

T H E W A R A T H O M E

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

Ten of us in the back of a Huey, assholes clenched like fists, C-rations turned to sno-cones in our bellies. Tracers float up at us, swollen, sizzling with orange light, like one dud firecracker after another. Ahead of us the gunships pound Landing Zone Dog with everything they have, flex guns, rockets, and 50-calibres, while the artillery screams overhead and the Air Force A1-Es strafe the clearing into kindling.

We hover over the LZ in the sudden phosphorus dawn of a flare, screaming, “Land, motherfucker, land!” while the tracers close in, the shell of the copter ticking like a clock as the thumb-sized rounds go through her, ripping the steel like paper, splattering somebody’s brains across the aft bulkhead.

Then falling into knee-high grass, the air humming with bullets and stinking of swamp ooze and gasoline and human shit and blood. Spinning wildly, my finger jamming down the trigger of the M-16, not caring anymore where the bullets go.

And waking up in my own bed, Clare beside me, shaking me, hissing, “Wake up, wake up for Christ’s sake.”

I sat up, the taste of it still in my lungs, hands twitching with berserker frenzy. “M okay,” I said. “Nightmare. I was back in Nam.”

“What?”

“Flashback,” I said. “The war.”

“What are you talking about? You weren’t in the war.”

I looked at my hands and remembered. It was true. I’d never been in the Army, never set foot in Vietnam.

THREE MONTHS EARLIER we’d shot an Eyewitness News series on Vietnamese refugees. His name was Nguyen Ky Duk, former ARVN colonel, now a fry cook at Jack in the Box. “You killed my country,” he said. “All of you. Americans, French, Japanese. Like you would kill a dog because you thought it might have, you know, rabies. Just kill it and throw it in a ditch. It was a living thing and now it is dead.”

THE AFTERNOON of the massacre we got raw footage over the wire. About a dozen of us crowded the monitor and stared at the shattered windows of the Safeway, the mounds of cartridges, the bloodstains, the puddles of congealing food.

“What was it he said?”

“Something about ‘gooks.’ ‘You’re all fucking gooks, just like the others, and now I’ll kill you too,’ something like that.”

“But he wasn’t in Nam. They talked to his wife.”

“So why’d he do it?”

“He was a gun nut. Black market stuff, like that M-16 he had. Camo clothes, the whole nine yards. A nut.”

I walked down the hall, past the potted ferns and bamboo, and bought a Coke from the machine. I could still remember the dream, the feel of the M-16 in my hand. The rage. The fear.

“LIKE IT?” Clare asked. She turned slowly, the loose folds of her black cotton pyjamas fluttering, her face hidden by the conical straw hat.

“No,” I said. “I don’t know. It makes me feel weird.”

“It’s fashion. Fashion’s supposed to make you feel weird.”

I let myself through the sliding glass door, into the back yard. The grass had grown a foot or more without my noticing, and strange plants had come up between the flowers, suffocating them in sharp fronds and broad green leaves.

“DID YOU GO?”

“No,” I said. “I was I-Y. Underweight, if you can believe it.” In fact I was losing weight again, my muscles turning stringy under sallow skin.

“Me either. My dad got a shrink to write me a letter. I did the marches, Washington and all that. But you know something? I feel funny about not going. Kind of guilty, somehow. Even though we shouldn’t ever have been there, even though we were burning villages and fragging our own guys. I feel like ... I don’t know. Like I missed something. Something important.”

“Maybe not,” I said. Through cracked glass I could see the sunset thicken the trees.

“What do you mean?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t sure myself. “Maybe it’s not too late,” I said.

I WALK THROUGH the haunted streets of my town, sweltering in the January heat. The jungle arches over me; children’s voices in the distance chatter in their odd pidgin Vietnamese. The TV station is a crumbling ruin and none of us feel comfortable there any longer. We work now in a thatched hut with a mimeo machine.

The air is humid, fragrant with anticipation. Soon the planes will come and it will begin in earnest.