

The Vigil

I watched the car ahead of me on the interstate, and my hand gripped the wheel of our station wagon like a life line leading me out of the vast ocean I had been living in for the past year. The sounds drowned away, and the white lines of the lanes sped past in a blur. I blinked in quick succession, forcing them to clear. Watching Tom out of the corner of my eye as I had been the whole time, I moved to take his hand in mine. Then I hesitated, maneuvering my fingers up to the radio dial instead, the static sounding and feeling as though it was coming from inside of me.

Tom was staring out the window again, his eyes unseeing. I wondered if he was watching the beech trees and wild flowers, the ponds of cattails of our hometown pass by, wondering at how they were so different from the sticks of bamboo and elephant grass, the rice patties of stagnant water he had been living in. Afternoon sunlight cast itself across the dash. I watched a line of it ripple across his fingers as he clenched and unclenched his hands. I fingered the new perm in my hair, the one I had hoped he would notice.

I remembered the way his eyes had first locked on mine, the way he had almost dropped his bags as he crossed the parking lot. He had come right up to me, his army boots touching the tips of my beige pumps. I remembered the cautious look in his eyes, one I would see many times in the years to come. He had looked confused at first and he had blinked. He had let his duffle bag fall from his shoulder, the other from his hand. I reached up and placed my hand on the side of his face. He took it in his own, his blue eyes never leaving mine, and held it to his cheek. I remembered the way he pulled me into his arms then, lifting me off the asphalt. I remembered being surprised at how long he held me.

I blinked and looked at the interstate sign, swearing under my breath. I had been driving north beyond our exit for the past fifteen minutes. Tom looked up for the first time and met my eyes in a soft

question. I smiled and shook my head, changing lanes to take the next exit.

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I never forgot the long months of waiting, hurrying for the mailman at the door whenever I heard him pull up to our house, watching the news anxiously in the evenings after I sent the children to bed, hanging on to every word that McNamara said. I remembered it going into footage from the battlefield, the reporter huddled in the elephant grass with his glasses, microphone, and helmet. He cringed every time a shell went off in the field far behind him. I could see soldiers in the distance, running, screaming, shooting. I remembered Susan's voice from the hallway one of those times, her braids mussed slightly over her pajamas.

"Is he talking about Dad, Mommy?"

"Go back to bed, Susan."

"But, I want to—"

"Go to bed!"

I remembered taking my glasses off and holding my face in my hands as I listened to her soft feet patter through the hall. I remembered sitting at the kitchen table in the same manner with my head down, passing the afternoons in still silence when I could no longer maintain the will for mindless chores around the house.

One day Michael came home from school, and I watched him get off the bus with Susan. They shuffled to the house, Michael dragging his heavy backpack through the yard even though I had scolded him for it several times before. Susan was talking to him, and he kept his head down.

I turned away from the curtains, back to the living room, and continued wiping the clean coffee table as I heard their steps on the front porch. They said nothing as they came in the door and walked to the kitchen as they always did to start their homework. I gave them a few minutes before I went to make some snacks for them, smelling the pot roast that I had cooking in the oven for dinner.

"How was school today?" I asked. I spoke with my back to them as

I set out cheese and crackers on a plate and poured two glasses of milk. I could practically hear them glaring at each other behind my back.

"Michael almost got in a fight," Susan said.

"I did not!" His small fist pounded the table.

"That's not what I heard from Alice McClain. She said you almost knocked Richard Harris's lights out on the playground, even though he's twice your size."

"All right, Susan, that's enough." I turned and carried the tray with the plate and glasses, setting it on the table. Susan took a handful while Michael stared into his chocolate milk. I smoothed my apron and crossed my arms with a gentle sigh, looking down at him.

"Michael? What happened today?"

He was silent for a moment yet. I saw tufts of his soft brown hair sticking out over his ears. I made a mental note to give him a haircut over the weekend. "Richard said that Daddy's a baby killer, just like the others," he said. "What does that mean, Mommy?"

I reached out and took a cracker, biting it in half as Susan joined Michael's hesitant look at me. "Nothing, Michael," I said. "It means absolutely nothing. Don't listen to Richard."

I hardly noticed then when my feet carried me across the thick carpet of the hall to our master bedroom, when I sat down on my side of the bed and opened my nightstand drawer, when I opened the box I had used from Michael's little green army men to hold letters from Tom.

I hardly noticed when I fingered the letter on top, still crisp and creased in a fold. I had received it just the other day, but I had already read it a few dozen times. I grimaced as I opened the page.

You can't imagine how much I miss you, Nancy. It's so hard over here. War is never supposed to be pretty, but it seems that things get more horrible every day. Maybe it's just me. I don't know anymore. All the days seem to blend together. There are families and children here just like any normal place. I don't know why we thought we would only be fighting the VC, only grown men. I don't know why we thought this would be easy.

"Mom! The oven!"

Susan shouted from the kitchen and I placed the letter in the box

again, closing the drawer and rushing out to meet the smell of the burning roast.

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I often wondered what Tom was seeing over there. I saw enough on the news to know it was worse than any of them had expected. More and more boys were dying. I saw women walking along the sidewalk in town, sitting together in diners, crying into handkerchiefs and cups of coffee. I knew the reality. Tom was older, though, 29. He knew what he was doing.

He would be safe.

I couldn't tell from his letters how frightened he was. I reread the older ones with gentle fingers, always thinking of the hysterical crying fit that had ensued the first time I tore one of the pages along the crease. The small writing had smudged and faded on these letters. I knew every word. Some of the papers had a wet, mildew smell to them, and I wondered how long he had kept them in his pocket. I inhaled the scent, closing my eyes and trying to picture myself there with him, jealous of a smell I knew he loathed. I imagined him writing whenever they stopped, scribbling a few more words before he had to fold it up, put it away, and keep walking.

I read the lines carefully, imagining Tom's fingers writing them, moving across the page. I fingered the blurred stains of the paper, seeing the rain drops as they were falling on the words he had just penned. I often considered taking it outside to read when it was drizzling, to let a few drops of cold New England rain mix with the steamy drops of his world.

He told me in his letters what was happening, like I asked him to, but I knew he was still just summarizing. I felt his censoring when I read his words, full of as few details as possible. Sometimes he seemed sincere, and other times I hardly sensed the gentle man I had married. I could tell by his writing when things were bad and when they were worse than bad. Some letters were more legible than others, and I imagined his hand shaking when he wrote it in the same way mine shook when I read it.

He would ask how the children were doing in school, and I would tell him about Susan's science project, about Michael's spelling bee, how he misspelled helicopter and sulked for three days. I would send him small wallet photos of the children's new school pictures, and a black and white Polaroid that I had taken of myself one afternoon in the bedroom. He had asked for one to keep in his helmet. I would send him a pressed daisy from the flowerbed, a blade of the new spring grass from the front yard. I would tell him about my grocery shopping trips, my appointments at the hair salon. I never told him about the things I heard women saying there. I never told him about the protests in the street, the students staging on college campuses. I never told him about the *TIME* magazine articles. I never told him about Richard Harris from Michael's class.

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When we finally arrived home, I picked up the children from the next door neighbor and apologized for the late hour. Susan, 9, and Michael, 6, jumped into my arms, hugging me briefly before racing across the yard toward Tom. He had climbed out of the car and knelt down when he saw them running. They only saw the happiness in his eyes. I saw the fear behind, the pain at seeing how they had grown. I saw just how much he had feared the possibility of never seeing them again, of seeing me again. I saw the struggle to release that fear now that it was over. I saw the struggle to separate what was over and what would never be over.

We walked up to the door together, Michael dragging Tom's smaller bag on his trembling shoulder. My heels clicked on the sidewalk, while the children's shoes slapped in between the long strides of Tom's boots behind me. Susan and Michael rushed in the door when I unlocked it, but I turned to see Tom standing on the doormat, his face still and hesitant again. His blue eyes darted around the doorframe, around the foyer behind me.

I thought about the letter I had read before traveling to pick him up. *We pass different huts. Most of them are deserted, but we check. I stand outside and look in the simple rooms, the signs of things left be-*

hind, of the life that existed. I halfway expect a mother to come in with her child from a side room and look at me in fear and surprise, as they always do.

I listened to the children laughing and running around inside, and I leaned against the door, looking back into the living room. "I cleaned the curtains. So they look lighter. Michael's room had a new coat of paint. I . . . I straightened up the bedroom. I left your side the way it was. Nothing else has really changed."

Tom nodded slowly and I stepped back onto the porch, rubbing his arm. "Come on inside," I said. I eased him in the door and he set his bags down. I didn't realize I was holding my breath, watching him as he sat on the wicker chair and unlaced his boots to set them alongside Michael's and Susan's. He followed me into the bedroom, and I left him to unpack while I kicked my pumps off in the closet and changed into a casual dress.

He was sitting on the bed, and I walked over and kissed him on the forehead. He wrapped his arms around me and buried his head in my chest, sighing deeply. I ran my fingers through his hair and rubbed circles on his back, my lips still bowed over his head. I wanted to close my eyes and let it all out. I wanted to sink down on that bed with him and squeeze him until I couldn't feel my arms anymore.

"I'm going to go get dinner started. Should be ready in half an hour or so."

And so, I left. When I came back in the room, forty minutes later, he was still sitting there staring at the dresser. He had not opened his bags, had not moved, had not changed his clothes. He wrung his hands together, his forearms resting over his knees. He did not even look like he was breathing. But then, neither was I.

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I found a pack of letters in Tom's nightstand when I was cleaning a few days later. I had just opened the drawer to dust the top of it, and I saw the yellowed papers. Crinkled and smelling of rain and dirt, they had been wrapped up in a rubber band. I kept mine in my own nightstand, still in Michael's box, but I held this pack in my hands

and stared at it for minutes. These were letters he had written with the intent of never sending. They were his alone, and I felt the truth of that creep up to my cheeks in shame as I sat on the bed and carefully pulled off the rubber band. I began reading the one on top, and my eyes immediately burned as I saw my name. He still wrote it to me, addressed to me, addressed to the memory of me always with him. I wondered if he took out my picture when he wrote.

I'm writing this at night, but it helps me stay awake, so don't worry. I'm on watch. You have to be careful at night. The gooks come around 0200 or 0300. We learned to put pebbles in a soda can and hang it between the wires, but they're so small they can slip between them without disturbing the can. I hate them. Sometimes I can see them when they come, their eyes looking out at me in the dark. When the elephant grass moves, you can be tempted to think it's just the wind. But there's no wind. Ever. It's so wet here, Nancy. Some of the new boys already have bad feet because they don't change their socks enough. The mosquitoes are hell, too.

There's been something I've been meaning to tell you, Nance. We were humping one day last week and we came through a village, a village that Charlie had already been through. We saw a lot of dead women and children. It was the first time seeing it for a lot of the younger boys. Some of them were shaking for days after. I saw something they didn't, though. I saw one of the VC, lying away from the villagers. He looked just as young as our boys. He had a picture of a young girl in his hand. She was smiling in the picture, wearing the traditional dress, and I saw writing on the back. I took the picture. Do you think that's wrong of me, Nance? I just want to see you again, but I'm afraid of when I do. There's no place I'd rather be right now than home, but I'm terrified of going back.

I controlled the sob in my throat and placed a hand on my chest, taking one deep breath after another. With trembling fingers, I laid the letter aside and looked at the next one, hating myself. I picked up the page and read the scrolling words, realizing a similar, but far different letter than the one I had actually received five months ago. The tears fell this time as my heart clenched. I had to blink throughout as I read. I noticed the difference in what he had actually told me and what he had wanted to tell me. I cried as I recognized words that had been eliminated in my copy, and I cried as I recognized why.

I became entranced by the words, by the story he told. My heart slammed inside me, but I controlled it, forcing myself to read on, to read the words I loathed.

You can't imagine how hard it is, seeing these children. Mothers come to us with injured babies in their arms, begging us to take them and get them help. We aren't allowed, of course. Some even run out to us in the field as we're loading up in the Hueys, holding their crying children up to us. It's so hard, Nancy. One of the young grunts actually reached out once and we had to pull him back. He started fighting us, screaming and cursing that we should have let him save them. He cried the whole way back to base. The children who live are forced into working for the VC. We come through a village one day and the kids are there smiling and waving and holding their hands out for candy. Then, on the way back, the VC are there instead, waiting for us. One time, I saw a little girl standing beside one of them. She couldn't have been older than Susan. She was holding an AK-47.

We all know these kids have been trained to kill as much as the older ones. Sometimes, we can't even tell the difference between them and the other soldiers. Especially when we pull the men out of the tunnels and they fight us, swinging and kicking and biting. I would laugh at the fuckers if I didn't want to shoot them. They're all so small. The children know their way around better than any of us, and the VC keep them posted at different stations, waiting for us. I see their little faces everywhere. What do you do when one of them is about to shoot your buddy? Do you hesitate, hoping they won't do it? Do you hesitate, hoping he won't kill you?

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We sat in the living room in the evenings, the TV turned off, the lamps warm and bright. I watched Michael and Susan interact with their father, cutting each other off to be the first to tell him something that happened in school. He smiled and listened patiently, playing with the material of his jeans like he always did now. I knew he wanted nothing more than to be back in his army pants. He still wore a t-shirt, the sleeves stretching around his biceps. I worked on

my knitting blanket in my armchair by the lamp, soaking in the atmosphere of all of us together again.

"Did you make any friends over there, Daddy?" Michael asked one night.

My eyes flashed up over my thick rimmed glasses. Susan flicked him in the ear and I noticed the stoic expression pass over Tom's paling features in the glow of the table lamp. His blue eyes clouded in the way that always made me want to scream at him, to pull the clear sky back out from the storm that only he saw, when he went where I couldn't follow. I set the knitting needles and yarn down and stood from the couch, motioning for the children to do the same.

"Let's go Michael, Susan. Early rising for school tomorrow."

"I did have a friend, Michael."

The three of us froze on our way to the hall and looked back at Tom, sitting on the couch with his hands folded over his knees. He glanced up hesitantly and I placed a hand on Michael's shoulder, Susan standing behind me.

"He was maybe ten years older than Susan. His name was Harry. I wish you could meet him. I think you two would have liked each other. He always had baseball cards with him."

"Wow," Michael said. "Did he come home with you on the plane?"

Tom glanced up at me and I raised my chin, holding his eyes. Susan tugged on my dress and I took her hand in mine. Tom blinked a few times and licked his lips, looking at our son with a forced smile and eyes that I couldn't quite see the bottom of anymore.

"Yeah. Yeah, he did."

I hurried the children off to bed and settled them down for the night. I scanned the bookshelf while they sat on their beds in flannel footie pajamas, my fingers flying past Nancy Drew books to find something quick to read.

"No, Mom, it's okay," Susan said. She was messily braiding her hair with a calm, contented expression that I had been mastering toward for almost a year. "Daddy's home now. We don't need a story."

I glanced at Michael, sprawled out over his pillow, his eyes only half open. He gave a sleepy smile. I knelt down and placed a kiss on his forehead, brushing his now long fringe aside and picking up his

stuffed bear that had somehow managed to find itself thrown on the floor already. When I came to Susan, she put her arms around me, still and steady.

A few minutes later, I returned to the living room only to find that Tom had cleaned everything and turned out the lights. I walked slowly to our bedroom, seeing only the bedside lamps lit. He was sitting there, in a t-shirt and boxers, staring again at the dresser. He didn't notice as I changed into my nightgown and climbed into bed behind him. I stroked his shoulders and laid my head over his neck. My hand snaked around him, and he held it to his stomach with clammy, calloused fingers. I let my hand work down his waist. I felt him shudder, and he turned around, pulling me into his lap with a sudden light in his eyes. His hands gently pulled up my nightgown, holding my hips as I rocked against him, arching my back.

I saw the eyes of my husband again, the eyes I had seen on our wedding, our honeymoon, the eyes I had seen in the hospital when the nurses placed Susan in his arms. I saw the face of the man I knew, the one that had sought me out in that airport. He pulled himself up and I braced my hands on his shoulders, keeping time. His mouth covered my jaw, my throat, my breasts, and when they met my lips they were deeper, as if he was trying to savor something he hadn't before.

He lowered me down on the bed, his frame smothering and protective. His hand moved up under my back, the other on my face as he kissed me. I remembered our honeymoon, our wedding on his parents' ranch out in Ohio, our first meeting in a lecture hall as college freshmen. I threw my head back on the pillow, keeping my moan quiet as he moved inside me. My legs wrapped around his back, and his body pressed closer against mine. I eventually eased him onto his side, caressing him. Our hands and bodies moved together in the dark, and I held him as I had been waiting to. I hooked my feet around his ankles and held his face to my chest, squeezing him in my arms and feeling his hot breaths. He was home. He was mine. And no one would ever take him from me again.

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I knew things would not always be pleasant. I knew some days would be worse than others. I knew to give him time when I would find him sitting on the bed, his head in his hands, his back shaking with silent sobs. I thought about our separate nightstands as we slept side by side at night, one with pages vague of truth, the other with realities stripped bare. Only once did I ever find a small bottle of Jim Bean in his sock drawer when I was putting laundry away. I left it there and never mentioned it.

I would think about the letters I read from his nightstand in the afternoons, a new one every day. I always put them back exactly the way I found them. I found the small black and white picture of the girl he said he had kept. I must have sat there for hours just looking at it. I traced my finger over the texture of the dried blood on the corners. I looked in her eyes, the hollow smile there that was absent from her lips. I looked at her long black hair, straight like the fall of night against her traditional gown, white like the rise of dawn. I studied the scribbled writing on the back, the foreign symbols that had faded and smeared.

Susan and Michael grew up with the Daddy they had always had, the Daddy who had simply gone away for a time and came back a hero in their eyes. They were never with him in the long hours of the night, though, pretending that they were still asleep while they listened to him heaving up his stomach in the bathroom from a nightmare. Michael had asked about Harry, but he never heard his father cry out that name at 2:00 in the morning.

One night, I awoke to a loud thud and the rattling of the nightstand lamp. I thought I was only dreaming that I was falling, but then I found myself lying on the floor, Tom stretched out on top of me, pinning me down. I gasped, and his hand clamped over my mouth.

“Shh! Stay down.”

I tried to wrestle my arm free, but he moved his hand from my mouth to pin my wrist. The carpet burned against my bare shoulders. I tried to keep calm, to banish the tears in my eyes from the grip of his hands that sent numbing sparks up the lengths of my fingers. A strand of hair lay across my face, but I didn't try to blow

it off. I didn't move at all. I took a shuddering breath as best I could and spoke clearly.

"Tom, honey, it's just a dream. Honey, wake up."

"No, you have to stay down . . . Don't move."

He continued breathing heavily over my shoulder, the weight of his whole body shaking against mine. He raised his head slowly then, blinking at me. The vein in his forehead bulged and the chords of his neck strained, glistening with sweat. I could see the dream yet in his eyes, the dream he was protecting me in, the vision of something that was all too real. I watched the color drain from his face as he came out of it. I saw the light fade from his eyes, the look of self-loathing swim to the forefront of the fear and confusion.

"No, it was real. They were here." He let my arms free and I brought them up around his neck, stroking his hair and kissing his jaw. I would have to wear a wide bracelet tomorrow to cover the bruises. His head fell back over my shoulder and his hand met the back of my neck.

"And Harry, he . . . he went in and he . . . I told him not to . . . And then they came . . ."

I closed my eyes and thought about the letter I had read the other day. *We lost another one today. Harry, 18 years old, from Arkansas. He heard a crying baby in one of the huts. He went in to get it and sprang the grenade trap the gooks had set on the crib. Blew him to fucking hell. It's happened before.*

"Shhhh, it's okay now," I said. "It's all right." I rolled him over gently and snuggled up next to him on the floor, my arms around his chest, my head on his shoulder. He held me to him, breathing heavily even as I tried to comfort him. His fingers touched my soft hair, the strap of my nightgown. My hand traced on his chest again to let him know I was real until I finally felt him drifting off, still murmuring, "They were here."

I remained awake the rest of the night, watching the ceiling through blurry tears. I thought about one of Tom's letters, one I had read from his nightstand just the night before while he took a shower. *I can't sleep here, Nancy. None of us can. We flinch at the slightest noise, thinking it's a gook. I think we have each other all psyched out. We're*

starting to see things during the day, thinking we're asleep. It's FUBAR. It feels like I've been here forever, like I'll always be here forever.

I heard a car drive by out in the street and wondered where it was going. I thought about having to pack Susan's and Michael's lunches for school in a few hours. I thought about which letter I would choose to read tomorrow. I thought about the shame it would bring, the guilt I would bear, and the small measure of peace I would find.