WITNESSING

by Kim Cooper Findling '93

FOR SOME, IT WAS THE FIRST TIME they'd spoken of their war experiences. The real stuff, anyway—a friend's blood splattering across your face, traipsing through a jungle village and killing people before they killed you, the sights and sounds of torture and death that can't be erased from the mind, even thirty-five years later. Through the long morning, into the lunch break, past the afternoon's scheduled end, 110 Vietnam vets stood and spoke in a hotel conference room done in too much mauve. I fidgeted. I waited for an opportunity to escape; the pool, maybe, and my paperback.

In some ways, each story was similar. Dust, heat, the constant *chop chop* of Huey helicopters, the *thwack thwack* of gunfire. Creeping through the jungle on orders to engage the enemy—which simply meant hiking around until someone shot at you. Blind, terrifying nighttime battles. Searching for meaning in the melee and finding little. Hot dirty hours merging into eternal blurry days. The sheer folly of hoping you'd survive 365 days in hell when men fell around you in a spray of fresh carnage every day. Seeking what oblivion you could find—beer, cigarettes, drugs, prostitutes, and the most morbid, self-denying humor you could muster. The oppressive aloneness of coming home from an unpopular war to people who didn't understand your experience and never even really tried. "We disappeared into our lives," said one vet, and because he was not just another in this sea of middle-aged men, but my father, I realized that it was my life that he disappeared into, as well.

I worried that my presence would interfere. These men—men with huge bellies, men with no legs, men with every one of their fifty-odd years etched on their faces like scratches on a cell wall—would edit themselves for my sake. There were other women in the room, a few wives, but no other daughters. Would I remind them of their own daughters, back home: the girls who they were protecting most when they swallowed yet another private horror story? Eyes followed me when I left the room at the break, penetrating, somber. I tried to make myself invisible.

The soldiers' stories diverged when their Vietnam tours ended. Some went home to rural America and became mechanics or factory workers, made a family, got by. A smaller number went to college and became teachers or bankers. A handful stayed in and made the army a career. But it wasn't so much what they did for work that was notable—it was what they did for a life, after the promotions earned and children raised and marriages saved or broken. How much of the war did they carry? Some had never really left Vietnam. If they stood, they stood rigid and anxious. If they spoke, they ranted, choked, spit crude, bawdy jokes. Their stories were of divorce, alcohol, thrown jobs, bar fights. Their bodies were very big or very small, as if they were trying to expand outside of or vanish within their own emotional cocoon.

Others had made it all right; some, even, had thrived. They had found the thread of their life waiting back home and followed it somewhere good. There was no reliable war-trauma-to-current-trauma equation. Some of the men most seriously physically injured were often the healthiest emotionally—at least on the surface—and some who never saw combat were still waking with night terrors.

My uneasiness was not just because of my fear that the vets wouldn't be able to speak freely in my presence. Their stories were not easy for me to hear. A bomb exploding—your leg—but it's too far away to be your leg. Visits to pubescent Vietnamese whores. Buddies blown into pieces, then collected by your hands from rice paddy sludge. Enemy bodies, heads removed, piled, rotting. The atrocities were bad enough, but that horror was compounded by the constant fear and uncertainty, the unbearable strain and loneliness, a supreme misery made tragic by an unrelenting suspicion that it was all for no reason at all.

Some men wept, some blustered and bragged, some simply quivered in a familiar fight against an enemy that at some point had morphed from a VC soldier with an AK-47 into three decades worth of an invisible emotional tidal wave. I watched. I listened. I hoped for an end. I stayed for the duration, even though the day, for me, was an unlikely mixture of trauma and tedium. I didn't want to be there. I didn't think I needed to be.

I was wrong. After the last man spoke, I stood from my conference chair and, head down, began to dart toward the door through the thicket of small groups that formed for final personal exchanges. I tried to make myself small, to leave and let these men say what they needed to say, to escape the ache of hearing it. But as I passed through the room, eyes locked on me, and then arms reached for me. "Thank you for coming," a man with an impossibly droopy face said. "Thank you for being here." Then, another, with a deep Southern drawl—plainly "Ma'am, thank you so much." Startled, I managed replies, and began to see something new in the steady and contemplative gazes I'd received all day.

In my discomfort, I'd forgotten what it can mean to simply bear witness. Having your story heard—not only by those who were with you but by those who weren't, and who otherwise would never understand, and therefore never understand you—validates it. I had said nothing and done nothing but simply be present. Somehow, that had been enough.

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