

INTRODUCTION

even envy you. I see you walking up the street to the clinic and you're not checking the rooftops for snipers or looking between cars as you pass to make sure there's nobody going to jump you, and I'll bet you have *no idea* who's on the street with you. I can tell you every person two blocks ahead of me and two blocks behind me every second. I see you coming down the street, but you don't see me, because you're in your own world not looking for ambush. How come you're like that? I envy you.

You know, when I go into the men's room here at the clinic I have to pop open the door of each stall with my fist to make sure there's nobody waiting there for me. Sometimes there's guys in there taking a shit and they look at me like I'm a queer or something, but I got to do it or I'm too nervous to pee. Once I was in there and I was washing my hands and you walked in and just said, "Hi," and walked over to the urinal and peed without checking the stalls. How can you do that?

You know, people ask me if I work out. I look very healthy, athletic and stuff. I don't work out. I don't do anything. Maybe it's muscle tension that keeps me this way. But you know, I'm not really healthy. I went to the _____ Fair a bunch of years ago and they had a Take Your Blood Pressure for Free table, and they made me lie down and wanted to call an ambulance it was so high. They were afraid I was going to die on them right there. They worked me up at the hospital for a feo-something, a tumor that makes your blood pressure go through the roof, but they never found anything. Then when I told them that I had stomach pains a lot and vomit every morning, they told me I had ulcers and worked me up for something else, I can't remember the name, but again they thought it was another kind of tumor that makes your stomach pump out acid all the time by the bucketfull. They didn't find anything, but they gave me those pills to stop the acid, and now I don't vomit every day, only around my anniversaries. My skin is still all black in my groin from the jungle rot and Agent Orange, but my hands are better—see? It's only cracked a little here between the fingers and only kicks up during the summer. For years it was all around my waist cracked and oozing blood. My undershirt'd get caked to my skin and I'd have to change it three times a day or the smell would get to you. I was sprayed with Agent Orange during my second tour when we were working the Cambodian border. I thought they were spraying for mosquitoes, but it was Agent Orange, I found out afterward. This big plane came over putting out this big cloud behind it,

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and it came down on us like a mist, and I thought, "Ain't this amazing, they're spraying the mosquitoes all the way out here." But maybe it's all nerves, and not Agent Orange. That's what Dr. _____ told me. I don't know what to believe.

I know it all kicks up around the time of year we went into _____. I can't tell you what we were doing there, it's still secret and I've never been too comfortable with these dropped ceilings here in the clinic. It's just too easy to hide a microphone here. Maybe someday I'll be able to talk about it, but for now you never know who might be listening, and I'm not allowed to say anything about it. I shouldn't even have said we were in _____. I guess they need to keep tabs, because you know we still have our people over there who'd be dead in a minute if the wrong thing was said. There've been times I took every stick of furniture out of my house, took all the plates off the plugs in the walls and replaced every light fixture, and I had a guy sweep my house for bugs—cost me \$600, but I still had the feeling I was being watched. I don't know if it was the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] or a CIT [U.S. Marine counterintelligence], or maybe both. You *know* the NVA has people over here disguised as refugees. Maybe that sounds paranoid, but I can't help thinking it. Here I did three fucking combat tours serving my country and I feel like a fucking fugitive.

It still makes me mad the way nobody understands what we did over there. When I first came back it was like I was living under a toilet and every five minutes somebody had diarrhea on me. There's nothing I can do. I feel like a complete freak, maybe like the Elephant Man—that's me. Nobody can understand, 'cept maybe another 'Nam vet. If only I could cry like I cried the day _____ had his face shot off. I haven't cried since then. Never.

Well, I guess it's something that I can even talk to you like this, and you not even a 'Nam vet and all. Remember how long it took me to say *anything*? I just had to watch until I could trust _____ and _____ and you. It was almost three years till I started to open up.

The people who read this book ain't going to believe any of this shit. And *you* better look out. Nobody's going to believe you when you tell them, and you'll end up an outcast like us.

These are voices of men as they are today, more than twenty years after their war service. About three-quarters of a million heavy combat veterans from Vietnam are still alive today, of whom a quarter million are still suffering in this manner.² I shall