



The boy stumbled under the weight of his basket. He shook his head, trying to get the hair out of his eyes and keep his arms wrapped around the cumbersome object. His bare feet came down on the cracking dirt. He took careful steps, hot tropical sun beating down on his back as he tried not to spill the clean clothes that his mother had folded and laid in the basket. Setting his burden down, he looked to his right, across the river, at the neighboring hamlet.

Through the tall grass he could see the gardens, overtaken by weeds, standing alongside the rubble of houses that had been consumed by flames. *I lived there once*, he thought to himself. *Before that day when I first heard the diesel engines and saw the trucks filled with American soldiers. Before my home burned and we had to flee. Before Father tried to fetch a stem of bananas and didn't see the death-warning sign. Before, he thought, the shell exploded.*

He shook his head. He tried not to think of such things, tried not to think of the war, the deaths. At night when he lay on the dirt floor of his little hut with his younger brothers and sisters, closing his eyes and longing for sleep, he tried to concentrate over the sound of gunfire and distant bombing.

The boy picked up his basket and again began to walk toward the American soldiers' camp. He approached the tall barbed wire fence which bordered the building that soldiers had turned into a military camp. Hearing the sound of a helicopter, he glanced up.

"What is it, kid?" The voice surprised him. He lowered his head to see a burly soldier, barring his way. He paused, looking at his basket.

"This laundry." He croaked out the few English words he knew as he squinted at the man. The man carefully took the basket and gave the boy a few coins. The boy slipped the coins into the pocket of his calf-length pants, then turned in the other direction and headed toward the grocer's shop to buy rice for dinner. A group of soldiers was sitting at a table in front of the shop, watching the boy's approach. They motioned for him to come over. His steps were hesitant. He did not trust these men who slouched in their chairs with guns across their laps and cigarettes dangling from the corner of their mouths.

"I won't hurt you," one of the men said as he set his gun on the ground behind him and put his hands in the air. The other men were talking, laugh-

By Samantha Bates



ing and nudging him as he did so. The boy understood none of this and stood staring at the soldier. The man reached into his left breast pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, opening it and offering one to the boy. He cautiously reached out to take the item as the soldiers' laughter grew louder. The boy had seen his father and other men smoking, but had been told that he was too young to begin the practice. The man held out a lighter to ignite the cigarette and the boy tried to draw in a long breath as he had seen others do. The taste was revolting. The boy coughed out the burning smoke and felt like throwing up. Some of the men began to laugh even harder, but the one who had given him the cigarette shook his head and showed him how to inhale. The boy tried again and still coughed, but the nausea wasn't as bad. When he finished the cigarette, the man gave him another to take along with him.

Later that evening, before the boy had eaten dinner, he walked out behind the small hut that he lived in. The weak structure was built halfway into the ground and was made of a wooden frame with thatched walls and a corrugated metal roof. A few of their chickens pecked at the ground near his feet and he shooed them away. Glancing around to see if anyone was coming, the boy reached into the pocket of his light blue shirt and pulled out the cigarette the soldier had given him. He had taken a match from the kitchen when his mother's back was turned and now struck it to construct a bright flame in the dimming twilight. Strangely, he had been craving the almost revolting taste of the cigarette throughout the afternoon but had waited till now, knowing that his mother would scold him if she were to

and the boy could see that his older sister had returned in their boat from the neighboring hamlet. In the boat sat food from the garden that had formerly been theirs. Every day his sister left in their small boat to gather food from their old garden and, she hinted, other gardens as well. She always had to keep a watchful ear out for the sound of fighter planes soaring over, preparing to

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bomb. Going over to that hamlet was extremely hazardous. The boy had been forbidden to go there.

He quickly ran to help her carry the food to their hut. He noticed that she also carried a small piece of paper in her left hand. They had received a letter from their older brother who was fighting in Saigon. The family received letters from him every few months.

When the family sat down at the bamboo table for their supper of rice with soy sauce, salted cucumbers, and fresh water, his sister read the letter aloud. The boy's brother's words spoke of how difficult the war was, how he missed them all and wanted to see them—the same words he always wrote on the small sheet of paper. The very words they themselves thought but rarely expressed.

The boy lay his head on the mat and closed his eyes, trying to sleep. From far off, somewhere, came the sound of rapid gunfire shooting hollowly at some meager victim. The boy jumped at the sound of a bombshell as it hit the earth. Against the deep blackness of night, with the sounds of war echoing across the landscape, a small thought rolled into the boy's mind. He wanted a cigarette.

The boy sat in the back of the bar, watching the American soldiers intently. They were drunk. He knew that. And when they got drunk they started to get careless about things. Things like cigarettes. The boy had already taken two from his mother's room the day before. He stood and took a seat closer to the bar. The soldiers had started to sing. He watched carefully as one of them pulled a pack from his pocket. The large man

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find out. He lit the cigarette and began to smoke it, blowing out the gray fumes as he'd seen many soldiers do as they walked the streets of his hamlet, their guns nestled comfortably in their arms. Suddenly a large bumping sound made him jump and drop the cigarette. He quickly extinguished it with a clump of mud by his feet and ran around the hut to see what had caused the noise.

The bank of the river lined the edge of his house,

took out one cigarette and placed the pack on the bar. He then turned his back to light up. *Now*, thought the boy, *this is the moment. Now!* Quickly but cautiously, he rose from his chair and walked over to the bar while the soldier's back was turned. He reached out his right hand, grabbed the pack and sat back down—just before the soldier turned around. The man looked down at the

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place where his pack had been and looked confused.

"OK," he said to his comrades, smiling. "Where'd you put it?"

"Put what?" one of the other men asked, turning from the conversation.

"My smokes, what do you think?" The first soldier was already becoming angry.

"Hey, man, I don' got your thmokes!" The second soldier's words were slurred from the alcohol as he shook his head fuzzily.

"Give 'em back!" the first soldier demanded, pushing the other man.

"I told you. I don' got 'em," the second soldier repeated.

The boy made a discreet exit. Through the darkness he walked back to his hut, halfway smiling at his ability to fool the soldiers.

The morning sun warmed his face and woke him. He had dreamed of his father, how they had once played together, a carefree family. Before the war. But the thought of his father also reminded him of the bomb. The explosion. Of seeing his father's body sprawled in the deep brown, blood-soaked dirt. His father's eyes, clouded with the milky look of death. The boy opened his own eyes only to be blinded by a shaft of morning sun glancing through one of the holes in the matted wall, the deafening sound of the explosion still ringing in his mind.

Stretching, his hands reached up, just brushing the ceiling of the small hut. He looked down at his younger twin brothers still asleep on the floor. Walking stiffly

out the door and around to the back of the house, he pulled out the pack of cigarettes he had taken from the soldier—that's how he thought of it: *taking* from the soldier, not *stealing*. He somehow thought that it wasn't the same. It wasn't wrong, he told himself. After all, he was taking what he really needed. Trying to push these thoughts to the back of his mind, he pulled out one of the few remaining cigarettes and once again began to smoke. By now he had become fairly good at it. He could draw in a long breath, hold it for a second, and then let it out easily. When he had finished the cigarette he began the short walk to the grocer's.

It was still early. Only a few citizens walked along the dirt roads of the small hamlet (not including the ever present American soldiers). When he reached the grocer's shop he quietly took a seat behind the small booth, by the back door.

While he waited for the shop to get busy, a thought began to creep into his mind. A memory. A recollection of when the American soldiers had first come. How the gunfire had broken out like lightning, slashing through the black sky. The shattering sound had awakened him from his sleep. Opening his eyes, he saw his parents arguing. His father kept telling his mother that they must leave the house soon or they'd be burned alive. Finally, his mother was convinced, and they began hastily packing their possessions. Everything went into baskets which were then placed on sticks to be carried against their shoulders.

Exploding shells and bloodcurdling screams filled the boy's ears. The rapid chops of helicopter blades low overhead had made him duck in fear as he ran with his family across the mud to the river. The most constant sound had been that of his infant sister, wailing in his mother's arms. But as they boarded the small boat to escape, his sister's crying had abruptly ceased. He turned to look: on one side of his sister's head was a small hole, with blood trickling down her face. The baby now hung in her mother's arms, a rag doll, the life gone. He had been unable to believe it. It was so simple. One little bullet was all it had taken to end life. One bullet and she was gone. Forever.

By now the villagers had reached the store, pushing and shouting their orders to the old storekeeper. The boy stood up shakily and made his way closer to the front of the shop. His eyes fixed on the old man rushing around trying to satisfy all his customers. Over on the wall to his right he spotted the item he desired. The cigarettes! He crawled over to the wall, being sure not to be seen by the harried storekeeper. Quickly, deftly, he reached up a hand to snatch the pack, then scurried back to where he had stood. His feet made a slight



drumming sound as he ran from the shop—one second too late. His footfalls had alerted the storekeeper, who turned to see him leave, the cigarettes in his left hand. “Thief! Thief!” The man ran after him until he was out of breath.

The boy glanced back behind him, and, seeing that he was no longer being pursued, stopped running. His escape had been too close. He would not try to take from the grocer again. He had to think of a better way to get cigarettes, or money for them. The boy continued walking, enveloped in thought.

It was still dark. The boy stood next to the boat, wondering if he’d made the right decision. He glanced over his shoulder at the small structure where his mother still wept and the others slept. The boy’s hands looked small to him as he clasped the rope that held the boat to shore; then he hopped into the small vessel. Drifting slowly on the shallow waters of the river, the boy tried to steer the boat to the shore of the opposite hamlet, the oars heavy and cumbersome in his weak hands.

He almost fell forward when the boat hit the opposite bank. Quickly, before the boat could get caught in the current, the boy jumped out, rope in hand. He hid the boat in a large growth of reeds, then turned and stopped—dead in his tracks. Now he could see the truth of the destruction. He saw the dirt of the old streets, all chewed up and mixed with incredible stacks of ashes from the burnt homes. The ashes reminded him of the last time he’d stood in this very same spot. The sight of his home being devoured by flames.

By now, the sun was just beginning to peek over the eastern horizon, its pale rays spilling onto the bodies of people he had once known, now decaying amidst the ashes, rusting shells, and stinking mud. The smell was overwhelming.

The boy sat, stunned. Why had no one buried the dead? And how could it be that his older sister continued to take food from their gardens, probably stepping right over their bodies?

He walked cautiously down the street and entered one of the gardens. As he knelt to pick a few vegetables, he felt he was doing something wrong but once again pushed the thought to the back of his mind.

Just then, he heard a very faint sound. Almost unnoticeable. But the sound began to grow, as whatever it was drew nearer. The sound was familiar, but what was it? Suddenly, the boy’s heart filled with fear as he recognized it. The engine of a plane. *A fighter plane.*

The boy froze, then began to run. Run for his life.

Behind him he could hear the deafening sound of shells tearing up the earth. *It’s not supposed to happen this way,* he thought. *I’m supposed to get the vegetables and trade them for cigarettes. This isn’t supposed to happen.*

His heart pounded in his heaving chest as he ran with all his force across the mud. He could hear the roar of the engine as it drew ever closer. He tried to run faster, to escape, to find a hiding place, but he just didn’t have the power. The strength. No one can outrun a plane.

The blast was beyond deafening. Smashing into his brain and then out again. Simply the force of the sound could have destroyed him. The shell had hit, blowing a massive hole into the earth and lifting his body into the air. He hit the ground, the mud suddenly hard as steel

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against the snap of his breaking ribs. All that was left was the faint sound of the plane, continuing on its way. That and the pain. Pain in his leg that obliterated all else. He shut his eyes and everything went black.

The boy awoke on a soft bed, something he hadn’t felt in a long time. He slowly opened his eyes. The bed was bright white, surrounded by curtains. And . . . and . . . *he couldn’t feel his leg!* The leg that had held all the pain in the world! He tried to sit up and look at himself. It was excruciatingly difficult, his ribs screaming in protest as he did so. Glancing down at his midsection, he could not at first make sense of what he was seeing. His leg, the one that had taken the brunt of the shell, was gone. All that was left was a bandaged, bloody stump. He fell back into the soft pillow, moaning, eyes tightly shut.

When, hours later, he at last summoned courage to reopen his eyes, the first thing he saw was the cigarettes on the small bedside table. He knocked them to the cement floor. *You!* he raged. *Because of you I am this?* But deep within the boy’s heart, a small voice spoke, too. *No, not you . . . it is the soldiers . . . their evil war . . . the leaders who sent them here, their greedy government . . .* It spoke otherwise. ★

