

Sanctuary

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Later, when asked, he would have said that the halcyon days of his youth ended when he was only seven. In truth, though, the day that Ahn became shadows of himself, one original accompanied by two copies, sometimes three, never able to be the same, had been a beautiful day. Standing at the window, he heard the sound of the bombing that had been both bedtime story and morning bell for many months, but he had never seen the fighting. All that there had been up to that time was the sound. But on that day, the sunset had been too much for him to take in all at once. He could smell the garlic and onions scenting the lemon grass soup that his mother was making over the cooking pit in the yard. His Papa was just at the edge of the rice paddy, hoe over his shoulder, wiping his brow, and he remembered being happy. Papa was about to call to Mama when he saw it, that sunset, yellow-streaked and purple, hazy ribbons of red light blending into orange glows, when he saw it coming. Before his brain could discover what it was, it flew as if it was being born from the womb of that searing sunset, straight

towards them. A black fleck before the piercing sound that made him cover his ears, even as he watched his mother turn to run back into the house. But then there was the explosion, and the ground where his mother had been standing was just gone. He smelled the blood before he realized that he was hurting. He would have cried but for the crushing weight of the stones that had been his house that were suddenly resting on his chest.

When the soldier came and pulled him out, he was taken to his brother. It was only later, when his brother told him that they were on the way to their father's village, because they were alone, that he realized that his parents were gone. And then the shadows came. That was the day when he learned to mask his tears with silence.

The soldier who pulled them from the rubble was the darkest man either of them had ever seen. His brother had learned some English from the soldiers who had been passing through their village since the bombs had started, and he started to plead with the soldier in English broken with Vietnamese when the Dark Soldier asked their names, flawlessly, in their own language.

His brother pointed to him and said, "Ahn," then to himself and said, "Hoai." When the soldier told them that he could not take them as prisoners, he stopped listening, certain that this Black man with his giant hands would be the last thing he would see in life. It was not until Hoai told him that the Black man was going to take them to Papa's village that his stomach—relieved started to heave, and he bent double as the nothing that was

inside of him tried to spill out. It was the giant who touched him lightly on his back, and gave him some lemongrass to hold in his mouth until the retching stopped.

Ahn watched the other soldiers gather what was left of his parents and the other people who used to live in their village. He and Hoai collected stones, one by one, to cover the mounds of the dead. And when the cold night air took hold of him, there was nothing left of the russet colors of the sunset, except those that would not leave his head.

He wanted to cry, but instead he used the magic of the russets and yellows and hues of orange to hold onto as tightly as he held to his brother's hand. Thoughts of his mother rotting under the mounds of rocks and of his father sleeping with his father's fathers appeared in the colors in his head, but just as suddenly disappeared. For more than a moment, he wished that Hoai would run and take him away from the soldiers who had saved them, but who could just as easily kill them without thinking. But something about the Dark One held them there even as Ahn captured his feelings and covered them in the colors of the sky. He was a big man, with tightly woven hair that stuck out under the rim of his helmet. His hair coiled in and over top of itself, twisting and untamed. He was heavily muscled, hard beneath the camouflage of his clothes, but there was nothing but gentleness in his eyes when he spoke to them. When there was nothing left to do with the dead, the dark giant took paper and colored chalk from his pack and sat quietly, capturing what was left of the greenness of the rice paddy on the paper. He gave Ahn his own paper to capture life onto that day. It was the beginning of his life as an artist, the life that made it possible for him to journey to America in search of the hard and gentle man who gave him his life back in the midst of all that was dead.

In times when Ahn looked back to his past, the Dark Soldier was always there. When the other soldiers made their camp and lit their short-lived fires, he shared the tin-plated food with them.

"Does your brother talk?" He asked Hoai in Vietnamese, pointing to Ahn.

"Yes, he speak," Hoai told him in English; the effort to say more in English was clearly visible on his face. Ahn was about to speak, but changed his mind when the tangles of the colors came to save him. They stopped waiting in the gap of silence, both knowing that the words would come from Ahn when he could find a way to speak.

Hoai broke the silence first. "We are . . ." he spoke in English, then switched to his own language "orphans now. We must go to Papa's village. We must go to Mai Li." When Hoai said the name of Papa's village, the soldier's expression changed to something they recognized as anger, though there seemed to be no reason why.

So Hoai, knowing that these soldiers could easily kill, started pleading, "I keep Ahn safe." Ahn watched his brother start to cry, and, because he could not hold it, he turned his face away back toward the colors in his mind. The soldier's face became its hard and gentle blackness almost instantly. He looked away, too, as if to give Hoai the space to compose himself.

Without bothering to give in to emotion, the Dark Soldier said, "Mai Li is . . . gone. Nothing lives there anymore. I will take you to the closest place where you can be safe. Do you understand?"

When they did not respond, he looked at Hoai and spoke slowly.

"In the morning, you will gather all the food you can find. I will take you; I will make sure you will be safe." Then he gave them a green tarp and helped them to cover themselves.

“You can call me ‘Pete,’” he said, pointing to himself. “You are safe with me.”

Then he softly whistled a song to them, so quietly it was almost a whisper. It was a strange and foreign song, but it held them still until sleep came. Even now, when Ahn thought of him, he could hold the image of his hands and remember the sound of the soft, night-song and feel at peace.

As the boys slept, Pete let the nightmare begin as it usually did when there was nothing more to do and no one left to fight. Their room had been right across the hallway, so he had carried himself there on the soles of the pajamas that covered him shoulder to feet. He could move as fast as his heart was beating; it was as if it was beating itself out of his chest without regard for his life. And he had been certain that the next time she came—bad dream or not—that Red would get him. She had come again in the night, stealing the peacetime of his dreams. Across the room in his matching twin bed, his brother snored into the night, but he knew that he was powerless against the demon spirit who threatened to carry him away into the mystery of whatever was on the other side of life. Sneaky as she was, she never appeared when he expected her, never on a night when his parents’ fighting was loud, never on a night when the nine o’clock movie or Alfred Hitchcock was too scary for him to watch without covering his eyes. But since she came so often, unbidden, he had determined to always be ready, swearing to best her so his father would not think that he was afraid. Always one leg out from under the cover, he was ready to run across the hall to the room with its safely paneled walls and seek sanctuary in his parents’ room.

The family had named her ‘Red,’ not only because she refused to speak her name in the meandering of his dreamspace, but because he had told them that she had reddish brown hair and redbone skin and that every time she came to him she was wearing red. Red stockings, red dresses, red pants, and always the same color red on the long fingernails that clicked together when she tried to kill him. That night, she had almost had him. In his dream, she had caught him off-guard, playing with some puppies, patched in brown and ribboned in blue, that someone had thoughtfully left on the porch. He should have known that they were too beautiful, too sweet, too perfect to be his. But she had trapped him there gazing into the brown puppy eyes, almost unaware. Her breathe froze him in place. It felt hot on his neck, and the hair on his neck stood up. And he ran, out of his dream and into the hallway, on to sanctuary.

In the scenery of his nightmare, it was the little things that he remembered about that day that made it stick with him. There were photographs of his brother, sister and himself, growing up in the dust-covered frames on their dresser. There was the *Ebony* magazine on the bed, with a smiling photograph of Willie Mays and his tannish wife. And then there were the seconds. Just seconds had passed between finding safety and when the tears dried on his face. When his father’s fist first raised and reared back, then struck his mother’s eye, and when she fell for the last time in that room. There were just seconds between the time his father’s eyes had clouded over when he pulled the trigger of the .38, that he was pointing at his heart. And there Pete was, framed in the mirror on their bureau, lost behind the largess of his eyes.

The waking dream always ended there, just at the point all safety was gone. It only took him a moment to realize that the awe that was revealed in his eyes in that mirror was what he saw reflected in the younger boy’s eyes. He was determined to be unafraid, to save