

frag. [1] A fragmentation grenade. [2] To explode a fragmentation grenade. [3] To kill or wound one's superior officer, from the fact that a fragmentation grenade was often the weapon of choice.

Paul Dickson, *War Slang*,
Second Edition

frag pot. A place for collecting money to induce somebody to kill an officer; from the fact that the preferred container was often a helmet, or "pot."

Common G.I. slang, Vietnam
War

frag box. The same as above, only in civilian life.

Charles Victor, veteran

Prologue

Eveleth, Minnesota
Early March, 1968

It was twelve degrees below zero when he got off the bus. He still had fifteen miles to go, but Eveleth was the end of the line, as far north as the Greyhound would take him. He would have to hitch hike the rest of the way to the town of Mountain Iron, where his parents had a tiny house. Neither the town nor the house nor the parents were much to come home to, but they were what he had.

After four years in the service, three of them in Vietnam, he had finally had enough. The Army had dangled a big wad of money and some stripes in front of him, but this time, he didn't bite. He mustered out and went back to the World.

His class A uniform and greatcoat were no match for the cold, and he had nothing to cover his hands or ears. He decided to get a few shots of antifreeze before starting the rest of his trip, and he walked the two blocks to Main Street, weaving between mountains of shoveled snow that towered above his head.

Downtown, upstairs over an appliance store, there was a VFW bar. He assumed he would be welcomed there. With his uniform and his ribbons, he might get a freebie or two, or even a ride home. Who knew?

At the side of the appliance store, he opened a frosted-over glass door, kicked the snow off his polished jump boots, and climbed the stairs.

Upstairs was a workingman's bar, with a small hardwood dance floor that hadn't been varnished in thirty years and cheap paneling on the walls, adorned with stuffed moose and deer heads and phony looking lacquered fish. Beams of feeble late afternoon light from a few narrow windows pierced the smoke and dust and illuminated a big American flag on a floor standard and some dingy patriotic bunting over the bar. Under the moose head, a movie poster of Jane Fonda in her sex-kitten role from Barbarella had obviously been used as a dartboard, with the moose also getting his share of random punctures. The tables and chairs were all stacked and pushed against the outside wall, but that didn't matter, because the seven or eight regular patrons all sat at the bar.

They looked interchangeable: dumpy-looking retired or out-of-work men in dirty baseball caps, plaid shirts, and Osh Kosh work pants held up by wide suspenders. Their Chippewa or Red Wing boots rested on the brass rail, showing rubber soles worn to banana-shaped profiles. They also wore

expressions of well-practiced boredom, and they hunched low over the bar, nursing flat beers, trying to keep an all-day buzz going on a scanty mining pension or an unemployment check. They did not chat. The bartender was younger, though definitely not young, and he wore black slacks and a white shirt with a crumpled clip-on bow tie.

Near the door was a jukebox with selections by such worthies as Whoopee John, Frankie Yankovik, and The Six Fat Dutchmen, but it wasn't playing. This was not a place for music. Everything here was yesterday, elsewhere, and too bad.

All eyes turned when the young sergeant came in with a cloud of frigid air. He took off his greatcoat and hung it on a peg, dumping his duffle on the floor nearby. Most of the regulars turned back to stare into their beers, but some of them smirked and exchanged knowing looks.

"Anybody looking to buy some cookies?" said one of the smirkers. "I think the Girl Scouts just came in."

The soldier ignored him and took a stool near the center of the bar.

"Beer and a bump," he said.

The bartender made no move to get him anything.

"You a member?"

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He spread his arms wide, to display his chest full of ribbons, including a purple heart with a bronze V in the proper position of honor, top row, inside.

"Well," he said, "I am damn sure a veteran, and of the foreign-ist goddamn war the politicians ever made. What else you gotta have?"

"This place is for members only," said the bartender, now folding his arms and tilting his chin up aggressively.

"Aah, give the kid a drink," said a voice from the end of the bar.

"Who the hell asked you?"

"He wears the uniform, he's entitled."

"Not if he ain't a member. He ain't entitled to diddly shit." That brought a chorus of muttered agreements from up and down the bar.

"That's bullshit, and you know it," said the lone dissenter on the end, a stumpy, bowlegged troll with a barrel chest and a full white beard. He detached himself from his stool and came over, his hand extended.

"Luther Johnson," he said. "I was with the Seabees in Burma."

"He was with the Salvation Army in Bumfuck, is where he was," said another regular. "He has a half a beer, he gets all confused."

"No, he don't. The two are the same thing."

"Throw the both of them out, Mack."

"Fucking-ay. We don't need their kind here."

"Charlie Victor," said the soldier, taking the hand. That brought a whoop from the others.

"He not only couldn't beat the enemy, he took their name!"

Johnson stood his ground. "Can that shit," he said. "I'm a paid up member, and Charlie here is my guest. Pour him a drink."

"You ain't paid your tab in two weeks, Luther," said the bartender, though now he moved to get a glass from the counter behind the bar.

"Well, it ain't the end of the month, is it? I ever stiff you on it?"

"Just don't be calling yourself paid up, is all I'm saying."

"Listen, mister civilian barhop, you can—"

"How much is his tab?" said Victor.

"What do you care?"

"How much?"

"I dunno without looking it up. Twenty, maybe twenty-two or three bucks. Mind your own business, soldier boy."

The soldier reached into his wallet and dug out a twenty and a five and slapped them on the bar top.

"My friend Luther is all paid up, okay? Now give us both a drink."

"I can pay my own way, kid."

"No shit. And I can fight my own battles."

"Really?" The voice belonged to somebody slightly younger and a lot bigger than Johnson, though still cut from the same common mold. He slid off his stool and came up behind them, doing his best to look imposing despite a sagging beer belly and unfocused eyes.

"Seems to me all you candy-ass, druggie Viet Conga boys know how to do is whine, get high, and lose."

Somewhere in a primitive part of Victor's brain, old wheels began to turn, mixing dark impulses into explosive slurry, begging him to add a detonating spark. But he ignored it with a force of pure will, also ignored the fat, belligerent drunk.

"Are we square now, or what?" he said to the bartender.

The bartender didn't answer, but he poured a shot of rye and slammed it down on the bar, deliberately slopping some over the side. Then he drew two beers and put them on the bar top as well. After he had scooped up the money and stuffed it in the till, he walked back to where the soldier was throwing back the shot and pointedly spat into his beer. The cogs turned a notch farther and the juices started to approach critical mass.

"Just exactly what is your problem?" said Victor as calmly as he could.

"His problem's same as our problem," said Beer Belly, now coming close enough to poke him in the arm. "His problem is that we won our war. We didn't protest and we didn't run off to Canada and we didn't get high on dope and badmouth our country. We didn't fuck up."

"What makes you think I did?"

"Well you damn sure ain't won, have you?" The bartender again, and Victor turned back to stare into his eyes.

"And just exactly which war did you win, Mr. Bowtie?"

"Well, I, um—"

"He don't have to have been in any war to respect the guys who was. He knows how to act. But you phony jungle heroes with your pussy berets don't even know how to do that. You screw around and you keep this damn war going, and pretty soon some real Americans are going to have to go over there and die."

"Like his precious kid," said Johnson.

"What about it? My kid is college material, is what he is. His hockey coach pret' near said so. This asshole here's nothing but mine slag. That's probably why he got drafted; they always take the trash first. And if he couldn't finish the job, he shoun't a come back."

The final bit of machinery clicked. To Victor's surprise, though, the wave of rage that flooded through him was cold, quiet, and supremely controlled. And he knew exactly what he was going to do with it.

"You know what's wrong with war?" said Victor. "I mean, three tours in-country and two purple hearts, and I didn't figure it out until just now. Do you know?"

"Easy, man," said Johnson. "Maybe you should—"

"Oh, now we're gonna get the peace and love speech." Beer Belly turned sideways to play to the rest of the regulars, but before he could say another word, Victor took the glass with beer and spit and smashed it against the side of the man's head. Foam and blood ran down his pasty face, obscuring one smashed eye. The other eye bulged, matching the astonished "o" of the mouth below it. The man howled but didn't go down, so Victor gave him a solid jab to the solar plexus, dropping him in a blubbering heap.

Behind him, Victor heard Johnson say, "Whatever you're reaching for under that bar, Mack, it better be made out of chocolate, 'cause I think you're about to eat it."

Victor whirled around to see the bartender pull a sawed-off baseball bat from under the bar. But before he could do anything with it, Johnson pounded the man's forearm with the side of his fist, pinning the arm to the bar top. The hand went limp. Victor snatched the bat and shoved the end of it into the man's mouth, grabbing a fistful of greasy hair with his other hand, preventing him from backing away.

"What's wrong with war," he said, staring intently into the bartender's eyes, "is that the wrong people always die."

Johnson said something he didn't hear, and the bartender tried to say something but couldn't. Victor shoved the bat down his throat, as hard and as far as he could. He felt things tear and break and squish, and he gave himself over utterly to the delicious black rage that flooded his brain.

Up and down the bar, nobody else moved. No beers were drunk and nobody spoke as they waited in frozen terror to see what the crazy Vietnam vet would do next.

The lunatic went around behind the bar, where the bartender now lay on the floor, convulsing and making choking, gurgling sounds. Victor ignored him. He slammed two handfuls of shot glasses up on the bar and poured them full from two bottles of liquor he picked up at random, one in each hand. He sent the glasses sliding up and down the bar, distributing them, then continued to pour. He doused liquor on the bodies on the floor and flooded the bar top.

"Drinks all around," he said. "On the house." In the background, he saw Johnson go over to the pay phone on the wall and rip out the receiver cord.

"Drink, you sonsabitches," he screamed, "or I swear I'll kill every fucking one of you!"

They drank.

Over by the phone, Johnson made a gesture toward the door.

"Time we got out of here, kid."

He nodded, held up a finger in a gesture that said "just one minute." Then he took out his Zippo lighter and calmly lit the puddles of booze.

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What the rest of the regulars said or did after that, he would never know. Nor did he know what else, if anything, he did to them. The next conscious memory he had was of himself and Johnson running over brittle-crusting snow to jump on an ore train that was laboring up a grade on the edge of town. Twenty miles later, just outside the Erie Mining plant, they swapped it for a ride on a trainload of processed taconite pellets, headed for the dockyards at Duluth. It was blackest night by then, and the temperature seemed to drop almost as fast as the train speeded up. They huddled on the machinery platform at one end of a big hopper car, holding onto the framework with arms looped around steel bars. Neither of them had gloves, and they didn't dare grab the frigid metal with their bare hands. Somewhere between Hoyt Lakes and Duluth, Luther Johnson froze to death.

"So it's true in the World, too," said Victor. "Always the wrong ones who get killed."

He jumped off the train in West Duluth, dumped his uniform, except for the boots and fatigue jacket, in a dumpster at a truck stop, and started hitchhiking. South. In a Catholic church across the street from a gas station in Cloquet, he stopped long enough to light two candles, one for Luther Johnson and one for himself. He was not a Catholic, but it seemed like the right thing to do. Then he continued heading south.

He never made it back to Mountain Iron, to the father who had once told him to go off to war. He settled in St. Paul, finally, sometimes living on the street, sometimes with a former hooker in Lowertown, in the wino district.

"It's always the wrong ones get killed," he told her, when one of their fellow winos died from drinking antifreeze.

"Well, why don't you quit your whining and do something about it?"

So he did.

Chapter One Blood Game

It was a day for pocket billiards, snow, and death. The snow came in the late afternoon, in fat, globular flakes that swirled in the eddies of the urban canyons, stuck to the rough brick of old buildings, and covered the streets in a layer of slush for cars to splash onto pedestrians. On the windows of Lefty's Pool Hall and Saloon in downtown St. Paul, they dribbled down the dirty glass and made mushy heaps on the sills, leaving crooked, wet trails behind them.

I was inside Lefty's at the time, shooting eight ball with Wide Track Wilkie. And while the hapless man on the street below was lost in a world of pain and despair, we were lost in the click of the balls and the smell of smoke and stale beer and the electric tension of money being put in harm's way.

Lefty's is an old-fashioned pool hall, a walkup flight above a not-quite-downtown street, with high ceilings and lazy Bombay fans and green-shaded hanging lamps. It has pool tables with real leather pockets and no coin slots, and snooker and billiards tables, too. And it has high, multi-paned windows. You have to stand on tiptoe to see anything out of them except the sky. It's an easy world to get lost in.

Wilkie likes eight ball, because it's slow and it gives him a lot of time to hustle side bets. I like it because it lets me get more mileage out of finesse than power, which means I can beat him sometimes. At snooker, I almost always can. At nine ball, never. He can sink the money ball on the break one time out of every six, and those are odds that I can't ignore. And I am nothing if not a believer in odds. So for our separate reasons, we agreed to play straight eight.

Back about a hundred years ago, in the shiny chrome city of Detroit, I worked for my Uncle Fred, a bookie and numbers man and the smartest handicapper I've ever known. He taught me that the secret to all of life is nothing more than being able to figure the correct odds. That, and knowing who the house is and always betting with it.

After he went upstate for the second time, I used his money to start a bail bond business, which I figured was as house as you can get. And I was doing okay, with more cash flow than any of Fred's games produced and none of the risk. But I forgot his second secret to life, which is never to be your own customer. I foolishly used my office to recruit some talent for a caper that went not at all well, and I wound up having to flee The Motor City for good. I kept my old name, Herman Jackson, since it's a common enough one, but I changed everything else. I started a new bail bond business and a new life in St. Paul. It's the capital of Minnesota, of course, and I suppose that makes it important, but I always think of it as an uneventful old shoe of a city, which was exactly what I wanted.

Now I spend my days quietly, playing low stakes pool in Lefty's and writing get-out-of-jail cards for small-time losers too stupid to stay there. I bet only the smart odds, and I spend a lot of time looking over my shoulder.

Sooner or later, I suppose, that had to change.

That afternoon, the odds didn't seem to matter. I was on a roll, and I had just dropped the seven ball with a long-green shot as soft and subtle as destiny's whisper, leaving the old timers in the place thumping the butts of their cues on the floor in muffled applause.

"Nice," said Wilkie.

"I thought so," I said.

"Yeah," he said, rocking on his heels and making the floor groan in the process. "Slicker than snot on a doorknob. It ought to make you feel so good, Herman my man, you forgive yourself in advance for missing the next one, which you are definitely going to do."

"You wish."

"I know. Look it over, man."

I looked. I had only the solid-colored black eight ball, the money ball, left to shoot, while Wilkie still had three striped balls on the table. But the eight was backed up in a corner, frozen against the end rail and totally hidden by the thirteen. In the other direction, down the table, there wasn't enough English in a whole bottle of Beefeater's to let me miss the nine and fifteen and do a two-cushion double around the far corner. I could do a deliberate scratch, without touching the eight, and stay in the game, but that would give Wilkie another turn at shooting, which was never a very good idea. For reasons I will never fathom, I decided to go down with style.

"Massé," I said.

"You can't be serious."

"Have you ever known me otherwise?"

"A hundred bucks says you can't make it."

I looked over the setup again. He was right; I couldn't make it.

"A hundred to my twenty," I said.

"Five to one? Are you nuts? I wouldn't give my sweet old grandma five to one."

"If I had your grandma shooting for me, I'd give you three to five. But you're so damn sure I can't do it, you ought to be willing to be a little sporting."

"Hey, I am a little sporting. I promise not to bounce on the floor while you're setting up to miss. Five to three, then; my hundred to your sixty."

"You bounce on the floor, and all bets are off." Wilkie is over four hundred pounds on the hoof. When his stomach rumbles, so does the earth around him.

"I said I wouldn't, didn't I?"

I looked at the shot again and made a few practice strokes. It really was a terrible setup. A massé is a bizarre shot where you actually stroke the cue ball vertically, as if you were trying to drive it straight down into the table. But you hit it off center, and it goes drunkenly spinning off, waltzing around the ball you have to avoid and back to the one you want to hit. Sometimes. It's never all that easy to do, let alone with exact control. And with the eight ball frozen against the cushion, this one had to be perfect. But for any event in the entire universe, there are odds. And if the odds are right, you have to play. That's another secret of life, which my uncle Fred did not teach me. "Four to one," I said, "nonnegotiable."

"Remind me never to buy a used car from you. All right, against my better judgment, your lousy twenty-five bucks to my hundred."

“I’ve only got twenty on me, Wide. I told you that up front.” And truth to tell, I shouldn’t even be risking that. My cash flow situation just then was a disaster.

Wilkie groaned. “I’ll carry you, Mr. High Roller.”

“Nope.” I shook my head while he looked as if he were about to blow a gasket somewhere in his vital machinery. “I never play for what I haven’t got. You know that.”

“Listen, Superchicken, if you—”

“Call the cops!”

All heads turned to a shapeless character in a dirty parka and watch cap, charging in the main door and screaming at Lefty, who was at his usual spot behind the bar.

“They killed a man out there!”

“Who did?” said Lefty.

“The hell difference does it make, who? Call the cops, will you? And gimmie a beer. And a shot, while you’re at it.”

Part of the crowd went to the windows and gave out a bunch of noises like, “awgeez,” and “willya lookathat?” The rest of them headed for the door. I leaned toward a window.

“Screw that,” said Wilkie. “Take the damn shot.”

“Who’s dead?” I said, looking over the setup with the eight again. It didn’t get any better with further study.

“Looks like old Charlie Vee,” said one of the voices at the window.

“Oh, shit,” I said, and my shoulders sagged. “You sure?” I suddenly had a sinking sensation in my stomach and no interest in the game at all.

“Hard to tell for sure from here,” said the voice. “He’s messed up awful bad.”

I put down the cue stick and headed for the door, leaving Wilkie to fume about the bet. The first shouts of anger and denial inside my own head were already drowning him out.

I didn’t know if Lefty had made the phone call yet or not. When I passed him, he was pouring the drinks for the bearer of ill tidings.

“Friend of yours?” said Lefty. “The dead guy, I mean?”

“Customer,” I said. At least, that was the short version.

“Always a bitch, losing a good customer.”

I didn’t bother to stop and explain it to him.

I don’t generally look out the windows of Lefty’s once in five years, but if I had done so ten minutes earlier on that day, I’d have seen it. I’d have seen them back him up against the wall and punch him in the chest and stomach until he gushed blood from his mouth and the strength went out of his legs and he sagged down against the bricks. I’d have seen when they pushed him all the way down, until he was flat on his back, and one of them stood on his chest while another one finished the job with a heavy boot. And when they spilled whatever was left of his soul onto the cold concrete, along with the addictions and nightmares he carried from the jungles of a distant, dirty war, I might have screamed. I might have. The sky was dim and gray at the time, but it was still daylight. I could have seen it all, and I could have screamed for him.

And I should have.

It makes absolutely no sense and does no good to say so, but I know I should have.

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The wet, wind-driven flakes hit me in the face and insinuated themselves inside my open collar and up my shirt cuffs, reminding me that I had run out without a coat.

Across the street, there were a dozen or more spectators ahead of me, clustered in a semicircle about ten feet back from the body on the sidewalk. Gawkers, drawn irresistibly to the sight of violent death but still wanting to keep a certain sterile distance between it and themselves. From somewhere far away, I could hear the first sirens. I pushed through the crowd and had a look, instantly regretting it. The guy at the window had not been exaggerating about how messed up the dead man was.

The face was a deflated soccer ball, smeared with blood and draped in overlong gray hair. And the body shape was masked by the countless layers of old clothes that street people collect. At first glance, it could have been anybody. But there, unmistakably, was the threadbare khaki fatigue jacket with the faded sergeant stripes and the frayed Air Cav shoulder patch. There, also, were the thick-soled work boots, their brown leather daubed endlessly with black shoe polish, to try to make them look like combat boots, because Charlie couldn't get any real combat boots at the free store on West Seventh Street. And there were the big, once powerful hands, now cruelly deformed by arthritis, with a blue tattoo of a coiled cobra on the back of the right one. I knew all that well enough, and a good bit more. It was Charlie, all right. In some ways, he was still a complete mystery to me, but I knew him when I saw him, even in this sorry state.

Charles Victor was his real name, and yes, he did once have to go to Vietnam with that most unfortunate of handles. What they called him over there, I didn't know, but I imagined that he must have had to be one hell of a soldier, just to keep from being shot by his own people. He had a lot of stories, but who knew how many of them were true?

Whatever he had really done, he never got over it. I didn't know if he fit the orthodox definition of post-traumatic stress syndrome, but for my money, he could have been a poster child for it. In Southeast Asia, the war was over decades ago. People go there as tourists now. The war in Charlie's soul went on every day, and no sane person would go there, ever. He left the jungle, but it never left him. It was always sitting on his shoulder like a dark, leathery gargoyle, waiting to trip him into quiet madness and horror. If he was violent, I never saw it, but I did see times when he just wasn't present in the real world at all. Whether for that reason or others, he never held a regular job or had a home or a woman or wanted anything from life but anonymity and oblivion. And he finally got both of them, but as usual with him, he paid way too much.

But then, there's a lot of that going around. By rights, I shouldn't have cared. What was he to me, after all? A customer, and not a very big one at that. But there was another link there, not so easy to put a name on. Sometimes I had the feeling that his story, if I knew it well enough, would also turn out to be my own. And as with my own, I knew I hadn't heard it all yet. For the moment, though, I felt sick. And at least part of that sickness was called guilt.