

On the Rainy River
(excerpted from *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien)

This is one story I've never told before. Not to anyone. Not to my parents, not to my brother or sister, not even to my wife. To go into it, I've always thought, would only cause embarrassment for all of us, a sudden need to be elsewhere, which is the natural response to a confession. Even now, I'll admit, the story makes me squirm. For more than twenty years I've had to live with it, feeling the shame, trying to push it away, and so by this act of remembrance, by putting the facts down on paper, I'm hoping to relieve at least some of the pressure on my dreams. Still, it's a hard story to tell. All of us, I suppose, like to believe that in a moral emergency we will behave like the heroes of our youth, bravely and forthrightly, without thought of personal loss or discredit. Certainly that was my conviction back in the summer of 1968. Tim O'Brien: a secret hero. The Lone Ranger.

...In June of 1968, a month after graduating from Macalester College, I was drafted to fight a war I hated. I was twenty-one years old. Young, yes, and politically naïve, but even so the American war in Vietnam seemed to me wrong. Certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons. I saw no unity of purpose, no consensus on matters of philosophy or history or law. The very facts were shrouded in uncertainty: Was it a civil war? A war of national liberation or simple aggression? Who started it, and when and why?

...The draft notice arrived on June 17, 1968. It was a humid afternoon, I remember, cloudy and very quiet, and I'd just come in from a round of golf...I remember the rage in my stomach. Later it burned down to a smoldering self-pity, then to numbness. At dinner that night my father asked me what my plans were.

"Nothing," I said. "Wait."

...I spent the summer of 1968 working in an Armour meatpacking plant in my hometown of Worthington, Minnesota. The plant specialized in pork products, and for eight hours a day I stood on a quarter-mile assembly line – more properly, a disassembly line- removing blood clots from the necks of dead pigs. My job title, I believe, was Declotter...At night I'd go home smelling of pig. It wouldn't go away. Even after a hot bath, scrubbing hard, the stink was always there – like old bacon, or sausage, a dense greasy pig-stink soaked deep into my skin and hair. Among other things, I remember, it was tough getting dates that summer. I felt isolated; I spent a lot of time alone. And there was also that draft notice tucked away in my wallet.

In the evenings I'd sometimes borrow my father's car and drive aimlessly around town, feeling sorry for myself, thinking about the war and the pig factory and how my life seemed to be collapsing toward slaughter. I felt paralyzed. All around me the options seemed to be narrowing, as if I were hurtling down a huge black funnel, the whole world squeezing in tight. There was no happy way out. The government had ended most graduate school deferments...my health was solid...I could not claim to be opposed to war as a matter of general principle...The problem, though, was that a draft board did not let you choose your war.

Beyond all this, or at the very center, was the raw fact of terror. I did not want to die. Not ever. But certainly not then, not there, not in a wrong war. Driving up Main Street, past the courthouse and the Ben Franklin store, I sometimes felt the fear spreading inside me like weeds. I imagined myself dead. I imagined myself doing things I could not do – charging an enemy position, taking aim at another human being.

At some point in mid-July I began thinking seriously about Canada. The border lay a few hundred miles north, an eight-hour drive. Both my conscience and my instincts were telling me to make a break for it, just take off and run like hell and never stop. In the beginning the idea seemed purely abstract, the

word Canada printing itself out in my head, but after a time I could see particular shapes and images, the sorry details of my own future – a hotel room in Winnipeg, a battered old suitcase, my father’s eyes as I tried to explain myself over the telephone. I could almost hear his voice, and my mother’s. Run, I’d think. Then I’d think, Impossible. Then a second later I’d think, *Run*.

It was a kind of schizophrenia. A moral split. I couldn’t make up my mind. I feared the war, yes, but I also feared exile. I was afraid of walking away from my own life, my friends and my family, my whole history, everything that mattered to me. I feared losing the respect of my parents. I feared the law.

...Most of this I’ve told before, or at least hinted at, but what I have never told is the full truth. How I cracked. How at work one morning, standing on the pig line, I felt something break open in my chest. I don’t know what it was. I’ll never know. But it was real, I know that much, it was a physical rupture – a cracking-leaking-popping feeling. I remember dropping my water gun. Quickly, almost without thought, I took off my apron and walked out of the plant and drove home. It was midmorning, I remember, and the house was empty. Down in my chest there was still that leaking sensation, something very warm and precious spilling out, and I was covered with blood and hog-stink, and for a long while I just concentrated on holding myself together. I remember taking a hot shower. I remember packing a suitcase and carrying it out to the kitchen, standing very still for a few minutes, looking carefully at the familiar objects all around me...My house, I thought. My life. I’m not sure how long I stood there, but later I scribbled out a short note to my parents.

What it said, exactly, I don’t recall now. Something vague. *Taking off, will call, love Tim.*

(The essay goes on from here, describing Tim’s drive up north to Rainy River and to the Tip Top Lodge, a old fishing resort that’s in bad condition. The only person there is the owner, a man named Elroy Berdahl, an eighty-one year old “skinny and shrunken and mainly bald.” Elroy seems to understand that Tim is fighting a battle with himself. He and Tim fall into a pattern of playing Scrabble, reading by the fire, taking long hikes, and working together around the resort – all in near silence. Elroy doesn’t ask questions of Tim, something Tim really appreciates.)

“One thing for certain, he knew I was in desperate trouble. And he knew I couldn’t talk about it. The wrong word – or even the right word- and I would’ve disappeared. I was wired and jittery. My skin felt too tight...At night I’d toss around in bed, half awake, half dreaming, imagining how I’d sneak down to the beach and quietly push one of the old man’s boats out into the river and start paddling my way toward Canada. There were times when I thought I’d gone off the psychic edge. I couldn’t tell up from down. I was just falling, and late in the night I’d lie there watching weird pictures spin through my head. Getting chased by the Border Patrol – helicopters and searchlights and barking dogs...Twenty-one years old, an ordinary kid with all the ordinary dreams and ambitions, and all I wanted was to live the life I was born to – a mainstream life – I loved baseball and hamburgers and cherry Cokes – and now I was off on the margins of exile, leaving my country forever, and it seemed so impossible and terrible and sad.”

(Six days go by. On his last full day at Rainy River, Tim and Elroy go fishing. While they’re out in the boat, Tim tries to make himself jump into the water and swim to the Canadian shore. He can’t do it.)

“I gripped the edge of the boat and leaned forward and thought, *Now*. I did try. It just wasn’t possible.

All those eyes on me – the town, the whole universe – and I couldn’t risk the embarrassment. It was as if there were an audience to my life...and in my head I could hear people screaming at me. Traitor! They yelled. Turncoat! Pussy! I felt myself blush. I couldn’t tolerate it. I couldn’t endure the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule. Even in my imagination, the shore just twenty yards away, I couldn’t make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that’s all it was.

...And right then I submitted.

I would go to the war – I would kill and maybe die – because I was embarrassed not to.

That was the sad thing. And so I sat in the bow of the boat and cried.

It was loud now. Loud, hard crying.

Elroy Berdahl remained quiet. He kept fishing. He worked his line with the tips of his fingers, patiently, squinting out at his red and white bobber on the Rainy River. His eyes were flat and impassive. He didn't speak. He was simply there, like the river and the late-summer sun. And yet by his presence, his mute watchfulness, he made it real. He was the true audience. He was a witness, like God, or like the gods, who look on in absolute silence as we live our lives, as we make our choices or fail to make them.

Ain't biting," he said.

Then after a time the old man pulled in his line and turned the boat back toward Minnesota.

(Tim leaves the next day. In the last few sentences he describes his trip home.)

...The day was cloudy. I passed through towns with familiar names, through the pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam, where I was a soldier, and then home again. I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war."

Reading Question:

In your opinion, did the main character make the correct choice in deciding whether or not to comply with the draft? Please cite 2-3 pieces of evidence from the story to support your point of view.