
Opening Extract from...

Perfume River

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PERFUME RIVER

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For Kelly

PERFUME RIVER

What are Robert Quinlan and his wife feebly arguing about when the homeless man slips quietly in? Moments later Robert could hardly have said. ObamaCare or quinoa or their granddaughter's new boyfriend. Something. He and Darla are sitting at a table in the dining area of the New Leaf Co-op. Her back is to the man. Robert is facing him. He notices him instantly, though the man is making eye contact with none of the scattered few of them, the health-conscious members of the co-op, dining by the pound from the hot buffet. It's a chilly North Florida January twilight, but he's still clearly overbundled, perhaps from the cold drilling deeper into his bones because of a life lived mostly outside. Or perhaps he simply needs to carry all his clothes around with him.

Robert takes him for a veteran.

The man's shoulder-length hair is shrapnel gray. His face is deep-creased and umbered by street life. But in spite of the immediately apparent state of his present situation, he stands straight with his shoulders squared.

He sits down at a table beside the partition doorway, which gapes into the crosswise aisle between checkout counters and front entrance. He slumps forward ever so slightly and puts both his clenched fists on the tabletop. He stares at them.

'You should've put your curry on it,' Darla says to Robert. So it's about quinoa, the argument.

'Instead of rice,' she says.

She has continued her insistent advocacy while his attention has drifted over her shoulder to the vet.

Robert brings his eyes back to her. He tries to remember if he has already cited the recent endorsement of white rice by some health journal or other.

'All those famously healthy Japanese eat rice,' he says. She huffs.

He looks at his tofu curry on the biodegradable paper plate. He looks back to the vet, who has opened one fist and is placing a small collection of coins on the table.

'I'm just trying to keep you healthy,' Darla says.

'Which is why I am content to be here at all,' Robert says, though he keeps his eyes on the vet.

The man opens the other fist and begins pushing the coins around. Sorting them. It is done in a small, quiet way. No show about it at all.

'Thanks to their fish,' she says.

Robert returns to Darla.

Her eyes are the cerulean blue of a Monet sky.

'Fish?' he asks. Uncomprehendingly.

'Yes,' she says. 'That's the factor…'

He leans toward her, perhaps a bit too abruptly. She stops her explanation and her blue eyes widen a little.

'I should feed him,' he says, low.

She blinks and gathers herself. 'Who?'

He nods in the vet's direction.

She peeks over her shoulder.

The man is still pushing his coins gently around.

She leans toward Robert, lowering her voice. 'I didn't see him.'

'He just came in,' Robert says.

'Feed him quinoa,' Darla says. She isn't kidding.

'Please,' he says, rising.

She shrugs.

This isn't a thing Robert often does. Never with money. He carries the reflex attitude, learned in childhood: You give a guy like this money and it will go for drink, which just perpetuates his problems; there are organizations he can find if he really wants to take care of himself.

Giving food is another matter, he figures, but to give food to somebody you encounter on the street, while rafting the momentum of your daily life – that's usually an awkward thing to pull off. And so, in those rare cases when it wouldn't be awkward, you can easily overlook the chance.

But here is a chance he's noticed. And there's something about this guy that continues to suggest *veteran*.

Which is to say a *Vietnam* veteran.

Something. He is of an age. Of a certain bearing. Of a field radio frequency that you are always tuned to in your head.

Robert is a veteran.

He doesn't go straight for the vet's table. He heads toward the doorway, which would bring him immediately alongside him.

He draws near. The man has finished arranging his coins but continues to ponder them. He does not look up. Then Robert is beside him, as if about to pass through the doorway. The vet has to be aware of him now. Still he does not look. He has no game going in order to get something, this man of needs. It has truly been about sorting the coins.

He smells a little musty but not overpoweringly so. He's taking care of himself pretty well, considering. Or has done so recently, at least.

Robert stops.

The vet's hair, which was a cowl of gray from across the room, up close has a seam of coal black running from crown to collar.

Robert puts his hand on the man's shoulder. He bends near him.

The man is turning, lifting his face, and Robert says, 'Would you like some food?'

Their eyes meet.

The furrows of the vet's face at brow and cheek and jaw retain much of their first impression: deeply defined, from hard times and a hard life in the body. But his eyes seem clear, and they crimp now at the outer edges. 'Yes,' he says. 'Do you have some?'

'I can get you some,' Robert says.

'That would be good,' the man says. 'Yes.'

'What do you like? I think there was some chicken.' Though he hasn't invoked the preternaturally healthful quinoa, he catches himself trying to manage this guy's nutrition, an impulse which feels uncomfortably familiar. He's trying to get him healthy.

'It needs to be soft,' the man says. 'I don't have very many teeth.'

'Why don't you come with me,' Robert says. 'You can choose.'

The vet is quick to his feet. 'Thank you,' he says. He offers a closed-mouth smile.

Standing with him now, about to walk with him, Robert recognizes something he's neglected: This act is still blatant charity, condescending in its anonymity. So he offers his hand. And though he almost always calls himself – and always thinks of himself – as *Robert*, he says, 'Bob.'

The vet hesitates.

The name alone seems to have thrown him. Robert clarifies. 'I'm Bob.'

The man takes Robert's hand and smiles again, more broadly this time, but struggling to keep his toothlessness from showing. 'I'm Bob,' he says. And then, hastily, as if he'd be mistaken for simply, madly, parroting the name: '*Too*.'

The handshake goes on. The vet has a firm grip. He further clarifies. 'I'm *also* Bob.'

'It's a good name,' Robert says.

'It's okay.'

'Not as common as it used to be.'

Bob looks at Robert for a moment, letting the handshake slow and stop. Robert senses a shifting of the man's mind into a conversational gear that hasn't been used in a while.

'That's true,' Bob says.

Robert leads him through the doorway and along the partition, past the ten-items-only register, and into the buffet area. He stops at the soup warmers on the endcap, thinking of the man's tooth problem, but Bob goes on ahead, and before Robert can make a suggestion, Bob says, 'They have beans and rice. This is good.'

Robert steps beside him, and together they peer through the sneeze guard at a tub of pintos and a tub of brown rice. Good mess hall food, Robert thinks, though thinking of it that way jars with a reassessment going on in a corner of his mind.

Of no relevance to this present intention, however.

Bob declines any other food, and Robert piles one of the plastic dinner plates high with beans and rice while Bob finds a drink in the cooler. Robert waits for him and takes the bottle of lightly lemoned sparkling water from his hand and says, 'Why don't you go ahead and sit?'

Bob nods and slips away.

Robert steps to the nearby checkout station.

A young man, with a jugular sunburst tattoo and a silver ring pierced into his lip, totals up the food, and Robert lets his reassessment register in his mind: From the clues of age in face and hair, Robert realizes Bob is no Vietnam veteran. As old as the man is – perhaps fifty or fifty-five – he is still too young to have been in Vietnam. He missed it by a decade or so.

Robert pays.

The clerk gives him a small, understanding nod.

'Do you know him?' Robert asks.

'He comes now and then,' the young man says.

Beans and rice and fizzy lemon water in hand, Robert turns away.

He steps into the dining area and sets the plate and the can before Bob. The man has carefully laid out his napkin and plastic utensils and has put his coins away.

He squares around to look up at Robert.

He is not the man Robert first thought him to be. 'Thank you,' Bob says.

Robert knows nothing about him.

'It's a good meal,' Bob says.

'You bet,' Robert says, and he moves off, thinking: *It would have made no difference. I would have done this anyway.*

He sits down before Darla.

She leans toward him and says softly, 'I'm glad you did that.' To her credit, she does not ask what he's bought the man.

She sits back.

Her plate, once featuring the spicy Thai quinoa salad, is empty. He looks at his remaining tofu curry. He picks up his fork and begins pushing it around.

She says something he does not quite hear.

He stops pushing.

There are other voices in the dining area. Conversations. He thinks: *Can it have been that long ago?*

But of course it can. Even consciously thinking about it, Vietnam yields up no clear, individual memory. Images are there – faces and fields and a headquarters compound courtyard and a bar and a bed and a river – but they are like thumbnails of forgotten snaps on a cellphone screen.

'More,' Darla says. As part of other things she's been saying, no doubt.

Robert looks at her.

She narrows her eyes at him.

'It's probably cold,' she says, nodding at his food.

'Probably,' he says.

'You can get some more,' she says.

'I don't need anything,' he says.

She shrugs. 'Shall we go?'

'Coffee,' he says. The word is a nanosecond or so ahead of the conscious thought.

She cocks her head. He went back to the stuff a few months ago after she'd wrangled a year of abstinence from him. She was reconciled to it but the one-word announcement sounds like a taunt, he realizes.

'Bob needs some coffee,' he says.

'Bob?' She twists at the word in her snorty voice, assuming he's referring to his coffee-seeking self in the third person. She occasionally calls him *Bob* when she thinks he's behaving badly.

He doesn't explain. He rises. He approaches Bob. The man is hunched over his food, wolfing it in.

Robert is beside him before he looks up.

'You a coffee drinker, Bob?'

'I surely am,' he says.

'How do you take it?'

'With a splash of milk.'

'I'll get you some.'

'I appreciate it, Bob,' Bob says.

Near the buffet, Robert begins to fill a cup from a percolator urn. Framed in the center of the urn is the bag art for today's brew. An upsweep of mountains dense with tropical forest, the vista framed in coffee trees.

Somewhere along the highway to Dak To, they'd laid out the beans to dry. He is passing in a jeep, heading to an assignment that will quickly be changed, sending him upcountry. A pretty-faced girl in a conical hat, leaning on her coffee rake, lifts her face to him. And he sweeps on past.

The cup is nearly full.

He flips up the handle.

He splashes in some milk.

He returns to Bob.

The man thanks him again, briefly cupping both hands around the coffee, taking in its warmth before setting it down.

'You a Floridian, Bob?' Robert asks.

'I'm from Charleston, West Virginia,' he says.

'Good thing you're not up there for the winter.'

Bob nods a single, firm nod and looks away. 'I have to go back,' he says.

'Perhaps when things warm up.'

'No choice,' he says. 'I've got responsibilities.' His face remains averted. He isn't elaborating. His beans and rice are getting cold.

Robert still has the urge to make this encounter count for something beyond a minor act of charity. Learn a bit more about him. Offer some advice. Whatever. And this is all he can

think to ask: 'What sort of responsibilities, Bob?'

Bob doesn't look at him.

He doesn't eat.

He doesn't drink.

Robert has made the man go absolutely still. But Robert sloughs off the niggle of guilt, thinking: *He's probably been asserting these responsibilities to himself for the whole, long slide to where he is now, knowing there's nothing left where he came from, knowing he'll never go back.*

Robert puts his hand on Bob's shoulder for a moment and then moves away.

He does not sit down at their table. Darla looks up. She glances at his empty hands. 'No coffee?'

He shrugs.

She nods and smiles. 'Finished with dinner?'

'Yes,' he says.

She gathers her things and they put on their coats. She leads the way across the floor. Darla may well glance at Bob as she passes, ready to offer him an encouraging smile. She would do that. But Bob looks up only after she's gone by.

He fixes his eyes on Robert's and upticks his chin. He says, 'You know my old man, is that it?'

Robert takes the odd abruptness of the question in stride, answering a passing 'No' as he follows Darla out of the dining area.

And that is that.

~

Darla and Robert are finished in town, and he drives toward home on the parkway. The two of them do not speak. This is not uncommon after dining out.

They live east and south of the Tallahassee city limits, on an acre of garden and hardwood and a dozen more of softwood, and the quickest way carries them first along a commercial scroll of strip malls and chain eateries, lube joints and furniture stores, pharmacies and gas stations. Robert finds himself acutely aware of all this. He turns south at his first opportunity, and then, shortly, he turns east again, onto Old Saint Augustine Road.

Darla humphs, though for all their years together she has alternately used this dismissive sound as a sign of approval. It is up to him to know which humph is which.

Old Saint Augustine is easy to interpret. Canopied in live oaks and hiding its residences and smattering of service commerce behind sweet gums and hickories and tulip poplars, this is a road from the state's past, a subject he occasionally teaches at the university and Darla occasionally is happy to hear him discourse upon. Though their silence persists tonight.

She switches on the university radio station.

This same ostinato of orchestral strings presses his face to a window on a TWA 707. The Rocky Mountains crawl beneath him. He is flying to Travis Air Force Base, north of San Francisco. From there he will go to war. And this music is playing in his head through a pneumatic headset. Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. The first movement has tripped and stomped and danced, making things large, as Beethoven can do, but confidently so, almost lightly so. A little bit of the summer pastoral spilling over from the Sixth Symphony. And now, in the second movement, the largeness of things is rendered into reassuring repetitions. Can Robert believe this of what lies ahead of him, this grave contentment the music would have him feel?

He is not to be a shooting soldier. He will do order-of-battle work, rather like research, rather like the things he learned to love in his recent four years at Tulane. Wherever they put him, he will be bunkered in at the core of a headquarters compound. It would take an unlikely military cataclysm – or a fluke, a twist of very bad luck, a defiance of an actuarial reality of warfare that is obscured by Cronkite's nightly report – for him to die.

He is young enough to feel confident in that reasoning. It is September of 1967. Four months before the military cataclysm of the coming Vietnamese New Year, Tet 1968. And if he does survive, he believes he will earn a thing he has long yearned to earn, foreshadowed only a few days ago in a bar on Magazine Street. His father shed tears over his tenth farewell Dixie, Robert's fourth. Silent tears. William Quinlan has always been a quiet drunk. A quiet man, about feelings he could not command, feelings better felt by women. Robert still thinks, as he flies away to music his father could never understand, that he knows what the tears were about.

In the car, however, this ostinato is solemn and insistent. More than solemn. It aches. He feels nothing like contentment as he races through the corridor of oaks. It is forty-seven years later.

He glances at Darla.

Her face is pressed against the window.

~

Down a pea gravel drive they emerge from a grove of pine and cedar. They stop before the house they built in 1983 from early-twentieth-century Craftsman plans, with a shed-dormered gable roof, a first floor of brick, and two upper

floors of veneered stucco and half-timber. For a decade Darla's parents withheld every penny of their considerable resources from the struggling young academic couple, disapproving of the politics that brought the two of them together, and then, upon their deaths, they surprised their daughter with a will that split the parental wealth in half between her and a brother as conservative as they. She got the sprawling Queen Anne estate on Cayuga Lake and enough money to keep it up, along with the expressed hope – just short of a mandate – that their 'daughter Darla and her family come home.'

The parents' death itself surprised her. It was by late-night car crash on the Taconic Parkway, both of them apparently drunk. Darla immediately sold the Queen Anne and she and Robert built this new house, to their shared taste, having lately taken their places at Florida State University. At the time, their son Kevin was eleven. Their daughter Kimberly was five.

Tonight, with Robert's Clinton-era S-Class Mercedes sitting next to Darla's new Prius, they enter the house and put away their coats and go to the kitchen and putter about, she heating water for her herbal tea and he grinding his Ethiopian beans to brew his coffee, and for a long while they say nothing, not uncommon for this early-evening ritual, which occasionally feels, for both of them, comfortable.

Then, when their cups are full and they are about to go off to their separate places in the house to do some end-of-evening work, Darla touches Robert's arm, very briefly, though only as if to get his attention, and she says, 'What did you two talk about?'

'Who?' he says, though he knows who she means.

'The homeless man,' she says.

'The weather,' he says.