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Peter

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by Robert B. Slocum

The first time I saw him was just after I took the call to Holy Spirit Parish in Belvedere, a small city in central Kentucky. I was newly ordained, and it was my first parish. Driving downtown one morning, I glanced over at the truck in the next lane, and there was Peter. He was sitting on a toolbox in the cargo bed, sitting up straight as an arrow, facing backwards as the truck moved along. Everything he wore looked like a soldier's uniform, but with no insignia, no stripes, nothing. It wasn't Army surplus, just some kind of camo.

Peter was probably in his fifties, maybe older, but lean as a rail. He had shaggy hair that bushed out under a green hat, and a scraggly beard. There was a bulging backpack over his shoulders, and it looked like he was carrying everything he owned with him. He had a small, tattered American flag on a black stick that was tied to a strap of the backpack. At first I thought it was a joke, but he wasn't laughing. Riding backwards, hands on his knees, he was perfectly still, eyes focused somewhere far away, a place I couldn't see. I was thinking we didn't have many homeless people in Belvedere, and certainly no one who looked like him.

It was maybe a month before I saw him again. I was running late to get ready for the parish council meeting at church. Walking to the parish hall, I was fumbling with some papers when I saw him sitting on the steps in front of the door. Same green hat, same funny camo. This time no backpack, no flag. He was looking right at me, like a marksman, watching me coming up the sidewalk, waiting for me to notice. "Eve'nin, parson," he said. Jeez, I thought, no one calls me parson. He told me his name.

I was in a hurry. The parish council people were going to arrive any minute, and I still had to get everything together for the meeting that night. Doors open, lights on, handouts ready. So I kind of snapped at him. "I'm sorry, there's no money left in the Handshake Fund today. And the Clothes Nook won't be open until tomorrow morning." He kept on looking at me, and it got real still. His eyes seemed to narrow just a little, then soften. "Don't remember asking for money or clothes, parson," he said, then a pause, "but maybe a cup of coffee." Another pause, still looking right at me. "Thought you might like to talk."

So I sent him on his way with coffee in a styrofoam cup, and told him to come back any morning during office hours. I figured my secretary could handle him, at least at first. I did offer him one of my business cards. It had an embossed logo of a descending Holy Spirit, with neatly printed lines of information in script. He wouldn't take it or look at it. "I know how to find you," he said, and left.

This was a busy time in the parish, and in Belvedere. Seemed like a lot was going on. One day a prisoner escaped the corrections van that was transporting him between the county lockup and a court appearance. Somehow he got out of his cuffs, and slipped the locked door at the back of the van. He was halfway down an alley before the guard and driver knew he was gone, and then nobody could find him. Belvedere was going nuts. Andy, the town constable was driving around town with his flashing lights on, except when he was going to the Rooster, his favorite diner, for the breakfast special. People were calling the church to ask if we knew anything.

Of course, it was just me and Jill, the secretary, at the church office during the day, unless some of the parish volunteers came by for the food pantry or the altar guild. So we kept getting all these calls. Someone even wondered if it had anything to do with that strange guy in the Army uniform they kept seeing around town. I said no, he's not a prisoner. It's not him. I nearly added that it's not an Army uniform, just looks like one. But I didn't. About this time, Peter yelled at someone for standing too close to him in the check-out line at the Kroger, and that didn't help. People were on edge, and people were talking.

Later that day, I had to review the annual report with the senior warden, Anne Taylor, so I went out to her farm at the edge of town. Going to Fox Run Farm was like visiting a plantation with rolling fields, grazing horses, and four-board white fences. This was life in the Bluegrass. It was almost dusk when I arrived, and I found Anne with her husband Larry on the front porch. They were each in their own rockers, enjoying the mild late spring and the fading light above the tree line. On a table between them were two half-filled glasses on paper napkins, their evening toddies, and two pistols. I also noticed a shotgun leaned against the wall of the house at the back of the porch. This was something I never saw before at Fox Run Farm, but I admitted no surprise. I was pleasant.

"Eve'nin, vicar," boomed Larry, "have a seat. Want a drink?" I pulled up a chair and said no, I'm fine, just wanted to come by to have a quick visit and show these papers to Anne. But before I knew it, they were both going full speed about the escaped prisoner. Someone thought they saw him, and someone heard he was dangerous, and the mayor was organizing a town meeting to talk about it, and someone called to say watch out tonight, and make sure all the windows and doors are locked.

Actually, Anne explained, that's what they were doing out on the porch that evening. They figured to see the prisoner if he came their way, and they'd be ready. They both reached for their drinks at about the same time, and sipped thoughtfully. I noticed one of the pistols on the table was sort of pointing my way, but I was deciding not to mention it when I realized someone was talking. It was Larry, saying if he saw that creep on his property, he wouldn't wait for any sheriff or police car, he'd just shoot him right off, and that would settle it.

So we watched the quiet sunset, talked a little parish business, and I went on home. "Be careful out there," Anne said, and they waved goodbye from the top step of the porch. Later that night I heard the police caught the escaped prisoner, and that ended the crisis for Belvedere. He was looking for food in a dumpster behind the Burger King downtown.

The next morning Jill left the office for her lunch break at about the usual time. She'd always leave around 11:30 to check on her daughter in day care across the street, and then pick up a sandwich to eat in the park. That meant the front door of the parish hall was open with no one at the desk near the entrance. My office was down the hall, and I was the only person in the building. I kept working in my office after Jill left. I

was writing something, probably a sermon, and not paying much attention to anything else. I thought I heard a sound somewhere, but then everything was quiet again. I kept on working, looking up every now and then if I got to a stopping place.

I glanced at my office door, and he was there. Peter was standing in the doorway, looking right at me, saying nothing. He was wearing the same camo and green hat. He was blocking the doorway. That was my first thought. He'd helped himself to a cup of coffee from the pot next to Jill's desk, and it was steaming in his hand. "Ah, Peter," I said, "here you are. What a surprise." He smiled for just a moment, watching me like a hawk, and then said, "Yeah, I knew how to find you. Thought you might want to talk."

So I invited him to sit down in the chair across from my desk. And he sat, pleasantly enough. He was unhurried and waiting, hands on his knees. Actually, we both waited. Usually, when people come to see me, they have something to say. But he waited, like he would have sat there all day until I said something. So we had a little silence, until I finally said to myself: Okay, I'll talk with anyone; I'll talk with this guy. "Well, did you hear they caught the escaped prisoner?" I began, drawing on the big local news item. "It's probably a good thing," I continued, "I have a couple of parishioners who were ready to shoot him on sight." Peter looked away for just a moment, made a sound like spitting, and said, "What do they know about killing?"

About that time I was thinking the escaped prisoner wasn't the best topic of conversation, but at least Peter was talking, and he kept on. "That prisoner was just a scared kid. Hanging out just inside the tree line behind the strip mall. You could hear him coming from a ways off. He knew nothing about living outside. His survival plan was to wait for the mall to close and then dive for scraps in the dumpster. I thought about sharing some food with him, but figured I'd just spook him. He seemed pretty much ready to go back by the time the police caught him. Looked like he was tired of sleeping on the ground, tired of being hungry and dirty. He had no damn business living outside."

Outside was where Peter lived, and he told me why. He talked about the war, and his camps inside concertina wire. He told me about nightly rocket attacks, enemy charges that began with whistles, and burying friends. He talked about the sound of helicopters overhead, and shouts in the night. He talked about burning hooches, and kids with guns or bombs. "But you know," he said, eyes straight on me, "bad as it was, you always knew who the enemy was. That's why I like outside." He paused. "Inside," he said, glancing sideways at the doorway, "you never know who's coming at you. They get behind you before you know it. You never really know who's on your side. You can't tell by looking at them. People cheat you, lie to you, stab you in the back while they're smiling at you." At that point I remembered a few stories of my own, but I kept quiet.

He looked me square in the eyes. "Parson, that's why you won't be seeing me in the church building for any prayer services or potluck suppers. I don't like crowds, or people behind me, or folks dressed up to be something they're not." I didn't try to reason with him, or explain. I just listened. He was talking faster now. "But I pray all the time. I prayed when I was sloshing through tunnels in country, looking for resistance. And I prayed back here when I got off the plane. I pray nights when I can't sleep, and when the dreams wake me up. I pray when I could scream. Sometimes I can tell other people who pray, and I'll talk to them when I can. I figured I could talk to you." He glanced down, and his expression softened a little. "I don't know. Maybe I'll show up for that early morning prayer service of yours on Tuesdays with the same three people. I'm usually up pretty early."

About that time I learned he didn't like sudden noises. Jill got back from lunch, and the office door closed hard behind her with a gust of wind. Peter snapped up straight in his chair, and looked side to side. Everything tightened. He finished what he was saying, but the conversation was over. He was moving, and in a minute he was gone.

I didn't see Peter for a couple of weeks, until one Tuesday after the early service. I remember Henry had to miss that day; Marge and Betty were already headed down to the Rooster for breakfast, and I was about to close the church door and join them. There he was, standing in the doorway, wearing the same gear as usual. Dawn was breaking behind him. "Hey," I said, "I thought you were coming to church. You're late." He smiled, and asked if he could go inside. He wanted to sit and pray in the quiet church. "That's fine, Peter," I said, "that's fine." I stepped out of the way, and he went inside.

The next time I saw Peter was a few days later. He appeared as I was getting out of my car in the church lot, and he asked me a favor. It was the first time I ever saw him hesitate, or be anything but direct. "The thing I need, parson," he said, "is, well, fall's coming, and my VA check may not be enough, and I don't take handouts." He started again. "So, I was thinking maybe you'd know someone who could use some help."

I could help. "Sure, Peter," I said. "Just a couple of days ago Anne was saying she needs some help at Fox Run Farm." So she put him on a tractor in one of her fields, and said he was a great worker. After Thanksgiving he told her he was leaving to spend the winter in Florida. Anne tried to keep him around, but Peter said he had his marching orders. His mind was made up. Anne promised his job would be waiting for him in the spring.

The week after Thanksgiving I saw Peter again. He was in the back of a pickup truck, stopped next to me at a traffic light. The truck was on the way out of town, and he was sitting on a chest in the cargo bed with his back to the cab. Same overstuffed backpack, same tattered flag, same fixed look at a point somewhere you can't see. But I think he saw me. I think he smiled.