

Excerpt

*The Frog Hunter: A Story About the Vietnam War, an Inkblot Test and a Girl*

by TB Stamper

Suddenly, Glenn began waving his hand, pointing into the blackness ahead. As if in response, a twig snapped. A moment passed and a branch slowly broke, cracking under weight. The noise came from the bushes somewhere to my right, away from the trail. I looked over in Wally's direction but could see nothing. My eyes scanned the darkness, and my ears strained for sounds, but it was my nose that confirmed the enemy's presence. That alarming, unmistakable smell wafted under my nose and flooded my head with danger. *Gooks!* As the gut-quivering odor drifted across our position, I could almost see Death lightly placing a dab of the foul perfume behind each ear as he dressed for our date.

The team tensed, ready to strike. *Should we fire... or wait?* We might attack a force much larger than ourselves. We only had one chance to make the right decision. We remained still as the night noises broke around us, not knowing whether our hesitation would kill us or save us. Voices pierced the silence. Sharp commands, given in Vietnamese. Then... all was eerily quiet.

It was the witching hour. Our senses and those of our enemy became one with the night air. Submersed in the same pot of pitch, we adjusted our sensory radar as if we were fine-tuning a radio, rising to a higher frequency where we could feel each other's movements through the thick blackness as it undulated and rolled with every stirring of the night.

From the scurrying feet of a timid field mouse to the careful padding of an enemy boot, the night felt all. We scanned the airwaves and monitored the invisible sensory net, reading each other's presence by discerning the changes in night pressure, perceiving each hidden movement, and gauging the distance and nature of every noise.

Suddenly, just ahead of my position, I saw a shadow glide by, pitch moving through pitch. I drew a fix on the intruder but held my fire. Moving laterally, it passed before me, then slipped away. I drew in a deep, even breath and tasted fear. Time slowed, then stopped altogether, as if it, too, were holding its breath. The clouds held fast around the moon. I peered into the blackness, listening to the NVA probe for us.

*Where are my teammates?* I'd lost track of their positions. I only knew that they were there, dead motionless in the dark. Soft and muffled voices whispered ten yards away. A metallic click... followed by breaking twigs as more enemy soldiers joined the hunt.