



Deer Neck

Darrell McLaughlin

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Deer Neck is partially set in Vietnam, yet it is not a war novel. Its protagonist, Shelby Elkins is a wounded Vietnam vet, but his really serious wounds had nothing at all to do with the war. The war was only one of the 'strange new worlds' Shelby had found himself in over the years, some from which he was never able to find his way entirely back. Yet, for everything lost, something still remains. His friend, who had gotten killed in a helicopter crash, had left a letter for Shelby to read should something like that happen. In it he referenced a poem by Carl Sandburg, which ends "I have asked to be left a few tears and some laughter." Sandburg once also wrote, "If it can be done it is not a bad practice for man of many years to die with a boy heart." Deer Neck is about that wish and that practice. The war is long over, now as far away in time as it was in distance from the innocent world of the Tennessee cotton fields of their childhood. Now the best friend Shelby ever had is dying and asking to see him. This is the same best friend who Shelby has, over and over, betrayed and disappointed. This is the same best friend now married to the woman who has truly always been the love of Shelby's life. This is the same best friend whose thirty-year marriage almost ended because of Shelby. Caught literally at a crossroads, Shelby has to decide whether it takes more courage to face the situation or to continue to stay away. He finds that facing the horrors of Vietnam was nothing at all compared to finally facing himself and the truth.

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Jackie Ballesteros:

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