



11-15-2013

## May Day

Dennis Vannatta

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

---

### Recommended Citation

Vannatta, Dennis (2013) "May Day," *Westview*: Vol. 30 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol30/iss1/7>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

# May Day

Dennis Vannatta

We descended on Branson like two wild men from the hills, unshaven, unwashed, wearing the clothes we'd slept in, talking too loud and laughing too much, on the lookout for loose women and willing to fight for them. It was all an act, of course, and fooled no one, least of all ourselves. Curtis is from Milwaukee originally and, despite living in the Ozarks for close to forty years now, still speaks with that Wisconsin cheese-eater accent. I've been living in Little Rock nearly that long. Once, I think, Little Rock was probably an elegant little city hugging the hills above the Arkansas River, but now it's just another place where too many people live and everyone drives either a big pickup without a scratch on it or an SUV with a "Baby on Board" sign in the window. We meet once a year at Curtis's place in the Ozarks to raise hell and reminisce. We've been calling it our "*Brokeback Mountain* weekend" ever since that movie came out, but that's just another of our jokes. No, those hooks go deeper than gay love: we were in the war together.

I'm talking about Vietnam. There was a time when, if you mentioned "the war," everybody just automatically knew you were talking about Vietnam unless you were an old fart, and then you might be talking about World War II or Korea. But those days are long gone, and now I guess Curtis and I are a couple of those old farts, and the country has gone on to other wars. I don't even recognize the uniforms any more.

But enough about that. I mean it. Enough.

I'd taken off work at noon Thursday and made it to his place by dinner time. Curtis cooked up some burgers and fried potatoes for us, and then we drank beer and talked about the good ol' days that never were until we fell asleep where we sat, me in the La-Z-Boy and Curtis on the floor, his back up against the couch; and we woke up the next morning skuzzy and hung over, had a little hair of the dog, and talked some more about the war. At some point, the sun went down, Curtis said, "I'm so ho'ny, I'm so ho'ny," and we headed into Branson to raise some old-codger hell.

We ended up in Grumpy's Tavern in downtown Branson. We didn't have any trouble finding a table even though it was a Friday night with enough tourists in town to make the state of Missouri list to the southwest. But they mostly stay over on 76, the Music Highway, and leave downtown to the locals.

I ordered a Diet Coke because I wasn't up to another beer just yet, and Curtis ordered a Bud long neck.

"Make sure it's a long neck."

I rolled my eyes. His long-neck beer is another of our rituals. We have our rituals, our roles, and we memorized the script long ago. He'll hold the beer with his bad hand and look around the room until he catches someone glancing his way by accident, and then he'll scowl and say, "What are you looking at?" It's

like the scene in *Lonely Are the Brave* when Kirk Douglas has to fight the one-armed man who throws long-neck beer bottles. Douglas chokes the man with his empty shirt-sleeve. In our version, Curtis plays the one-armed man. All for a joke. I keep telling him that one of these years some redneck is going to take him up on it and stomp his ass, and Curtis always says, "Why do you think I sit next to the exit?" I think the last time I found it funny was about 1980, but that doesn't stop Curtis. Rituals are at their most powerful, after all, once they've lost any practical reason for being.

The bad right hand that Curtis insists on grasping the long-neck with is missing the pinky and ring fingers, blown off in Vietnam. I don't know exactly how it happened and never asked, although I always had the feeling Curtis would be more than happy to tell the tale. He sure as hell talks about everything else from Nam. But the first time I met him, I didn't ask for details, and he didn't volunteer any, so that's the way we left it.

We were both clerk typists in the big army supply depot at Cam Rahn Bay. We didn't have a damn thing in common. Curtis had barely made it through high school, while I'd had a few semesters of college and was three years older than him, from Oklahoma to his Wisconsin, and I'd been a clerk my whole tour in country while he was a combat infantryman until he lost his fingers someplace near Dalat. Anyone else would have taken his million-dollar wound back to the world, but Curtis stayed in, even fought the DOD bureaucracy to stay in. I still just shake my head. But we'd been drafted on the same date and had the same DEROS, May 1st, and somehow that coincidence trumped all the differences.

He lived in the headquarters company barracks but spent half his time at my hooch. I think it had less to do with me than with Annie, my Vietnamese hooch honey, a sweet sweet seventeen-year-old who cooked and cleaned and kept my horns well trimmed. I think he had a crush on her. I wasn't any better. Hell, I didn't know anything about women. I thought I was in love with her. I wanted to marry her and take her back home with me, and I told her so. Then one week to the day before I was supposed to rotate back to the world, she moved out on me and moved in with an FNG. Insert tearful scene here. Callow young American soldier begs world-weary Asian chick for explanation. "Can't eat promise," was all she said. Like she read it off a fortune cookie. Well, it was a lesson learned: what you can expect from a woman. I never forgot it, I can tell you that.

Anyway, that whore's betrayal gave me one more good reason to be glad to get out of Nam, but I think the only reason Curtis didn't sign up for another tour was that I threatened to cut off his other fingers if he did and promised we'd still be buddies, still see each other regularly once we got out of the army.

We both had six months left to serve after getting back to the States. Curtis did his at Fort Campbell, while I got stuck at Fort Sill, dregs of the universe, even if it is in Oklahoma. We talked on the phone at least once a week, Curtis always reminding me of my promise to see him after we got out, "Or I'll have my ass back in Nam faster than you can bat your baby blues."

And close to forty years later, here we were, Grumpy's Tavern, Branson, Missouri, Friday night, April 30, May Day eve, a day you'd think would be a cause for celebration.

But for Curtis? I don't know. I just don't know.

Turns out he never could catch anybody's eye when he had his claw curled around the neck of his beer bottle. So he grunted a sort of general, "What are you staring at?" as he waved the bottle around, and he still didn't get a bite. Come on. The guy's in his late fifties. You can try something like that when you're in your twenties or thirties, maybe, but fifties? It's a joke, all right, but not the kind you laugh at. Besides, those weren't even Vietnam vets in *Lonely Are the Brave*.

Since I'm going down that empty-ritual road, might as well add another stop on the line: the hunting wild women thing. I've had more women in my life than I care to think about—hell, about half of them I've been married to—and I'm usually looking for a break from them on my weekend in Branson, so it's always Curtis we're trying to "hook up" with someone, as they say now. "We need to find you a woman, Curtis," I'll say, and he'll say, "Damn straight!" And after enough beer, we'll head out to attempt that very thing.

We've never had any luck. For the longest time, I thought I was the Jonah, but Curtis had no tales to tell about scoring when I wasn't there, so apparently it wasn't just me. I even went through a period of half-wondering if that *Brokeback Mountain* thing wasn't too far off after all, but I don't think so. Curtis never put any moves on me, anyway. No, I think the explanation is simpler: Curtis is just too damn shy. He was just a kid out of high school when he got drafted, and he'd never had any experience in the romance line except for worshipping from afar like boys do until they find out that women don't fly with the angels but are lying, conniving sacks of guts just like men only with a few variations on the basic equipment. Trust me on that one. The only girl Curtis ever talked about was this girl Carol something who moved in across the street from him when he was a junior in high school. Luckiest thing that ever happened to him, he told me. He liked to peek through the curtains of his living room at her as she practiced baton-twirling on her front lawn. Did he ever talk to her? Hell, no. He had a photograph of her, though, that he kept in his wallet and showed to me once when we were even drunker than usual. Yeah, it's coming back to me. We were up on the roof of the headquarters company barracks sitting on lawn chairs and pounding that Bud, and off in the distance you could see the flash of artillery and mortar fire and hear the soft, almost-pleasant "whomp whomp." It was the closest I ever got to combat. Anyway, that's when he hauled out the photo. He flicked his cigarette lighter so I could see better, but still it wasn't very clear. The photo was small, and the girl was tiny in the distance, in shorts and holding something shiny in her hand that I finally realized was a baton. There was some distortion or glare, too, not from the cigarette lighter but right in the photograph, and then it came to me: He'd taken the picture from his living room, through the front window. What a sad SOB.

Anyway, as far as I know, that was Curtis's sum total experience with women before he got drafted, and the army didn't help him any. In the army, the only women you have a shot at are whores and old lady thumb and her four daughters, and Curtis never went to any whores. Then he processed out at Fort Campbell, had a nervous breakdown before he got out of Kentucky, and spent several months in a V.A. hospital. What happened? I don't know, but he hadn't seemed all that nervous in Nam. I drove up to Kentucky twice to visit him at

the V.A. hospital, and I told the doc that he'd been all right in Nam and asked if there was any possibility that he could get back over there. But they nixed it. Curtis told me he'd be OK if he could come live with me, but I'm not as stupid as I look and told him I'd be happy to let him, but my fiancée wouldn't like it quite so much. Finally, they discharged him from the hospital on permanent disability, and he moved to a cabin in the Missouri Ozarks. Why there? Well, look at a map. It's one state up from Arkansas. As close to me as he dare get, I guess. He might have thought he needed me, but I knew what he really needed: to get laid.

There were four women in Grumpy's besides the waitresses, two at a table across the tavern from us, one sitting at the bar by herself, and a blond in her mid-twenties built like a brick pagoda and sitting at a table with three guys. So which one does Curtis choose as the lucky recipient of his affections? Of course, the young blond.

Curtis couldn't get over how hot she was. He was drooling in his beer. "Look at that! I'm sorry I didn't brush my teeth and change my socks."

"Yeah, you've got a real good chance with that one there."

"You never know. She may just be on the lookout for a man with experience."

"Well, why don't you go out and find one, and we'll see."

"She'll find everything she needs inside my drawers."

"Too bad you didn't change those while you were at it."

Etc.

That's the way these things went, with Curtis always on the verge of jumping some woman's bones but inevitably picking one he had no chance with, all just an excuse for us to crack back on one another, and I have to admit that in the right mood and with the right amount of beer, it can get pretty funny. I wasn't in that mood. I mean, come on. I'm sixty years old. Sixty. There was a woman back in Little Rock that I'd been seeing for awhile, and things were looking sweet. When I mentioned driving up to Branson for a weekend, she said, "Oh, good!" because she thought it was going to be me and her. When I explained the situation, she said she understood, she admired my loyalty to an old friend, blah-blah-blah. With every woman, you go through a phase early in the relationship, where things are fine, life is good, until finally it all goes to hell. We were in the good phase, but who knows what it would be when I got back from babysitting arrested-development Curtis?

Sometimes you just get tired.

Maybe Curtis did too and decided to jazz things up a bit, because his attentions to Blondie went beyond the talking and gawking stage. He had to turn halfway around in his chair to look at her, which he did, then caught her eye and winked. She just rolled her eyes and looked away. Then, when she looked back, Curtis waved at her, wagging the fingers on his five-finger hand.

I was about to tell him to cut it out before he made an even bigger fool out of himself when one of the men at the table—the biggest one, of course, and all three were bigger, stronger, younger, and looked a hell of a lot tougher than Curtis and me—said, "You got a problem over there, Pop?"

"No problem that this sweet young thang can't cure," Curtis said.

That's when I stood up and headed over to the juke box like I wanted to pick out some music to get your ass kicked by, then took a hard right and high-tailed

it out the door.

Out in the parking lot, I was standing by my car trying to figure out whether, if I dialed 911 on my cell phone, I get a Branson or a Little Rock operator. Suddenly, from around the side of the tavern here, comes Curtis moving as fast as he's able to in his condition. I guess his exit strategy came in handy for once.

"Start the car, jackass!" he hollered. I jumped in and started the car.

He collapsed on the front seat, panting and laughing. Then, as I gunned it out of there, he said, "Don't get off the boat! Don't get off the boat! Don't ever get off the boat!"



Illustration by SWOSU Design Studio

A line from *Apocalypse Now*, of course. The chef gets off the boat to hunt up some ingredients for a gourmet meal and runs head on into a tiger. "Don't get off the boat! Don't ever get off the boat!"

By this point in our lives, Vietnam popular culture is more vivid to us than the memory of Vietnam itself—or at least that's so for me. Curtis owns every movie made about Vietnam, every novel, every history, every memoir. Seems like it, anyway. There'll always be a movie on in the background while we're drinking beer. His purchase this time is *Hearts of Darkness*, not really about Nam but about Coppola's making of *Apocalypse Now*. It's close enough to a Nam movie, though, to earn a place in Curtis's collection. On each of my visits, we'll watch a new one or two and a couple of the old standbys. We can't carry on a conversation of more than four sentences without movie dialogue showing up. See a nice-looking girl? "Me so ho'ny, me so ho'ny." Walk into an especially seedy bar? "I got a bad feeling about this one." And of course, appropriate for any occasion, "Charley don't surf!"

Curtis's cabin is a mini-museum of Vietnamiana, and he's an equal-opportunity collector. There's a Viet Cong flag on one wall of his bedroom and an American flag on the other. There's an M-16 hanging beside an AK -47 (purchased online, Curtis confessed). There's a pair of army jungle boots and a pair of rubber thongs that Curtis swears were taken off a dead dink, but they look like they could have been bought at Wal-Mart. The possibility that he bought them at Wal-Mart disturbs me more than the possibility that he took them off some poor slope he'd just wasted, because then he really would be a creepy piece of work. Which, let's face it, he is.

I mean, I had my Vietnam souvenirs, too, until one day I got back home from a visit with Curtis and found a big pile of ashes on my driveway. Turns out that was all that was left of my Vietnam souvenirs, my clothes, my books, my

personal papers, and my LPs. I guess Phyllis (wife number two) didn't want me to leave that particular weekend. Or maybe it was something else. I honestly don't remember. It'd take an Einstein to remember each and every one of our fights. I've hooked up with some crazy women in my life, but Phyllis was the only one who outright scared me. The divot in my right cheekbone is thanks to her. It happened when I was down under my car on a creeper, this was during that spell when I was trying to prove my manhood by changing my own oil, and all of a sudden, someone grabs me by the ankles and yanks me halfway across the driveway. Well, it was Phyllis with a ball-peen hammer, with which she proceeded to go upside my head. If it hadn't been for two garbage men who happened to be out front dumping trash running over to pull her off me, I'd be buried in some veterans' cemetery right now. A couple of times when Curtis would get in a conversation about Nam with some stranger and the subject would turn to his lost fingers, I'd say, "Hey, man, take a look at my face. I came closer to death in the battle of West Markham Street than this cowboy ever did in Tuyen Duc Province." I thought it was a pretty funny line, but Curtis didn't seem to appreciate the humor, so now I let him wave his disgusting hand and get all the glory.

It's all for Curtis. I don't get any pleasure out of it any more. How can a man go on building a whole life out of 365 days in a pesthole of a country that'd make Arkansas look like the pinnacle of civilization? I tell you, I get tired.

I think Curtis sensed it, too, because when I didn't laugh at his "Don't get off the boat" bit, he gave me a look and then said, "OK, Jerry, what's frosting your balls for you? You've been one cold son of a bitch the whole weekend."

"It hasn't been a whole weekend yet. I just got here yesterday."

"Hey, Jackass, you want to get technical on me, you should have gone to OCS."

Jesus Christ, could he not get one single sentence out without some army crap in it? But it was easier to lie than to fight, so I just told him that I couldn't seem to shake that hangover, and a sixty-year-old with a hangover isn't much fun to be around, and so on. I didn't know if he bought it, I didn't much care, but at least he dropped it. When we got back to the cabin, I said I was too damn tired for any more beer, went into the bedroom, flopped down, and turned out the light. I was tired, beat in every way, and my head did hurt. I lay there hoping that the bed wouldn't start spinning, and I was just about to go to sleep when I heard Jim Morrison singing, "This is the end..."

The little cheese-eater was watching *Apocalypse Now*.

\*\*\*

When I woke up in the middle of the morning on Saturday, Curtis was gone. I shaved, showered, and tried to eat a little something. He still wasn't back, and I thought maybe he really was pissed at me and planned to stay away until I left. I was packing my AWOL bag when his Jeep pulled up outside.

I could tell right off he was in a good mood, like the cat that ate the canary. I didn't ask.

Let him come out with it in his own time.

"How's the head this morning, Jerry? Naw, save it. I know what your problem is, and it's not a hangover."

“OK, Carnac the Magnificent, tell me what it is.”

“Your problem is you’re bored. We’ve been doing the same stuff year after year. That’s on me. My fault. You need a change of pace, and I’m the man to supply it. Here she be.”

He pulled something out of his pocket. Tickets. He flicked them with his finger.

“Here you come all the way to the entertainment capital of the Western world, and you never see any of the sights. Well, tonight we change that. What you see here are two tickets to ... ta ta ta! ... the Baldknobbers!”

“The Baldknobbers.”

“Best show in town. Laughs. Songs. Dancing girls. And let me tell you, trying to get two tickets for a Saturday night in May at this late date, hell, you don’t know what I had to do to two guys down at the ticket office.”

“That was no hardship for you.”

Typical army-type anti-gay humor. As I said, there was a time when I had my doubts about Curtis, but I don’t think so. He’s so ho’ny for Vietnam, nothing else.

He was so pleased with himself that all I could do was smile. We spent the rest of the day watching some baseball and then *Hamburger Hill*, not my favorite, but I pretended to enjoy it for Curtis’s sake. And why not? The next day I’d be gone, and, at our age, there was a fair chance that by next May 1st, one of us would be dead. My money was on Curtis. If ever there was a candidate for swinging over the drain, it was him. Hell, he told me he thought about it a few years back when he noticed that all the PTSD wackos on TV dramas were from Iraq rather than Nam. I don’t think he was kidding.

The Baldknobbers, though. By the name, you’d expect to see nothing more than some hayseed jug band, but it was a sophisticated production with its own theater seating, probably at least a thousand, a gift shop, a big refreshment stand, and a cast of, if not thousands, a couple of dozen serving up huge doses of country music, patriotism, Jesus, and the corniest jokes this side of Minnie Pearl.

It’s the sort of thing you can sigh and roll your eyes through, or you can get in the spirit of things and enjoy the hee-haw heck out of it. I couldn’t imagine anyone sitting through it more than once, though, but from the frequent, “Watch this!” it was obvious that Curtis was a Baldknobbers vet.

An hour into it, they broke for an intermission. I’d had about enough cornpone by then and suggested we head out for a couple of tall cool ones. “Oh no, the best is yet to come,” Curtis said.

In fact, after intermission, I sensed some sort of mood change come over Curtis. He watched the performance with less delight, more distraction, even a slight irritation as if he were waiting for the important thing and anxious to have the preliminaries over with.

And then it came. The theater lights came up. The MC, in cowboy hat, boots, and sequined suit, addressed the audience. The Baldknobber family never let a performance pass by without taking the opportunity to honor our nation’s veterans. Then he called on those veterans to stand up and be recognized, branch by branch, army first. Curtis shot up out of his seat, then pulled me

up with him. After our nation's fighting men were honored according to their branch of service, the rhinestone cowboy did it all again, this time calling for us to stand up and be recognized according to the war in which we served, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq I and II. The hell with that. I refused to stand up this time. Curtis reached down for my arm to pull me up, but I yanked it away. So he stood there by himself, at attention—I swear to God, at attention—his face just glowing. Sweet merciful Jesus! This was the highpoint of his miserable life.

We didn't say a word to each other after the show as we waited in the traffic jam to get off the lot. It wasn't until I turned onto 76 that Curtis said, "So. Why wouldn't you stand up back there?"

There were a lot of things I could have said, but the truth is I wasn't entirely sure why I didn't stand up or why I felt so much anger. So I just said, "He meant for combat veterans to stand up, Curtis. Combat. That's you, not me."

This seemed to satisfy Curtis—or at least he didn't say anything. I wasn't ready to go back to the cabin and be alone with him, though, so I stopped at the first watering hole I saw—some lounge connected to a motel—and we went in, ordered beers, and looked around like everything we saw was interesting as all get-out. But really, we just didn't know what to say to each other.

What I did next, I don't know. I guess it was because I was still mad. (Not that I could have said exactly what it was I was mad at). Anyway, I noticed a woman sitting by herself at the bar: a lot of hair, a lot of jewelry, a lot of makeup, looking like she'd been around the block more than once, and on the first trip that the streets weren't paved. I left Curtis at the table and went over to her to turn on the charm, which I can do. They always catch on eventually, but I'm hell on women in the short haul. In about two minutes, I had her by the hand and was leading her over to our table.

"Trixie, this is my pal Curtis. Now I know you had to have seen him staring at you like a love-sick puppy ever since we walked into this place—come on, admit it; you know you did—but he's a little on the shy side, and I figured either I make the introductions or an hour from now Bashful Bob here would still be mooning around over you .... OK, then! I'll leave you two to get better acquainted."

Trixie sat down next to Curtis, and I went over and stood at the short side of the "L" bar where I could watch.

When I introduced them, Curtis nodded and mouthed something that could have been "Hi," but I didn't hear any sound coming out. I didn't see him saying a thing to her, either. She talked to him, though, and one time, she reached over and kind of ruffled his hair. The only thing I saw him do was hide his bad hand in his lap and fiddle with his beer with the other hand, raising it almost to his lips several times but never quite getting it all the way there as if he'd forgotten how to complete that particular process.

It didn't last long. I hadn't even finished half my beer when Trixie came over to me and said, "You shouldn't have done that to him. You really shouldn't have done that."

"Piss off."

"Bastard."

I walked over to the table but didn't sit down. I stood there, but Curtis wouldn't look up at me. Then I leaned down with my palms flat on the table

and said, “Would it have hurt you to talk to her? Huh? Would it have killed you, Curtis?”

He looked up at me then and said in a quiet, even voice, “You never heard a shot fired in anger. You might as well have been stationed in Iowa.”

“Well, you’re a virgin,” I shot back. “You’ve never had a woman, and you never will.” Then he did something with his face—I think he was trying to smile—but I couldn’t bear to watch.

I went out to my car and got in but didn’t start the engine. I was in no shape to drive just yet. Not from alcohol, though. Hell, I hadn’t finished one beer. But my hands were trembling, I was having trouble controlling my breathing, and I felt sort of dazed. Maybe it was how a soldier feels when he’s just survived a firefight. But then, I wouldn’t know.

I know I’ll never see Curtis again. Trixie had been right: I shouldn’t have done that to him. I wished I could take back what I said to him, too, but you can’t ever take anything back.

That goddamn war. I’m sixty years old, and Curtis damn near it, and out of all those years, we each spent one year in Nam. There was nothing for either of us you’d make a movie about. Curtis lost two fingers and I lost a dink whore. That’s all. Big deal. So why can’t we get past it? It’s like a swamp we walked into and then ... oh, yeah: Halberstam already wrote that book. Curtis has a copy, of course, but it was never one of his favorites.

They don’t have enough names on that black wall in D.C. The least they can do is make room for two more names.

