

BAC SI

A NOVEL

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outskirtspress
DENVER, COLORADO

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Outskirts Press, Inc.
<http://www.outskirtspress.com>

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-4787-5105-2
Hardback ISBN: 978-1-4787-5221-9

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

DEDICATION

For the Veterans of that place and time we call Viet Nam.

*For my mother and my daughters, and for their encouragement to
write this story.*

“Got in a little hometown jam.
So they put a rifle in my hand.
Sent me off to a foreign land.
To go and kill the yellow man.”

Bruce Springsteen
“Born in the U.S.A.”

“If you were there, I don’t need to explain.
If you weren’t, I can’t explain.”

James Webb
Former Secretary of the Navy,
Virginia Senator, and
Viet Nam War veteran
CBS Sunday Morning,
May 25, 2014

“Once upon a time, a girl with moonlight in her eyes,
put her hand in mine, and said she loved me so.
But that was once upon a time, very long ago.”

Tony Bennett
“Once upon a time.”

PROLOGUE

The mind is a wondrous place. It holds memories, pleasant ones and painful ones. These memories may surface unexpectedly, or when its master, the mind, conjures them up. The definition of memory is the retention of learned experiences. There are two types of memories, primary or short term, and secondary or long term. The former endures for a very brief period of time. The latter reflects the knowledge of a former state of mind after it has already once dropped from consciousness. We should be thankful for both.

So let it be with the memories of war, and so let it be with the memories of innocent love. These experiences are, or should be retained in our memories lest we not learn from our experiences, the ones that brought us pleasure as well as pain.

The mid 1960's are years typical of that yin and yang of the memory process. It was during those years that many happy and many painful memories were forged for a generation. They still linger today. What one does with those memories, the good ones and the bad ones, characterizes this story.

CHAPTER 1

*Neuropsychology Unit
Bethesda Naval Hospital
22 December 1968*

Her almond shaped eyes looked up at me when she said, “Xin chao, Bac Si,” which I knew was Vietnamese for “Hello Doctor.”

“Xin chao, Quynh. You look very pretty this morning. Did you have breakfast?”

“Oh yes, Bac Si. Cam on (thank you).”

“English, Quynh, remember?” This little 8-year-old girl took my hand and we walked down the long, gray and blue hall, to my office, where she sat on the chair next to my desk, in her little dark blue pleated skirt with a white, navy style jumper top, ever so prim and proper. Her pitch black hair was cut in a typical Asian, little girl style, with bangs to her mid forehead. After she sat there for a couple of minutes, she looked at me, and politely picked up one of the crayons on the desk and began drawing. She knew the routine, as she had been doing it since she was first assigned to my service, Pediatric Neuropsychology, two months before.

Typically on this service, the focus was on the assessment and treatment of brain disorders, usually resulting from either physical trauma or any syndrome, such as autism or even Attention Deficit Disorder. In Quynh’s case, she initially presented with mutism, an inability to speak. The question asked by her neurologist was whether

this mutism, which had a relatively sudden onset, was a function of some brain dysfunction of a clearly physical nature, even though nothing showed up on scans, or was this some sudden onset psychological issue, which would later be classified as post-traumatic stress disorder. It took only four sessions for Quynh to begin to talk, and speak to me, but that was only after I had placed crayons and paper in front of her, as I drew some pictures with another set of crayons and paper on my side of the desk. And, once she started talking, she could not stop. So much for mutism. But later, a clear, post-traumatic stress disorder became manifested. She came to describe her dreams and nightmares with such detail that I could almost see them myself. And when she did describe them, she became either acutely anxious and agitated, or quietly depressed. When either of those symptoms occurred, she would grasp my hand and squeeze it so tightly that she would leave her little finger indentations on my hand or wrist, and frequently on both.

Actually she did not want to sit directly across from me, as other children I saw in treatment did, but rather at the side of the desk. In the first few sessions she merely looked up at me, and then down at the pictures I was drawing. I drew some scenes with trees and birds. Clearly I was not an artist, and once Quynh even laughed when I tried to draw a dog. It was then that she picked up a crayon and began to doodle. Then she drew. She always started with the green crayon, and then proceeded to the red one and then the black one. She drew large, green palm fronds that covered virtually the entire page. It was clear that what she was drawing was the jungle. There was a small structure in her drawing, which she described as her house, her home in Viet Nam. The roof was the beige color of weathered bamboo, and was clearly thatched. The walls were clearly of bamboo, but darker than the roof, and they had large sections of red. When I asked her about the red part of the house she looked down and bit her lip. She shook her head, so we didn't go there. I was sure I knew what the red on the top and sides of the house represented, but I certainly didn't want to

feed her symptoms, especially if I was wrong, and merely projecting something from my own background, or even something I might have seen in a movie or television show.

Quynh really was such a polite little girl, and I was confident that she was developing a trust in me. Perhaps it was because I would attempt to talk with her in her native language, which I was trying to learn. I had purchased all the Vietnamese language tapes I could, and was actually proceeding through the second level of a three level program of that language. I always had a knack for languages, and had mastered several, including Italian and French. But, in Quynh's case, not only was Vietnamese her native language, but so was French, which was a function of her being educated early in her young life by French speaking nuns. So, "bon jour" was just as likely to come out of her mouth as was good morning. I had learned French in college, and then had to perfect it, as if any non-Frenchman could ever perfect French, as a requirement for the Masters Degree. German was the language I had to learn, to some extent, for the Ph.D. requirement. I didn't master that guttural language, and had difficulty in keeping straight the der, die, das, die, which are the German articles for the word "the." I found German a difficult language, but yet I was able to study and learn Vietnamese, in spite of the almost guttural quality of that language as well. Perhaps it was because I was through with academic requirements, that Vietnamese was easier to master than was German, and in working with Quynh, I was happy that I learned, or at least was learning Vietnamese. Little did I know, or realize, that studying this language would propel me into a bittersweet part of my life, less than 24 months in the future. And in the shelter of Bethesda, I had no idea yet, what the 1000-yard stare was.

"Bac Si, I like to draw with these crayons, but I am not sure you like what I draw."

"Why do you say that, Quynh?"

"Because you always lean forward when I use the green crayon,

and then you really lean forward when I use the red one, but not so much with the black one.”

I didn't realize that I was giving that “tell” but I couldn't deny that I was doing it and that it probably was noticeable to this bright little girl.

“Well Little One, I have to admit, you are probably right and I think I will tell you why. I think something happened to your house in Viet Nam, and that you saw it happen. Can you tell me about it?”

“I miss my house, Bac Si, and I think about it beaucoup. I think my brother is still there, but I am not sure. I know I saw him run away.”

“Can you tell me about it honey?”

“I don't want to talk about it today Bac Si. Is that ok? Will you be sad if I don't want to talk about it today?”

“No little one, I won't be sad. You can talk about it if and when you want to, hieu (understand)? But, we have to stop for today. Commander and Mrs. Mason are waiting for you in the waiting room. I will see you next week, OK?”

“Vang (Yes) Bac Si. Tam biet (Goodbye) Bac Si. I like talking with you.”

That sweet little girl took my hand as I walked her out to the waiting room where her adopting parents, Commander and Mrs. William Mason, were waiting for her, and were smiling as she ran to them and hugged them both. She tried to wrap her little arms around both of them at the same time. It was obvious that Quynh loved them and felt so secure with them. And, it was apparent that the Commander and his wife loved this eight year old little girl, and would do anything to assuage the psychic pain they knew she must still have after all that they knew she went through in Viet Nam, before they were able to get her out through a Catholic child relief organization, in Saigon. They learned all about her village being burned down by the Viet Cong because the guerillas thought the village was cooperating with the enemy, the soldiers of the United States. The Viet Cong burned the

village, including Quynh's house, and killed her parents and sister, and chased into the jungle her brother, Tran, who was eight years Quynh's senior. She was able to escape only by hiding in a well a hundred meters from the village, while she was going to get some water and had heard the gunfire and screaming coming from her village. She did not recognize the voices of the screaming people, but knew about how the Viet Cong burned homes and killed villagers from nearby areas. And, it was ironic that her brother was sympathetic to Hanoi, and North Viet Nam, but was still so frightened that he had to run. However, his ideas were formed as he learned in school that the French tried to colonize his country, and that now, he was convinced that the Americans were trying to do the same. She remembered how Tran came home from school one day so angry because he learned that in spite of a victory for the Vietnamese, so many of his countrymen were killed by the French, at Diem Bien Phu, including an uncle whose picture was proudly displayed by his parents, in their home. Quynh loved her brother and described a very close relationship with him. She confided that when food was scarce, Tran would somehow get her a little more rice because she was hungry and she would tell him so. The only items that she was able to carry with her from Viet Nam were a small picture of her family, her father, mother, sister, Tran and her, and another one of Tran wearing a "non la," which is the traditional conical hat made usually of palm leaf.

CHAPTER 2

Four Years Earlier
Marquette University Campus

“Hi, are you going to Norge Village?”
What a way to try to pick up a good looking young coed, but she really was good looking and I really wanted to meet her, so I had to say something.

Norge Village was a laundromat on Wells Street, right off campus, where students took their laundry to either wash or have dry-cleaned. The reason it was called Norge Village is because all of the machines, washers and dryers, were made by Norge. It was also a student’s restaurant area that years later would be the hunting grounds of Jeffrey Daumer, where he would eat people. Besides the smell of hops in the air from the breweries, around the Laundromat you could always smell the exhaust from the dryers. But in this case I thought I smelled this pretty young girl’s perfume, or maybe it was her soap. But, whatever it was, she was perhaps the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, and seeing her was a fortuitous accident. Oh, I had seen and gone out with many girls since I had been at Marquette, but none had completely knocked my socks off, as did the sight of this girl.

She turned around and smiled and said, “Do I look like I need to go to Norge Village?”

At least she didn’t just keep walking and ignore me, like I feared she might do.

“Cute,” I said, “both that, and you.”

She smiled the most beautiful smile I had ever seen, and walked back to me and said, “Thanks, and that was good.”

I was a Psychology major, with a Modern Language minor. I debated trying to dazzle her with something in French or Italian, but I thought better of it, since it looked like I was on a roll in English. We chatted for a few minutes, mostly about school, our majors, the weather. I asked her if I could walk with her for a bit, and she said that her dorm was just a couple of blocks away, and that yes, that would be great.

I introduced myself to her, by sticking out my hand and said, “I’m Tommy Staffieri, what’s your name?”

She introduced herself to me by taking my hand in both of hers and said, “Hi, my name is Carolyn Young.”

Her handshake had the firm and vigorous qualities I would associate with someone who was raised on a farm, and as it turned out, she had, in fact, been raised on a farm, in South Dakota, near Rapid City. Yet, she was unmistakably feminine. She had the most beautiful eyes, and even though she was wearing a long sweater, I could tell she had a great figure. Her smile was captivating. Little did I realize then, that I would be carrying this encounter with me half way around the world, and half way through my life.

Maybe it was her beauty. Maybe it was the sweetness of her voice. Maybe it was, well everything about her. All I knew at that moment was that I wanted this to last forever. So, I asked her out, and she said yes. And I asked her out again, and again, and she kept saying yes. I don’t think that I had ever been so happy. And, we continued to go out, regularly, and both of us were so happy.

We dated exclusively, and although like so many college romances, some things, like jealousy, probably more on my part, got in the way, nothing diminished what both of us knew we had, something special. And, we never argued, about anything. I took her to fraternity parties,

concerts, and basketball games. We went to some of the better restaurants in Milwaukee, like Mader's, but we also went to the dives to have pizza and listen to music. We had a great time no matter where we went. We laughed, we sang, we talked, we planned, and we kissed. We also attended church together every Sunday, and held hands during the Mass. And sometimes during Mass, we would draw letters in each other's palms with our fingers, spelling out "I love you." We had a great love life, and the sex was incredible. And it wasn't just sex, it was lovemaking.

Although for probably the first time in my life I was actually paying attention to my studies, and my grades were showing it. We even studied together. Maybe it was because with her, I was really feeling content. We were getting so close, both emotionally and physically. I was feeling that not only was she the most beautiful girl I ever met, but also the smartest. In my eyes she could do no wrong. I was really smitten. I kept wanting to be so deep inside of her, that she was all I could think about. The first time we really went at it and making out, we were parked in front of her dorm. She was wearing this beautiful silver-gray dress, which she later told me she had made it herself. As I moved in for the feel, second base, in my clearly uncertain way I asked her, "Do you want me to?" She nodded yes, and I was in heaven. We progressed over the months to the best love making in my life. We spent as much time together as we could. We would meet in the student union between classes, for coffee. We even actually took a couple of classes together, just so we could be together. After several months, we had even become "pinned." By me giving her my fraternity pin, that was sort of being "engaged to be engaged." My fraternity brothers even serenaded us in front of her dorm, the weekend after the pinning. They presented her with a bouquet of roses. Everything was perfect. She was truly an angel.

But then reality reared its head. It was the middle of May. I knew that I had to leave. We both knew it. Graduation. I was so looking

forward to that day, yet dreading it because I knew I would have to leave this angel behind. Actually, we both had to leave, even though she still had another year to go before she would graduate. She sat with my mother at the graduation ceremony, and afterwards we did the family celebration lunch. The three of us, my mother, Carolyn, and I, laughed, reminisced, and even talked about the future, but when we discussed the future, Carolyn began to tear up. Then so did my mother. So did I.

Later, Carolyn and I walked the campus, and even made a point of walking by Norge Village, where it all began. Where we began.

On the night before I left, we walked along the War Memorial, on the Milwaukee Lakefront, hand in hand, and not saying a whole heck of a lot. I guess we both feared that something beautiful was ending; and hoping it wouldn't end.

She pulled me close and said, "Tommy, I love you. Please don't ever forget me. I will never forget you. You are the love of my life. I know you have to go. Can I go with you? I will quit school if you will take me with you. Oh Tommy, do you think we will ever see each other again? I can't bear to think that we will not be together."

She had tears in her eyes, as did I. I held her so close, and wanted to be so deep inside of her one more time. God I loved this girl. How could I ever forget her? I even thought that maybe I should ask her to quit school and come with me to Washington, and that she could finish there, either at Georgetown or at Catholic University of America. Ultimately though, I knew that that probably would not be a good idea, either for her or for me.

She brought some pictures of her I had not seen before. They were of her holding a pet fox, back in South Dakota. She was so beautiful in those pictures, and she still looked the same. She was just so lovely as I stared at her, tears streaming down her face.

I held those pictures close to my heart and said, "Carolyn, wherever I am, wherever I go, you will always be with me. I promise you

that you are the love of my life.”

As I took her back to her dorm, and we hugged so tight, not saying a word, we had said it all. We professed our love, although we had done that all the times we made love all that year. She kissed me so hard, and put my hand on her right breast, the “Do you want me to?” breast. And then she turned around and ran into the dorm. I could hear her sobbing as she ran. And, that is when I, too, started sobbing, covering my eyes with my hands. I was walking away from the love of my life. But I had to. My calling was calling. I knew I had to go to graduate school and not just to avoid the draft. I really wanted to become a psychologist. I had been accepted into the Clinical Psychology Program, at Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C. I was initially torn between Clinical Psychology and Modern Languages, and actually had applied to both programs and had been accepted by both, and had even thought I could do both. But I also knew that whichever path I chose, I would carry her pictures with me, wherever I went, and that maybe some day.....