

# Nos Da

WHY COULDN'T HE NAME IT? Something green. Unfamiliar. A good smell. Something green and . . . and something. He could smell another thing too, a bad smell without a name, damp and dark and close.

Lying on his back, he was staring at a sky bluer than any blue he could remember. Bluer than his father's eyes. Where are the clouds?

"Rich!" someone said, urgently, close to his ear. "It's me. It's Denny. Stay with me, buddy. You've got to stay with me. Tell me something. Your name. Start with that. Say your name."

Rich didn't say his name or look at Denny, squatting by his head. He heard a flutter in the distance, a bird's heartbeat. Can you hear a bird's heartbeat? The flutter didn't have a smell, not yet. It wasn't good, it wasn't bad. Like a basketball dribbled in a gym far away. Somewhere to his right, men were shouting, "Keep alert! Keep focused!" He didn't want to hear their voices. He wanted to hear the bird or the far away basketball.

Someone closer shouted, "Bowen! Private Bowen!"

Rich glanced at a big man kneeling by his legs. "State your name and rank!" the man shouted.

Rich had seen him before. Lambert. The medic. Sergeant Lambert. Rich shifted his gaze to the sky. He couldn't think of a reason to state his name and rank. "What's . . . that smell?" he asked Denny, croaking out the words.

“He’s talking, Sarge,” Denny shouted. “He’s saying something.”

Denny leaned close to Rich’s ear. “Smell? I don’t know. Don’t everything smell like garbage in a garbage pit? But you’re talking. It’s great you can talk. Because as long as you’re saying words, you’re not, you know, not saying them.”

“Like a thing you’d eat,” Rich said. “But you wouldn’t.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Denny said. “It’s different here for sure. There’s every stink you can imagine and plenty you can’t. In a strawberry field, you smell strawberries. In a garbage dump, you smell garbage, and if it’s not garbage, it will be.” He sounded tired. “Anything I smell here, I wouldn’t want to eat. Where the hell’s that medevac, Sarge?”

“On its way.”

“It needs to be here.”

“I know,” Lambert said. “I know. OK, got the tourniquets on.”

“Can he feel anything?” Denny asked.

“Nah. Shock. And I pumped him with morphine.”

The blue sky narrowed and darkened, though Rich didn’t see clouds moving in. Strange to be here, he thought, and not somewhere else. Strange to hear a voice close, then far away. Strange to be on my back, staring at an empty blue sky, like staring at a ceiling while you’re having your bath.

“When it’s dark,” Rich asked his father, sitting on the edge of his bed, “where does the sun go?” He was under the bedcovers, feeling warm, though his hair was damp from his bath. His bedside light illuminated his father’s brown hair and white shirt, but the rest of the room was dark. He didn’t want his father to leave—that’s why he asked about the sun. If his father answered, Rich would answer his answer, and they’d be together longer. They would talk about where the sun goes. Megan was already sleeping. Their mother was putting away dinner dishes.

“It goes below,” his father said. “No, sorry, it doesn’t go anywhere. We just can’t see it. We turn away from it.”

“Must be around three o’clock by now,” Denny said. “They came out of nowhere, like shadows from under rocks. If shadows carried AK-47s. But now they’re gone. The sun’s out, the perimeter’s secure, so they crawled under those god-damn rocks again with the snakes and spiders. Always coming and fucking going and fucking coming back again.”

“Where does the sun go?” Rich said.

“Jesus,” Denny said. “What is it now? The sun? I have no idea. I flunked astronomy, the most gut course you could take. That’s why I’m here, I’m a flunky. The sun’s far the fuck away is my guess. Other side of the earth. Like the dark side of the moon, you know?”

“A good smell,” Rich said, “and a bad smell. That’s what I don’t get.”

“What the hell’s he talking about?” Denny asked Lambert, now working on Rich’s left arm.

“No idea, but keep him talking. If he’s talking, he’s breathing. And if he’s breathing, maybe he wants to do it some more. There, got the arm done. The medevac should get here any minute. Keep him talking, that’s your job. I need to move on.”

“OK, Rich, you know who I am, right?” Denny said, squeezing Rich’s shoulder gently. “It’s your buddy. Denny. Denny from Brooklyn with the six brothers and two sisters. Irish guy, remember? Good-looking—that’s what Mom tells me. You stepped on a mine. I saw your foot go down and the earth go up. Then the gooks started firing, so it took a while to reach you. But Lambert, he’s fast—you know, with what he does. And you . . . you’ll be OK, I promise. You bought yourself a ticket home. No more freaking rice paddies. No holes in the ground to crawl into. No shadows in the daylight. Nothing more for you, buddy. You’re all done. How you feeling?”

“Cold,” Rich said. “The water gets cold.”

“Yeah, it gets cold. It won’t be long now, I promise.”

“Dad was the one.”

“For what?”

“For me. Friday nights.”

“What? What was Friday night?”

“Bath.”

“You liked that? God I hated bath night. Ed Sullivan and then a bath. But you couldn’t enjoy the show, knowing what was coming next. The scrubbing, the stinging eyes. And if you’re number seven in line, no hot water.”

“Warm then cold. Then warm.” Rich looked up at Denny. “Where’s the towel?”

“Got no towel,” Denny said. “I got nothing. I’m empty. Hey, I’ve got water.” He lifted up his canteen. “You need water?”

“Cold.”

“Yeah,” Denny said. “You lost . . . you know, some blood. They’ve got blankets in the medevac. And coffee. It’s a thousand degrees here, but I’d die for hot coffee. From Dominick’s, Second Avenue. I’d actually die for that.”

“She cried all night,” Rich said. “And wouldn’t get out of bed that morning.”

“Who? Your girlfriend? I thought you didn’t have a girlfriend. Hard to keep up with you, buddy. No moss under your feet. Don’t matter what the girl wants. No one wants you to go. And you, especially. No one except your crazy Uncle Frank because he got sent to Korea and now thinks everyone should get an arm blown off like him. But here the fuck you are anyways. Talking, right? At least you’re talking, and that’s the main thing. Though I gotta be honest, I can’t wait for the chance to shut up.”

“Cars,” Rich said.

“Now we’re talking cars? Not many here. Unless you go to Saigon. What sort of wheels did you drive, anyway?”

“*Nos da*,” Rich said.

“What?”

“*Nos da*.” Rich was smiling.

“Are you talking Russian or something?”

“*Nos da*.”

“That’s not a car. What the fuck does it mean?”

“*Nos da*. Where does the sun go?”

“Fuck man, talk sense. I got no time for bullshit.”

Rich again stared up at the blue sky, which had widened and brightened. He lifted his head to see himself. His legs were missing, but he could wiggle his toes. Just like in the bath, he could lift his feet and wiggle his toes. Lambert had cinched straps around his thighs. His fatigues were soaked dark red, but everything else was green: grass, leaves, trees, bushes—the hills were rolling, endlessly unfolding shades of green. Then the sky narrowed, leaving a pinprick of light. Rich wasn’t sure if his eyes were closed or open or both or neither.

“Red,” he said softly, “that’s the bad smell. Green, that’s the good smell.”

Denny couldn’t think of anything to say.

Now in complete darkness, Rich had a moment of certainty. He knew he was about to die.

“Chopper’s here!” Denny shouted, standing and waving at the descending medevac churning up debris. The pilot in his massive helmet gave a thumbs-up.

“God-damn here at last! No more talking crazy bullshit. *You* are going *home*, Richie boy. Back to your cars and your fucking mother and father and girlfriend you maybe have and those baths you love and the sun on the dark side of the moon. Back to the towel. Nose-fucking-da, you crazy fuck. You’re going home.”