

A short story by Pat Post

A Long Way to Mogadishu

by Pat Post

The Fifties

I can't recall exactly how old I was when I first met Columbus but we could be assured that it would be a special day when his wizened face would appear in our screen door. My mother would often be up to her armpits in bread dough and I might be cutting out paper "ladies" from last year's Simpson's Sears catalogue that I rescued from the outhouse.

Now this was not the famed explorer that I was to learn about later in school. My "Columbus" did not discover any new land. He only wished to live in peace on his own. In the fifties I was not impressed by his heroic acts but by his ability to spit tobacco juice six feet in the air and hit the lard pail every time.

Seeing the face in the door it was my signal to run for the pail which was kept just inside the cellar door for this express purpose. Like the ritual of pouring cream in someone's coffee, I would begin pacing backward until he grunted "when," then I would drop the can...and run. I would resume my place at the other end of the kitchen table, rest my chin on my ink stained hands, and wait for the spitting to begin. Once I had become so engrossed in manoeuvring the scissors around a particularly sophisticated paper elbow that I had hesitated in placing the kitchen spittoon. Consequently, when my mother lifted the lid of the stove to put in another stick of wood, Uncle Columbus spat a stream of brown juice right into the fire. Even though she washed her hands all that day my father joked about her choice of serving brown bread that night instead of her usual snowy white offering.

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If my mother had had her way Uncle Columbus would not have visited at all and on the odd occasion when my father was not at home, and she had sufficient warning of our visitor's approach, she would have me run and lock the door, and we would hide in the hall closet until he left.

I suspect Uncle Columbus' house didn't have a hall closet where he could take refuge from unwelcome guests. For one thing, as far as I know, no one ever visited his little shack which appeared to have been constructed around the stove pipe which stuck out of the tin roof like a liberal at a CoR convention. His home had one door and one window which faced away from the road. The back, or front, was covered with dried animal skins, three snowshoes and several pairs of antlers.

Come to think of it, Uncle Columbus, looked a lot like his house. His nose protruded from his mottled face at a similar angle as did the stovepipe from his roof. His mouth, which may have contained three teeth (I suspect this had a lot to do with his juicy accuracy) was stained as dark and cloudy as his curtainless window. His wiry hair stuck out from the sides of his cap like frosted antlers.

My father would come from the barn on these occasions, at my mother's insistence, and the two men would talk, about what I have no idea. I was too engrossed

in watching for the pattern of wrinkles around his mouth to change which would signal an approaching spit. After the "ping," my mother would turn her head slightly from her kneading and roll her eyes. That was my signal to giggle and Uncle's Columbus' cue to wink.

I never knew if he visited anyone else but twice a month he would walk the five miles to town, returning at dusk with a bulging potato sack slung over his stooped back. My cousin, Murray, said he went out to get kids so he could skin them and nail them up on his house.

Years later I found out that Columbus Taylor was not really my uncle or any one else's uncle for that matter. He had, however, rescued my father, who at the age of eleven had been sent to work in the woods of northern New Brunswick, from being trampled by a team of runaway workhorses.

Years before Columbus had returned from World War I to find that his home had burned to the ground on Christmas Eve with his wife and young daughter inside. He built his little shack from the pile of rubble found on that spot and lived there until he died.

Although I have never visited his house while he was alive, last year my children and I passed by his grave. It is flanked on one side by his wife and child and on the other by his only brother, who did not survive the Great War. I placed the lard pail we intended to fill with berries beside the crooked little stone. I swear I heard a familiar metallic "ping" echoing through the trees. It was too late for wild strawberries that year anyway.

The Sixties

The street light shoots a cold yellow ray at the roof of the Firebird that is parked in the middle of the otherwise deserted lot. Encased within its metal frame a man and a woman sit silently.

He stares blankly out his open window, his tanned hand giving a perfunctory flick to his third Marlborough in ten minutes. Grey smoke wafts aimlessly off into the warm summer night. The brass insignia on his shoulders and above his left breast catch the light with each movement of his wrist and twinkle ominously like some distant star threatening to implode.

Her long hair, still damp from a hurried shampoo, falls veil-like down the sides of her lowered head, concealing her tears from the world. She allows the water to pool in the palms of her hands and she studies the liquid that is collecting there.

Finally, her voice intrudes into the night air. "Do you want to tell me what's going on, Jimmy? I thought you'd be in Saigon by now."

He launches the cigarette out into the darkness.

"Shit, Holly. I don't know. I'm all screwed up. All I know is that one minutes I'm sitting beside some old lady in Boston airport waiting for my flight and the next minute I'm on a plane for here."

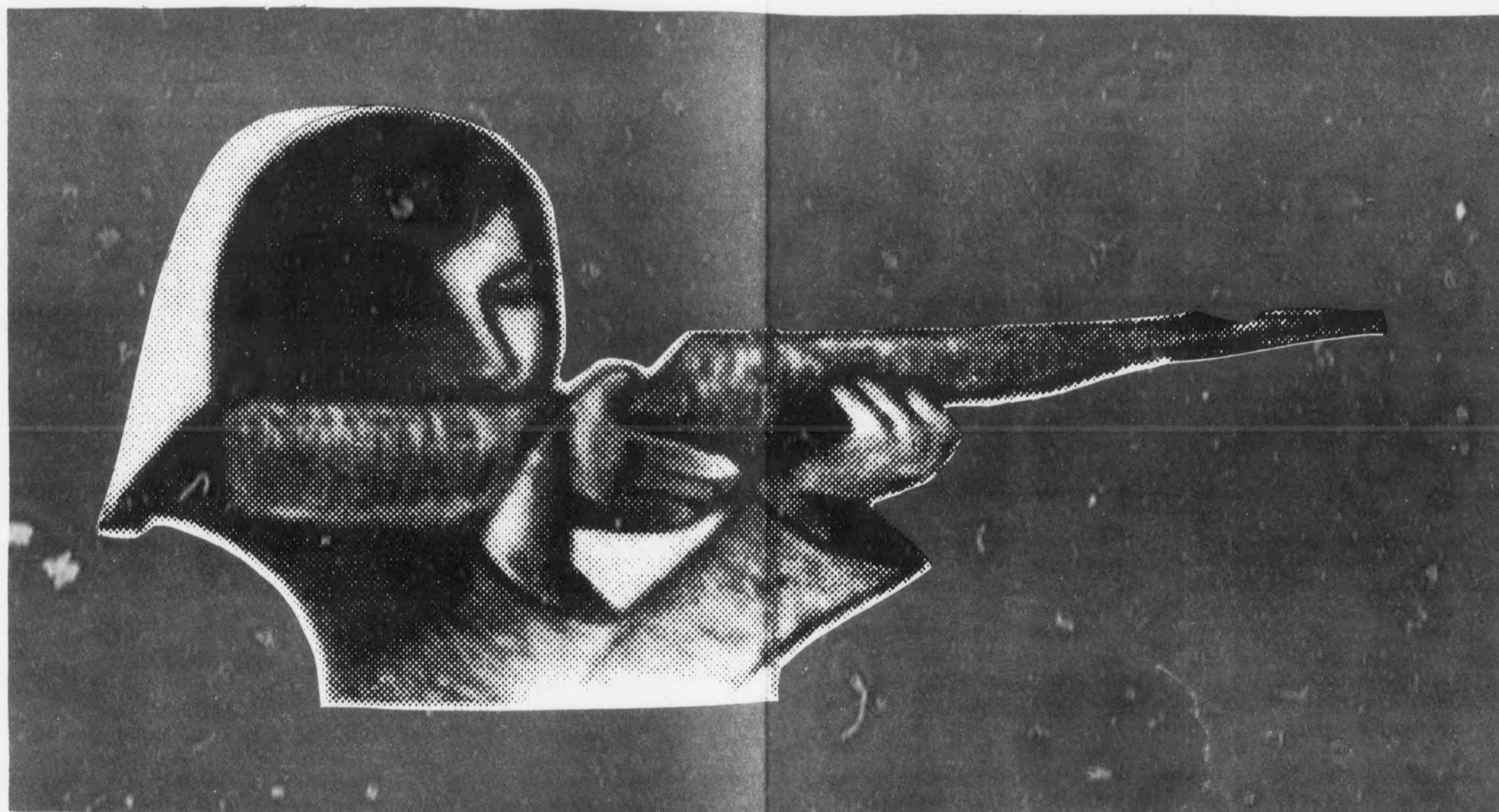
"I see."

"No. I don't think you do 'see,' Holly. And I don't know if I can tell you so you'll understand."

"Try me, Jimmy. After all, I am your wife. You can tell me what happened."

"Okay, but you won't understand...or I don't understand." He speaks to the street light.

"I made it to Boston, no problem. I had a couple of hours to kill before my flight to LA, so I went to the bar for a couple of beers. Well, I was sitting by the window and I was on...maybe, my second or third one, and I was watching the people go by. Then this family, kind of like I imagined us to be like in the future, came by. They had a couple of little kids, a boy and this really cute little girl...and I started fucking crying right there. And you know what the scary part was? I didn't give a sweet damn who saw me either. I said to myself 'Jimmy, you're not going to have any kids of your own because you're hauling your white ass back



to fucking Vietnam to get it shot off or blown to hell."

"You don't know that, Jimmy."

"I do know that, Holly. I feel it in my guts. My number's up. I've already been shot out of three choppers, had by ribs caved in by some Charlie and come so close to having my balls blown off a million times that..."

"Yes, but Jimmy, you came out alive. You're a good soldier. You're smart."

"Smart's got nothing to do with it. The 'smart' ones hightailed it for Canada a long time ago. Besides it's easy for you to say. You can sit down without having shrapnel the size of a can opener crawling around under your skin."

"Yes, but Jimmy, you said that they were going to take that out when you got back. Maybe you won't go back to the front, or whatever they call it. Maybe while you're recovering they'll give you an office job or something."

"You don't go back on a battlefield commission, Holly, and get assigned an office job. Shit, you just don't understand. It's not the same as it was in '64. We were kicking their little yellow asses then. We had

the whole damn world behind us. Fuck, Holly, that old woman in the airport spit on me then got up and left. In '64 should would have bought me a drink and told me how I reminded her of her grandson."

"What did you say to make her so angry?"

"Nothing! That's the point. All we have to do now is show our faces in public, in any state, and it's the same reaction. I don't want to die to save a country like that. I didn't go there to die! I went there for something to do after I flunked out of college...for some fucking adventure."

"So, Jimmy, just seeing this family made you get on a plane for home instead of San Francisco? I told you I'd wait for you."

"Yeah, well, you'd be waiting a hell of a long time if I went back...and I wasn't drunk then and I'm not drunk now. As a matter of fact, I'm about the most sober I've been in four fucking years."

"What are we going to tell your parents...my parents?"

"The truth, Holly. That it's hell. And I'm not going back. They can either like it or lump it. I just know I can't go back.

The army will survive without me. They'll bring in some young brainwashed punk, fresh out of boot camp and keep right on napalming villages. They're all a bunch of potheads now anyway. That shit grows everywhere over there and I can't blame the poor bastards for -kicking advantage of it."

"Look, Holly, I don't want to talk about it anymore. I just know I'm sick of sweating like a pig twenty-four hours a day and I'm sick of looking at all those little kids. Charles is everywhere. You can't tell who you're supposed to kill or who you're supposed to rescue so most of the time we just torch anything that moves."

"You just need a little more leave. You said yourself that you were screwed up. You haven't unwound from the wedding and everything. Can't you call your commander and tell him you're sick or something."

"Oh, yeah, right. I just call the Pentagon and say, excuse me General Sir, this is Sergeant Jimmy Kilcollins, you know the brave boy from Maine, well, I don't feel like coming back for my third tour right now because I'm still recovering from my honeymoon..."

"Oh, Jim, that's not funny."

"You're right, baby. It's not funny. It's not funny to see your best buddy blown to bits beside you either. I didn't tell you the reason I got home two days early in June did I? Well, I accompanied a buddy of mine. I was the official escort, except I sat in first class flirting with the stewardess and my buddy was in baggage all comfy in a nice zippered body bag."

Jimmy fumbles for another cigarette.

"But we don't have any place to live. And neither of us has a job now. What will we do?"

"Don't sweat the small stuff, Holly."

"It might be small stuff to you, Jimmy, but it's pretty big stuff

in the real world."

"Bigger than being alive, Holly."

"Oh, Jim, didn't you know all this stuff was happening over there before you signed up again?"

"Yeah, I kind of knew...but I didn't care then. I wasn't married then. Shit, Holly, I love you. I want to be with you. Can't you understand that. The only thing I had to sleep with before I married you was my M-16."

"Is that why you married me...to have someone to sleep with?"

"The army will survive without me. They'll bring in some young brainwashed punk, fresh out of boot camp and keep right on napalming villages."

"I need a drink. Let's get to hell out of here."

"Where are we going to go, Jimmy?"

Jimmy finally looks at Holly and says, "I've got a few bucks left. I thought maybe we'd go to your parents place and get your stuff and then head for Canada...the coldest, farthest, fucking part we can find. I'll dig ditches if I have to. And we'll have lots of babies and travel around and do things we can tell our grandchildren about. What do you think, Babe? It's going to be okay, you'll see. I'll be good to you, Holly. I love you. You still love me, don't you?"

She looks at the street light and answers, "I married you, didn't I?"

A light rain is falling as Jimmy turns the keys in the ignition and pulls the stick shift quickly into reverse. Holly sighs and reaches for her seatbelt and they speed out of the terminal. Jimmy leaves a long trail of rubber graffiti on the cold grey asphalt.

The Nineties

Dear Mom:

It's me again. How's everybody doing? The weather here is still very hot. Tomorrow my battalion is going to do an air assault mission (using helicopters to land troops quickly and stealthily) on a city called Marka on the coast of Somalia. It has a population of 76,000. Our intelligence has told us that there are many gunmen there who are pulling educated people from their homes and executing them.

I was promoted today to Specialist E-4. My chain of command chose to promote me because of (as they put it) my exceptional leadership qualities and my actions while under extremely stressful situations.

Bye, for now. I'll write when I can,

Love,
Robert
"Infantry, Queen of Battle"

These are excerpts from a book by Pat Post, *Get Off the Table Rosie, the Two Dollars is for the Beer.*