

Persecution

Bang! Bang! Bang! A loud scream rang out in the night. I desperately searched through the primitively made shelters of hay, in a small village. I followed my ears to a dilapidated hut, there before my eyes, a small bleeding body lay whimpering, bodies surrounded her, but unfortunately, they were silent. The scent of blood and gunpowder resonated. My throat was burning with a need to vomit, quickly my hand clasped my mouth. My arms shook with disgust and fear, my hands gingerly grasped the body of a middle aged woman, and I pulled her off the crying girl. Next was a little boy, my sight became blurry, my cheeks were wet, he looked like he was only five. "It's going to be ok" I whispered to the little girl doing my best to soothe her.

I scooped her up and started running through the jungle to the helicopter landing point. My arms surrounded the little girl, holding on tightly, my feet moved and dodged around trees and bushes. I heard shouts in a language I was never taught in school, suddenly my leg froze up, it spread through my body, and I resisted the urge to fall to ground writhing in pain. I'd been shot. As I felt my body lose weight and as I began falling backward, I glanced down to the small form still cowering in my arms, I knew I had to keep running.

Halfway to the chopper, my burden became almost impossible to handle. The pain was agonizing, but I knew that this little girl was suffering even more. Fearing that the skittish pilots would take off without us, I began to move even faster. My eyes glanced to the eyes of the pilot, he was just as scared as the little girl, I had to get there faster, and my leg was bleeding to the point where I couldn't even feel pain anymore. The guerrillas continued to send rounds our way. I could occasionally hear the bullets snapping past my head. They were so close I could taste and smell the gunpowder down the back of my throat.

Twenty metres from the helicopter my body began to give way. My legs failed me, and I fell to my knees. My damn leg, the pain had come back, and in pure pain, I collapsed on the blood coated jungle floor. The little girl fell from my arms.

"Agggghhh!" Her cry of agony rang out into the night. The noise pierced my ears, it was like my ear drums had been stabbed, and my chest clenched as my heart was being ripped apart into millions of pieces. A young inexperienced soldier quickly ran to the dying girl, he had absolutely no idea what to do, but to get her the hell out of this godforsaken place. He roughly picked her up, but held her tenderly as if he was her father, and ran back as quickly as he could. I dragged myself to my feet. I could hear the Vietcong getting closer.

"We have to leave now!" the pilots screamed as they started shutting the door. I felt the adrenaline flow through to my entire body, and with the last of my energy, I grabbed onto a fellow soldier's hand as he pulled me desperately into the chopper, just as it got off the ground.

I hurried over to the girl, while the medic on board desperately tried to staunch the bleeding from her stomach and leg. I started stroking the girl's head repeatedly promising, "You'll be okay. I won't let anything happen to you. You're going to make it..."

We were taking so long.

The sounds of breathing became quieter and quieter, her chest was now failing to rise up and down. "Bloody hurry up!" I screamed furiously at the pilots knowing this was a dire situation.

I glanced down at her. Her wide eyes looked up at me in pain and I could hear a gargling in her lungs. Her breathing grew more laboured and then....

silence.

"Nooooo!"

I jolted awake still screaming, with tears pouring down my face.

The light turned on.

"Honey it's ok, you're home now, you're safe,"

The sound of my wife Emily's gentle voice soothed me. Reaching over she pulled me into a hug. She waited for my breathing to return to normal and when she sensed me relax gently said "I'm going to make some breakfast, could you do me a favour and run down to the café and order us two coffees?" I nodded, giving her a kiss on the cheek and trying to ignore the worried look in her eyes I got up. Pulling on her pink fluffy robe and white slippers she rose and walked out of the room flashing me a smile.

I began the familiar trek down to the old Blue gum. It's been a month since I've returned to Australia from South Vietnam and still dreams haunt me every night. I wake up still feeling the mud, rain, heat, sweat, dust, sand, and mosquito bites on my irritated skin. I can still hear the screams of people lying screaming in the jungle after being nearly blown apart by the mines. I can still feel the pain in my leg where I was shot. Still smell the sharp acid smell that Agent Orange leaves behind.

But most of all I can see the dead bodies. They haunt me. I can still see their empty eyes and their mutilated bodies. I can smell the blood and burnt and decaying flesh. I can see them; the bodies of nearly my whole patrol, bodies of innocent Vietnamese families burned by acid and blown apart, but most of all I can still see the body of that innocent little village girl.

While absorbed in my thoughts my feet had carried me down the familiar streets of my hometown. As I walked into the Blue gum café, with its never changing bright blue doors and red framed windows up to the dark green counter, people turned to stare. Being from such a small town everyone knew I had served in Vietnam. Then all of a sudden the muttering started.

"Murderer" I heard whispered.

I turned around looking for the speaker. Many pairs of eyes met mine as people shamelessly gawked at me like some kind of sideshow spectacle.

I heard a slight cough and turned around to see the owner Malcolm who smiled at me "The usual?" he queried.

"You still remember it!" I exclaimed "An old fart like you can still remember my order?" I joked with the old man. Malcolm chuckled and walked out the back to make a caramel latte for Emily and mocha for me.

I sat down to wait for my order. I could still feel people's eyes on the back of my neck. One man spat at me as he walked out.

"Scum" another older man murmured as he walked past shooting me daggers.

The heat was rising in my body. I glanced around. I was being treated like a criminal.

One particularly loud woman looked directly at me and shouted "Baby murderer."

Tears sprung to my eyes. Baby murderer? These people have no idea of what we went through over there. How can they judge me? I didn't even choose to go and yet I'm being blamed for the War.

Anger sprung up in me and just as I was about to lash out...

"Order 12!" Malcolm's brisk voice yelled out.

Rising I walked shakily up to the counter rage coursing through my veins and tears stinging my eyes. People's eyes followed me, their mutterings continued.

When I reached the counter Malcolm looked me dead in the eye and saluted me. Then looking around the room as if he was addressing his speech to everyone seated there not just me, he spoke, "I cannot thank you enough for bravely serving our country after you were called up, so these coffees are on the house and will continue to be so as long as you choose to come here, oh and same goes for any other Vietnam heroes."

The room was deadly silent. Pin dropping kind of silence.

Awkward shuffling and ashamed faces greeted me when I finally looked around. Then slowly two young women, who had previously been muttering and giving me shifty looks, saluted me. Other people in the diner nodded my way as if in acknowledgement. The woman that had cried out was by now looking suitably uncomfortable.

I nodded first to the young women, then to Malcolm, and I walked out of the shop and down the familiar street back to my home and my beautiful wife, grasping my coffees with the shadow of a smile on my face. Sometimes when you feel like there's no hope left for you, all you need is a friend who will stand up.