

The Guerrilla

“I accepted killing and being killed. It’s part of the job.”

—Soldier quoted by BBC News

When I awoke, the room was dark. It was still before dawn. My pillow was sopping with sweat. I sat up with a start, as if the guerrilla were still coming.

In the half-moment after a dream, nothing is clear. Everything happens again. The image of events which cannot be forgotten suddenly reappears. But the image is now itself the reality. My room becomes the ditch I had slept in, my bed the soft mud in which I had lain. And I see him. I see him just as clearly as I had that morning, the devil lunging at me from above, his fang-like teeth covered by a drooping black moustache. The eyes are invisible, lost in two black pools of shadows. And the knife. The sudden flash of his knife at my throat.

He’d come from out of nowhere. I’d been sleeping, not very soundly, in a shallow ditch, alone, with a rock for a pillow. The rock was hard and uncomfortable, but better than no pillow at all. I didn’t have my gun. I’d wanted to get away and left it back with the others. On the side of the ditch facing the front, the mud had been slapped up into a wall. I’d spent most of the night, asleep or awake, hugging the ground just under the wall, all the time telling myself I no longer cared if the bullets the wall was supposed to shield me from found their mark or not. Towards morning I was dozing again.

Suddenly a small shower of water and mud splashed down on my face. I was instantly awake, eyes open.

And there above me, just a few feet away, was the guerrilla.

He looked at me, but only for an instant. His knife was already out of its sheath. Before I could move he was flying down on top of me.

Instinctively I rolled to one side. The blade of the knife grated down the side of my pillow, the guerrilla’s top-heavy body falling after it. The muscles piled on his shoulders and chest bulged from under his shirt. The hand holding the knife was hardened into a fist, tense and preparing for a second strike.

Before he could regain his balance I shoved my boot into his groin. The power seemed to surge from some mysterious place deep inside me, effortlessly, without exertion.

The man’s body folded in half. He fell to one knee and began reeling from side to side. In a single motion I scooped up the rock that had been my pillow and lifted it over the guerrilla’s head.

He continued reeling for a moment, then stopped. Still holding the knife he looked up, first at the rock and then at me. His eyes were distant, without gleam or fire, sunk deeply in their sockets like black unmined diamonds, shielded by the overlapping shadows of brows and cheekbones, no passage left between them and the world.

The rock remained above him, ready to strike.

The guerrilla’s mouth slowly twisted up into a smile. I tightened my grip on the rock.

“How did you get behind our lines?” I shouted.

The man did not answer, but simply continued smiling. His eyes remained motionless, without fear, as if daring me to do something: either to kill him and get it over with or to let him go.

I hesitated. I was hardly groggy but hadn’t been awake long enough to fully comprehend what was happening. I desperately wanted a moment or two to sort everything out. I must have noticed that he was still holding his knife, but somehow it didn’t register. With the rock remaining frozen above his head, I felt I had the advantage.

The man began to laugh, softly at first, then more loudly. It was insane. I looked at him with wild incomprehension.

“What the hell’s the matter?”

But he just sat there, his head between his knees now, laughing. I kicked him with my boot.

“Don’t make me kill you!”

I was sobbing, hardly aware of myself. He didn’t say a word, but simply continued laughing. Involuntarily I raised the rock slightly. Then without warning he lurched forward. I felt a sharp pain as his knife sliced across my thigh. I looked down and saw that the blade was covered with blood. He was

about to lunge at me once more.

Then—only then—the rock fell.

It glanced sharply off the side of his head.

A cry blasted through his lips.

I raised my arms and let the rock come down again. The guerrilla squeezed his knife firmly for a moment. Then, seeming to lack the strength to thrust or even hold onto it, he let it fall harmlessly to the ground.

A third time I struck with the rock. The man struggled to get up, screaming.

“You bastard!” I shouted. “I don’t want to do this!”

Yet I continued hitting him, over and over. It felt as if my arms had detached themselves from their sockets. I had lost all control of them.

The screaming crescendoed with each blow from the rock. It was aiming straight at his head, at the bone of his skull, crashing through with a raw, magical potency. The fang-like teeth were smashed, the black moustache ripped from the skin. The eyes disappeared.

Abruptly, all was silent. I only then realized that the screaming had ceased being his and become my own. The guerrilla lay crumpled up in a heap at my feet. His lungs were empty. He was dead.

The entire skull had collapsed by the time the rock had finished its awful business. I stood back shuddering. My hands, still clutching the rock, seemed unearthly. I looked down, watching them tremble. Were they mine? Were these bloodstained hands really mine? They were numb. I couldn’t feel them. They belonged to someone else. I hadn’t killed the man. Someone else had. Or the rock. Perhaps it had been the rock, acting entirely on its own. However it had happened, I’d had nothing to do with it. I wasn’t a murderer. And yet the evidence was right there in front of me, stark and indisputable. The body lay directly at my feet. The rock remained in my hands.

It’s unlikely that this was the first enemy soldier I’d killed, but it was the first time I’d had to confront my victim so directly, with the certain knowledge that it had been I, and I alone, who had killed him. In combat there usually isn’t any way of knowing how many men you have killed. When you fire your gun, soldiers fall. But you never know whose bullets actually kill them—your own or those of your comrades. You simply pull the trigger and hope that the bullet would somehow find the mark by itself. And you pray that one of theirs won’t get to you first. It’s a game. With the bullets flying at random you play the odds just like you would at dice or cards. You never have to face the man you are killing or look him in the eyes, never need to feel the heat of his breath or smell the sweat from his body. And after it is all over, unless they were those of your friends, you could view the corpses that lay strewn around a battlefield with complete indifference.

The rock dropped out of my hands and landed near the guerrilla’s stomach. He lay there motionless. Dead and completely harmless. Hesitantly, I reached out to touch him. Was he real flesh and bones or nothing more than a phantom the long days of fighting had conjured up for me? Perhaps I was still asleep. The whole thing had only been a nightmare.

As I moved my hand toward the man’s chest, I felt like a child reaching out to touch a dead bumblebee, afraid that somehow the bee might still be able to sting me. I envisioned the man suddenly being resurrected, vowing to pursue me until he’d had his revenge, refusing to enter hell unless he could take me with him.

My finger brushed up against the tanned, hairy skin. I could feel the warmth from inside dissipating. I recoiled. A fly lit on the man’s battered ear. Yes, he was real. And yes, I had killed him. Not shooting blindly from a distance, but here, with my own two hands. Not with a gun, but a rock. Rivulets of blood slowly seeped into the ground, turning the earth to a sickening mud. My shirt was splattered with it. My arms were stained brownish-red.

I crawled to the edge of the ditch and collapsed. The screams had aroused some of the soldiers sleeping nearby. The sky was just beginning to lighten but the sun still wasn’t up. The ground was covered in shadows.

“What the hell’s going on here?” came a loud booming voice. Walking towards me was the commander, followed by a young recruit. The recruit was just a kid, so short that he couldn’t quite manage to carry his own gun. It swung awkwardly from side to side in his arms.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” the commander grunted pleurably. He was looking past me to the body of the guerrilla. “There’s not much left of that one now is there?”

He walked over closer for a better look. The recruit didn’t follow. As soon as he’d seen the mutilated head the recruit stiffened and, stifling a gasp, turned away. The commander poked a few

times at the body with the barrel of his gun. The boy hazarded a cautious second look. Another stifled gasp. But this time the recruit let his eyes linger. I heard the boy's stomach start to rumble.

The commander turned the corpse over, revealing what was left of the dead man's face. The nose, ears, and mouth had been rearranged in a strange, twisted configuration. There were no eyes, not even the slits. The blood-soaked head didn't resemble anything even remotely human. It was the head of a monster, a demon, of the devil himself.

The boy suddenly belched. Vomit spewed up and drooled down his chest. He bent over, heaving till he lost his wind. I went over to put my arm around him, but the boy brushed it away. The vomiting stopped.

"Now don't get sick over it!" the commander bellowed, coming back towards us. We all sat down together. To me he said, "The kid's not used to it yet. He's only been out here a week or so. Give him a few more days. He may even come to like it!"

The commander took off his neckerchief and handed it to me.

"Here, put this around your leg. That's a pretty nasty cut you've got there. Sorry we haven't got any more bandages. This is the best I can do."

I'd almost forgotten about the knife wound. But now that I'd been reminded of it, the pain suddenly returned. It was still bleeding, but not very much. I gingerly covered the gash with the neckerchief. After wrapping the ends behind my thigh, I tied them together with a loose knot.

"Overkill—that's what they called it," the commander was saying to the recruit. "It's when you go on killing someone over and over, even after they're dead. But you see what that bastard did to this soldier's leg here. If he hadn't've killed him first, it wouldn't've been a pretty sight either, believe me—even worse than what you see lying over there in that ditch. They aren't human, I tell you. They got no souls."

The commander had put his hand on the boy's knee, which seemed to settle him a little. Noting that I was shaking, the commander then turned to me and said, "Don't let it get to you. What you did was right."

"It wasn't right," I said. "I was just scared, that's all."

"What do you mean scared?" the commander said, his face suddenly stern. "That's a masterpiece down there. You ought to be proud of it!"

"I'm just telling you like it is," I answered. "I was scared."

And then, before I knew what was happening, the commander came over to me and grabbed me by the collar.

"I don't want to hear you talking like that," he said. Turning me around so the recruit couldn't hear, he seethed just under his breath, "Never, but never, admit that you're scared. And never, but never, admit that you're wrong."

He clutched my hair with the hand not holding my collar.

"Understand?" he said, shaking me.

I nodded my head yes, or perhaps he nodded it for me. The commander pushed me away. His demeanor suddenly changed.

"I'm going to see you get a medal for this!" he said gustily, turning his face towards the front. "Hey men, we're beating them!"

The commander gave me a good, hard slap on the back and took one final look at the corpse. The recruit picked up his gun and re-erected his body in line with it. He was sniffing a little but trying hard to make it seem as if nothing had happened.

"You'd better stay here a while and take care of that leg," the commander said to me. "You can catch up with us later."

He motioned to the boy and the two of them headed back toward camp.

I lay back in the mud, numb, unable to get up. In a little while the troops began to move out. And soon after that there was gunfire and shouting. As the morning slipped by, the noise of the battle grew fainter and fainter, more and more distant. The commander had been right. We were winning.

And now I was dreaming it all over again, just as I had nearly every night since the incident occurred. Sitting up in bed I felt the guilt of that day pressing down on me. The room was unbearably hot. The window was open but there was no trace of a breeze. Some mosquitoes were buzzing close to my ears.

I shook my head vigorously to force myself fully awake. It had only been a nightmare, nothing more than a dream. But the dream preserved the memory of something very real and concrete. It was

no illusion. I had actually killed him.

We had lain there for quite some time, just myself and the guerrilla's mutilated body. He'd deserved his brutal death. Why did I feel so guilty? I had actually enjoyed seeing his head crushed by the rock, feeling the skull crack and collapse with each blow. It was so primitive. Like Cain killing Abel. Something dark and horrible had surfaced from the depths of my soul, a monster which I never knew lived inside of me, a monster that counted beastliness as strength, the monster that I in fact *was*.

A strange sense of power had been unleashed. It was an intoxicating, god-like power, able to determine the fate of all men, to take vengeance into my own hands. I had poured out my judgment on my victim as if he himself bore all the world's sins—and how would my own sin be atoned for?

If he deserved death, didn't I?

I found myself clutching my own head, touching every part of it with my hands. I began shouting. My voice was a half-sobbing scream. The words were incomprehensible. They were loud, defiant, yet heard by no one. The sky overhead refused an echo. I was alone. Alone with a man I had murdered. A man I had killed with a rock.

I stood up exhausted. I couldn't bear to look at the dead man anymore, especially at this head. Picking up his knife, which was lying only a short distance away, I grabbed the guerrilla by the only tuft of hair remaining on his head and stretched out his neck. Swiftly, cleanly, with a precision remarkable for my lack of previous experience, the blade sliced through. Hot blood spurting onto my trousers. It dripped to the ground like tears of fire. The pools which formed at my feet burned as hot as the red sun overhead.

The brains were starting to ooze out of the severed head, but I didn't let go. With my one free arm I hurriedly dug a small hole next to where I'd been sleeping. I placed the head inside and covered it over with dirt. Then I stamped down the mound with my boot.

Cleaning the knife and slipping it under my belt, I limped out towards the front. And laying my own head once again on my pillow, I heard the sound of my footsteps fading back into my dreams.