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Rest Camp

By Claude F. Koch

REST CAMP is the winner of the first annual Catholic Press Association Short Story Award. The story, which appears for the first time in **FOUR QUARTERS**, was adjudged best by a board composed of editors of leading Catholic publications.

W KIPPER'S going ashore in half an hour, Rubber."

Over by the rail the dumpy little figure started, turned, and split unshaven cheeks in an indecisive smile.

"That'll be great, eh, Commander, eh?" On his damp collar, cross and lieutenant's bars were dull and awry. The lieutenant commander nodded condescendingly and waved himself away, and the priest leaned his belly against the rail again, contemplating with dull-eyed fatigue the unloading operations in the Noumean dusk. His khaki clothes draped limply over the frame that awkwardly slouched, bereft of the weight that earned him his nickname—a pale, grimy, fever-ridden little man small on the transport's forward well-deck.

That earned him his nickname. The Reverend William Ball, Roman Catholic chaplain to the 501st Construction Battalion, rubbed soft, padded fingers over his cracked lips. On the wharf below, behind which glinted the dissembling sun in its setting across the red tin roofs of the palm-sheltered town, pugnacious green trucks of a Marine convoy were already loading the advance party of the Sea Bee Battalion—his battalion, his disdainful flock. . . . And later, the drinkin' padre, old Rubber Ball himself, hail fellow, the good guy among his peers would step down to the commander's jeep

and another round of drinks at this damn rest camp wherever-it-was *Saint Louis*.

But the Solomon Islands were behind. Father Ball looked down at his slight fingers clutching white the ship's rail and expelled his breath with a grating sigh. The quonset hut was behind, the screened mess ("officers only"), the beer (out beyond the screening in the Tulagi twilight bent and dejected figures of elderly men clanked messgear in the long lines—some looked in and saw him, and saw the skipper, and the tables, and the icebox), and now the rest camp in this New Caledonian security. The advance party was loaded, angular figures of men joyous on the planked seats lining the sides of the six-bys—laughing, and boisterous joking. . . . Then one looked up at him and ceased his good humor, or so the priest thought.

Father Ball turned away from the rail, and padded his awkward knock-kneed waddle toward his cabin in officers' country.

It was dark as the jeep followed the main convoy through the town, but the priest in his seat behind the commander and beside his exec shivered at the piercing whiteness of headlights. Light for the first time at night for six months. Light that cut across the paving as the trucks mounted to the hills and thrust still

glowing houses into relief. They were silent as the hushed witness of conventional life took shape in the headlights, as the faint musk of lavender or stranger scents hung in the cooling air. Like the little towns in the late springs at home. Like, thought Father Ball, the road to my first curacy. The same loneliness and uncertainty and weakness that filled him then assailed him again, and he said:

"Well, Skipper, civilization at last, eh?"

"Right-o, Padre. Here's where you fill out again. They say," the Commander turned around with a grin, "they say that the god-damnedest officers' club in the Pacific is right here at the Hotel du Pacifique . . ."

"Lead me to it," the exec yipped his shrill delight.

Father Ball nodded absently.

It was a strange returning, he thought. Six months baked in green, or scraping sodden cots in total blackness: every sound familiar, weighted and understood. Now to learn to hear again the isolated, half-recalled, and fearless sounds of a community; to see after green-blindness the wealth of a spectrum—freed of the tyranny of green. Freed of all familiars, except the self, he thought. The little-fat-man-priest-in-his-spare-time, lover of Number One. An abrupt curve, arrowing the headlights out across angular naeouli trees, sliding along wire mesh fencing and plowing shadows across the tilled earth, threw him against the exec.

"Hold it, Rubber!" The priest

shrank at the nickname. He was silent.

"But are the French lasses friendly?" Ball could not see his commanding officer's teeth—but they would be unveiled fully in the dusk, caught in a moment by the clean light approaching upgrade.

"Now, here, here," he bantered, "remember your chaplain . . ." A bark of laughter, and the little priest nodded his head with a weak smile in the darkness. It was so easy.

But to begin again maybe here. Or fifteen minutes ago with the convoy and the singing men blasting through the gate of the long, deserted wharf—twisting the streets of the town fragrant with memories aching to burn away the months just past, swinging the twisted palms and the relaxed streets, and swinging the jeep like the tail of a long dog behind. To begin again with that beginning—but just to find the moment of decision, and cast away the parasite of body that when and God knows how became the host and rode the spirit out to something infinitely small and lost. Or to begin now?

"What the hell did you say, Padre?"

"I said the men sound happy . . ." Father Ball clenched his hands on his lap and closed his ears to a reply.

And all the hushed ride through the Noumean night journeyed the priest further into the past—beyond all memories of his failure as a chaplain, along the wide roads above the lights that emphasized the pall of valleys below, back to old illusions. But then they were at Camp Saint Louis, and while the Skipper tugged at a case of luke-warm beer and the

priest watched him with desire and chagrin, the Marine Captain who was Camp Commander bobbed into the tent and handed him the notice for his morning Masses at Camp Bailey.

"And where is Camp Bailey, eh?" Ball slipped the notice into his sagging khaki shirt and grabbed eagerly for the tin of beer.

"Across the way, Chaplain. And watch yourself," the Marine Officer grinned in the candlelight, "it's a Raider camp and one of the outfits is heading North soon; they need a Catholic chaplain . . ."

"Not for me; not for me," he lifted the can to his lips with a jerky movement and drank avidly, "I wouldn't go back there for the Pope himself."

II.

The bell was a pattern in his consciousness long before he awakened. Back and forth, the notes caught pure like water in a silver pool, stirring a dream with echoes of the seminary lawn created anew each morning for the cassocked boys, the ripples widening to drag within the dream the room where once he, a little boy, still sleeps and late for Mass. . . . But he awakened to the instant morning; outside the tent the paper-peeling bark of a naeouli, and the belling across the startled valley. The priest hunched to his feet, clattering a beer can across the tent flooring. No movement in the two remaining bunks. The first night's party had done its work. His wristwatch blurred to the hour, and he remembered his Mass at the Raider camp.

But when he had dressed and trimmed his beard, and—clearing the still sleeping camp—returned the disinterested greeting of a sentry, the bell distracting from some memory down the valley drew him, shuffling and vulnerable, down a trail between kauri.

There was a moment of hesitation at a wide dirt road, untravelled in the early morning; if there were signs, he did not see them—the bells clipped echoes from hills he could not see beyond the thickened growths of palm and kauri and wry naeouli; and so he took the wrong trail, continuing on the road deeper into the trees down the valley.

Then they ceased their calling and he paused, suddenly breathless. Up and down the trail was the silent morning, and the light held in the moisture of fronds. When he moved again, bewildered, he heard his footsteps and was uneasy. Lifting his feet carefully, he tugged at the cross on his collar and searched through the texture of fronds settled overhead for the sky—seeking movement of clouds, of birds.

And when the bells pealed forth again—jarring, it seemed, from the trees into which he had been staring, he bit his lip and quickened his steps.

The mission was there suddenly, unexpectedly at the turn of the trail: a whitewashed mass on a rise, its spire directing his eyes to the lavender and green mountains against which it ordered its whiteness. Then he knew he had been climbing, for, looking off to his left, along the fringe of woodland stretched out-

buildings latticed like cloisters and irregular patches of farmland sloping to a blue marsh.

III.

The two nuns were so still he had not noticed them. They were up to his right, by a tumbling stone wall below the church level, their habits the dusty grey of stone. They stood in repose, facing him.

He raised his hand and smiled, and one nodded her head so slightly he hesitated to advance. The stones, tumbled to their feet, deepened their silence to the silence of statues in the grottoes of the seminary where the bells tolled. Here now, the bells were silent, he realized. The sky a settled blue that backed the spire; the spire and the mission church arching beyond the stone wall; the grey wall that backed the grey nuns—and only he stood alone and out of it.

"Sister," he hesitated again—addressing the nun who had nodded to him, "Sister, I'm a Catholic priest, and I'm afraid I'm lost . . ."

He watched the nun incline toward her companion, whisper, and then move with robes dissolving into morning toward him down the grade. Her companion remained still, hands folded before her in her long grey sleeves.

The nun confronting him, her eyes fixed with respect on the ground at his feet—he saw the bone structure sharpened beneath the yellow skin and thought of the decaying year and a fragile leaf come to rest.

"I speak English, Father," she said—and in her voice he heard the disturbing calm of the bells, "this

is the mission of Saint Louis."

"Then I have taken the wrong road. The Marine camp—the raider camp—Bailey—where is it, Sister?"

Behind her the other nun took a faltering step forward.

"I am sorry, I do not know, Father. I have just arrived myself." The grey robe fell back from her arm, and Father Ball looked quickly away from the limb, severed at the wrist. "The Curé up there, he will tell you . . ."

The church again on the rise. He hesitated; to step beyond her was to enter the intolerable regularity of the circle of sky, mountain, church, and wall.

"Father," her voice was timid. "You have just come back?"

"Yes."

"The Solomon Islands? It was most difficult there, was it not?"

But to stay was to be involved in *this*. Down the fragile and delicately ordered fields, tilled in grey-green shimmering levels to the marsh, he saw himself walking, in his mind's eye, with honor. The degrading personal recollections of the islands were as unreal as the islands themselves, here where the nun's calm voice was thunder stirring memories.

"Yes, Sister," who in this timeless place could contradict? "at times, it was very difficult." (Out in the Tulagi twilight, again and again the men averted their eyes from the priest in the screened enclosure—yes, *difficult*.)

With a quick, shy glance at her face in its wasted repose, he gestured farewell and entered the citadel of wall and church and hill. She moved soundlessly aside and stepped

to the wall, extending the ruined arm to her companion.

The church smelled of springs of damp, and termites had eaten at carved statues in the indefinite shadow. Father Ball genuflected toward the vague repository, and withdrew. The nuns no longer stood by the stone wall, the valley and the marsh drew him, and as he followed the stone wall downward he felt relief from that disturbing solitude.

If, he said, I say my Mass this morning, and resolve—because I've done no wrong: loneliness is not a sin, and if I was occasionally comfortable, I needed it more than most men, who . . . His voice fell suddenly upon his own ears, and he halted and looked around at the fields where nobody moved. He was at the marsh, and as he searched upwards again at the white spire, he saw the grey nuns, immobile, watching him.

"Anyhow," he spoke softly across the mile of intervening hill to them, "with God's help I will not go back there, I'm lost if I go back there, and here I start again . . ."

As though they heard him, the grey forms pirouetted silently and drifted in their smallness toward the chapel, entered, and yielded deeper silence to him.

IV.

"Y'know, Skipper," he told the commanding officer that evening as they drove toward the Hotel du Pacifique, "I never did find the Raider camp—wandered around for three hours on the edge of that marsh, finally got a hop back to camp—and then, eh, discovered that Camp

Bailey was right across the road from us."

"Padre, Padre—you just didn't want to go to the trouble of saying that Mass."

Lanterns bobbed in the slight breeze sweeping in across Ile Nou and the harbour swaying its lighted shipping in the evening tide. Lanterns in the iron-railed enclosure of the officers' club from which female voices cut across the heavy chatter and the roll of the slot machines . . . and female voices seized the senses beyond the odor of stale beer . . . and the SP's on patrol beside the gate and the morose enlisted drivers in the jeeps were unnoticed in the female voices that usurped the night beneath the lanterns . . .

"God, women!" said the exec, and Father Ball trailed them into the portico beneath the lanterns.

"And female voices," the skipper was saying, "are enough to make you forget your sacred office, Padre." At which Father Ball smiled mechanically and wedged his way to the bar.

"Well, here we start *all o-ver a--gain*, hey?" And the exec's singing and loud releasing laughter rang to the exclusion of all else in the little priest's mind. His hand over the damp bar halted halfway to a glass and closed in an ineffectual fist. He bowed his head . . . and the grey forms pirouetted silently and drifted in their smallness toward . . .

"Yo, Padre!"

The lights burst in the shattering noise and the Skipper's teeth were white in the grin that promised acceptance and enervated dissent.

"Are you just back from the islands, Chaplain?"

The shot was comfortably down, and he was warm and secure before he turned to reply. This was a type he had seen on the posters in Chaplain's School—a pursed sensitive mouth, and a thin face poised with considerate expectation. A lone silver bar was very straight, impeccably balancing the cross.

"Yes, Chaplain," he said. "I'm Father Ball, with the 501st Sea Bees."

"You came in yesterday then. I'm Slade. Presbyterian chaplain at the Raider camp across from Saint Louis . . ."

"I got lost hunting your camp yesterday." Ball waved two whiskey-straight from the corporal behind the bar.

"I know," Slade laughed deferentially. "Say, let's sit down and talk a while. I haven't been up yet, you know, and I'd like to hear . . ."

The priest balanced his drink and led his youthful confrere through the thick smoke and the boisterous crowd, out past the slot machines to the lanterned patio and an empty table under the palms.

"How did you know?"

"What? Oh, that you were lost? I came over after you—I'm the only chaplain now at Bailey—and I wanted to be sure you got there for the Catholic men. I figured you took the wrong turning—to the Mission, and the sisters put me straight."

"The sisters?"

"Yes, I must have come up just behind you. One is blind, you know—but the other said you had wandered down to the marsh, and that

you were quiet and seemed ill. She was quite concerned."

"That was good of her, eh? But why should she think I was ill?"

The young man shrugged in his narrow shoulders, and tilted his head sympathetically: "But you do look all in, you know. It must have been pretty tough up there . . ."

Ball blinked at him and dropped his eyes quickly to his drink. The lanterns danced their wan light across his soft fingers cupping the glass; he moved his chunky arm into that more certain light.

"They're wonderful, those nuns." Slade's voice rose enthusiastically.

"They were prisoners of the Japs on Bougainville, you know—evacuated by an American sub just a few weeks ago—and they want desperately to go back, even the blind one . . ."

The priest shrank within himself and was silent.

"The one lost her arm up there—she spoke great admiration for you—you must have suffered, she said." Slade reached over and touched Ball's arm, "So I invited them over to your Masses—every morning. To hear you preach on Sunday . . ."

"Every day! But they can't do that!"

"Ah, but they can, Father. You see, they're just back here to rest too, and they have quite a lot of freedom—like yourself."

"But you say they want to go back," Father Ball ran his hand nervously through his hair. "It'll be worse—much worse for everyone, the second time. It is bad enough the first . . . A man—anyone—goes to pieces. Why, you can lose your soul . . ."

Slade patted his hand again, "I know, I know, Father. The nun said it must have been terrible for you . . ."

"No, no—I don't mean . . . Oh but you don't understand . . ."

Over the clipped sound of glasses there was a scuffling at the gate, and when Ball turned back to Slade the man's eyes, soft and thoughtful, were fixed on him.

"Why didn't you come with us, Father? You're right, I don't understand—but you, with your experience—and we need a senior chaplain, and a Catholic . . ."

Ball struggled to his feet. "Not for the Pope himself," he said. "I need a drink."

And before the shocked eyes of the younger man, he pushed his chair clumsily aside and waddled toward the bar.

V.

Though the bells were a discordant clang splitting with a knife of ice a vast pocket of pain, he did not waken. The dream recurred endlessly, and he watched himself groping and hopeless to pull his figure away from before the blurred grey daubs behind which the fire flared. Separated from them by the Host quivering in his hand he saw their broken faces bow away in a blur, while mumbled to a trapped conclusion in their humility his Mass disintegrated to a bitter taste of the night in his mouth.

See, Father, we come every day, at the chapel door that shifted and dissolved the nuns' faces had a terrible brightness of what lost innocence? *Chaplain Slade is sending*

the jeep . . .

The habit fell from her arm across the eyes of the falling face.

The bells silenced. He awakened. At first he could see nothing.

Grotesque through the opened tent flap the waiting trees were still. A guide line flapped emptily its inverted question, noose-like across the slit entrance. At the foot of his cot the bulk of his holster suggested certainty.

The bells dissected his thought. He sank back, horrified.

VI.

On the third day, when the profanely startled exec jerked aside the tent flap with Ball's change-of-station orders in his hand, he found the priest on his knees beside his footlocker, carefully stowing tins of beer on the tray.

Under his bunk, T-shirts, dungarees, and shorts lay discarded.

"By God, Rubber," he shook the papers at Ball. "These are to the Raider Regiment! Did you ask for this?"

The chaplain nodded, and avoided his eyes.

"Well, I'll be damned . . ."

"No," Father Ball said, "no, you won't. But I will."

Hidden, down the valley the bells chimed *Angelus*, and a beer can clattered from the priest's fumbling hand.

He stood with difficulty, and padded to the entrance to the tent, the indecisive mouth trembling, the little hands groping toward the dull canvas that stretched without ambiguity in the sun.