

# Bless me Father

*A Novel*



Michael Deeze

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*To my mother who taught me that 'you are only as happy as your most unhappy child' and to Kate, because after all, she's Kate.*

*Thank you to those few who saw how important this was for me and encouraged and supported me most especially Jo, Anna and Margaret, and the amazing and multi-talented Mary.*

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Michael Deeze



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About the Cover

*Excerpt for: I Have Sinned*

*Prologue*

*Chapter 1*

“Being Irish, he had an abiding sense of tragedy, which sustained him through temporary periods of joy.”  
- W.B. Yeats

## Introduction

In my neighborhood, there were the Ins, and there were the Outs if you were lucky enough to have a nickname that meant you were one of the Ins. Otherwise, you were just the Jew on the corner or the Polack Janitor. A nickname meant that people knew you, and being called, Little Asshole or Hole made me feel unique so that I secretly liked it. Eventually, Hole stuck, and became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

# Prologue



I shed my jeans and oily shirt on the small linoleum square inside the door and step back out into the hallway long enough to shake out all of the metal chips and grindings that have found their way into my pockets and waistbands. Once satisfied, I carry them into the bathroom to hang on the hooks on the back of the door, ready for another tomorrow. Turning, I spend a solid five minutes with dish detergent and a nail brush on my hands until only the cracks and fissures, and nail beds alone are highlighted by the black machine oil that they now bathe in daily. I don't bother to put anything else on; the curtains provide complete privacy. No one will be visiting. The phone will not ring.

It is much too early for dinner. The sun will not set for another hour or so, but I survey the refrigerator out of habit. I guess it is heated hot dogs or cold bologna tonight. It will depend on how stoned I am by then. From the butter compartment, I pull out a baggy of pre-rolled joints and light one up with my new fancy butane lighter with the fake tortoise-shell finish. I lean against the stove, taking a much-needed hit. My brain sighs in relief. I select a couple of joss sticks from the utility drawer. Balsam and cedar tonight, I think. Lighting one, I place it in the carved dragon incense holder on the counter. In the living room, I pull the chain on the red glass lamp that hangs from the ceiling next to the recliner and place the other joss stick in the ashtray on the single end table. A used sofa makes up the rest of the room's furnishings except for the massive component stereo system - my pride and joy.

The system is the only thing I brought home from overseas that I view with pride. It sits on two 2' X 6' planks supported by liberated bricks along the wall under the window. Two massive Bose 501 speakers sit on the floor at each end; their deafening output capable of vibrating the paint off of the ceiling in the third-floor apartments far upstairs. But sadly leashed in this environment, they are hardly ever allowed to show off their skills. Firing up the receiver, I turn on the

reel to reel, put on my headphones, and sit down in the recliner. The cold pleather is stiff and hard against my bare back and legs. In the headphones, Deep Purple launches into the long, frenetic guitar solo of "Highway Star." I close my eyes while I finish smoking the dope. The roughly two hours of music on the tape will take me past sunset and into the night.

Later, I eat the last three hot dogs cold while standing at the open refrigerator door. I might need the last of the milk in the morning, so I drink water straight from the tap - all of the glasses are dirty. In the bedroom, I open the drawer of the dresser designated for socks and lift out the .38 Ruger long barrel revolver and make my way back to the recliner, which is still warm against my bare skin. In the red darkness of the lamp, I release the cylinder and drop it into my hand. Dumping the bullets into my open palm, I select one, replace it into the chamber, and line the other five up in formation on the table beside me. I reassemble the gun almost unconsciously, the movements automatic.

Settling into the chair, I lean it all the way back. With the headphones back in place, I listen as Pink Floyd begins the iconic "One of These Days" - a fitting song to match my mood. I rotate the cylinder by rolling it down my bare leg, each chamber distinctly clicking into position in line with the barrel and firing pin. I light another joint and fill my lungs, holding it tight in my chest. Closing my eyes, my demons are immediately present in the dimly lit room, my nighttime companions of terror and remorse. Lifting up the almost two-pound handgun, I place it under my chin, the end of the barrel cold against my skin. I exhale the smoke and close my eyes. The headphones mask the sound of the clicks as I thumb back the double-action hammer.

# Chapter 1



July 1970

**Central Highlands, Republic of South Vietnam**

There is a hum of countless noises and the wet vegetation that surrounds me drips with moisture. Night frogs, crickets and the constant trickle of dirt that breaks away from the small berm I am sheltered behind, the loose earth streaming down into the almost knee-deep water that I am standing in. Even the ground under the trees and grass sucking in water makes a sound. Even in the thick fog that envelops me, I can hear them all clearly. Although I am listening harder than I have ever tried to in my life, I cannot hear anything that I want to hear. I am hot. It is wet; the night sounds are pregnant with dread. The silence is deafening.

It is not the time to be anchored anywhere. I am standing in a ditch filled with water up to my calves. The clinging mud beneath the water forces me to shift constantly from one foot to the other. Standing still for too long captures the soles of my boots. Instead of helping to cool me, the water is warm - nearly the same temperature as the sweat running down my face - soaking my shirt and stinging my eyes. The air is stifling, hot and still; the overcast gray sky, like a thick blanket, makes the air seem more humid and the heat more claustrophobic.

The damp air along with the copious sweat I've been producing, have made my clothes wet. They now cling to me making movements uncomfortable, tight and awkward. My shirt feels too small, pulling between my shoulder blades and pinching under my arms. I shrug my shoulders to relieve the tightness created by excessive moisture and fear. The clammy cotton in the crotch of my pants pinches the insides of my thighs, and my calves are beginning to cramp with the pressure of continually marching on the spot.

The fog, pea-soup thick, set in before darkness and is damp on my face. A small rock under the toe of my boot helps to stabilize me from the constant sink into the morass, but the pressure of standing on one toe causes my calf and arch to cramp with fatigue. I must shift back to the constant march of my feet in the water and mud to avoid having my boots trapped.

To the left of me, I hear Dugan doing the same shifting in the water and mud, slosh, suck and slosh - pause - slosh, suck, slosh. He's less than four feet away, yet I cannot see his face. I can't even see my own hand in front of my face.

I imagine Dugan as I last saw him, the whites of his eyes slightly bloodshot and mildly yellow in stark contrast to his expressive black face. His steel-pot helmet was pushed back on his head, sweat on his face, and the fear in his features as he stared into the gloom in front of him. Dugan, with a smart-ass comment for every situation, is now silent, except for the occasional whispered outburst, "This is BULLSHIT!" or "We are so royally FUCKED." I hear him breathing; pulling the high- altitude wet air into his lungs as if there isn't enough oxygen in it. Panting, just as I am: just as we all are. All of us afraid, all of us wet, and most of all - all of us trapped.

The quiet, like the air, seems oppressive. It is easy to imagine that we are alone. It is easy to believe that there is no one and nothing for miles in any direction. We all know different, that there is someone else here and not just generally but near, very near, less than fifty or sixty meters away from us, about half a football field, roughly as far as I can kick a football. We also know it is moving toward us. We know that when they find us, they are going to do their best to kill us. We know this because they already have.

We are trapped here in this puddle of water - this narrow furrow of safety. At our back, the land falls away, a sheer drop of several hundred feet. Far below, the forest reaches up toward us, but not close enough for us to chance a descent, even in daylight and certainly not blindly in the dark. There is no escape, and so, we march in place until our fate is decided by that something out in front of us. We wait, marching in place, soaked in our sweat, panting as if breathing through gauze, and we know with each second, death could be moments away. I can feel my fear pounding in my chest my heart racing.

We cannot call for help. The PRC-25, the radio pack, was on Spencer's back when the booby traps went off. Spence took the full blast. What is left of the radio and Spencer is twenty meters out in front of us. I saw him lying on his back, the front of his shirt and face smoking from the explosive charge that went off at his feet drifting slowly away from the gore of his ruined body in the still air. What was left of Spence was dead before he hit the ground. Whether the radio was damaged or not became immediately irrelevant, there was no time to retrieve it. Even if we had the radio, the night is too dark and overcast to call for air support. We are still four or five "klicks"(kilometers) from the forward operating base (FOB), and we are late getting back inside the wire. By now, they know why we are late, and will set a watch, but they will not come for us. There will be no help tonight. I offer a prayer that they come anyway, although I know they will not. They must wait, just as we must wait - for the morning.

We started out this morning with twelve; now we are eight or nine. I am not sure of the exact headcount of us that remain. A few of us didn't make it as far as this ditch. They're lying on the ground out ahead of us, some face-up and some face down. They make no sound lying there. We left them where they fell in our

headlong rush to the meager shelter of this ditch. That seems hours ago. Since then we have maintained the steady march in the mud facing out, waiting, listening for them. We aren't talking anymore. We are frozen by the silence, which isn't silence, straining to hear anything. There are only the sounds we don't want to hear. The wet jungle sounds of the living earth, and none of the sounds of those that bring death. The dirt bank in front of me is level with my chest and canted away from me, so there is nothing to lean on. There is nothing to assist us in the constant effort of standing while we march in place. Some grass and vine-like plants overhang the edge, but their roots are too shallow and provide no dependable handholds as they pull out without any resistance from the soil. The soil is loose as far as I can push my fingers into it all the way to my wrist without much effort. I withdraw my wrist, and I think about that for a while; no rocks so high up in the mountains. There should be more rocks. I could use a couple to stand on. My legs are tired from the constant dance to keep my feet free of the mud.

It is so quiet.

Sgt. Hobbs whispers somewhere from my right, "Everybody get ready - they're coming." His voice is calm, commanding. I wonder how he knows they are coming. I don't doubt him for a second. I can see nothing, and I cannot hear anything except the constant dripping of the moisture and the dribble of the dirt cascading into the water around my legs. I drop my chest against the tilted face of the ditch and get my eyes level with the top. Impossibly, my heart increases its pace. "Conserve your ammo, semiautomatic only. You FNGs got that?"

An FNG is what I am, a fucking new guy.

I start to nod until I realize he can't see me do it. "Got it," I reply, and my voice sounds tight, harsh in the dark. Even though I've tried to whisper, my reply is louder than I expected against the wet, still air. I realize that I sound as scared as I feel. How many of us are left? How many are already down? How soon before I'm one of the down ones? Hobbs took a roll call when we first got in here, but I couldn't hear all of the responses.

I've been in country thirty-three days. Dugan and I arrived together; a week to process, a week to assignment and then dropped into an FOB. Ours is Firebase Storm, 173rd Airborne Brigade, the Sky Soldiers. Sky Soldiers are the most decorated and the most shot-up group of fighting men in Vietnam, plenty of pride and a lot of fear. Storm is in the Central Highlands of the Republic of South Vietnam almost directly south and little west of Pleiku, in the Dak Lak province, for what that is worth. More important, right up against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the main supply route from North Vietnam into South Vietnam and a stone's throw from Laos.

Almost everything has been a jolt to my preconceptions - it is so beautiful here. The forests are vast, filled with mature growth trees and vegetation. The forest canopies overlap each other, rising over a hundred feet into the air and filled with countless forms of wildlife, some of them good, some not so good. The majority of the growth contains lush jungle vegetation. Where there are open

areas, some of the grasses are astonishingly tall, well over a man's head. Elephant grass it's called, and it provides plenty of stealth cover for Charlie, the Viet Cong guerrillas. The vistas from the high ground into the valleys below are breathtaking. In the distance, forest-covered hilltops and neatly squared out and tended farm fields make up the rest of our view. It is a beautiful country, well worth fighting for, no matter which side you chose.

The old-timers and short-timers are just as afraid of FNGs as they are of Charlie. FNGs do stupid things with their lack of experience and overabundance of fear. Supplied with plenty of firepower FNGs cannot be trusted. The veterans avoid us when they can and do not step in front of us if they can help it. On patrol, FNGs are in the middle of the squad. They are the mules, strapped with bandoliers of fifty caliber machine gun rounds, ammo cans, and grenades. From that position, if the shit comes down, they can distribute ammunition to the fire teams and take someone's place if he falls. That way they stay out of trouble, and if they survive, they become more experienced.

It seems inevitable that the possibility of my own mortality seems ridiculously likely. This moment has the feel of a long march; not just with my feet but also with my adolescently short life to this final destination. It is my fault that I am here, and it has been seemingly inevitable from the beginning. I brought this on myself, and no one knows it better than I do. My memory of sunny Mifflin Street, golden autumn light, and the smell of dry leaves, hurrying to campus in the morning light, is shattered. Replaced by the nightmare that is now. How much I wish I had a chance to go back, to do it all over again. I rack the slide on the rifle - not much chance of that anymore. Tonight is only my third patrol and my first skirmish. When you arrive in the country, you are considered a cherry until your first firefight. As of today, I am not a cherry anymore. I don't know how things are supposed to go in a firefight; I am pretty sure it is not this way. We are in trouble. The short-timers tell tales of their exploits and encounters, but I don't recall any of them telling one like this.

Dugan whispers, "Jesus, I'm scared. Ain't you scared Hole?"

"Fuckin' A." I rasp back.

I am acutely aware that I am afraid, not just because of the circumstances but because I am afraid that I might be a coward. I have been afraid before and right now - they are coming.

## **About the Author**

Michael Deeze is a natural-born storyteller - in life and in print. A child of the sixties, he draws extensively from his own diverse life experiences and subsequent education to introduce the hapless Emmet Casey. A Vietnam vet and Doctor of Chiropractic, Deeze weaves the history of an ill-fated child's transition from a lonely, inner-city rebel, decorated war veteran and into a man who looks all too familiar to him, a man like his father - all earned the hard way. After spending decades living near the forests of rural Wisconsin, Deeze now lives and maintains a small, private practice in Illinois. He's a devoted father to his three children, a magical daughter, two grown sons and his dog.

# About the Cover

Lori Pecchia, cover artist

<https://twitter.com/37zombies>

Born in the suburbs of Chicago in 1978, Lori Pecchia grew up with a love for drawing and sculpting. She won numerous awards from junior high school through college for her abilities in pencil, charcoal, printmaking, and sculpture in multiple mediums. Lori began tattooing while in college, and a decades-long career followed. She has won multiple tattooing awards, but the real reflection of her art is the amazing clients she has amassed over the years. For Lori, tattooing creates a bond that lasts a lifetime.

In 2017, she followed her dream to move to the mountains with her husband, Peter, and daughter, Cora. She currently tattoos in a beautiful shop in historic downtown Golden, Colorado. Even though a thousand miles separate her from her Illinois clients, she returns regularly to work with them, while also expanding her new clientele in Colorado.

When she isn't tattooing, Lori enjoys both outdoor and in-door hobbies. She has completed the Chicago Marathon three times, and run every other type of race leading up to the marathon. Now she has taken on hiking and paddle boarding in her mountain surroundings. Living on Bear Mountain gives her family a chance to see nature's beauty every day.

She has a passion for board and role playing games. Lori is involved in gaming convention culture. She loves the social aspects and shared experience of playing games. Most important to Lori, gaming is yet another place for making lifelong friends.