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THE NAKED, RUNNING, SCREAMING GIRL

By Norm Miller

Her tight, short, red skirt and stiletto heels accentuate her taut ass, swaying hips, and well-formed legs. She climbs onto the barstool next to mine and turns to face me. The skirt's so short that there's no allowance for modesty. I catch a glimpse of a blue thong before she crosses her legs. The top three buttons of her blouse are undone. There's an unrestricted view of nice cleavage and pink areola as she leans towards me. A nipple peeks out when she moves just so.

Her only jewelry is a silver chain around her neck and silver studs in her pierced ears. I don't think she's wearing makeup. She's built like the proverbial brick shithouse, but she's just a kid. I think she's younger than my granddaughters. She tosses her head to move strands of long, auburn hair out of her face. It's a practiced move and she's very good at it. God, she's cute! I wonder what her story is. I'd like to know but she's here to work, not to talk about her life.

"You look like you could use a friend," she says. Her voice is soft and sexy with a hint of Valley Girl. "You can call me Candy. Why don't you buy me a drink and tell me what's bothering you?"

I turn away and look at my shot glass while deciding if I want to answer. If I stay mute, she'll go seek another warm body with a wallet and I can drink alone. That's my preference. I don't want to buy what she's selling. I should ignore her, but I don't.

"Why do you think something's bothering me?"

"Because you're drinking in a hotel bar...alone...at midnight. You can talk to me about it if you want. I'm a really good listener, especially in bed. If you take me up to your room, I can demonstrate." She flashes a smile. It's not real.

“I don’t have a room here; I live outside town. I don’t want to go home and I don’t want to go to my bed. That’s why I’m drinking in a hotel bar...alone...at midnight.”

I raise my hand like a student wanting to be called on. The bartender’s standing across the room, watching what looks like an ESPN channel. He’s probably wishing I’d leave the bar with Call Me Candy, so he can close. Tough shit. I’m here until two A.M, the closing time mandated by the State of California. “I could use another,” I say, in a raised voice, to get his attention.

“Is the lady drinking?”

Lady is a bit of a stretch. She’s a hooker and nowhere close to the legal drinking age. The fact he doesn’t card her tells me he knows those things and they have a working arrangement. Is he her pimp? Does she pay him in coin-of-the-realm or sexual favors? I look at Call Me Candy and she nods. She wants a drink. Her mouth gapes and a pink tongue slides out between straight, brilliant white teeth. The tip caresses ruby-red lips. I wonder how long ago the braces came off. Maybe last year, when she was a Sophomore? When I was younger, that move would’ve stoked my fire, but her attempt to seduce is amateurish and hasn’t changed my mind. I’m willing to buy her a few drinks, but I won’t take her to bed. Like I told her, I don’t want to go there—even alone. I know what’s waiting.

“I’d love a scotch,” she says, leaning closer. She’s trying hard to make a sale. She lays a hand on my forearm. It slides down to brush the back of my hand and, eventually, her fingers land on my inner thigh. They massage the muscle, gently squeezing in and out, like a shopper checking to see if a mango’s ripe. She moves the fingers to my crotch and gropes for a moment, before pulling her hand away. Her expression tells me she’s surprised she didn’t feel anything hard.

I’m sure most men would’ve taken the opportunity to do a little stroking in return. I can tell she’s disappointed that I haven’t. She would’ve allowed just enough touching to peak my interest

before discussing price. She looks around, and I figure she's searching for a more interested John. Regretfully for her, I'm the only customer in the bar. Will she leave? I shouldn't encourage her to stay but I wouldn't mind a little company, if she just wanted to talk. Oh well, it's her choice. I fumble with my wallet, extract two twenties and lay them next to my empty shot glass. "Scotch for the lady and me until this is gone," I say, to the bartender. Call Me Candy smiles her fake smile again.

She shows her gratitude by trying harder to encourage me to rent her for the night. She takes a sip from the full shot glass placed in front of her, leans back and re-crosses her legs; allowing an even longer look at her scanty, blue thong. I can't believe how smooth those thighs are—all the way to the top. I look away. I'm only interested in talking.

"Why don't you want to go home?" she asks, trying to re-engage.

"Something there scares me."

"What could be in your home that'd scare a big, strong guy like you?" Her smile and flattering words are phony. I wish she'd quit working and just be herself.

"My bed."

"You're afraid of your bed?"

"I'm afraid of what's in it."

"What? Do you have a wife or girlfriend there?"

"There's no wife. I've had three. They all left me. There won't be another. I gave up on girlfriends years ago. They're a waste of time, money and energy."

Call Me Candy giggles and leans closer. I feel a soft breast rub against my shoulder. Her left arm raises and fingers caress the back of my neck. Her head's so close that there's warm breath on my cheek when she whispers, "I'll bet I could handle whatever it is. Why don't you take me home and I'll show you?" She must think I'm suffering from a sexual dysfunction she can fix because of

the vast experience she's gained blowing the high school quarterback.

"You can't fix nightmares," I say, shrugging her off and sliding my stool a little bit away. She frowns. I guess she doesn't appreciate being rebuffed. This time, I'm certain she'll leave. Now, for some reason, I'd like her to stay. I just got my disability check, so I have plenty of cash. I take five more twenties out of my wallet and lay them on the bar. "Those're yours if you'll drink and talk with me. But, you'll need to be satisfied with doing those two things here. I'm not taking you home with me."

It's late, and it's unlikely she'll get any other offers tonight. The bills are snatched from sight. I toss back my drink and wave at the bartender to refill the shot glass. Call Me Candy has taken only the one small sip from hers. Since then, all she's done is swirl the amber liquid in the glass. Her hand quits moving and the scotch comes to rest. She looks at the glass for a moment, raises it and swallows the contents in one gulp. She grimaces and gasps. She's not yet learned to handle the harsh burning. I don't think she realizes her tongue pokes out to collect the last drops hanging on the lip of the glass. It's the most sensuous thing she's done all night. Licking her glass like that would better advertise what she has to offer potential Johns than caressing their necks. She interrupts my thoughts before I can tell her.

"Nightmares? Are you saying having me in your bed would be a nightmare?"

"I have nightmares every time I sleep. I scream and thrash around and become violent with whoever's near me. That's why my wives left me and took my kids. That's the real reason I don't have girlfriends. I don't want you in my bed, or to be in it by myself, for that matter."

"What do you dream about that scares you so much?"

I never shared the contents of my dreams with any of my wives; or anyone else. The VA therapists said I should talk or write about them, but I've never been able to. For some reason, I

decide to tell her. Perhaps it's because I'm paying for her time. Perhaps it's because she's caught me at the right stage of drunk. Perhaps it's because the bartender is just far enough away, engrossed in the replay of some sporting event, and there's nobody else in the bar to hear. Perhaps it's because she's just a child herself who, unlike most adults, might be hesitant to point a finger at me and voice disgust about my part in what happened. Perhaps it's because I've finally decided it's time to tell someone. Whatever the reason, or for all these reasons, I decide to answer her question. It'll require a history lesson.

“Did you know Phan Thi Kim Phuc was nine, when AP photographer Nick Ut took a picture of her, naked, running, and screaming on a road near Trang Bang, north of Saigon?”

“Huh?” Call Me Candy grunts. “Who's Fanty Kim Fuck?” I don't correct her pronunciation. Vietnamese names are difficult to say, even if you speak the language.

“She was a Vietnamese girl whose back had been burned with napalm from a bomb dropped by a South Vietnamese airplane. She was running with four other children to escape the flames and pain. The photo was one of the iconic images of the Vietnam War and it shocked America. People think of war as men killing each other. That makes it easier for them to accept and justify. They seldom think about what happens to the children caught up in the fighting.”

“I've seen that photograph,” Call Me Candy says. There's a puzzled expression on her face and her head tilts a little to the side, in the manner of a person trying to remember. The expression fades, her head straightens and she nods. “Oh, yeah. I remember now. My World History teacher had it hanging in her classroom with other historical photographs. I'm sure it's the one you're talking about. It was near the door and all of us looked at it every day when we were leaving. Then, one day, it was gone.”

“What happened to it?”

“Mrs. Richardson, that was my teacher, said a student’s mother had filed a formal complaint with the school district and demanded it be removed. The superintendent gave her a choice: take it down or lose her job.”

“A student’s mother complained about the photograph? Do you know why?”

“Well, the girl was naked. If you looked closely, and we all did, especially the boys, you could see her vagina. The mother said young, innocent minds shouldn’t be exposed to depraved, disgusting, obscene photos meant only to excite boys and demean girls.”

I empty my glass and call for a refill. I wait until the bartender pours the drink and walks back to his TV, “Some mother was concerned a photograph showing the genitals of a nine-year-old girl, who was running to save her life, would make the boys horny and embarrass the girls? The average age of a soldier in Vietnam was twenty-two. That’s what? Only five or six years older than you and your classmates? How about the effect on the ‘young, innocent minds’ of those G.I.’s that watched her and others being burned alive by congealed gasoline?”

“You saw her, didn’t you? You were there. She’s who you dream about, isn’t it?” Call Me Candy nods in affirmation of her statements. She’s made a deductive leap and her smug expression is that of a television detective who’s just solved a murder case. She’s so sure she’s got it right.

“I never saw her. I only saw the photograph. It was taken in June, 1972. I served in the Nam from ’68 to ’69 and ’70 to ’71. I just mentioned that photo because almost everybody remembers it. Phan Thi Kim Phuc isn’t the naked, running, screaming girl in my nightmares.”

“Then, who is?”

“There’re lots of them. Nameless girls and boys, toddlers and babies who’d been shot, stabbed, or blown up by artillery or aerial bombs. They all weren’t naked and they all weren’t running, but every one of them that didn’t die immediately, was screaming. I held many of them as

they gasped out their last breaths. The one I dream about most is the school teacher's daughter."

Call Me Candy chugs her drink with less grimacing and no gasping. She sets the empty glass on the bar and calls for a refill. The bartender raises his eyebrows at me and I nod. "You'll need more money," he says. He must be thinking I'm more drunk than I am. There's no way he's poured forty dollars' worth of scotch. I don't argue. I don't argue with anybody about anything. I've had my fill of fighting—even just using words. I have a difficult time extracting bills from my wallet because my fingers don't want to work. I hope it's only the scotch affecting my manual dexterity; I've heard Parkinson's is hereditary. After a few moments, I toss two more bills on the bar.

"Those are C-notes," Call Me Candy says.

"Really? Well, whatever we don't drink up is yours." This time, her smile looks real and I like it. I say it again, louder, so the bartender hears me. I don't want him to accuse her of stealing it. I'm sure he'll get his share anyway. Probably more than his share.

"Who was the school teacher's daughter?" Call Me Candy asks, as her glass is refilled. I swig my drink and point at the empty glass. He fills it too. He takes away one of the hundreds and returns with a crumpled wad of bills. I don't count it; I already know he's cheating me. It's his Karma. I wait for him to walk away before answering. My story isn't for him.

"I'll tell you about her in a while. You need the backstory to understand. I commanded an Advisory Team in the Central Highlands. There were no schools there and I decided the local kids should have one. We advisors had a fund to tap for reconstruction and re-settlement projects, so I had plenty of piasters to spend. I picked an old, one-room, brick building in one village and paid for a basic remodel. The village chief wasn't too interested, but I encouraged and cajoled until he agreed. I requisitioned all the things needed: desks and chairs, books, pens and pencils, writing

paper, a blackboard and chalk. Lots of chalk. I went to the provincial capital and hired an unemployed teacher. The man I chose was reluctant to accept my offer, but he finally agreed. He had a wife and daughter to feed and was desperate to find work.”

“Why was he reluctant? If he was unemployed, it must’ve been a real opportunity for him.”

“He knew it was dangerous for him and his family. Looking back, I realize he tried to explain that to me, but he never said it was a stupid idea or flat out refused. See, in the Vietnamese culture, subordinates never question decisions made by superiors. It’d be an incredible insult. It’s that ‘Face’ thing. My position as an advisor gave me status equal to a district chief. That was pretty high up in the hierarchy. Only province chiefs and the national government outranked them. That prevented most Vietnamese from objecting to whatever I decided.”

“You had a lot of power,” Call Me Candy says.

“I did. And, it was my duty to use it wisely. I wish I had. I wish I would’ve listened, but I didn’t. Like the words in the song, ‘I did it my way.’ I made sure to schedule my visits to the other hamlets and villages, so I could be at the school the day it opened. The village chief and the teacher wouldn’t help cut the piece of cloth tacked, like a ribbon, across the doorway. They insisted I do it. I never understood why, until later, but it probably saved the village chief’s life. Seventeen boys and girls, aged about seven to fifteen, filed into that single classroom that first day. I taught a short lesson on the English alphabet and used plenty of the chalk doing it. I planned on helping teach English as many days as I could, before my DEROS. That’s the date my tour ended and I could go stateside. I hoped if they learned the basics, they might find work as interpreters with the U.S. Military or civilian contractors and have better lives. Apparently, they didn’t need to learn too

much. The ARVN interpreter assigned to me spoke very little English. I'd had a quick course on the Vietnamese language at the Advisory School, just enough to understand and say some basic words and expressions. I learned a lot more of it living with them. Mostly, we communicated in French. Thank God for the three years of it I'd taken in high school." I stop to take a sip of my scotch. I don't chug this one. I'm getting close to that tipping point between awake and passed out. I'm also buying time before I have to tell the rest of the story.

"I think that was a good thing you did," Call Me Candy says, perhaps to fill the void.

"Victor Charlie didn't agree with you."

"Who's that?"

"In the phonetic alphabet, Victor and Charlie are the words for the letters V and C. The bad guys were the Viet Cong, so we called them VC or Victor Charlie or just plain Charlie, depending on the situation. Anyway, the local chapter of the VC didn't want the school and they closed it."

"They hurt those kids," Call Me Candy guesses. "I'll bet the school teacher's daughter was one of them."

"No. She was too young to go to school and the VC didn't hurt the students. They just taught them a lesson. Charlie believed the villagers' purposes in life were to grow food for them. They expected the kids to work the rice paddies like their parents and grandparents had done, for as many generations back as anyone could remember. They didn't need to go to school. And God help any of them who wanted to learn English and work as interpreters for the Americans. Of course, the village chief knew this. He'd tried to warn me, in his own way, but I didn't listen to him any more than I'd listened to the school teacher. I was the all-knowing American advisor with rank, status, and government money to burn. I decided the village needed a school, so he was

obligated to do what I directed, even though he knew better. I've always wondered how he convinced those kids to participate. They all knew what could happen to them."

"I don't understand," Call Me Candy says. "If they didn't hurt them, how did they teach them a lesson?"

"One night, less than a week after the school opened, my Advisory Team was several miles away from the village, conducting nighttime operations with the local RF and PF. We heard gunfire and explosions coming from the direction of the village and knew Charlie had attacked. The VC knew we had to use that road to get to the village and they were waiting for us. It took close to an hour to fight our way out of the ambush. When we did get there, we found several people dead and wounded and a lot of destruction. The school house had been demolished. The students were kneeling, in a group, in the rubble, and would not get up and leave. The VC had told them to stay kneeling there until morning, while contemplating whether or not going to school was really that important to them. Nothing I said or did convinced them to move or convinced their parents to move them. Nobody even brought coats or blankets for them. Did I tell you it was monsoon season? It was pouring rain. Those kids were soaked and cold, but none of them left until daybreak. They knelt there, staring at the teacher lying, face-down, in front of them. Charlie had cut off his hands and tossed them to the side, before shooting him in the back of the head. The message was clear: School was not allowed and nobody should ever touch the American chalk."

I pause to finish my scotch without ordering another. Call Me Candy is staring at me. It looks like she's going to throw up or run out the door. Maybe both. She takes and exhales several deep breaths and seems more composed. "Oh, my God," she whispers. "You said your nightmare is about the teacher's daughter, not the teacher. What happened to her?"

I nod and resume talking, before I find a reason not to. “A child was screaming in the hut the teacher called home. I ran there, with my medic right on my heels. Of course, it was wet and muddy outside, but I couldn’t fathom why there was water all over the dirt floor of the hut. The teacher’s wife was lying in a small puddle; she’d been shot in the head too. Next to her, was their three-year-old daughter. She was a beautiful little girl with a friendly smile that could light up a dark room. She’d always run to me when she’d seen me coming. I’d grab her and toss her into the air, while she laughed with joy. I’d taught her to pump her fist and shout, ‘U.S.A!’ before I’d give her a piece of the hard candy I always carried in a cargo pocket of my jungle fatigues. Now, she was lying in a pool of muddy water, on the dirt floor of a squalid hut, squirming and screaming. Except it wasn’t her.”

I pause because I’m choking up. I’m a seventy-year-old man and the memory’s making me start to cry like a sissy-boy. When the tears start, they’re hard to stop. Will the teacher’s daughter be my nightmare visitor again tonight because I’m talking about her? I shudder at the thought.

“If it wasn’t her, who was it?” Call Me Candy asks. Her eyes are huge; her face is ashen. She reaches out to hand me a paper napkin from the bar. I’m embarrassed, but I accept it and wipe my eyes. I don’t want to finish the story, but I have to. I need to finally tell somebody what I saw that night.

“It wasn’t a ‘who,’ it was a ‘what.’ It was a grotesque, lobster-red, parody of a human child, with no face and most of the skin from its upper body blistered and hanging in folds around its waist. Other blisters were forming on the skin remaining on its arms and legs. My medic pushed past me and knelt at the side of the writhing, screaming creature and I wondered what he was going to do. He injected a shot of morphine and looked at me. I nodded, and he

injected more until it quit moving and the screaming stopped. I knew he'd killed it, and I was relieved."

Call Me Candy is shivering. "Oh my God! What'd they done to her?"

"A woman, who'd been hiding in a nearby hut, told me what'd happened. Two VC held the mother, while others stripped the girl, sat her on the dirt floor and poured twenty-five-gallons of boiling water from a cauldron over her head. She said the girl's screams were horrifying. Apparently, the VC hadn't intended to kill the mother. They wanted her alive to tell everyone what would happen if they shouted out support for the 'Capitalist American Pigs,' even if the person shouting and pumping her arm was a three-year-old girl who had no idea what she was saying and doing. Even if it was just a child who wanted a piece of candy. But, somehow, the mother broke free and attacked one of the soldiers with a rice cutter and they shot her. I caused the VC to torture that girl and kill her parents. It was my fault they died. I was arrogant, stupid, and wouldn't listen. I'll never forgive myself for that. The teacher's daughter wasn't running, but she was naked and screaming. I wonder if that mother at your school saw a photograph of what the VC had done, do you think she'd be upset if the girl's vagina showed?"

"I can't believe anybody could do something like that to a child," Call Me Candy whispers, shaking her head side-to-side. "The thought of it will give me nightmares for...oh!"

"Yeah, you got it. I dream about her and the of hundreds of other kids I saw shot, burned, and blown up. Some lived, but they were horribly disfigured. Men lost arms and legs because they stepped on land mines or played with unexploded artillery shells and bombs. I was nineteen on my first tour, twenty-one on my second. Do you think seeing those things might've messed up my 'young, innocent mind?'"

Call Me Candy shakes her head. "It's so awful just hearing about it, but you saw it," she

says. Tears roll down her cheeks and I hand back the napkin.

“Yeah. It’s awful for all combat vets, regardless of what war they fought, but most won’t admit it. We deny our PTSD, medicate with alcohol and drugs and suffer in silence; often alone. Occasionally, the dreams get so bad one of us eats his or her pistol. Everybody who knows us, knows we’ve changed; knows we’ve experienced terrible things, but we seldom tell anybody what we saw. We don’t want to talk about it because it stirs up the memories we’ve tried to put to rest. The Peace Company printed a poster in 1966. It read: ‘War Is Not Healthy for Children and Other Living Things.’ Boy, did they get that right.”

I turn my shot glass upside down on the bar and slide off my barstool.

“Where are you going?” Call Me Candy asks. She actually sounds concerned.

“I’m going home to my bed. I need to find out if sharing this with you helps with the nightmares or makes them worse.” I grasp her hand, raise it and kiss the back of it. “Get a life, Candy. It’s not too late. If you keep whoring, you’ll be having your own nightmares before long. That’s the best advice I can give you.”

I don’t stumble too much as I head for the door; I’m not as drunk as some nights. I hope the therapists are right and talking about it helps. But, what if they’re wrong?