A Brief Guide To Other Histories

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Paul McAuley

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My platoon had been in the American Bund sheaf for two weeks before it suffered its first major incident. It was gruesome and it robbed us of our innocence, but it was only the beginning of something stranger and deeper.

We'd come through the Turing gate at Brookhaven with the rest of the Third Brigade, First Armor Division, second battalion, as part of the ongoing operation to bring peace and reconciliation to that particular version of America's history. Seventeen PFCs and Spec 4s, and me, their commanding officer. We were all kids. I was the oldest, and I'd just turned twenty-four. Most of us hadn't been through the mirror before, and it put the zap on our heads. This was America, but it wasn't our version of America. New York, but not our version of New York. There were buildings I recognised from my visits to the city back in the Real. The Chrysler Building. The Empire State. St Patrick's Cathedral. Yellow taxis jostled on the streets, manholes vented plumes of steam, and Central Park was right where it should have been, although it had been stripped of trees by people desperate for firewood in the last days of the war, and there was a refugee camp sprawled across Sheep Meadow. But although the Statue of Liberty stood out in the Hudson, she was holding up a sword instead of a torch. The sword was a hundred feet long, and forged out of stainless steel that shone like cold flame. The skyline was different, too. Lower. Instead of glass and steel skyscrapers, brutal chunks of marble and white stone hunched like giant toads: monumental railroad stations, government buildings, and palaces. Some were burnt out or shattered by bombs. The rest were holed by artillery shells and pockmarked by small-arms fire.

We'd been given orientation lectures and issued with copies of a pamphlet that explained that the different versions of history accessed by the Turing Gates were every bit as real and valid as our own history. That their people were real people, American citizens just like us. Even so, driving around a city where familiar buildings mixed with alien intruders, half the traffic was military, and pedestrians were dressed in drab antique styles, was like inhabiting a dream. Or like taking the lead role in a movie when you had no idea of the script or plot.

The American Bund sheaf shared most of our history, but it had taken a different turn in the 1930s, when a bunch of generals and tycoons who didn't like where their country seemed to be heading under the New Deal had assassinated Franklin D. Roosevelt and installed a military government. One of the generals turned out to be more ruthless than the rest. After the coup, he'd seized power by a ruthless programme of murder and arrest, made himself President-for-Life, and established a tyranny that had lasted for more than thirty years. Towards the end of his rule, he'd become insane. He'd styled himself the Dear Leader, ordered the construction of hundreds of grandiose monuments to himself, put millions in prison or in work camps, massacred millions more. He'd been about to go to war against Europe when, in 1972, scientists in our version of history had opened a Turing gate onto his version of history. The Central Intelligence Group had sent through agents who'd made contact with rebels and supplied them with weapons and intel. As soon as civil war kicked off, two divisions drove through the mirror, quickly took control of the Eastern seaboard, captured the Dear Leader as he tried to flee to Argentina, and pushed over what turned out to be a regime hollowed by corruption and self-interest.

When my platoon and the rest of the Third Brigade came through the mirror a year later, deadenders who refused to accept that the war was over were waging a guerrilla campaign up and down the country. They used car bombs and land mines, improvised explosive devices from fertiliser, fuel oil, and scrap metal, and detonated them when convoys drove past. They fired mortars into our bases. They shot at us with sniper rifles or rocket-propelled grenades from vantage points in buildings, or took potshots at us and melted into panicked crowds. As in any insurrection, it was almost impossible to tell the good guys from the bad guys, and that was why one of my men ended up killing three innocent civilians.

We'd had been ordered to set up a traffic control point on the West Side, ten blocks south of the green zone. Two APCs backed by a Martindale light tank, razor-wire coiled across the street, the men waving vehicles forward one by one, doing stop and checks. The traffic was bunched up and jumpy, simmering in hundred degree heat so humid you could have wrung water out of the air. And we were all jumpy, too. At any moment, someone could pop a trunk and find weapons or a primed car bomb, or some screwed-up munchkin could decide to take a shot at us just for the hell of it. So when a taxi lurched forward after it was directed to an inspection point, accelerating crazily, scattering men, Bobby Sturges, behind the .50 caliber machine gun on top of one of the APCs, made a split-second decision and put two hundred rounds into the taxi in less than a

minute. Punching holes in the hood, exploding the tyres, shattering the windshield, shredding the driver and his two passengers, a man and his seventy-year-old mother. Sudden silence as the taxi rolled to a stop, engine dead, blood leaking from its door sills, blood and human meat spattered all over the interior.

That evening, Tommy McAfee said, ‘If these fucking munchkins learned to drive, this shit wouldn’t happen.’

Munchkins — that’s what we called the locals. New York City — the American Bund sheaf’s version of New York City — was Oz. The green zone in Oz, built up around a palace that before the revolution had been owned by one of the Dear Leader’s sons, was the Emerald City.

Like many of the men, Tommy McAfee had trouble accepting that the people on this side of the mirror were as real as the people back home, couldn’t believe that Americans could have brought themselves so low. He treated them with rough contempt, made endless jokes about them. He had a quick, sharp wit, knew how to time a punch line and cap someone else’s joke with a zinger of his own, was gaining a solid reputation as the platoon’s joker. So when he made his quip, he was surprised and upset when Ernie Wright told him to can it, and the rest of the men either made murmurs of agreement or looked away.

They were all lounging around by the side of the entrance that curved down to the underground garage where the Dear Leader’s eldest son had once stored his limousines, sports cars and motorcycles, where we now parked our APCs and Jeeps. We ate and slept in what had been servants’ quarters nearby, and had set up a barbeque pit outside. Folding chairs. A basketball hoop. A table-tennis set liberated from somewhere in the palace. Tommy McAfee was sitting on a case of oil cans, a rangy kid with rusty hair cropped short, a tattoo of a boxing leprechaun on his right bicep, looking at Ernie Wright and saying, ‘Jesus. You’d think I was the one shot that fucking taxi to death.’

Ernie Wright was the biggest man in the platoon, but he could move quickly. He stepped up to Tommy McAfee and grabbed the front of his fatigues and pulled him to his feet in a single fluid motion, and asked him, their faces inches apart, ‘Any more smart remarks about what went down?’

‘I can’t think of any.’

Wright set McAfee down and patted him on the shoulder, but that wasn’t the end

of it. Later on that evening they got into a fistfight. It was supposedly over who should have the last steak, but it was really about McAfee trying to regain some face after Wright had shamed him. McAfee could box, but Wright was stronger and heavier, and after some sparring he knocked McAfee on his ass with a solid punch. McAfee got up and came back at Wright and was knocked down again, and this time he stayed down. Sprawled flat on his back on floodlit concrete under the basketball hoop, breathing hard, his nose and mouth bloody, one eye swelling shut. After a while he got up and went to the ice-chest and washed his face with a handful of ice chips.

I didn't think much of it at the time. We'd all been on edge after the shooting, and the fistfight seemed to have dissipated much of the tension. And besides, I was more concerned about Bobby Sturges. He was a gentle kid, barely eighteen, sick to his soul over what he'd done. When I'd told him that he wouldn't get any blame when I wrote up the incident, that I accepted full responsibility because it had happened under my command, he'd given me a haunted look and said, 'Doesn't make it right, Lieutenant. They're Americans, like us. Americans shouldn't be killing Americans.'

'I agree. But some of them are trying to kill us, which is why you did the right thing.'

'Maybe it was the right thing to do,' Bobby Sturges said, 'but that doesn't make it right.'

I put in a request to pull him off the line for a few days R&R, but it was kicked back immediately. There was sand in the gears of the mission. We couldn't spare any men. I took him off the .50 cal, but he had to ride out with us on patrol the next day, and the day after that.

We manned checkpoints. We escorted convoys of supplies to hospitals and aid stations. We escorted a convoy of construction material to a power station that had been badly damaged during the war — jackhammers were pounding all over the city, cranes were swinging to and fro, and scaffolding was springing up like kudzu as the munchkins patched and repaired and rebuilt, as if tearing down one movie set and erecting another in its place. I noticed that Ernie Wright did his best to keep behind Tommy McAfee during foot patrols, and guessed what he was thinking. Tommy McAfee might want to even things out after his beating, we were all carrying guns, and it wasn't unknown for a soldier with a beef to put

a round or two into their rival's back in the middle of a firefight. But Tommy McAfee seemed to have forgotten the incident, and although the deadenders were staging hit-and-run raids in Texas and parts of the Midwest, and Washington, D.C. was paralysed by a spate of car bombings, New York was pretty quiet. It was August, hot and sunny. I remember one day we were parked up near a playground, and Dave Brahma and Leroy Moss started handing out candy bars and cans of soft drink to the kids. Two men in flak jackets and helmets, M-16s slung over their shoulders, up to their waists in a crowd of happy children. Another time, Todd Cooper was checking IDs at a control point and a man started shaking his hand and wouldn't let go. This old man in a dusty suit and battered fedora, pumping Todd Cooper's hand and thanking him for being there, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Then a supply convoy running the expressway from Brookhaven into New York City was hit by a massive improvised explosive device buried at the side of the highway. Five died instantly, six were badly wounded. That night, my platoon took part in a raid on an apartment building in Brooklyn. According to an informer, the deadenders who had planted the IED were storing weapons and explosives there.

It kicked off at two in the morning. A psy-ops vehicle blasted out a message telling everyone to leave their doors open and wait with their hands on their heads for questioning. Two Cherokee helicopters beat above the building's flat roof, lighting up the front with searchlights. A squad of explosives specialists hit the basement first, and then everyone else went in.

My platoon had been assigned the top two floors. I was determined to do things by the book. I told the men to knock first and break down doors only if they had to, to keep their fingers off their triggers and treat everyone with respect. Even so, it was a pretty brutal business. We'd storm in, grab the man of the house and throw him down, pacify the rest of the family, and interrogate the man in front of them, ask him if he owned a weapon or had any insurgent propaganda, if he was involved in insurgent activity in any way. Then we'd rip up the place, pulling out drawers and tossing the contents, ripping through closets, looking for anything that could be used as a weapon. The people were mostly passive, but we'd been told to expect trouble and we had no idea what we might find or if the situation might suddenly turn ugly. Despite my orders, there was quite a bit of roughhousing and horseplay to relieve the tension, shouts and screams, the smash of glass and crockery. A frat house party with half the participants armed

to the teeth, and the possibility of sudden death hanging in the air.

I was going from apartment to apartment, trying to curb excesses, when Ted Brahma came up and told me that something weird was going down. Smiling his gentle stoned smile, saying, ‘You have to see this, Lieutenant. It’ll blow your mind. Truly.’

I followed him downstairs to a single-room apartment with bookshelves along one wall, posters above the couch, books in piles on the floor. It was very hot. A standard lamp had been knocked over and threw huge shadows everywhere. Searchlights pried through blinds at the window. The whippy flutter of the helicopters matched my racing heartbeat. Todd Cooper and Tommy McAfee stood behind a man kneeling on the bare boards with his wrists plasticuffed. Ernie Wright stood in front of him, studying an ID card.

‘Tell me what you think, Lieutenant,’ Tommy McAfee said, and jerked up the prisoner’s head by his hair.

‘Is he on the list?’

‘Take a real good look,’ Tommy McAfee said. Both he and Todd Cooper were lit up, grinning. ‘His eyes, the colour of his hair … You don’t see it?’

‘Show the Lieutenant that ID,’ Todd Cooper said.

Ernie Wright handed the card to me. He had a baffled, dazed expression, as if he’d run full-tilt into an invisible wall.

‘You see it?’ Tommy McAfee said, as I studied it. ‘You see it now?’

The name under the black and white photo card was Ernest C. Wright.

Tommy McAfee’s grin widened when he saw my reaction, ‘I reckon we found ourselves Ernie’s double.’

‘Bullshit,’ Ernie Wright said. ‘He’s nothing like me. He doesn’t even have the same date of birth.’

‘Oh yeah? Then how come he just told us he was born in the same dipshit town as you? His parents have the same names as your parents, he has your name, and

he has your eyes, too,' Tommy McAfee said, jerking the prisoner's head up again.

It was true, the prisoner's eyes were the same sharp blue as Ernie Wright's, and his hair was the same dirty blond. But otherwise he didn't look much like Ernie Wright at all. He was shy about fifty pounds, his face was leaner and paler, and he had a mustache.

'He's your doppelg�nger, dude,' Ted Brahma said. 'Your dark half.'

I asked if they'd found any explosives or weapons.

'There isn't anything to find,' Ernie Wright said.

'Ain't this sweet,' McAfee said. 'Ernie is in love. In love with his own self.'

Brahma asked the prisoner why he had all these books.

'I'm a teaching assistant at Brooklyn University,' the man said.

His voice was lighter than Ernie Wright's.

'Yeah? What do you teach?' McAfee said.

'American literature.'

Ernie Wright shook his head.

'If you're a teacher, I guess you're a party member,' McAfee said, grinning at me. 'This guy is guilty of something, Lieutenant. I can smell it.'

'There were fifty million party members,' the man said. 'Including everyone who worked in every university and high school. It was the law.'

'All these books,' McAfee said. 'I bet we could find something subversive. What do you say, Lieutenant? Shall we take him in?'

I thought that this was more about the beef Tommy McAfee had with Ernie Wright than about uncovering a potential suspect. I pulled my knife, cut the plasticuffs that bound the man's wrists, and looked straight into McAfee's grin and asked him if he had a problem.

No one said anything. The man knelt on the floor, rubbing his wrists, carefully not making eye contact with anyone.

‘Move on,’ I said. ‘Everyone, right now.’

Ernie Wright was staring at the man. Then he shuddered, all over, like a man waking in the middle of a dream, and marched straight out. The fallen lamp wheeled his shadow over the bookcase and ceiling. As McAfee, Cooper and Brahma trooped after him, I remembered that I was still holding the man’s ID card.

‘Sorry,’ I said, and dropped the card in front of him and bolted from the apartment, thoroughly spooked by the situation.

The men ragged Ernie Wright about his alleged double or doppelg�nger on the ride back to Emerald City. Most of it was good-natured, but he turtled up, hunched in the back of the APC in a glowering silence that he broke only once, when Tommy McAfee told him that something must have gone badly wrong with his life, seeing as he’d ended up in the shit, while his doppelg�nger had a good job, an education …

‘That’s the point,’ Ernie Wright said. ‘That guy, he isn’t anything like me. So can your shit, McAfee. It ain’t right. It isn’t even funny.’

After a silence, Ted Brahma said in his doper’s drawl, ‘Know what they say about your doppelg�nger? That it’s just like you in every way, but it doesn’t have a soul. And it knows that, and it wants one real bad. So if you ever meet it, it’s like meeting a vampire hungry for, like, your exact blood type. One look, it can suck the soul right out of you. Turn you into what it was, make itself into you.’

‘There’s something to that,’ Leroy Moss said. He was at the wheel of the APC, inclining his head so that the men in the back could hear him over the roar of the engine. ‘Everyone agrees that there can be no miraculous multiplication of souls. If there are two people the same, one in the Real, one in some other history, there can be but the one soul. And you can’t divide a soul, either, so only one person can be in possession of it.’

‘You ask me, all the munchkins lack souls,’ Todd Cooper said. ‘They’re all ghosts.’

It was a common belief. The munchkins were spooks. Unreal. And because they were unreal, it didn't matter what you did to them.

'That's what doppelg�nger means,' Ted Brahma said. 'It's German for ghost double.'

'They say it's okay to fuck your doppelg�nger,' Todd Cooper said. 'Really. It's like jacking off. Only, you know, double the fun.'

'Yeah, but the only problem is, you have to waste him right afterward,' Tommy McAfee said. 'Otherwise, he'll waste you.'

Most of the men laughed. Ted Brahma said, 'It must have been pretty intense, Ernie, meeting your own ghost back there.'

Ernie Wright didn't reply. I turned around and told the men to knock it off, but Tommy McAfee had to have the last word.

'The big question is, which is the ghost and which is the man? You think about that, Ernie.'

A couple of days later, I saw Ernie Wright sitting on one of the plastic chairs in the R&R area, barechested in shorts and sandals, reading the pamphlet we'd all been given before coming through the mirror, A Brief Guide to Other Histories. I asked him how he was doing, and he said he was doing fine.

'Pretty interesting reading you have there.'

He shrugged.

'You read it carefully, it'll explain why that guy isn't really your double.'

'I know it,' Ernie Wright said. 'I knew it when I saw he was three years younger than me.'

'As I understand it, if he was born after the history of this sheaf split from the history of the Real, he has to be a completely different person,' I said. 'Because all of his experiences are different from yours.'

I'd been reading in A Brief Guide to Other Histories too, after that night.

‘That’s pretty much what it says here,’ Ernie Wright said. He was holding the pamphlet in one hand, his forefinger marking his place. ‘You are what you do, and what’s done to you. The sum of all your experiences. Him and me, we’ve had such different lives we aren’t even like brothers.’

‘That’s how I understand it,’ I said.

‘Still,’ he said, ‘I guess we had the same mother and father.’

I didn’t understand the significance of that remark then. It was hardly my fault. I had trouble remembering the names of all my men in my platoon, let alone the details of their lives before they’d joined up or been drafted. But even though I could hardly have been expected to remember that Ernie Wright’s mother had died in childbirth when he was just two years old, he’d been brought up by a father who was a bitter and violent drunk, I still feel guilty about what happened. I still have the irrational idea that I should have known about Ernie Wright’s unhappy childhood, that I should have done something to prevent what happened next, instead of making some inane remark about being pleased to see that he was putting the encounter in perspective.

‘It was weird,’ he said, ‘but weird shit happens through the mirror. We just have to deal with it.’

‘Glad to hear it.’

And after that, Ernie Wright did seem to be dealing with it. I overheard him having an earnest conversation with Leroy Moss, who carried a copy of the Bible in the breast pocket of his flak jacket, about the nature of souls and their indivisibility. He shrugged off Tommy McAfee’s jibes. And then, two weeks later, the platoon was given a day of R&R, and he disappeared.

I didn’t find out what had happened until the next day, when the military police took charge of Ernest Wright, the man Tommy McAfee had claimed to be Ernie Wright’s doppelg�nger.

It seemed that Ernie had changed into civilian clothes, hitched a ride out of Emerald City in a contractor’s truck, and turned up at Ernest’s apartment later that evening. Drunk but lucid, saying he wanted a quiet word, offering cigarettes and a bottle of Four Roses. A gift, he said, for the trouble a couple of weeks back. Ernest had deep misgivings, but he also felt sorry for Ernie, who seemed

sad and bewildered and lost. And he was curious, too. So he invited Ernie in and made coffee, and they got to talking. They shared the same parents, but Ernie's had met several years before Ernest's had, Ernie's mother had died giving birth to a still-born baby when he was two, his father had become a serious drunk, and Ernie had joined the Army to get away from the son of a bitch, who had died three years ago, when his liver had finally given out on him.

'I don't miss him,' Ernie said. 'Not one bit.'

Ernest's father — the American Bund's version of Ernie's father — had died in a traffic accident when Ernest was less than a year old. A couple of years later, his mother had remarried, to another teacher in the high-school where she worked.

'That's how you got to be a college professor, uh?'

'There were always books in the house.'

They talked about the town where they had been born, the little house where Ernie had lived with his father until he joined the Army. Ernest and his mother had moved out when he was three, he didn't remember much about it.

'I think there was a cherry tree in the front yard,' he said.

Ernie smiled. 'It was still there, last time I looked. Same tree, different lives.'

'Two different trees, really,' Ernest said. He told Ernie how he'd won a scholarship and come to New York to teach and study literature; Ernie told him a little bit about his so-called career in the army, fighting in a sheaf wrecked by nuclear war, and now policing the streets of New York.

'I never really knew my Mom,' he said. 'And my dad was a mean drunk who beat me 'til I got big enough to beat him. But you had a real family. You have a college degree, all those books …'

'If you knew what it was like, growing up here, under the thumb of the Dear Leader and his psychopathic sons and his secret police, you might not think it was so great,' Ernest said. He'd been tense and nervous all through their conversation, growing more and more resentful about the intrusion. 'Look, it was nice to talk to you. Strange, but nice. But I have to go to work tomorrow.'

‘Me too. Out on the streets. Hey, I was just wondering,’ Ernie said with ponderous casualness, ‘about your mother. Is she still alive?’

That was why he’d come there, of course. It wasn’t anything to do with Ernest, who was at best a brother he’d never known. No, Ernie Wright was chasing the ghost of his long-dead mother.

He looked for a long time at a snapshot Ernest reluctantly gave him, asked if she was still living in their home town. Maybe he could look her up some time, he said, and grew agitated after Ernest said that he didn’t think that this was a good idea. Ernie blustered, said that he barely remembered his mother, all he wanted was to see how she had turned out, what was the harm? Sharp words were exchanged. Ernie started to paw through papers on the table Ernest used as a desk, drew his pistol when Ernest asked him to stop. Ernest panicked, threw coffee in Ernie’s face, and the pistol went off. The shot barely missed Ernest. There was a struggle, another shot. That one hit Ernie in the thigh, nicking his femoral artery. There was a lot of blood. Ernest went to the apartment next door, which had a phone, and called an ambulance, but it took two hours to arrive because there were road blocks everywhere. Despite the best efforts of Ernest and his neighbours Ernie Wright bled to death on Ernest Wright’s old Persian carpet.

Ernest Wright told me all this in a bleak interrogation room in Camp X-Ray, the holding facility for suspects in bombings or shootings, people caught trafficking weapons and explosives, curfew violators, and anyone else who had gotten into some kind of trouble with the occupying army. He’d been arrested on suspicion of murder by the local police, but they’d handed him over to us after they had discovered that the dead man in his apartment was a soldier. My commanding officer had advised me not to visit him, but it had happened on my watch and I felt responsible. I wanted to know what had happened so that I could figure out what I had done wrong. Also, I had read the transcript of Ernest Wright’s interrogations, I had talked the local police who had handled the case, and I was convinced that he was innocent.

When I told him this, he thanked me for my concern, and for my offer to give supporting testimony should his case come to trial. He told me the story while smoking several of the cigarettes I had brought, and at the end lit a fresh one and said, ‘There’s a writer who described time as a garden of forking paths. Whenever someone makes a decision, it doesn’t matter how small, it splits time

into two. So there's this time, here and now, and another time where you decided not to help me.'

I told him that I was familiar with the concept. By this time, I had read A Brief Guide to Other Histories several times from cover to cover, trying to find something that would help me understand what had happened.

'An infinite series of paths, some divergent, some convergent, some running in parallel,' Ernest Wright said. 'Until a year ago, I thought it was just a story. A philosophical conceit. But then your people made themselves known when the revolution started. You sent troops through their Turing gates and helped defeat the Dear Leader. You told us that their agents had been visiting our history secretly before that, helping set up the revolution. You told us that you wanted to help us built a better America. But what you're really doing is shaping us in your image.'

'We really do want to help you.'

'Your path is only one of an infinite number of paths. And no one path can claim to be better or more privileged than any other. All are equal.'

'Except we have the Turing gates,' I said.

'Which gives your history the ability to interfere with other histories, other Americas. But it doesn't give your history moral superiority. You brought us freedom. Democracy. Fine. We're grateful for it, but we're not beholden. We have the right to make from that freedom what we will, whether you approve of it or not. If we're forced to become nothing more than a pale imitation of your version of America, what kind of freedom is that?'

I told him that he sounded a little like the deadenders, and he shook his head. He was thinner than I remembered, but because his head had been shaved and he had lost his mustache it seemed to me that he looked a lot more like Ernie Wright now. Or my memory of Ernie.

'The deadenders believe that they can restore the Bund if they can push you back through the mirror. We want to restore democracy, but on our own terms. It's like your friend. He didn't really understand that we were two completely different people. Strangers. My mother was not his mother,' Ernest Wright said. 'And this is not your history.'

That was in 1974. I was twenty-four, back then. So innocent, so foolishly hopeful. Now, just turned thirty, I'm a published writer with five short stories and a novel under my belt. I've already used parts of this story in the novel, although in my version Ernie Wright doesn't end up bleeding out on the floor of Ernest Wright's apartment, shot by his own pistol. Instead, he finds out where Ernest Wright's parents are living and goes AWOL and hitches back to the American Bund's version of his home town. He spends a day watching Ernest Wright's mother, trying and failing to get up the courage to talk to her, finally realising that he has nothing to say to her because she isn't in any way like his mother, that nothing in Ernest Wright's life could explain what had gone wrong in his own. Although this version worked well enough within the frame of the novel, although it was true to Ernie Wright's need to understand and reach a reconciliation with his own history, although it clarified real events and gave them a neat ending, it was a contrivance. I was never satisfied with it, and felt guilty too, at the way I'd trivialised Ernest Wright, used him as a bit player, a ghostly reflection whose only function was to give Ernie Wright the information he needed to make his pilgrimage. This is as close to the truth as I can make it, and there's no neat ending, no bittersweet resolution.

Ernest Wright was released back to the local authorities after two months in Camp X-Ray. He didn't make bail, and was stabbed to death in a prison riot before his case came to trial. Todd Cooper was killed in a firefight a couple of months later, and Dave Brahma was badly wounded. The same day, Bobby Sturges injected his foot with a Syrette of morphine and shot off his big toe, a million-dollar wound that was his ticket back to the Real. I wrote it up as an accident; the kid had never gotten over shooting up that car. Then Leroy Moss was killed when a rocket-propelled grenade hit his APC. I was sitting next to him and spent two months in hospital while doctors worked to save my leg and shrapnel, some of it bone fragments from Leroy Moss, surfaced in different parts of my body. Some of it is still in there.

Tommy McAfee reupped, served another year, and survived without a scratch. After my novel was published, he phoned me late one night. He was drunk, and wanted to talk about old times. He told me that he had a bunch of stories I could help him make into a book as good as mine. I listened to him ramble on for a while, letting him vent whatever it was my novel had stirred up, making the right kind of noises, and when he finally hung up I realised that he'd hit on something useful, and started making notes for this story.

We are what we do, and what's done to us: if A Brief Guide to Other Histories was right about one thing it's this. And because what happens to us in war is more intense than ordinary life, it marks us more deeply, changes us more profoundly. Every soldier who comes back from war is haunted by the ghosts of the comrades who didn't make it, the people he killed or saw killed. By the things he did, and the things he should have done. And most of all by the innocent kid he once was, before the contingencies and experiences of war took that innocence away. I have summoned up my ghosts here, and tried to lay them to rest. But it seems to me now that all of us who passed through the mirror into different histories have become like ghosts, lost in the infinite possibilities of our stories, ceaselessly searching for an ideal we can never reach.