written throughout between lines. He was there—Tet '68. I read his words—I wish I hadn't—reflecting a steady fall into darkness. I buried his too personal journal with him. He had signed his diary, JC.*

*I will never hunt this forest again. I will never tell anyone about this and hope you will recognize a patriot marked by a never ending war, who coped until not, now in solitude... and leave him be at rest.*

*If you are a veteran you will understand... if not, then wonder about what good would serve a better ending than JC's own choice of forest solitude to suave howling beasts and lingering night-wanders of unresolved moments that lingered unanswered through the decades? And yes, I meant patriot. His words. His flag, war-worn by life's battles, hanging on outside cabin wall as witness—a patriot once lived here.*

*At first I felt my civic duty was to notify authorities; perhaps he—JC—had relatives... although they've done a great job not-looking for him. Suppose I did report this; the sheriff would show up...probably exhume the body, check for foul play; though he need look no further than Vietnam. Then what? Post a notice somewhere inviting 'anyone' to come pay*

*for a funeral? If no takers cremate him and bury his ashes in some potter's-field grave never to be thought of again?*

*How would that serve a good purpose, or be considered the right thing to do? No one to mouth shallow platitudes—He's in a better place—let him Rest In Peace.*

*I ask you . . . Really! A Potter's Field grave vs. swaying forest pines; roots gently rocking him in earth's final cradle?"*

Unsigned, I wondered who had written diary's words, and where did the man who buried JC go?

Outside, my eyes drawn once more to the faded-tattered flag, hung with rusting spike-nails, dropping on grave's side of cabin's wall. . . a fitting marker overlooking JC's final repose. Weathered times of war marked him then and until his last day; cascading torrential-burdens upon his soldier's heart that wilt the soul and bleed out life's spirit to darkness.

Even now... *even now*... cool-earth of a cool-forest soothes the bones of this skeleton—another casualty of the Vietnam war, far removed from home, missing, and alone.

Quiet, souging winds combed by pine-tree's needles rustle moments of solitude. Did they provide a peace in his graying-out final moments? I wondered.

I closed the Samaritan's diary without adding my thoughts. . . none were needed. JC's unspoken last words rested with him; shadowed scars of unhealing wounds quilled and unread by the many.

What should I do?

At morning, the air awash with scent of pine, I fixed coffee and pondered the peaceful forest's silence . . . except the forest really isn't completely silent, nor is the sleepless mind. *Did I do the right thing?* I had to look close to find where the grave was. Pleased by my good job of leveling and smoothing JC's grave with a branch that erased evidence of any grave at all. Then scattering of a deadfall leaf-quilt blessing.

JC had carried unbearable dreams to the limits of his strength. What veteran this day still runs that gauntlet awaiting end-of-life's baton? I knew the daily average is 21, the day was young and awaiting the last soul to fall.

I would honor the written message of the veteran who buried him. JC's flag would stay. Cabin door left unhinged to the wild. His written words, silent beneath him; the dark-witness and testament to a Spirit's last stand; life freely given—freely abandoned.

I turned away, melancholy, and heel-toed into the promised light away from that weathered cabin of secrets, uncertain if there remained an empty mind-box, left to lock away that last stand of darkness.