

A Soldier Inaction

I heard her before I saw her; that wavering breath, a trembling hand raising her index finger to blot the tear before it rolled down her face. Her eyes were gorgeous, a deep mahogany brown, but there was something awful sad about them, same sort of sadness you see in a wilting bouquet. She fiddled with the ring on her finger, a battle of acceptance and sorrow across her face. The hard swallow, the forced smile – she really tried and I love her for it.

Nothing is more nerve racking than apprehension, stood in the town hall, digging gnawed nails into callused skin, standing tall in lines, eyes forward, knees weak. There was no point hiding the sweat trickling from my forehead.

“Coffman.”

Never has my own name struck such fear into me, the very pit of my stomach, like someone created a deep ditch with a single blow. I’m no stranger to a punch, but that was like nothing I’ve felt in any bar brawl.

I pulled her in close that inflated belly putting a bit more space between us than I had grown used to, I felt her tension melt slightly as I hooped my arms about her. Murmuring it’ll be ok doll, only a few months.

By no means did old Johnson splash out for us; the plane there was more fragile than my mother after three glasses of red. It groaned as it drifted over great seas and vast jungles creaking and screeching, voicing the complaints about the journey that we couldn’t. The uniform blended us into one – a khaki tribe, and every man’s face was the same as the next. Fearful eyes with a strong lip; our token expression ‘til our last breath.

The heat of that god forsaken jungle suffocated every man trapped there, it was so thick you could choke on it. Heat which smothered men and baked their faeces. It was by far the worst part, the inescapable stench of the base; odours of petrol and human waste invaded every sector of the camp. See, the latrines were sawn from oil drums, and the only real way to get rid of the stuff was to stick petrol on and burn it. The stench clawed at your vocal chords and spat in your eyes; I’ll never forget it.

I’d be lying if I didn’t say I was nervous. The hands that had only a few days earlier been laying bricks now holding a rifle; don’t get me wrong, I’d held a gun before, shot one too, guns are no foreign object in Texas – but never had I killed a man with one.

Most of the time I shot blindly, not out of choice mind you. I’ll never understand the way of the VC; the plain could be clear and flat, as open as your own backyard. Cautiously our troops would etch out, checking the peripheral, and like fireworks their bullets came zipping through. The bushes shuffle and the entire plain morphs, then we’re battling an offensive from east and west, men thudding to the ground every minute, the sound of rapid fire and screams flood the plain, so loud you couldn’t see a thing.

The gooks were relentless, and not just when present. Sporadically, the jungle was littered with two step Charlies, hedgehogs, viper pits – every step felt like it might be the last and every two step almost always was.

Charlie Company and me had been in country about 3 months before the new orders came through. A southern village containing the remnants of the 48th battalion was our next destination, we were to go in and eliminate the threat.

They called it mission Pinkville. They said to follow orders. They told us they were Vietcong.

I'd seen the posters and heard the radio, those communist lunatics set on removing all rights and liberties, removing their choice, and that had to be stopped, no question. Ho Chi Min wanted the sort of crazy regime that suppressed the people and forced submission, we had to stop it. These people deserved to be free, and I swear to God we thought we were freeing 'em.

A lot of people will tell you instructions were not clear on the evening before. That is miles from the truth. There was no confusion or miscommunication, the orders were clear as daylight. That man, Medina, told us to kill anything walking, crawling, or growing. Anything at all.

About 7:30 the troops thundered in, Captain Medina leading of course, steering us all, barking commands. But something didn't feel quite right. There were so many women, so many old people, and so many kids and they sure didn't behave like Vietcong. The VC were slippery though, and masters of disguise. But they cowered away and begged and cried - a kind of fear that felt overwhelmingly authentic.

Even the air seemed hesitant, I looked to my left and right and the soldiers either side of me were thinking the same. I could see the guys relax their grips slightly; the doubt on my mind was heavier than the rifle in my hand. Sad thing is, I knew from the start it wasn't right. What we did that day, it wasn't right.

A cluster of shells sliced the air, piercing the leg of a woman cradling her child. Her shriek could have fractured glass.

Bullets fired ceaselessly then, they split the air and shattered bones. In a matter of seconds that apprehension vanished, the men, my friends looted and burned and shot and murdered those people - myself included.

Through a splutter of ammunition and growing pools of blood, we moved through the hamlet. We split off into smaller groups, raiding every home, killing what we were told were Vietcong. Women and infants littered the side of the paths like shrapnel, cast aside by the people they had been told would liberate their country. They wailed like lost cubs, a picture of absolute desperation, absolute terror.

I crawled between hooches to get away. It didn't feel right, they had to be civilians - these were not the Viet Cong we had fought in the jungle. The VC fought, these people did not.

Moving through one passage I found four men huddled round a young girl, she looked about fourteen but I struggle to tell with their kind. She was young though, could tell that much. My gun loosened from its tense position. There was grunting amongst the ruckus, and cheering, "Go on Rob, give it to her!" She wailed and kicked against them reaching for some boy strewn aside, bleeding from the skull.

Reluctantly, she went limp, but that girl fought harder than I ever did. Their guns went places they should not have, grenades too, until she lay still on the floor, violated and bare, her intestines spilling out of her. Her head rolled to face me, eyes starkly open yet utterly lifeless; a deep mahogany brown that sent chills down my spine.

"Didn't you want a go, Coffman?" one of them jeered. I realised I had been stood gawping at the group for a full ten minutes, my feet cemented still, my eyes paralysed. His comment shattered the visage, and I turned, kept walking. "Fag," I heard him chuckle to the rest of them.

My vision was awful blurry, I moved my limbs but it felt like someone else doing it, they weren't my hands holding the rifle and it wasn't my hands their blood was on. Someone else was shifting the gears. Surely.

Eventually, the command changed tactics, told us to stop shooting and start herding the people towards the centre of the village. To a degree, I was relieved, at least there was no more killing. But a fear brewed within me, change of tactics was rarely good, and I will admit I still prayed these people were VC, that they weren't civilians, that our actions could be excused.

I found a couple a families and herded them to the centre of this village. Not Medina this time but Calley, some young guy who seemed desperate to prove his competency, was directing them through and out of the village eastwards, towards the drainage ditch. The white noise wailing continued as we marched, the sidewalk scattered with bodies.

That smell was repugnant, a cocktail of rotting corpse, sewage and sorrow. I didn't hardly understand what was going on, the orders coming my way may as well have been Vietnamese. It was an irrigation ditch, no other way to describe it, a ditch for the pure purpose of collecting bodies.

They formed rough lines like cattle, and Calley was the rancher. Lined up, shot and shoved into the ditch. I just stood and watched, incapacitated in my position, only my eyelids moved, slowly. I eventually pretended to herd the people, real half-hearted, I couldn't just stand but I would rather shoot myself than a single other innocent civilian.

A young boy, aged about five clawed his way out of that trench, wailing and screaming for his mother. You could tell it was his mother he wanted, that primal cry is universal; he just wanted his mama. Confused and distraught he began to run, but made it no further than 5 yards before he was gunned down. My body contorted and I physically wretched then as his limp body was kicked into the ditch just as you might kick a rock along a dirt road. Lieutenant Calley himself. Callous and careless. And I just watched.

God knows how long that continued for. But eventually a young soldier came running up to Medina, exclaiming in clear dismay and horror. I heard Medina tell him dismissively that we were "just following orders," and the man rightly questioned who had ordered this. They bickered back and forth for a bit and the young man thundered off - he was a pilot it turned out, a man named Thompson.

He returned eventually and began pulling people out of the ditch, defying the threat of Medina's rifle and grenades. He is one of few men with a clean conscience.

Days after I could hardly sleep, the sheets suffocated me, an inescapable linen cage. I couldn't stand it. Looking at my own hands made me want to scrub 'em clean one million times over. I had to do something, distract myself; kid myself into guiltless unconsciousness. Darlene. She was an escape. A chance at brief oblivion perhaps – hell, I could hardly tell her what I did, I'd surely never meet my own daughter.

Putting pen to paper, I wrote as if I had possessed the same virtue and innocence as Thompson; that night was the first of many times that I lied to her.

March 20th 1968

My Sweet Darlene,

I miss you an awful lot doll, I really do. How are you getting along? And how's Mama and Pa? I hope you're managing to stay afloat, you're a treasure darlin and not a minute goes by I don't think about you, don't you forget.

I tell you, the fighting ain't half hard work, feels like it will never end some of the time, I got awful achy shoulders – wouldn't mind a rub down. I really couldn't have predicted what it's like but it sure is busy!

Not bad though, it's beautiful really, green like you've never seen, big giant trees, leaves bigger than the couch cushions. There are birds and they're beautiful, they fly in great patterns and sing songs (slightly annoying when I'm tryin' a sleep but I like 'em I think).

It won't last much longer dollface, we're really showing em a good beating! You keep yourself safe until I'm back to look after you.

Love, Joe

I let a tear fall from my own eye then, wiped it with hardened fingers. Never would I be able to truly look into those deep mahogany eyes again.