

PATRIOTS

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Here's a story what got passed around from some folks I gone to school with down in Hocking County. You got these two cousins called Harlow and Tuber who light out from Ohio thinking to deal with the Vietcong but end up pretty well dealt with instead. Harlow, he was a mouthy little balker, like some yappy bluejay. Tuber was the fighting type, looked an awful lot like a potato, which everyone was always telling him. Tuber was put together strange if you're asking me, squished up, like that kind of midget who's okay on thickness but not on length. He was regular size enough what the Army took him, but since he was so small, he ended up a tunnel rat, and Christ knows what awful shit he done and seen.

Both these boys go and enlist, and it's Harlow what decides he needs a tattoo. Harlow was like that, couldn't do good without making it a scene or bad without trying to convince you it was good. Always talking, Harlow. Tuber says he'll go along, thinking Harlow don't have the brass to go through with it. They borrow somebody's truck and drive way over to this tattoo parlor in Lancaster. They're looking at all the options plastered up on the wall, thousand of them, more maybe, Harlow talking all the way: *This one here might be right* and *You imagine the cooch a guy like me'd pull with this one?* and *Even you'd seem a tough son of a bitch with this one, Tube.*

Here, I imagine the old fella what owns the tattoo shop shaking his head at Harlow and Tuber, them being a big bucketful of stupid. Course a guy like that probably needs stupid teenagers to make his business work

out. Harlow finally settles on one, a bald eagle with an American flag hanging from its feet. Patriotic as all hell. That's what the story is, course he don't end up getting that one because right about then a couple old bikers walk in, leather vests, no shirts underneath, skin like old farmhouse floorboards, facial hair stained with chaw drip. What's wrong, though, what Harlow and Tuber and the old tattoo fella should have picked out, is that these two don't have no tattoos.

"How's things, friend?" the first one says. He strolls around, not really looking at anyone, more like sizing the place up to buy it. The other one, he's a big bruiser, stands in front of the door and don't say much. No way he's letting Harlow and Tuber get by, that much is easy to see.

The old fella what runs the place is looking a little nervous now. One of them times you can just tell shit's heading south quick, them two's not the kind you want to be alone with. Not the kind of thing he put in for. But he holds it together and says, "Just fine now. What might we be doing for you all today?"

The first biker, the leader, he keeps strolling around the edges of the shop same as Harlow and Tuber was a few minutes before. He's looking at all the tattoos. His boots strike on the laminate, and when they do, his wallet chain jangles. He stops when he notices Tuber. "The hell, son? Your folks run out of food or what?"

That's normally enough to get Tuber all up and bothered, but he just says, "No, sir. I eat okay."

The biker walks over toward him. "I'd make you for the king dick-sucker of this town," he says. "Don't even need to squat down." Then he laughs at his own joke and looks over to his partner, who grins but don't laugh.

"Well, we ain't even from this town," Harlow says.

The biker looks over to Harlow and studies on him a minute. "Oh, so you're the smart one, huh? I can always tell the smart one. Gift I got." He takes a step over toward him. "Okay, smart one, how smart do you feel now?" He pulls out a flick blade and it jumps open. Then his big partner does the same.

"Oh, now!" the old fella what runs the place says. "No need for that,

gentlemen. We don't want no trouble. Ain't got but a few dollars on hand, but you're welcome to those."

"You hear that, Hopper?" the first biker says. "Think we're here to rob them out."

"That's what they usually think," Hopper says. His voice is deeper but quieter than his friend's, like he can't be bothered to care about too much.

"No, sir," the main biker says. "Not here to rob you. Here for a tattoo."

"That we can do, sir. No need for that knife then."

"You're right, ain'tcha?" He closes the blade and stuffs it in his front pocket. "I'll just leave it right here, right in this front pocket, so we don't forget about it, huh? Now, back to this tattoo. I don't see it nowhere, not what I'm looking for," he says.

"I can do whatever you like. Just tell me, and I'll draw it up."

"Now that's the spirit!" The biker grabs a marker from next to the cash register. He goes over to the wall and finds the one empty spot in between all the other sample tattoos. Got his back to Harlow and Tuber and the old fella, so they can't see what he's drawing 'til after he's done, but it don't take him long, and when he moves away, it's a big black swastika he drew. No mistaking it. "Now, I ain't the artist I'm betting you are," he says, "but that's the rough cut of it."

"Sir," the old tattoo fella says, but Christ, what's he supposed to do? It's like he knows he's fucked deep, but he can't just go on and do it without complaining some. Folks have swastika tattoos, I guess, but it don't seem right what they make somebody else draw it on them. But the old fella says, "Okay, then, go ahead and set down in that chair and I'll get things ready."

"Oh, it ain't for me," the biker says. "I don't care for tattoos, myself. Ruin my complexion." He runs a hand through his beard. "No, I want it for this one here, the smart one." He points at Harlow.

"Sir—"

"Now, friend," he says, "Let's not get on repeating ourselves. We know what's in the front pocket, and we know what I want, so, let's just get on with it."

The old tattoo fella's all jammed up, no doubt about that. He looks over at Harlow, his face drooping like a hungry dog, probably trying to

apologize a thousand different ways without saying nothing out loud. But then Harlow, to that boy's credit, he rips his shirt off, his ribcage poking through his skin, and he walks over to the chair and sets on down.

"God damn, if I wasn't right!" the biker says. "You are smart."

The old tattoo man sets things up and goes to work, and it don't take him but half an hour to mark Harlow up with the swastika. It's thick and dark, and it covers up the whole left side of his chest. Harlow, he don't make a goddamned sound, that's the story I heard anyways. His whole life he's been the loudmouth, always telling folks how he'd do this or he'd do that, how he pulls so much cooch that don't even get the clap no more, how he's the toughest son of a bitch around, but right then he just takes it, quiet and almost dignified. "Damn, son," the biker says, "that can't feel good now." But Harlow don't say boo, and the old biker don't push it like he done before.

That's the end of the story as most people in town learned it, but there's more to it I heard years later when I came back to the States for a reunion and I run into Harlow's sister. I was always sweet on her but never had the stones to talk to until after I was safe and married. Turns out Harlow and Tuber head off to basic a couple months later and then over to Vietnam a couple months after that. They end up in different units, but they try to talk when they can. It's Tuber what makes a real show of himself as a tunnel rat. I guess he's just fearless, like he knows he was engineered just for it. Got a whole process. Every hole and bunker they come across, Tuber strips down to his skivvies and takes just a flashlight and a .45. Sometimes he's gone a long time, but he eventually comes back and calls it clear, meaning there wasn't nothing down there or there was but now there ain't. Then he packs the hole with explosives and they set off. Tuber earns medals and commendations and all that. Harlow's sister tells me all about it, like she remembers all the details all these years after, which seems strange, but I guess it ain't seeing as what Tuber done for her brother next.

It's Harlow what dies first, takes one from a sniper outside Kien Long. Here's the part what really sticks to me, though. Harlow gets shipped back stateside to get buried back in Ohio, and when Tuber hears about all this he loses it. His CO won't give him leave, not even after everything he done

in them tunnels, not even for his cousin being dead, his cousin who was Tuber's best friend. So Tuber goes AWOL. Somehow he manages to get back stateside, and the night before Harlow's funeral, he breaks into the funeral parlor, jamming that .45 into the mortician's temple. "I'm needing you to do this on the pronto," Tuber says to him, and the mortician don't do much for protest. He sets Harlow's body up on the table and helps Tuber strip him out of his new suit, all so Tuber can take a razor blade to his cousin's chest and carve out that swastika, seeing as I guess he couldn't stand the thought of him getting buried with that still there.

The cops show up, and he don't make no big scene out of it. He goes quiet, even gives the mortician his .45, like he knew it was coming. Turns out it weren't even loaded. He gets charged with carving up a corpse and burglary and assault, which sends him inside for a few years. Worst part? Army finds out he gone AWOL and broke into the funeral home, they discharge him, too, dishonorable after all he done. Harlow's sister says Tuber gets the final papers his first week inside. "Did you write him?" I ask, and she says, "Yeah, I wrote him most every week," which is what I was hoping for.

"That's good," I say. "You always was a good sister."

I lean in a little closer so we can whisper through the loud music. I set my drink next to hers, rims almost touching. That's when she looks at me pretty mean, and I know what's coming, I been waiting on it. "How long you lived in Windsor anyway?"

"Long time now," I say, and when she don't respond, I say, "You know how things was."

"Yeah," she says. "I guess I do."

We chat about the old days for a few more minutes and then she says she needs to go to the bathroom, and I don't see her after that. It's funny what you remember and what you tell people about. Always seems like you end up telling the wrong stories or telling the right stories the wrong way. Never can seem to get it right, and besides, nobody ever hears you all the way through anyhow.