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The Writer Next Door Mon voisin l'écrivain Mi vecino el escritor



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On Point

He remembered refrigerators, thousands of them on the docks in Vietnam, in the capital. Not Hanoi, not Ho Chi Minh City, the capital then ... he pulled down the well-thumbed atlas from above his desk. Saigon. How could he forget Saigon? He was not yet sixty, but details, important details, were already settling into the pond of his mind. That's how he saw it: a deep, bluish-green pond with stuff buried in soft mud at the bottom. When the mud stirred, a memory – refrigerators – popped to the surface.

He had stared into space, then at the damned refrigerators straining the docks as the rains washed over them. A whole army, battalions of white Maytags and Westinghouses lined up like tombstones sent by some aid agency in Washington, for what purpose he was never told. His job had been to get rid of the refrigerators. Bombs were dropping; people were making plans to escape through a window of time even though the shape and the size of the peace table in Paris had been agreed upon, and the treaty signed; but the peace was not holding. As he remembered, one of his last missions, one of his last opportunities to show his worth to his country and to his president, was to clear the dock and distribute the refrigerators to the South Vietnamese. But they had little electricity to plug them into, or the wrong current; he no longer remembered the reason the refrigerators couldn't be used as intended.

He'd taken on this task with the seriousness of his twenty-six years, his University of Pennsylvania education, and his aspiration to higher office someday. If he could acquit himself well under stressful circumstances when all around were giving up, if he could inspire courage in his men to distribute this gift from America to the people of Saigon, perhaps he would prove himself worthy, and someone might make a mention in his file that would reflect well in his pursuit of a higher opportunity to serve.

Refrigerators flew all over Saigon, on trucks, on bikes, in rickshaws, as everyone's dream came true for a Maytag or Westinghouse. The North Vietnamese were advancing and eventually might claim these refrigerators that didn't work, but until then the South Vietnamese found uses for them. Even if they couldn't keep food cold, they could keep it safe from rats and other vermin. Some families used them for general storage, protecting family heirlooms from moisture. Some set them on their sides and used them as tables, covering them with bright cloths. One family laid the refrigerator on its back, took off the door, removed the shelves, filled it with old clothes and placed a newborn child in it.

Sitting in his study in the dark now, in his brown leather chair, Ret. Major William Rice could still see the baby with two coal-black eyes peering up at him

from among the rags in the refrigerator crèche. The baby would be what, in his thirties now? Those two black eyes had followed him his whole life, keeping him fixed in their sight, reminding him of what he'd done and what he'd left behind. The face and the eyes had never sunk to the bottom of his pond, but floated just beneath the surface like vegetation with roots in the water. He felt trapped in the mirror of those eyes.

'Will, you're up again?' Rice's wife stood in the doorway. The hall light shined through the nylon of her blue nightgown, silhouetting her still-athletic body. Her short, gray hair frizzed around her face. 'That's every night this week.'

'Go back to bed. I'll be in soon.'

'I woke up, and you weren't there.'

'I'll come in soon.'

'Come in now; otherwise you'll wake me all over again.'

He settled deeper into the chair. He wore plaid pajamas, his robe tied loosely at the waist. His gray crew cut and stubbly gray beard made him look older than he was. 'Maybe I'll just doze here, then I won't bother you.'

She glanced at the atlas in his lap. 'Come in when you're ready. I don't mind.'

He'd been married to Barbara thirty years. They had two children together. Jennifer, now married herself, lived in San Francisco with her artist husband whom she, a lawyer, would probably support their whole lives; Ryan, just two years out of the University of Pennsylvania, was following in his father's footsteps as a Second Lieutenant. The US Army was all-volunteer now, not like in his day. It had given Ryan a full scholarship to university, persuasive at a time when the world was in a relative state of peace, though Ryan would have joined anyway. Money was never the lure for him, just the excuse he offered his friends, who didn't understand why he'd sign over four years of his life to have someone else tell him what to do and possibly put him in harm's way. That someone was going to tell *them* what to do didn't occur to them. In the Philadelphia suburb where they lived, few – were there any? – of Ryan's friends had joined the military. His friends' parents explained Ryan's choice by noting that Will had spent his early career in the Army. Will had ascended only to the rank of Major, never to Colonel, to which he'd aspired. When he left, he joined Westinghouse. He never ran for public office except for two terms on the school board. His ambitions had faded, or changed, or perhaps landed as early sediment at the bottom of his pond.

What eluded his grasp now as he reached into the waters of memory was the reason his ambitions had fallen away. Or had they been driven away by a mistake he'd made long ago, one he'd never reconciled over the years, even with the help of ministers? Lately he couldn't quit thinking about the night in Vietnam; his fear that history exacted tolls was a cold fist at his heart as his own son was on point in Iraq.

'Will ... Will ... It's Ryan.' Barbara was shaking his shoulders. He lifted his head. A small slick of drool coated his wrist and puddled on the blotter. 'He's on a satellite phone. He can only talk a few minutes.' His wife pressed the speaker button and switched on the lamp. Outside it was still dark. 'Ryan, we're here. Ryan, can you hear us? Here's Dad.'

'Hi, son! Are you there?'

'I'm here, Dad, nowhere else to be. Hotter than hell: 130 degrees, not much

shade.'

'It's so good to hear from you,' Barbara said. 'It's been a while. Dad was worried.'

'Your *mother* was worried,' Will said. 'The news isn't so good over there.'

'It's a big country. I'm all right. Most of the people just want to live their lives. They don't hate us. They don't much like us either; they just want to be left alone.'

'I wish you *could* leave them alone,' Barbara said. 'But I know you'll take care of others as well as yourself.'

'You take care of yourself and your men,' Will said.

'I'm doing fine. Don't worry. Listen, I can't talk long. I just wanted you to know I'm okay, and I wanted to wish you happy birthday, Dad. I have to give the phone back now.'

'I understand, son. You be careful.'

Ryan laughed. 'Yeah, Dad, I'll be careful. I love you guys.'

The phone went dead. Will and Barbara stared at it, then at each other, as if waiting for more words to come through. The dial tone hummed. Will returned the receiver to its cradle.

'He remembered your birthday,' Barbara said. 'Come on in now, let's go to bed.' Will rose and followed his wife to their bedroom as the first light of morning lifted the night sky.

'You think Jennifer will call?'

Barbara heard the hesitation in his voice. 'Have you called her?'

He didn't answer. 'What time is Tran coming over?'

'He'll be here by six.' Barbara settled her head into the cradle of his shoulder, and they fell into a deep morning sleep.

Ryan called this morning," Barbara greeted Tran and Mai, his wife, at the front door.

Will had met Tran Van Danh fifteen years earlier at the Exxon station where Tran worked behind a glass window making change. Son of a South Vietnamese official killed when the North overran Saigon, Tran had escaped the forced labor camps where many of his friends ended by hiding in the wine cellar of an abandoned home that had belonged to an American businessman, who'd left behind not only his wine and larder but also his library. Tran took a French/English dictionary, a Vietnamese/English dictionary and several novels before disappearing into the cellar and eventually into the back streets of Saigon. Years later, escaping on a boat to Hong Kong, he assisted authorities as an interpreter for the thousands of refugees flooding the island. He'd gained passage to the US and arrived at Philadelphia's airport, age twenty-seven, unmarried, dressed as meticulously as possible in hand-me-down clothes given him by a church worker in Australia. Eventually Will had offered Tran a job, persuading his superiors that although Tran held no university degree, his life demonstrated the fortitude and drive Will wanted in an assistant for new projects in Asia. Tran spoke five languages, including Chinese. Will predicted Tran would be extremely loyal; Tran had now been working at Westinghouse for thirteen years.

'How is Ryan?' asked Mai, who was Brooklyn-born of a Vietnamese mother and Filipino father.

'He says it's hotter than hell, but quiet.'

Tran heard the pride in Will's voice, and wondered: Was he proud his son was

surviving a place hotter than hell, or that the place was quiet, reflecting his son's effect on hell? Tran had no children, and few memories of his own father. 'So Ryan is well?' he asked.

'Yes, he did sound well,' Will answered.

'He remembered Will's birthday.' Barbara's pride attached to her son's thoughtfulness.

'He couldn't tell us exactly where he was,' Will added.

'When does he come back?' Mai asked this question every time they were together, because she knew Will liked to answer.

'They say February, but you know the Army; they're keeping people beyond their tours. These are not ordinary days. People are staying two tours, even longer.'

'It was different in our time,' Tran said, though he'd been a boy in Will's time; but he, too, understood that his friend needed to talk every day about his son.

'Yes, it's a new world, though not a much better world,' Will said.

'Shall we go in for dinner?' Barbara didn't want this detour into memory right now. Instead she opened the double doors to the dining room, which was completely dark. A frown crossed Will's face, as if he feared his wife had forgotten to make dinner or to make it nice, confirming his worst feelings of being left out – tonight, on his birthday. His friends had all declined invitations to dinner, claiming other plans. This morning he'd confessed to his wife his suspicion that there was another party to which they hadn't been invited. Only Tran had been able to come.

As Will stepped into the room, a light flashed on. From behind chairs and curtains a chorus called: 'Surprise!'

Will blinked, his gray lashes fluttering, unable at first to take in Paul and Ellen and Sharon and Jack and Ron and Margaret, all the friends who'd had 'plans'. For a moment he wondered if the other party had been canceled. His wife leaned into him and whispered: 'Happy Birthday.'

Across the room he saw his daughter. He hadn't seen Jennifer, had barely spoken with her, since her wedding six months ago – before Ryan left for Iraq, before Westinghouse promoted the head of marketing rather than him, before Tran was moved out from under him to assist the new executive vice president. His eyes clouded, and at the same time he felt like fighting, for he felt the pity around the edges of this party his wife had arranged. She'd persuaded Jennifer to come home in spite of how he'd behaved at her wedding. He'd let his views be known in their hotel suite the day before the wedding that her intended, Jim – what was his last name? Lemon – that Jim Lemon was *blah*. He'd said that to her. Jim Lemon had no passion, no ambition. He painted furniture and wrote poetry.

'He makes furniture with paintings on them,' Jennifer had corrected him. 'People pay a lot of money for Jim's paintings on their furniture. It's a dying craft.'

'Maybe there's a reason it's dying,' he'd said. Yes, he'd said that. He knew he'd misbehaved, gone over an edge, but he hadn't been able to help himself. He'd gotten in trouble not only with Jen, but with Barbara and even with Ryan (though in private Ryan confessed he didn't much like Jim's cabinets, with their scenes of mountains and flowers and animals).

'But Dad, Jen likes them, and she likes ... she loves Jim,' Ryan had said.

'Do you like Jim?'

'It doesn't matter. I'll learn to like him. Jennifer loves him and is marrying him.'

'It doesn't matter. I'll learn to like him. Jennifer loves him and is marrying him.'

'Your sister went to Yale, for Christ's sake! She'll be supporting him for the rest of their lives!' Jennifer was his beloved firstborn who'd lifted him out of depression after Vietnam, the child who'd made him believe his work and life were leading somewhere, if only to clear a path for her.

'If Jen doesn't care, why should you?'

'It won't work. You watch. It won't work.'

'Dad, that's no longer your business. Besides, Jim may be the Picasso of furniture painters for all you or I would know. Jen says his last cabinet sold for \$15,000.'

'Fifteen thousand dollars! Maybe the guy owed him a favor.'

'Jen says stores are starting to commission his work.'

'It's not the money. I thought Jen would choose to live ... I don't know ...

I thought she'd choose differently, choose to live on point.'

'What point?'

'On point ... at the front, leading, where life matters, where choices matter.'

He wondered now exactly what that point was. His son was on point in harm's way 7,000 miles from home, patrolling the desert and slogging through irrigation ditches searching for weapons on people who didn't want him there, as he himself had been thirty years before. He'd always thought he could protect his children, but now both of them were beyond his borders, and his own borders were contracting.

When he was on point, he'd made one wrong judgment. It wasn't even clear if it was a wrong judgment, but the consequences had lasted a lifetime. His platoon had pursued a young man they'd been told was Viet Cong, cornering him in the alley behind his home. He'd blown himself up. Or had they blown him up? It was no longer clear in his memory. When they stormed inside his house, the man's pregnant wife went into labor. She started screaming; she couldn't quit screaming. He could smell her urine, and the rice burning on the stove. Before he left Saigon, he returned to that house. He'd made sure the family received one of the first Westinghouse refrigerators. They didn't know who he was when he came to visit the second time, to meet the tiny son with the two coal-black eyes and the little fist that gripped his finger and would not let go.

He nodded now to his daughter across the room. He should have apologized to her before this, but wasn't about to admit he'd been wrong. He hadn't been able to talk to Barbara either about how he'd acted at the wedding, because he'd have had to say he was wrong – and he didn't think he was. He thought over time they would all see that he was right. But now here she was. Had her marriage failed already? He smiled at her, a smile that said 'welcome home', that said it didn't matter what had happened, that he'd never say: 'I told you so.'

Then Jim Lemon stepped out of the kitchen, and they came over to him together. 'Happy Birthday, Dad.'

'Happy Birthday, sir.' Jim handed him a teakwood box and a card. Painted on the lid of the box was an intricate landscape of a village in Vietnam before the bombs fell.

'Jim made it for you,' Jen said. 'And he wrote this for you.'

Will looked at the painting, its brushstrokes fine, almost luminous, letting light penetrate through the leaves of the trees, a filigree falling on the huts as though one were walking through the jungle and suddenly came upon this life, this

possibility, emerging in the sunlight, frozen in time before anything else happened, before the memory of it disappeared. He stared for a long moment at this rendering, and noted the precision and the skill.

'Jim wanted to paint something that would have meaning for you,' Jen said. He watched his daughter, her intelligence shining in her eyes and in her quiet smile. He saw something – what? She, too, was luminous. He glanced at his wife across the room, talking with Tran. He looked again at the small landscape, which seemed almost to breathe from the wood. He turned to his son-in-law, who'd never been to this place he had evoked with such care that it opened his own memory like a wound. Before the wound between them festered too long and too deeply, his son-in-law was offering to imagine and to empathize with him.

Will took a deep breath, swimming up from the bottom. He touched his daughter's hand. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I was wrong.' He stared at the box, then opened the card and read: *Over the hills of memory, new life walks ...*

He turned to his daughter. Her face was flushed and full, her waist thicker. 'Jen ...?'

She smiled, including him, forgiving him, and nodded.

'Does your mother know?'

'I told her tonight.'

He took her arm, and Jim Lemon's arm, and went over to Tran and Barbara.

'Here,' he said, showing the box to his wife. 'Here, you see? This. This ... life ... it is returning.'