

Fresh Earth

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Donny Doyle was my best friend in those days. We grew up as teenagers in a small town that sat about forty-five minutes north of Dallas and never gave a second thought about life around the corner, or down the road, or at any time that suggested the future. Predictions, like weather forecasts, came with the daily newspaper and nobody ever changed anything by reading what happened yesterday, at least not so you'd know.

The only two things that ran through our town was a two lane blacktop highway and a railroad, both going north and south, and parallel to the horizon depending on the time of day. Just about everybody knew everybody else back then; that's how small the town was in the 1960's, before Dallas started crawling all over the map with folks from someplace else. It used to be the town rolled up its sidewalks in early evening, and under the old blue laws in Texas everything closed on Sundays, except Arnie's Gulf station just outside of town on the main highway. He sold diesel to the truckers passing through and farm tractors during the week on their way to the fields. His wife, Millie, fried up the best onion rings and burgers for at least thirty miles in any direction.

When Donny and I were in high school we did just about everything that buddies do together: swimming down by the rock pits, fishing for the big cats along the spillway, collecting Coke bottles for spare change, and playing hooky from school. We even raided Charlotte Porter's slumber party one Saturday night and caused such a ruckus the neighbors called the police. It was all the shaving cream that got us into trouble, but it didn't last long and was quickly forgotten. Neither one of us though ever did get a date with Charlotte after that, and probably a good thing too because she popped out pregnant in her junior year and had to marry Gib Fowler. It was one of those things the town wagged their tongues about for awhile, and then bragged about how sweet and cute and beautiful the baby was after it arrived one Sunday morning for church service. Gib went from being a sorry bastard to a good-God-fearing-psalm-singing-citizen. Donny and I knew he was still a bastard though, and not very likely to change anytime soon.

Donny was the middle boy in his family; his younger brother by a year was Tim, and his older brother by two years was Conor. Mr. Doyle ran the feed and lumber store

down by the rail depot off Main Street and everybody around for miles knew and liked him. And you sure couldn't miss him either. Ben Doyle was a giant of a man at over six and half feet weighing near three hundred pounds, yet he had a real soft voice, an easy manner, and a big warm smile. He'd help anyone who needed it, gave credit to the farmers when they most needed it, and was known to pull a buck out of his coveralls for a hungry stranger, usually some bum catching a free ride on a slow moving freight train. One day Donny said that when his dad got up early in the morning to take a dump everybody in the house slept an extra fifteen minutes to let the odor drift out the open window.

It was just after Thanksgiving 1967 while I was over at the Doyle house that Conor rode up on his Harley and announced that he had joined the army and would soon be leaving home. He said he wanted to be a paratrooper like his dad was in World War II and besides, he said, it was time for him to do something worthwhile in life. Working down at the saw mill or feed lot had gotten old, but the army promised a better future with more opportunities for advancement than anything to be had around town. I think the idea of getting paid to learn something new really put the zap to his head. Everybody was happy for him, and we all admired his get-up-and-go attitude. Everybody, that is, except his mom. She wasn't sold on her first born heading off into the unknown and unseen world of tomorrow; for her, it was simply too far away from home.

There was a big going away party down at the Lion's hall the day before he left for basic training. It seemed half the town showed up with covered plates, casserole dishes, cooked briskets, cakes and pies and fresh baked breads, and enough iced down beer to start a revival meeting. We lived in a dry county, but Dallas was near enough to bootleg over the county line without too much fear or fuss from the law. Folks used to say that on Friday afternoons the Baptists would stampede right over you as they came out of the Centennial liquor store in Dallas before heading back to town. Anyway, Conor left the next morning by bus hung over like wet laundry, but he looked red-eyed happy.

Donny and I finished high school the following summer and it looked as if Patsy Archer might just lasso Donny into diapers and debt until her father jerked her straight into cosmetology school down in Austin where his sister lived working for the state license bureau. It wasn't that she was all that good looking or Miss Personality, but she

sure had a chest full of distraction. When a woman starts aiming those headlights at you pretty soon you're either a hit and run victim or just plain road kill. Mr. Doyle must have taken note because Donny started working full time at the saw mill and it wasn't long before Patsy became ancient history, and a dubious opportunity missed. I took a job with Texas Instruments in Dallas working grounds maintenance hoping to get into one of the machine shops where they made tools for equipment. It was that or work on cars as somebody's grease monkey in a garage bent over carburetors and spark plugs until something better came along.

During winter months we hunted squirrels and in summer we fished, cooked by a bonfire at the water's edge, and strung miles of trout line that seldom produced anything bigger than a lost sandy. Clint Eastwood was usually snarling up the body count at the drive-in on weekends and Shakey's Pizza installed two new pool tables that cost two quarters to play, but a lot more to lose. I guess you could say we were in no hurry to go nowhere we hadn't been and didn't give a hoot if we ever did. Donny said that he was conserving his ambition in case it arrived late and he needed it for something worthwhile.

Conor Doyle completed his basic training, then jump school and went off to advanced military training in Germany. After about a year the army gave him a ten day furlough to come home before they sent him off to Viet Nam. He had put some weight on, all hard muscle, and he had a couple of fresh stripes on his sleeves; his uniform had all kinds of patches, badges, and a few colorful ribbons on his chest that made us all backslapping with pride. He even brought home his girl, Emily. She was a doe eyed little thing, really quiet and shy, whose father was one of those career thirty year soldiers in the 82nd Airborne Division. Conor's parents adopted her right on the spot while little brother Tim flushed with a bad case of puppy love. I asked Donny what he thought of her and he just grumbled something about a carpenter's dream. I concluded that the saw mill must be really getting to him.

The time Conor was gone was measured by his letters home. The mailman would go out of his way to deliver a letter from him and always asked how he was doing and how soon before he'd be home. Donny said his mom read his letters every day over and over until the next one would arrive. After he wrote home that he had killed for the first time there seemed to be a change in the way he would write, full of profanities and

despair that worried his parents. You could tell he wasn't happy about what he was doing, the old gung-ho had disappeared. There was a lot of talk about burning down villages, fire fights with gooks, and friendly fires killing their own men by officers who couldn't read a map miles away from the fighting and too chicken shit to visit the front lines. It all sounded so unbelievable, so wasteful, and so sad. Rumors had it that bombs weren't the only thing being dropped in Viet Nam, but the bodies sure showed up on TV along with windy speeches about how America was winning the war. It didn't take a genius to figure out that truth was the real causality, and only misguided fools start wars.

1968 seemed to be a lousy year and the worst parts of it were on TV. Between the Viet Nam War, assassinations, the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the big city riots, talk of an Equal Rights Amendment, and the prospect of Nixon's election in November, it's a wonder the country didn't change it's name to the United States of Anarchy. It had only been a few years past when I had been young, happy and pleasantly dumb. Now I was a tax paying citizen, 1-A at my local draft board, and life didn't appear to be getting any easier; in fact, it was getting ever more dangerous. Even a bumper sticker could get you into trouble. It was all just one big pile of HEE-HAW!!

One hot Saturday afternoon in 1969 while I was chowing down on a greasy cheeseburger at the local Dairy Queen, Donny drove up in his dad's flat bed truck. He had just delivered a load of feed to the Harrington farm out on FM 544. The broad grin on his face made me think he found a new girl to go skinny dipping with out by the rock pits, but it was better news than that; Conor had sent a telegram from California saying he was back from the war and was headed to Missouri by train to spend a few weeks with the grandparents at their farm outside Kansas City. Tim was catching the bus that morning across from Landry's Grocery to surprise his brother in Missouri, and then they would spend time visiting the old folks before returning together. Meanwhile the Doyle household drew a big sigh of relief, happy he was safe and sound and soon to be once more home. The best part was he didn't have to go back to Viet Nam.

He did his year in country, plus an extra six months, and that added sergeant stripes to his sleeve. A few more bucks in his pocket were going to be needed since he had left Emily with a baby boy they named Butch. The little scutt looked just like Conor too, all wide eyed with dirty blond hair and a personality that made him piss on any

stranger that picked him up he didn't know. Mr. Doyle took the little guy down to the saw mill one day to show him off and came home with a custom made baby rocker composed of freshly cut timber. The wood had been sanded down smooth as paper.

I suggested to Donny that we should get his brother a car for a homecoming present now that he was a family man and would need four wheels instead of two. We talked it over with Mr. Doyle and he agreed, said he'd match whatever the two of us contributed to the purchase price, but it had to be a used car, not a new one. One of the guys at Texas Instruments had a Pontiac GTO for sale, and Donny found a three year old Chevy Bonneville that looked more tank than car. Mr. Doyle found a 1965 Ford Econoline in great condition and the guy only wanted six hundred and fifty bucks, so we settled on that as our present. It was clean, bright red, and was both truck and car, something Conor would definitely need once he started shopping for three. We shined that thing up until it looked like a glass mirror, and then covered it with a tarpaulin against the weather in front of the Doyle house.

It was a hot summer for outdoors maintenance work mowing grass or repairing busted sprinklers across acres and acres of the big electronic campus that was Texas Instruments. I took a few evening classes at the high school, college extension courses they were called, hoping to improve my chances at getting into one of the machine shops at work. My folks didn't have the means to send me to a university, so I tried to make do piecemeal and took whatever was offered, when it was offered; not many college teachers were willing to drive the distance to a small town for maybe a handful of students. The nearest junior college was up in Sherman and that was a good hour by car. Besides, who had ever heard of a college graduate in landscaping in those days?

One day after work I decided to call Donny to see if he wanted to go for a few beers down at our old watering hole called The Creek. It was the first wet location across the county line into Dallas. An old yellowed newspaper clipping from the Dallas Morning News hung on a wall saying that Bonnie and Clyde had stopped there a few days before they were killed over in Louisiana in 1934 by a posse of Texas Rangers. The place was nothing but a rundown juke joint with the ugliest women anybody could ever hope to find, and no matter how much beer you drank, they stayed ugly.

When he finally answered the phone I knew something wasn't right. His voice was weak and distant. The only thing he said was, "They're dead." The words echoed from eternity would forever ring in my ears from that day forward.

I drove out to the Doyle house and found Donny sitting in the kitchen looking out the back door smoking a cigarette with one hand and cradling a Coors beer with the other in thoughtful silence. His mom and dad were in their bedroom with the door closed and I couldn't begin to imagine their suffering. It wasn't long before people started coming by the house, so I stayed out on the front porch and took their flowers, cards, covered dishes of warm food, their silent handshakes, and somber nods. It was the least I could do, be a face and form to say thank you, for a grieving family in a time of awful tragedy. A sheriff's car parked a respectful distance down the road for security, but no wrecker truck in the world could haul away the broken hearts that bled raw in the Doyle house.

What happened was that Conor and Tim decided to hitchhike their way back to Texas backpacking along the service roads opposite the interstate highway. Traffic moved too fast on the wide interstate, so they figured the slower narrow service road would afford a better opportunity to thumb a ride, take a piss, or stop and sit at a safer distance. They had only been gone two days when late one night a drunken teenager, going the wrong way down the service road at over 90 mph, topped a hill and struck them from behind almost cutting both in two. The state police said they must have been thrown at least forty feet in the air before landing on the asphalt. The car slammed into a utility pole and exploded killing the teenage boy. Truckers from the interstate who witnessed the explosion called it in on their CB radios while others stopped to block any further traffic that might disturb the scene of the accident, and newspapers said it was a bloody mess to behold. Mr. Forney, who owned the funeral home in our town, later said it took all his skills to make the boys presentable for public viewing, but it was impossible to hide that kind of damage.

Donny asked me to join him as a pallbearer, and there was no shortage of local folks who quietly volunteered. Mr. Doyle was a past commander of the VFW post in town, but the veterans came from far and wide, as did police officers, constables, sheriff deputies, firemen, and all manner of military folks in their service uniforms. People came from miles to pay their respects as the bodies laid open for public viewing in the small

town church on Dove Trail Road. For all the genuine sorrow of that day, the one thing that stood out were all the sobbing girls that passed by their coffins, girls they never knew and never would know; even Gib Fowler had a few tears to spill as he went by with his wife and child. So the bastard had a heart after all.

Once the church doors closed and everybody left for Holy Oak Cemetery, some of the men from the VFW secured an American flag over Conor's casket, then we all very silently and dutifully placed them in the big long hearse cars for their last trip through town. Donny rode with Conor while I rode with Tim. It was one of those 'other' worldly feelings creeping along to someone's final destination, as if it was some kind of dry run for future consideration. My skin felt like it would crawl away at any moment.

There must have been hundreds at the cemetery waiting by the time we arrived, the hot sun standing overhead without a cloud to hide under. We slowly and gently moved the caskets to their respective strap-mounted settings and took our places among the throng for the reverend to say his parting words of blessing. Donny sat between his mom and dad as I stood adjacently near the family, wishing I were some place else.

It was more than a bad dream, it was reality at its worst. It was love and life and futures shattered. It was pain realized and hope gone on vacation, both here and someplace in Missouri. It was all a sad waste right in front of my eyes, and all I could do was stare at meaningless misery.

The reverend kept his words short and his blessings honest as there was no coming back from today and everybody knew it. Mrs. Doyle sat rigid as a tombstone while Mr. Doyle shook with big shuttering sobs of sorrow that was devastating to watch as he swiped at his face from inconsolable weeping. Donny sat there wedged between a rock and a hard place with nowhere to go; a blank stare looking off into the two freshly dug graves as if they were black holes communicating their dreadful secrets. I never saw a lonelier or lost soul in my life, and I wondered what was passing through his mind that moment. You can come to know someone almost as much as you think you know yourself, and then not at all. This was one of those times.

After the brief service folks mingled, paid their respects with soft words, a hand to the shoulder or touch of the sleeve, then wandered away back to their cars and their lives as the Doyles somberly sat before their two sons laid prone for the hereafter. I waited

around until the flag was removed from Conor's casket and folded into a triangle, and then an army officer presented it to Mr. Doyle. We watched as a cemetery worker pushed the button that slowly and simultaneously lowered the caskets into the cool fresh Earth, and then made our way back to the cars, leaving for what remained of a home.

Most people will tell you that after the deceased is planted the hard part is over and normal routine living begins the healing process; actually, it's the beginning of regrets, sleepless nights, bad dreams, and the long empty stares that seem to throw the mind out of gear as it idles quietly alone on the outskirts of perdition. I know how it feels because in the course of a lifetime I've caught myself double-parked one step beyond the twilight zone of maybeland, but then reality grinds you back into gear and you're back on the road to destinations unknown. I guess we're all here for the journey.

A lot of people had gathered when we returned to the Doyle house, neighbors and friends, townsfolk, kids we all went to school with, and bushels of girls all wanting to do something for poor here's-my-phone-number Donny. I grabbed a plate of food and a cold beer, found a nook to hide in, and watched the girlycats purr and play the oldest game known to nature. When Conor's demure little wife, Emily, came over and sat next to me smiling her demure little smile I figured it was time to get the hell out of Dodge. Every man for himself, and by the way, sorry-but-I-don't-have-a-phone-yet!! I know we're all scumbags, but guys, it's all about survival of the fittest and knowing when it's justified to run your own ass off before it's too late to lament.

I drove back to my small garage apartment after escaping the weight of sorrows and felt drained by the duties and obligations of the day. After changing into jeans and an old T-shirt, I went out and sat on the deck that was covered by an ancient elm tree and gave serious consideration to getting drunk or stoned. My mind kept programming reruns of the day's events and the only way I figured to change the channel was to roll a big fat joint and chase it with cold bottles of beer. I was glad I didn't have a phone. Let the world dial into someone else's life and annoy them for awhile, invade their space, their time, their peace of mind. A Do Not Disturb sign curled upwards in sweet smelling smoke as I gave Heaven a respectful nod.

Dusk eased in unannounced and cast its long silent shadows all around as the birds prepared to bed down for the night while the crickets and June bugs woke up in five

part harmony. The squirrels dashed about making one last take out order to their nests, and a giant mesquite rang my doorbell right behind my left ear. I missed him, but I wished him luck as he flew away on his less than steady flight for a better blood type.

The drink was letting me down. I wanted to forget and hoped sleep would rescue me into another, hopefully better day. Instead, all I could do was remember and it brought me back further than I really wanted to go, back to growing up with the brothers Doyle. I started to get angry at being sad, pissed at destiny, and resentful toward unreasonable fate. Then it came to me like a bolt of lightning. It was the flag.

Everybody had set their hopes and said their prayers that Conor would make it through the war and come home to his family and friends in one piece, but that's not what happened. He came home mangled, almost cut in two, and the flag covered his battered remains as if he had fallen in combat. His kid brother was collateral damage, but from another front line of another war he never knew existed. Conor's body made it safely back from the war, except he came home dead. He took a detour without scouting the trail and rendezvoused with his last mission along an uncharted landing zone.

The night before he left for Viet Nam he told me and Donny that, while he was gone, it was our responsibility to, "be the shield" that protects the family and keeps them safe from harm. He said that when he joined the army he had to swear an oath of allegiance to the United States, and he wanted us to do the same, this time to him for the duration of his absence. So the three of us put our hands together and swore "to preserve, protect, and honor" those left behind with all the love and dignity they deserved. He wasn't afraid, he said, of dying in combat so long as he went down fighting and his courage didn't fail him on the battlefield. It was important to him that when he left he could take with him our sworn guarantee because it made it easier on his conscience. It seemed to give him some kind of absolution for leaving home, and come what may after that, it was thoughtful preparation for any honorable changing of the guard.

Darkness finally descended and as I looked up, I could see the night sky was full of stars winking their little lamps in coded conversation. I wondered if something intelligent was being communicated through all that blackness high above, or whether it was my own inner void searching for some sign that made any sense. The day had begun with the crisp colors of the American flag and fresh Earth, but then it had become black

with a cold emptiness that completely enveloped me. Maybe Conor was sitting nearby whispering his thoughts as I looked above remembering how children used to wish upon a star for luck, and then I finally began to write in the faded light that remained.

Maybe it was Conor whispering the lonesome sound of Taps into quiet words of -

The Colors of Free

If I should die before I wake
Here is my wish, my last to make,
When out you take my body to drag
Cover it please with America's flag;
Bestow upon me the colors of three
My soul to know, at last I am free,
Thoughts in death were none but true
As I slipped away, I bid adieu.
No deed have I done, no hero am I
Only love is my reason, my reason to die,
Mine is my duty, my duty the best
My life was its shield upon which it did rest;
I gave no more than what I could
I gave no less than what I would,
I gave my all and all I did
Now down upon me close my lid.
My manner of end I knew not of
My order of leave came somewhere above,
I was willing and went, what more can I say
And now I am here, here where I lay;
No cannon you'll fire, no volley you'll hear
No taps of the bugle, not even a tear,
The flag will sound the end of my story
At peace under cover, with me and Old Glory.