

Recollections of War

Cruising along the highway, I tried to calm myself. My eyes frantically darted around, taking in every detail. The chequered vehicle I was in was traveling at 50 miles per hour, driven by a middle-aged American man. The smooth, fabricated seats were somewhat worn out, slightly ripped in some areas. Several other cars were on the road, their headlights beaming through the fading light.

I took a deep breath and ran a shaking hand through my dark blonde hair. I met the gaze of my own brown eyes in the review mirror. Serving in the Vietnam War certainly changes a man. Ever since my team had been demobilised, my mind refused to wander away from the thought of being in battle. Letting out a ragged breath, I shuddered at the thought of remembering all the damage that was caused. Before I got sucked into the whirlpool of memories, the vehicle came to a halt.

I cautiously stepped out, aware of every small movement, every detail that surrounded me. I looked up, marvelling at the beautiful sunset. Its orange hues spread across the sky, kissed by a white ribbon. After removing my luggage from the trunk and watching the car drive off, I turned around. Towering in front of me was my childhood home. It was strange to be back after so long. Barely anything had changed since I had left.

The red plywood was still faded and chipped, the roof was missing a few tiles. The door was in desperate need for a new coat, though I remember when it once resembled the colour of chestnuts. Walking through the rusty iron gate, the smell of jasmine coming from nearby bushes suffocated me. Toys littered the grass and footprints pressed into the mud, as though a hurricane of tiny feet had attacked the front lawn. As I approached the front porch, my eyes darted to the old wind chimes hanging by the pillar, the gentle ring created a symphony that wasn't unfamiliar to me.

Looking back to the front door, I raised my fist to knock but hesitated. Although I'd never admit it, the thought of returning home terrified me. I hadn't seen any of my family in almost 9 years. It had broken my mother's heart to see me go into war. I remember how my father had reacted. His grey eyes once shone like polished silver but after hearing the news, they had never looked duller. My little brothers had been so young, too innocent, too pure, to understand what was happening. I wondered how much they all had changed, whether they remembered me, or I was just a figment of their imagination.

Shaking my head to rid it of paranoia, I banged my fist against the wood. The sound of scattering feet and the clutter of plates echoed through the house as I waited for what seemed like forever. As the door swung open, a wave of anxiety fell over me. A woman in a red polka dot dress beamed, eager to embrace me. High pitched shouts came from below, as I was almost knocked over by my brothers. Wow, they had grown so much. I steadied myself and greeted them. I gently enveloped my mother, the feeling of her arms around me was foreign.

I walked into the old house, reminiscing about all the memories we had once shared. Standing in the hallway was my father, leaning on a walking stick to support his frail body. He may have been weak, but his smile lit up the whole room. His eyes once again had that shine, as though it returned with me. I hesitantly walked into his warm embrace. The feeling of being around them still didn't seem right. Over the next few hours, we ate dinner. Everyone was eager to catch up as though I hadn't missed a beat. I spoke little, partially because I couldn't fit in anything with my brothers rambling on about everything. But also because I felt out of place, as though I didn't belong amongst my own blood.

Lying in bed that night, I hardly slept. My mind was plagued by memories from my time in the war. I was haunted by the roar of gun shots being fired, the loud bangs that alerted us of an explosion in the distance. Soldiers shouted commands and warnings, adding to the thundering cacophony of chaos. Running across the battlefield was an obstacle course, trying to weave through the endless piles of debris. Gold bullet shells littered the ground, glittering alongside blades of glass amongst the grey ash. Buildings were blazing, strong and bright. They let out thick, black smoke into the air, covering the sky so the sun was barely visible. Every now and then, a building would cave in, leaving behind nothing but ruins. All around me, bullets were rapidly flying through the air, penetrating anything they came into contact with. Crimson blood stained the floor and our clothes, a reminder of all the damage that was caused. Soldiers were dropping like flies, only to be replaced by more soldiers in a never-ending cycle.

Training in the military taught you to be strong and brave. You endure the worst; days without food, hours of running through the mud and rain, living in the most difficult conditions. It taught you how to cooperate with your team, to literally depend on them for your very own survival. It taught you how to fight in hand-to-hand combat, to use a gun, to use a knife. At first, you train with dummies and in simulators, but before you know it, you're being taught how to shut out your feelings, to shove them deep, deep down and lock them away. That was the most important part of training. Because the first time you pulled that trigger and took away someone's life, was one of the hardest things to deal with. So, you trained and trained to ignore all the bloodshed and the poor, innocent victims.

But no amount of training could have prepared me for what happened. I remembered exactly how it unfolded. He was standing in the middle of the street, firing bullets at the enemy. I was taking cover behind a fallen building with two other members of my team, when I spotted a sniper across the field. I shouted at him to take cover. I remember each step he took, fast and heavy. Then it happened. He cried out in pain as his blood littered the floor, his face finding it quickly after. His blank eyes stared at me, cold as ice and darker than the night sky. After that, my team and I vowed to never fight another day.

Now I'm here. Cursed with sleepless nights, waking up in cold sweats. Suffering through anxiety and afflicted with paranoia. I stood up and walked over to the window. I opened it, allowing the crisp morning breeze to kiss my face. I stared out at the sun, only just beginning to wake up from its own slumber. Its beautiful morning rays beginning to dance across the sky, eating away at the darkness. Sunrises were one of the few things that had kept me going through the war. Their solar transits signified a new day, one that was hopefully better than the last.

Hearing the soft clatter of cutlery, I'm drawn back to the present. Thinking about how frightening it had been to return home yesterday, I realised victims of war are constantly drowned in tidal waves of guilt, regret and pain. I knew that I would always be tormented by my past, and that it would take ages to finally recover from the trauma. But despite all this, I had hopes that I would be able to find a sense of familiarity and comfort with these people. Maybe one day I might actually belong. I glanced back at the sunrise before I turned to go down for breakfast, hopeful that things would work out.