Farewell to Arms

Some people have it and some people don’t. Kenneth Lee has it, but you wouldn’t know by looking at him. His short frame sat stoically across from me, hands folded in his lap, biting the side of his cheek with impatience. It, of course, is courage; Hemingway called it grace under pressure.

“You like Hemingway?” I asked. A torn up copy of *A Farewell to Arms* rested between us on the stained wood table in the small kitchen of his Seattle apartment, its cover curved upward. “Looks like you’ve been reading it a lot.”

“Yeah,” he said, lifting his hand with a fist and gently punching down on the paper back novel. “Something to kill the time,” he laughed.

Ken knows about killing time.

“Reading books, writing letters, beating off; these are great ways to do it when you’re waiting for orders,” he told me with a grin. Having spent two tours in Iraq as an Army medic, I take his word for it.

“So you didn’t see a ton of action then,” I inquired, probably too boldly.

“Not a ton, but enough,” Ken laughed with a slight content for my question. He looked back down at the book and his chuckle trailed off as he pushed the bent cover flat, before looking back to me. The brown hue of his eyes made direct contact with mine; he was ready for my next question.

I’d met Ken once before this, only briefly, just before he was deployed when we were college freshmen. I was assured he was “one cool motherfucker.” I was also told that he could drink his weight in light beer, so when a short Korean guy stood in front of me I was a bit confused. I quickly learned Ken Lee was not what he appeared. He was the roommate of a good friend of mine at Central Washington University. I
Zach Hightower
nonfiction

went to visit and see a comedian, Jim Gaffigan, with the two. The fact that Ken was an Army medic came up only briefly between chain smoking and Bud Light. Gaffigan's jokes seem a blur now, clouded by the incredible story of Ken's adolescence. He divulged his motives for joining the Army two years later, when we were a sixer deep in the kitchen of his fourth floor dwelling.

Kenneth grew up in western Washington but his father, an inside salesman for Boeing, took frequent trips to New York for business. On one such trip in September of 2001, Ken accompanied his dad. They stayed at the Hotel Marriot in the city, thirty-two blocks from the Twin Towers, he was only fourteen. Everything was in order, it seemed a perfect getaway for the two, and Ken's father had promised to take him to the top of a tower on Thursday, September 13th. That promise wouldn't and couldn't be fulfilled, instead Ken was on lockdown in his room watching the chilling atrocities and tremendous heroics unfold on television; the constant smoke and ash from the towers blowing eerily by his third floor window the whole while.

"I picked up smoking that day," he croaked with a somber smile.

This day had started abruptly for Ken, as his father shook him from bed and assured him that everything would be alright.

This day had started abruptly for Ken, as his father shook him from bed and assured him everything would be alright. He explained the situation gingerly, telling Ken that bad guys got the planes.

"Like I was fuckin' five years old," Ken snapped angrily, his round flat face now low.

Ken was of Korean descent, and had joked about how he carried his emotions on his cheeks. They became a flushed
pink when he was really drunk or sad or uncomfortable. It was hard to tell if he was sad or uncomfortable, but with a story like that, I’d imagine it was both, for his chubby cheeks were now engulfed in a fleshy red. Sitting in a strange room for a week, thirty-two blocks from the greatest tragedy in modern American history; I think I’d have started smoking too. Although becoming a medic wouldn’t have crossed my mind. But that’s all that crossed his, a fourteen-year-old boy desperate to do something, anything, but all together powerless.

“I didn’t like that at all,” he said sternly, as the slightest crack tinged deep in his voice.

At age sixteen Ken completed his first Emergency Medical Technician evaluation and was up to a half-packaday habit. EMTs, as Ken described them, are the guys saving your ass whenever you’re hurt and not near a hospital; cigarettes keep them calm enough to do it. At least that was his thought.

“I need the smoke, I really fucking need it.”

Ken more or less job shadowed ambulance drivers until he was seventeen, when he early enlisted in the Army as a medic.

“My ass was theirs anyway, when I turned eighteen that is, I thought I’d just let ‘em have it early,” he laughed jubilantly.

I don’t think Ken believes in heroism though, or at least he doesn’t act like what he’s done is heroic. Frederic Henry, Hemingway’s protagonist in A Farewell to Arms didn’t either. Ken could be a Hemingway character. He fits the bill perfectly; a sometimes distant man whose enduring grit sits stoically with his unceasingly unassuming mettle. Ken is the archetype Hemingway would spit on his pages from a drunken pen. I would suppose that he has never made that connection, because when I brought it up he laughed.

“You read too much into shit, Hightower.”

It had always been his plan to join the armed forces in one shape or another, being an Army medic just appealed to
him the most. The nitty-gritty, that’s what he wanted; to help those who need help, and to enter the hour glass. The hour glass, Ken explained, was what Army medics called Iraq; for it was only a matter of time before someone got hurt and you did your thing.

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“That, and there’s a fuck load of sand where we were ... all the time,” he said with a face-flattening grin.

“Did you ever get to do your thing?” I asked, half laughing.

His face got a little more serious as he lifted his right pointer finger to the bridge of his nose.

“See that?” he asked.

I couldn’t believe I hadn’t noticed it until now. A slit of discolored skin sliced the top of his nose like a gory unibrow. Ken explained he had never belonged to one particular outfit, but rather was called from place to place if he was needed. Once while stationed just outside Karbala he was called to help a solider who’d been shot in the leg. It was his first bit of action while in Iraq and it would be his last. After attending to the man’s wounds, something happened.

“I don’t even really remember it,” he said somberly. “I just think I’m the luckiest guy to ever live.”

The last thing he remembers is an explosion of sand, and then a lot of pain. As Ken calmed and stopped the man’s bleeding, a grenade blew twenty to thirty feet away. A piece of shrapnel flew past Ken and sliced only the bridge of his nose, breaking it and causing blood to blind him in a puddle of red. His tour was up after a short-lived recovery time at an Army medical facility so they sent him home after that with a medal of honorary service.
"I didn't really care; I just wanted to stay there," Ken said. After a few moments he added, "It's not that leaving was so bad."

It was that leaving Iraq meant leaving the Army. His service had come to an end.

"When you work so hard to do something and then it ends, it's not a lot of fun, but it was always the plan, I guess."

Ken's plans now revolve around going back to school, and working to become a doctor. Saving people without worry for yourself should be easy with Ken's background.

"It'll probably be nice though to get away from all of that, at least for awhile," I said.

He looked down at his book again, lost in thought.

"A farewell to arms." He smiled and said, "It seems like that."