

Moving Day

by Robert Olen Butler

I didn't hear that Duncan Pratt had been killed until I'd been out of the Army for two weeks and had gone four days without a single thought about that final year in Vietnam. If the phone had been disconnected on time, I would never have heard at all.

A mutual buddy from military intelligence school called on his way to a year of bumming in Europe. He talked a long time before saying, I guess you heard that Duncan Pratt was killed. No, I said. How? He was killed by a mortar round in Pleiku, our friend said; and he hung up to catch a plane to Luxembourg.

"Duncan Pratt was killed in Vietnam," I said to Marta. She was sitting on one of the packing crates in front of the window, her legs straight and her feet spread outward from fatigue. She wore her hair pulled back and her face was a dark silhouette against the late-afternoon gray. Her face turned toward me and I saw her eyes briefly. "A mortar round killed him."

My God, she said, or something to that effect, and she was sincerely moved. My own feelings were difficult.

"Why is it so dark in here?" I said quietly. "They haven't turned off the electricity yet, have they?"

But I just stood there, my shoulder against the wall, and I was watching Marta's profile again. Her chin was lower now. I looked beyond her to the shuttered brownstones across Seventy-Eighth Street. No immediate image of Duncan returned to me. I had to remember his face consciously, although for a year we had been close, in an odd way.

Marta was very still. She had pulled her legs up and rested her head on her knees. I could hear the faint clicking as the Doberman upstairs paced along a wall. The rectangle of afternoon behind Marta was growing dim. We should call his wife, she said. Yes.

I remembered lying in bed with Marta one night in Washington. All of us in the Vietnamese course had received orders for Nam a week before, and today at language school they'd posted a checklist

for us. I copied the list and brought it home. One of the items was to make a will. Marta and I lay in the dark and laughed for the first time in a week. We laughed about my leaving her my life savings, which amounted to the three hundred and forty-five dollars I'd put together on a corporal's pay. We laughed about her refusing to let me will away my basketball and how she wanted to bury it with me and we laughed about how big the coffin would have to be and how we'd install a reading light and I'd start off by reading *Great Expectations*. Then we argued in the dark over plans for my leave. We lay unmoving beside each other, shouting furiously. She wanted to cash in our deferred wedding present from my father. She wanted to go to Europe and I wanted to go back to our place in New York and act normal. We shouted until we slept and it was never formally resolved. But we came back here to Seventy-Eighth Street. It wasn't until I was on a troop bus from Oakland and looking at a scab of sun low over the Pacific that I realized she had been scared that night. Scared most of all for herself.

I looked around the room. The wooden crates and the clustered furniture made it an alien place now. I had my job at the brokerage house and suddenly we were homeowners in Connecticut. Marta's head was turned toward me but I could hardly see her face in the shadows of the room.

"I'm going for a walk," I said.

"The movers will be here soon."

"Let them come. I'll be back," I said. The stairway to the foyer of our building was not yet alien, it was the same, and I thought of coming down these stairs in my sweat clothes, light in my running shoes, letting my arms dangle loosely, and meeting Duncan on the street, a towel around his thick neck, his Harvard sweatshirt inside out.

I stood on the street for a long moment. The air was murky with city grit. The chill that should have been bracing became corrosive. It was the same time of year when Duncan and I, on leave, had run every day in the park. I turned and began to walk east slowly. When I went down to the street to meet Duncan he would always give me a

clipped, wordless nod, as if we were boxers meeting in center ring, and it wouldn't be until we'd taken a few brisk steps east that he'd say, How's Marta? Fine, I'd say. How's Deborah? Fine. Fine.

He was big. Taller than me by several inches. I'd played basketball, but I was a guard, and not a big one. And he was broad in the chest, intimidating when he quoted obscure French writers that he knew I'd never read. He'd gone to Harvard, majored in literature and played lacrosse. I'd defied my father and taken a basketball scholarship at a small Midwestern school. I'd come to hate the place and finally eked out a degree in economics. But as far as Duncan knew, I thought it was a good little school and a chance to play ball.

I crossed Columbus Avenue and sat on a bench near the rear of the Museum of Natural History. Crossing the street distracted my mind, and for a while I sat watching the traffic. A truck went by and I thought for a moment it was the movers, but it went on. An Audi passed and I thought briefly about the car we would buy now.

But my mind inevitably returned to Duncan. I saw us walking along this stretch of sidewalk and I tried to remember the last time I had seen him. For a long moment I couldn't place the day; then I remembered very clearly.

We had walked along here in silence. Duncan usually had a point to make by now, but we had said nothing to each other since the ritual of first greeting. I absently marked our passage by the juttings and turnings of the back of the museum building and then by the tree-blurred glimpses of the planetarium. I clung for a time to the easy forgetfulness of routine, but soon it occurred to me to be thankful that I'd slept last night because my depression was worse if I was even slightly tired; and then from those thankful thoughts I slipped naturally into an exploration of my fear of Vietnam, eight days away now.

But Duncan's strength finally showed at the corner of Eighty-first Street. He looked across Columbus at the dark-smudged façade of the Endicott, a welfare hotel. As we turned east on Eighty-first he began making an eccentric but engaging point, somehow drawing

together the Hotel Endicott, Jean Genêt, Charles Manson, Baudelaire and John Lindsay. He went on in his bluff but friendly way, stopping on the street occasionally to gesture symmetrically with his thick arms. I didn't really follow his point, and I lost the thread entirely when we entered Central Park at Eighty-first Street. I watched children circling down a sliding board set in a tower with an Oriental roof, and one child sprawling on the back of a huge stone turtle like the one in the Hanoi lake that we studied in our folklore lessons. I stepped on leaves protruding from the compost on the muddy path, but they were soggy and did not crackle. The path ended in concrete, and Duncan's strong hand was suddenly on my shoulder as he pulled me back from the furious tinkling of bells. A bicycle flashed before me and Duncan said, "Be careful. You've got to learn to watch."

"Thanks. Yes."

"Were you looking for booby traps down there, or something?" He grinned.

"No."

"You look for booby traps and they get you from the trees," he said. We crossed the street, moving quickly to each corridor between the passing rows of bicycles. When we had crossed, Duncan resumed: "Best thing to do is not to walk around at all." He said it matter-of-factly—solid, sensible advice. But he was an order-of-battle analyst, and his job involved not walking around. Duncan would be sitting deep in an operations bunker somewhere, poring over field-intelligence reports. I was in counterintelligence. And in Vietnam the counterintelligence people would be out generating those field reports. I would do a great deal of walking around, and riding around in an open jeep.

We stopped at the bridle paths. Two young couples in jockey caps and jodhpurs cantered by. We looked up at them and one of the young men looked down. Duncan and I knew at once that he was three years younger than we were—that his birthdate would have been about Number 290 in the lottery draft. In that brief moment his bouncing, childlike face looked down at us, and Duncan and I were

struck dumb and motionless. We stood unmoving there at the bridle path as the muffled thud of hoofs receded. Finally I turned to look at Duncan. He turned to me and we shared the silence a few moments more.

"A grievous burden was my birth to me," Duncan said. Then after a pause he added, "Shakespeare. *Richard the Third*."

The grievous burden he meant, of course, was the year of our birth. Duncan and I both were born in 1947 and we graduated just before the lottery was instituted. Our local draft board had no other young men to meet their quotas and so we were chosen.

We crossed the bridle path and walked on in silence until I finally said, "Can you and Deborah come over tomorrow night?"

"No. I meant to tell you. We have a cabin up in Vermont for about a week." He glanced at me.

"A cabin?"

"Yes," he said quickly, as if he felt it necessary to explain. "Just a little holiday there. Deborah's uncle owns it and he expects us to use it at least once a year. We haven't yet, so we thought we'd better get up there."

"I see."

"He gets hurt about these things," Duncan added. There was a pause and then he said, "Aren't you and Marta going to get away anywhere?"

"No."

"You should."

"We just want to relax here in the city. We don't feel any need to have a last fling," I said.

"Good," he said.

We walked in silence for a few moments. Then Duncan began again.

"I got a letter from my new first sergeant."

For some reason Duncan had received orders to a specific assignment in Vietnam. Most of us had received orders only to the replacement battalion at Long Binh. We didn't know where we'd finally end up. Duncan had written a letter to his new first sergeant

to get a little pre-briefing. I didn't say anything at the announcement of the reply, and after a pause he went on.

"He told me I'd go to Cam Ranh Bay and they'd fly me in a fixed-wing plane to Pleiku. They don't even let us get in a helicopter. Too dangerous," he said.

I still didn't respond and he continued: "I asked how things go at Long Binh. Thought you'd like to know."

He paused again and I looked at him. "What did he say?" I asked, more softly than I'd wanted.

"You'll probably be out of there in three or four days. It won't be too long."

"No. That won't be long." Three or four more days on the sword's edge seemed intolerable.

Duncan used the one New York gesture he couldn't stifle—a closed-eyes, raised-eyebrow head tilt—and he said, "Chances of you going up north probably aren't too great."

"That what your first sergeant said?" I asked too quickly.

"No." He was emphatic. "That's just my own idea. Just guesswork."

"Wherever I go, I just hope it's by jeep. I don't trust *anything* that flies over there," I said.

"You don't want to take a jeep up to the DMZ, do you?"

"Chances are they don't need me up there."

"They need C.I. people all over, don't they?"

"I just have a feeling about it," I said lamely, and we were on the little bridge over the bridle paths. A horse galloped beneath us and away. The reservoir station was before us.

"Well, here we are," I said, trying to obscure with words of any kind the lameness of my last remark. We were on the track that circled the reservoir. It was black cinders once, but now it was packed smooth and hard. We began to run.

"I understand about your not coming over tomorrow," I said. "About your needing to go away."

"My uncle," Duncan said. "We may not even go. I'll let you know."

I was running next to the cyclone fence. In the distance, gulls suddenly flew up from the gray water like scraps of paper blowing in the wind.

"It won't be bad at all," he said. "I like the order-of-battle work. Poring over the reports. It's got the same joys of concentration as research."

"Watch Pleiku. Lots of contested territory around there." I looked at his profile for a moment and then past him at a clump of knobby black cherry trees.

"Could be places a lot worse," he said. "And I'll be in the top security spots for my work."

I looked back through the haze of the passing fence at the brackish, pasty water.

"Sounds pretty dull. I like the action, the movement," I lied, and realized it was my last lie for now because we were nearing the pain of the half mile; and I knew this lie was woefully inadequate because Duncan recognized it for what it was. But I knew he wasn't so sure about his own work and I wanted to run faster, run away from him, but it was no good because for some damn reason I needed to convince him I'd live. We ran into the turn at the upper end of the reservoir and I looked to the left and tried to concentrate on the distant green roof of the Plaza Hotel as the pain came. The pain lasted another quarter of a mile, and then I was in stride and not thinking much at all and I could hear Duncan breathing heavily beside me.

That was the last day I saw Duncan. We wrote one letter each while we were in Vietnam and then we wrote no more.

I sat on the bench behind the museum and I began to notice foreign cars again—a Mercedes, then a Fiat. It occurred to me that the last day I saw Duncan was the same day I found the quotation.

It's hard to say how effective the quote really was—whether it alone was what let me relax a bit my final few days or whether that was achieved by the cumulative numbness of a year's worry. But when I left Duncan for the last time I wasn't feeling good. I went back to the apartment and showered, and as I sat waiting for supper

I took down a book of quotations from the shelf. I looked up “death” and found a quotation from a seventeenth-century writer named Thomas Fuller. It read, “He is miserable that dieth not before he desires to die.” That's what it was all about, those tortured weeks before going over: I wasn't ready to die. And so I wanted to believe in the misery of living too long. It was a consolation. I wrote the words into the front of a small leather notebook I was to take with me. Looking back, I don't think the quotation was capable of wiping away the visions of amputated legs, of bleeding alone in undergrowth, of progressive mutilations under VC interrogation or of a six-foot cell for a decade in captivity. But it did give me a final few nights' sleep and some leisurely meals, and when I found it I suddenly thought to call Duncan. I looked at the phone for a long moment and then I decided not to. I didn't want to hear the silence after I answered that I'd found it in a dictionary of quotes; I figured he had his own, erudite epigraph in his notebook; and somehow his peace of mind lessened my own. So I didn't call.

Suddenly I realized that I was looking at the back of a moving van sitting in front of our building. I stood up. I had never referred once to the quotation after I got to Vietnam. Then I remembered Duncan's wife. I should call Deborah. And when I did, I should share the quote with her.

I crossed Columbus and walked toward our building. A man in white coveralls, carrying one end of our sofa, backed out of the door. A second man appeared, and they were at the truck when I reached the front stoop. I walked up the stairs and entered the apartment.

“They're here,” Marta said.

“I saw them.”

“Where were you so long?”

“Nowhere.” I went to the phone. “Do you have Deborah's number?”

In a pile of trash was the telephone book. I carried the book to the phone and squatted down. I found the listing under Duncan's name. I picked up the phone. It was dead.

The movers burst into the room and began heaving chairs. I squatted on the floor for a long moment, the disconnected phone in my hand. The movers disappeared and there were only a few crates left in the room. Marta stood before me.

"Not home?" she asked.

I didn't answer. I hung up the phone and stood up.

"Are you ready to go?" I asked her.

"Just about." She disappeared into the bedroom.

I put the phone book in the trash and then stood at the window, watching the movers load our chairs.

