PAUL PARK

TACHYCARDIA

I RETIRED FROM THE CORPS of Engineers when I was sixty-five. During the afternoons I'd play golf at Colonial City Park. I'd have lunch with friends, dinner and a couple of drinks. Then I'd go home to my house on General Pershing Street and turn on the lights. I kept that place as clean as a hotel After Mary Elizabeth passed away, I took down most of the photographs, cleaned out most of the things.

It says in the Bible that death can come at any time, so you might as well not fret about it. I was on the seventeenth tee at City Park. I sat down on the grass, because I was dizzy and my pulse went to 250. That day I was paired with Bobby Squires, who's a doctor I've known for years. He drove me downtown to his office at University Hospital -- the old Hotel Dieu on Tulane Avenue. I hadn't been there since Geoffrey was born. In half an hour I was on a table in the emergency room, and the technician was putting in a drip.

Bobby explained the whole thing as I lay there with a needle in my arm. There is an amino acid called Adenosin that stops the heart. After eight seconds they switch to saline and start it up again. Usually that takes care of the problem, which is called tachycardia. But my heart was still roaring even after the procedure, so they decided to try it a second time. I couldn't breathe because of the pressure in my chest, and I passed out.

How can I describe what I was feeling? Your heart stops, and everything is still.

My wife once read a ***book*** that says you hang suspended in the air above your body. I thought that was ridiculous, even at the time. I was sitting in the dirt, rubbing my knees and the backs of my hands, and then my chest and thighs.

It can be painful to grow old by yourself. If you outlive the members of your own family, you've lived too long. Now my heart was quiet, and I didn't breathe. I sat until my eyes were accustomed to the darkness. Smells came to me -- mold, concrete, a trace of urine. The dirt under my hands was clotted with spider web, and it seemed to me that I could hear the whining of a mosquito.

Now I could see the limits of that place, a concrete box about ten feet square. The ceiling was low, and I didn't want to stand. Instead I crawled forward on my hands and knees. There was a gray light that got stronger as I crawled toward it, though it remained indistinct and didn't throw off any kind of shadow. It wasn't until I reached the opening that I understood why. The concrete passage to the outside air was narrow, and it turned back on itself in two ninety-degree angles. Squatting on my haunches, looking back toward where I had been sitting, I saw deep, horizontal slits in the wall above my head, blocked, I imagined, with vegetation or debris. I could see now where I was, a concrete pillbox or bunker, with walls many feet thick. And though I understood the principle of the entrance, I was not prepared, as I turned the corners, for the brightness of the outside air. As I crawled out into the open, the brightness was like a punch in the nose, and my eyes were watering.

As I had had to get used to the darkness, now I got used to the light, which took a longer time. I collapsed onto my knees and forearms and put my head down. I could see that I was wearing my golfing clothes, and my hat was on my head. My shorts and polo shirt had seemed appropriate to a fall day in New Orleans. Abruptly, now, I felt like a fool.

There were huge, shaggy trees all around me, with roots like the fins of a rocket. There wasn't much undergrowth, and the ground was dry. Through the tree trunks I could see the ocean. Except for the entrance, the pillbox behind me was obscured with moss and hanging vines, masses of purple flowers.

I've spent a good amount of time in the swamps of Southeastern Louisiana. We had a camp near Slidell. But this was not like that. The smells were different. And the bugs as they lighted on my skin -- I didn't recognize them. They didn't cause me any trouble. My golfing shoes were full of ants that didn't bite.

I got up and staggered to the shore. Leaning on a tree, its bark as smooth as skin, I shaded my eyes and looked out toward the sun on the water, which was like a mirror. There was a mud cliff that was subsiding into a swamp, and then the open sea beyond. There was no wind.

As we get older, it gets easier to summon dreams and images from the past. After a moment, I thought I'd figured out where I was. My father's older brother had been a captain in the Marines. He'd had a stroke after he retired, and when I was a teenager I used to go visit him in a nursing home in St. Bernard Parish. It was a depressing place, but he'd taken a shine to me, and I'd sit by his bed and listen to him complain about "that faggot, Douglas MacArthur," as he called him. He'd tell me stories about New Guinea. I knew about the Japanese defenses, the mangrove swamp where my uncle's unit had been pinned down. "It was a day in hell," he said.

All that was long ago. The place was empty now. After a few minutes I turned away from the shore and followed a path through the bushes.

When my son Geoffrey was a little boy, on weekends I used to take him down to Audubon Park. Right by the zoo there is a stand of oak trees, and we used to play a game. He would toddle off into the undergrowth, and I would count for a minute and come after him. Usually I'd find him hiding about twenty feet away in some obvious place, or else standing in plain sight. But one day he disappeared, and after a few minutes of searching I was yelling as hard as I could. I assumed he really was hiding from me, even after I told him the game was over. But what had happened was this: He had fallen into a hole where someone had buried some illegal trash. He was up to his waist in the debris. And though I had passed within a few feet of him, he had been too frightened to cry out.

What is it that brings certain memories suddenly to mind? My son--his eyes were a color I've never seen before, a gray so clear that it was disconcerting. Maybe the image of his face is never far away from me. That day my threats had not consoled him. Terrified, I yanked him out, and his leg caught on a piece of metal. He had to get a tetanus shot.

Why do certain images come to us, whole and complete, as if out of the air? Is there always a reason? Maybe this was my train of thought: There were some sounds from jungle animals I couldn't see. Maybe there were some monkeys crying on the other side of the fence, which separates the park from the zoo. Now, as I took the path away from the shore, I thought about the animals my uncle had told me about, the ones he had seen in the camp near Buna in New Guinea, or else heard crying in the darkness. Why are they so frightening, the dangers we cannot see? In my son's face, even up to the last days, I could not guess what he would do.

Though I could hear the noises, I myself could make no sound. When I stumbled at the bottom of a small ravine, I opened my mouth and no sound came. My hat was gone, and I lay on my back at the bottom of the flitch.

And when my eyes had cleared, I saw that I was looking up at a human face, a black man. I have always been a prejudiced person, but I was happy to see these fellows--there were several of them. The sunlight was behind their heads. It slanted through the tall trees. Then I felt them help me to my feet, and they were pushing me through the long leaves, and I could feel the pain in my chest. Then they laid me down and left me, and I turned onto my side, and I could see Geoffrey, my son.

He was about twenty feet away. He was standing inside a bamboo cage, dug into the slope so that only the top third of it rose above the surface of the ground. I lay in a kind of a dell that had been cut into the raw earth. I lay on wood chips, and near me was a campfire.

I rose to my knees and tried to speak, but no sound came out. "Geoffrey," I tried to say. He wasn't looking at me. He was staring through the bars of his cage, his arms as thin as the sticks of bamboo, as they had been toward the end. Surely he'd been mistreated. The fire was smoking. On a stump near the fire lay an army helmet covered with netting and eaves.

Who had done this to him? What enemy had attacked us? I tried to speak but could not. Geoffrey stared listlessly away.

There was a pain in my chest. Still I managed to crawl forward reach out my hand. "Geoff," I tried to say. But then there were so explosions that shook the ground, and I dropped down into the dirt. WI I opened my eyes again, I was lying on my back on the table in the emerge: room, the needle in my arm. My heart was beating at a normal rate.

"Jesus," said Bobby Squires, "I thought we'd lost you. You were gone for over two minutes. They had to use the paddles."

"I need more time," I said, which he misunderstood.

This was after they had brought me upstairs to his office to recuperate. I was in a wheelchair, though I felt fine. Bobby was going over my prognosis, and telling me to quit drinking and the little cigars I smoke. I'd heard it all before. I take medication for high blood pressure and high cholesterol, and he was telling me about that. He wanted to keep me overnight in the hospital for observation and tests, but I said no. I wanted to get home.

Later I sat on the back porch of the house on General Pershing Street, drinking an Old-Fashioned. My wife used to make them for me, but she'd left the recipe, and to tell the truth, they tasted better now.

This was the house we'd moved to when Geoffrey was about six. He'd gone to school around the comer. Looking out over the back yard, I could picture him playing in the dirt between the chain-link fence and the gardenias.

Everything had been fine for a long time. I was working hard to put food on the table. I'd have to go up to Baton Rouge.

So then he went away to Grinnell College, which is not what I'd wanted for him. He had excelled in high school, and I guess he expected to excel there too. This was in the late sixties. He had what you might call a nervous breakdown, although I never called it that. But it was enough for his deferment, and after that he came home to live. I admit I was unsymphathetic. He was my only child. I wanted what was best. Looking back knowing myself, it's hard to imagine what I'd do differently. Nowadays of course, you can cure any of those mental problems with a few pills.

A few days after this experience with my heart, I went out to the camp north of Slidell in the

Honey Island Swamp. I hadn't been there for almost thirty years, since Geoffrey's death. It had been an important place to him and me. Now, after my experience in the hospital, for the first time I understood why the pictures in my mind had been so vivid as my uncle told his stories about New Guinea. There was a stretch of shore near the cabin -- I could see it now. For a long time it had been hidden from me by some trick of the mind. Instead of cypress, I had put in mangrove trees. I had made a steeper slope above the beach. And of course I had put in a whole ocean, the Solomon Sea, I guess, instead of the wide, brackish waters of the river.

But the shape of the land was the same. Only the scale had changed. Perhaps when my uncle described the place to me, he had allowed the image of that shore to supplement his memory -- he also knew the place well. Whatever the reason, as I came in over the old road, I thought about what I would find. I parked the Caddy at the turnaround, then got out and leaned against the hood for a while. It was evening time, after a clear, dry day. There were some lights at the neighbors' house, where Mrs. Douglas lived year-round.

Some cousins of mine still used the camp on weekends. I walked down the dirt path and then onto the bridge. The cabin was built on stilts over the water, a one-room, tin-roofed shack with a deck on three sides. There'd been some new work on the place, and it had been painted green, though not recently. There was a padlock on the door. I couldn't see anything through the windows, just some boxy shadows, though the table was the same. No one knew I was coming. Most of that part of the family, I hadn't spoken to in years.

The water was low. I lit a Dutch Masters to keep the bugs away, and sat out on the deck, dangling my feet, looking back toward shore. There was a new boathouse in the trees. After a while, I unwrapped a pint of bourbon, which I had mixed in the bottle with some of that Old-Fashioned syrup. I wasn't taking any of my medications, but even so, the doctors had warned me how it could be years before I had another episode of tachycardia. I could die first, which didn't interest me.

The water lay black and flat to Honey Island. It sucked at the pilings. I finished the cigar, then walked across the bridge, around past the new boathouse, down the slope onto the strand. It was an odd feeling -- a place I knew well, except I hadn't been there in over twenty-five years. Weeks together in my childhood, long weekends with Geoffrey or alone, then nothing.

The shape of the shore was just as I remembered it. The creak of the dry mud underfoot. I walked toward the fallen cypress where they had found the body. It had washed among the cypress knees, under some bushes that overhung the water. No current to speak of-- a dry, November night like this one. He had been drinking, they said. Mary Elizabeth was with me, and when we were driving back to the city from Slidell, suddenly we hit a squall over the lake. The streetlights and the raindrops on the windshield made a pattern on my wife's face.

I have had good luck in several aspects of my life. The worst things a not failures, but what can't be helped. My wife was religious at one time, which was no consolation, even though her priest was a reasonable man. The teachings of the church are clear. It is a sign of God's love to be able to help others. We would have done anything.

Geoffrey had gone up to the cabin for the weekend to think things over, after I blew up at him and told him he couldn't live with us anymore. He had to get out on his own. The police said his death was accident which I didn't believe and neither did Mary Elizabeth -- that's what a her up. Now I stood on the same shore where he had stood. Next time thought, I would not be unprepared or empty-handed. I would do my duty as a father and a husband.

But of course I had a long time to wait. It wasn't until June that I experienced my second episode of tachycardia. I had been drinking some, and my blood pressure was high. "You look terrible," said Bobby Squires. It was the first time I had seen him in months.

"Just a little more time," I said.

When he finally understood what I was asking, he shook his he "Are you crazy? We're not going through that again."

He didn't have a choice. I passed out in his office, and when I woke up I was lying in the darkness on a concrete floor. There was a smell of varnish in the air, and I knew where I was.

There was a pirogue on sawhorses, a line of brilliant light under the door. As before, everything was still. I lay on my stomach for a moment. But I had no time to waste. I was afraid the boathouse was padlocked on the outside. Then I put my hand against the door and it swung open.

The light was so sudden, it brought tears to my eyes. The grade was steep, and I pitched downhill onto the strand. The sun was bright on the water. It was the middle of the day.

I was afraid to raise my eyes and look. I studied the tassels of my loafers until I couldn't bear it any longer, and then I looked up. He was there, half-submerged under a cage of branches among the cypress knees. At first I thought he was just floating on the current, but then I saw him move his hand. I saw his head come up, his bony neck and long wet hair.

"Geoff," I said, and I could hear my voice. I felt in my pocket for my wife's pruning shears, which I had brought with me, along with several other tools. As I got close, I could see Geoffrey was caught. Something had him by the leg. I waded into the water and saw that his pant leg was caught on a submerged log, and he was yanking at it occasionally, trying to free himself. There was no urgency to any of his movements. Most of his torso was above water. He was lying in among the roots of a submerged tree.

He had on one of those colored shirts I used to hate. It's funny how you forget. Was this really how it had happened? He had just flopped around like a fish until he died? It was pitiful. The tide never ran more than a few inches here. Sure he was drunk, but that was no excuse. I saw his bony face with his cheek next to the water, his lank brown hair. He had been a strong boy, an athlete at Jesuit, but as he lost weight those last two years, his mother's weakness had come out in his face, her fine bones. His skin was paler than mine, dusted with red freckles. He'd gotten too much sun. It was a hot day.

He was pretty well caught. There was a hole in his jeans, and the cloth had twisted itself around a jutting stub of branch. The water was dirty and full of weeds. I worked at the wet denim with the garden shears until it gave way. All the time, Geoffrey was looking at me stupidly.

Like his mother, he was myopic, and his glasses had come off. It took him a while to figure out who I was. Then he was angry, and he tried to pull away. "Shut up," I said, as I was dragging him out of the water. "Enough of this crap. I'm taking you home."

He hadn't shaved. He smelled of whiskey and the swamp. I pulled him up by the collar of his shirt. He was twenty-three years old, and like a child. "Your mother will be worried stiff," I said.

"Leave me alone."

I wasn't having any of that. I pulled him toward the cabin. "Let me go. I can take care of myself," he said, which was ridiculous. I didn't have to answer. I didn't have to be his friend. But I wanted to get him away from that place where he had died. I kept in my mind the beach from my uncle's story, the camp deserted only for a moment. The camouflaged helmet on the stump.

Geoff was filthy and he stank. "Come on," I said. "Let's get cleaned up. You must be thirsty," I said -- he was very frail. I put my hand around his upper arm and led him up the slope. There was an empty bottle in the mud.

"Where are my glasses?" he said, and I picked them up. But I wouldn't let go of his arm until I had brought him up the slope past where the boat house had been, and over the bridge to the cabin. It was the same weathered gray that I remembered, and the deck was broken in along one side. The screen door was ripped, and behind it the door stood open. There was Geoffrey's old rucksack on the bed, and clothes strewn around, and dirty dishes in the sink. "Let's clean you up and get you into some dry things," I said.

All that had happened between us, I know it was my fault. Mary Elizabeth used to tell me I had worked too hard when he was young. She didn't say so at the time. This much is true--the problems we had, I didn't see them coming. Now I poured out some water from one of the ten-gallon jerry cans into a pot in the metal sink. He wiped his face with a dishcloth while I looked at the calendar for 1973. It was from a car dealership off Chef Menteur. Beside the stove pipe, thumb-tacked to the wall, was a grocery list in my handwriting.

Geoffrey was quiet, and I turned my back to let him peel off his shirt "You are a son of a bitch," he said, finally.

I glanced at him, then looked into his gray eyes. Clean-shaven, with a haircut and some meat on his bones, he would have been a fine boy Although my heart was quiet, still I had an ache in my chest. The truth was, the whole time he was a kid we'd gotten along fine. There hadn't been a lot of talking, which was just as well. You can never figure things out just by talking. We'd gone to Pelican games on Saturday afternoons an never said a word. Later I'd taught him how to catch a fish, how to drive a car.

I hoped some day he'd remember some of those things. It didn't matter now, and there was no reason for me to get angry. In the back of my mind I knew we were in danger. There was no time for him to speak before I smelled the fire.

Someone had lit the deck on fire, torched the bridge. I tried to go out, but the heat was intense. It was unnatural the way the whole thing went up. The deck surrounded the house on three sides, and I stepped between the bed and the table to the window at the back, which looked straight down over the water. I broke the screen out of the frame and called out to Geoffrey, who was rummaging through the rucksack on the bed. The fire was bursting through the planks over the sink. The calendar curled up, dropped off the wall. And Geoffrey wasn't moving. He had his rucksack in his hand, and he was looking toward the open door, which was full of the roaring flame. I grabbed his wrist. The heat was intolerable, and I couldn't be gentle. I climbed over the sill and bundled him down into the water, which was about five feet below the sill and about five feet deep.

He wasn't resisting me. He followed me down and then I pulled him into deeper water, because I was afraid some of the beams of the house would fall. Then we paddled a little way downstream where we could touch the bottom as it rose onto a shoal of mud, thirty feet from the bank. The heat was on our faces as we squatted down to watch the burning house, and also the woods behind it catching fire, and the fire moving up and down the shore along

the dry ground. There was fire on the other side of the river, too, and the sky darkened. Clouds came in, and a stiff wind, and it was dark except for the fire along the bank. There was all manner of scrub trees, but the treetops were dark and the tree trunks silhouetted by the flames, because the fire seemed to burn only low along the ground. So it got dark. The beams of the cabin collapsed into the water in a gust of sparks. The water was cold. I put my arm around Geoffrey's shoulder, and was surprised to find him heavier and more solid. He held onto my arm, and I could feel him being pulled away, as if there were something in the water that was holding onto him. I didn't have the garden shears anymore, but I had my sheath knife attached to my belt, and I pulled it out and hacked at the water while Geoffrey clung to my neck. All this time the wind was coming up, and there were waves on the river. The clouds were ripped to pieces overhead. I took hold of Geoffrey around the waist and brought him over the shoals onto the bank. The mud sucked at my shoes. The rain came toward us over the water, and it covered the fire and put it out, and we had to take shelter in the trees. Around us was the crash of breaking branches. I put my forearm over my eyes and then took Geoffrey by the hand. He followed like a boy, and I led him up the slope and through the smoking woods to my old Caddy -- not the hunk of junk I own now This one was solid as a tank, which was a good thing. I pushed a fallen branch off the roof, opened the door, and Geoff slid across the seat, and we were safe. The keys were in the ignition. The Caddy started up.

Then we were driving through the dark, and after a while the rain stopped and the wind quieted down. Geoff snuggled up against my side, and then he lay with his head on my knee. He didn't say anything, and after an hour or so we came into the lights of the city. He was lying on his back with his head on my knee, looking up through the windshield and the light was on his face. I drove right downtown. I parked the car on Tulane in a no standing zone, then carried Geoff into the Hotel Dieu, and then upstairs. I had him against my shoulder, and I was supporting his head. I knew the way. There were double doors to the maternity ward, and I went into the big room, and there was Mary Elizabeth looking as pretty as I'd ever seen her, though she was tired, and her head was against the pillows. But her face was glowing. I put Geoff into her arms, and he curled up contentedly. He hadn't cried the whole way. He was a good boy.

But I was a mess, and I didn't belong in that place. Mary Elizabeth scarcely glanced at me. Geoff had curled up under the covers, and then were some nurses giving me rotten looks -- black women -- as I say, I've never had much use for those people, though I've known a few. I didn't see a reason to stay, so I went upstairs to Bobby Squires's office. I didn't have to wait long to see him, just a few minutes, which was just as well. I had a pain like an elephant on my chest. "Christ Jesus," said Bobby -- he was pretty shaken up. But after a few minutes I felt fine again.

Afterward I walked down to the Quarter, which was the first time I had been there in years. But it was a beautiful evening. I walked down Canal Street and across Royal, and found a little outdoor place near Jackson Square, where I could drink a cup of coffee and smoke a cigar. There were some bands playing for the tourists in back of the cathedral. I sat there for forty-five minutes or so, listening to the music and watching the people walk by. There was an Oriental gift with hair clear down to her behind. And I just sat there and sat there, and in my whole life I never felt so good.