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The Naked, Running, Screaming Girl

Norman Miller

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The tight skirt, too short for modesty, hides little. I get a glimpse of a blue thong as she settles on the barstool next to mine. She wears little jewelry and no makeup. She's just a kid, younger than my granddaughters.

"Call me Candy. Buy me a drink and tell me what's bothering you."

I don't want what she's selling. If I stay mute, she'll seek another warm body with a wallet. I should ignore her. I should. I don't. "Why do you think something's bothering me?"

"You're drinking in a hotel bar, alone at midnight. You can talk to me about it. I'm a good listener." Her smile isn't real.

"I don't have a room here. I don't want to go home. That's why I'm drinking in a hotel bar, alone, at midnight." I raise my hand. "I could use another."

The bartender, across the room watching television, looks over. He's probably wishing I'd leave with 'Call me Candy' so he can close. Tough shit. I'm here until the mandated closing time.

"Is the lady drinking?"

'Call me Candy' nods before I can say no.

The tip of her tongue slides out between straight, brilliant white teeth and caresses her lips. Did the braces come off last year when she was a freshman? When I was younger, that move would've stoked my fire, but her attempt to seduce is amateurish. I'll buy her a few drinks, but that's it. I don't want to go there. I know what's waiting.

"I'll have what you're drinking." She leans closer, trying hard to make a sale. Her hand touches my forearm and slides down until her fingers land on my inner thigh. They gently squeeze, like a shopper checking a mango. The fingers slide to my crotch and grope before pulling away. She's surprised there's no reaction.

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She looks around. I'm the only customer. Will she leave? I shouldn't encourage her to stay. I shouldn't. But, if she's willing to just talk. I fumble with my wallet and extract two twenties. "Scotch for the lady and me." 'Call me Candy' fakes another smile. The bartender's grin is real.

She sips the booze and tries to re-engage. "Why don't you want to go home?"

"Something there scares me."

"What could scare a big, strong guy like you?"

"My bed."

"You're afraid of your bed?"

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

"What? A wife or girlfriend?"

"There's no wife. I've had three and they all left. I gave up on girlfriends. They're a waste."

'Call me Candy' giggles and leans closer. A soft breast touches my shoulder. Fingers caress the back of my neck. Her head's so close, she whispers with warm breath. "I could help. Take me home and I'll show you."

I shrug her off. "You can't fix nightmares."

She frowns. This time, I'm certain she'll leave, but I'd like her to stay. I lay five more twenties on the bar. "Those're yours if you'll talk with me."

The bills are snatched. "Nightmares, huh?"

"Every night. I scream, thrash around, and become violent with whoever's near me. That's why my wives left and took my kids. That's the reason I don't have girlfriends. That's why I don't want you in my bed."

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

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Is it because I'm paying for her time and she caught me at the right stage of drunk? Is it because the bartender's just far enough away and there's nobody else in the bar to hear? Is it because she's just a child who, unlike most adults, might be hesitant to point a finger at me and voice disgust at my part in what happened? Maybe it's just time to tell someone. Whatever the reason, or for all these reasons.

It'll require a history lesson.

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

"Who's she?"

"A Vietnamese girl. She'd been burned with napalm. 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. It shocked America. People think of war as men killing each other. Somehow that makes it easier to justify. They seldom think of the children caught up in the fighting."

"Mrs. Richardson, my history teacher, had that photograph in her classroom. 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. A student's mother filed a complaint and the principal made her take it down."

"Do you know why the mother complained?"

"The girl's vagina was in the picture. The mother said young minds shouldn't be exposed to depraved, disgusting, obscene photos."

"Some mother was concerned a photograph showing the genitals of a nine-year-old girl, running to save her life, would embarrass the girls and make the boys horny? The average age of a soldier in Vietnam was twenty-two. That's what? Only five or six years older than you? How about the effect on the young, innocent minds of those GIs who watched her being burned alive

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by congealed gasoline?”

“You saw her! She’s who you dream about!”

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

“Who is?”

“There’re lots of them. Nameless girls, boys, toddlers and babies who’d been shot, stabbed or blown up by mines, artillery or bombs. They all weren’t naked, and they all weren’t running, but every one of them who didn’t die immediately was screaming. I held some as they gasped out their last breaths. The one I dream about most often is the schoolteacher’s daughter.”

Both our glasses are empty. “We’ll each have another,” I holler.

“Show me the money.”

There’s no way we’ve drunk up forty dollars’ worth of scotch, but I don’t argue. I don’t argue with anybody about anything. 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.” I say this in a raised voice, so the bartender hears me. I don’t want him to accuse her of stealing it. Now her smile looks real.

“Who was the schoolteacher’s daughter?” Our glasses are refilled. The bartender 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 off.

“I commanded an advisory team in the central highlands. There were no schools in the area and I decided to create one. We had a fund to tap for reconstruction and resettlement projects, so I had plenty of Piasters. I picked an older building in one village. I got all the things needed, desks

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and chairs, books, pens and pencils, writing paper, a blackboard, and chalk. Lots of chalk. I hired a teacher. The man was reluctant but he was desperate to find work so he wouldn't be drafted."

"Why was he reluctant?"

"It was dangerous for him and his family. But he never said it was a stupid idea, or flat-out refused. In Vietnamese culture, it's an insult for a subordinate to question a superior. As an advisor, I was equal to a district chief. Few would object to whatever I decided."

"Wow."

"I had power. I should've used it wisely. I should've listened. When it opened, seventeen boys and girls aged seven to fifteen entered the one-room school. I wanted to teach some English, hoping they'd learn enough to find work as interpreters with the US military or civilian contractors and have better lives." I take a sip of scotch. I don't chug it, because I'm buying time before I have to tell the rest of the story.

"I think that was a good thing you did."

"The VC didn't agree with you."

"Who's that?"

"The Vietcong. Victor Charlie. The bad guys. We called them 'VC' or just 'Charlie.'

They closed the school."

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

"She was too young to go to school. Charlie just taught the kids a lesson. They believed the villagers' purpose was to grow food for them. They expected the kids to work the rice paddies. They didn't need school and God help any who wanted to learn English. The village chief had tried to warn me, but I didn't listen any more than I'd listened to the schoolteacher. I was the all-

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knowing American advisor. I decided the village needed a school, so he had to do what I said even though he knew better. I've always wondered how he convinced those kids. They all knew what might happen to them."

"If they didn't hurt the students, how did they teach them a lesson?"

"A few nights after the school opened, the VC ambushed my advisory team and pinned us down for an hour. That was all the time Charlie needed. We heard the shooting and explosions. We found the village chief dead and the students kneeling in the rubble of the schoolhouse. They'd been told to stay there until morning and contemplate if going to school was really that important. Nothing I said or did convinced them to move, or their parents to move them. Nobody even brought coats or blankets. It was monsoon season and it was pouring. Those kids were soaked and cold, but they knelt there, all night, staring at the teacher. Charlie had cut off his hands before shooting him in the back of the head. The message was clear. School was not allowed, and don't touch the American chalk."

'Call me Candy' gags. She exhales several times. "Oh, my God. What happened to the teacher's daughter?"

I answer before I find a reason not to. "A child was screaming. I ran to a hut, with my medic on my heels. It was wet and muddy outside, but I couldn't fathom why there was water all over the dirt floor. The teacher's wife was lying in a puddle. She'd been shot in the head, too. Next to her was their three-year-old daughter. A beautiful little girl. She always ran to me when she saw me coming. I'd toss her high, she laughed. I taught her to pump her fist and shout, 'USA!' before I'd give her a piece of the hard candy. 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." The memory's making me weep.

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'Call me Candy' hands me a paper napkin. I'm embarrassed, but I accept it. Her eyes are huge, face ashen. "If it wasn't her, who was it?"

I need to finally tell somebody. "It wasn't a 'who,' it was a 'thing.' A grotesque parody of a human child, with no face and most of the skin from its upper body blistered and hanging around its waist. My medic pushed past me and knelt by the writhing, screaming creature. He injected shots of morphine until it quit moving and screaming."

'Call me Candy' is shivering. "What had they done to her?"

"Villagers told me the VC stripped the girl, sat her on the dirt floor and poured boiling water from a cauldron over her head. They wanted everyone to know what would happen to anyone shouting out support for the Americans, even a child who just wanted a piece of candy. The mother attacked one of the soldiers with a rice cutter and they shot her. It was my fault the VC tortured that girl and killed her parents and the village chief. I was arrogant. The teacher's daughter was naked and screaming. If that mother at your school saw a photograph of that, would she be upset if the girl's vagina showed?"

"Fuck! How could anybody do something like that to a child?"

"She's in my nightmares, along with the hundreds of other kids I saw shot, burned, and blown up. Some lived, a lot were disfigured. 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?"

"It's so awful."

"All combat vets experience awful things. Talking about it stirs up memories we want to put to rest. We deny our PTSD, medicate with alcohol and drugs and suffer alone. Sometimes the dreams get so bad one of us eats a pistol." I slide off my barstool.

"Where are you going?" 'Call me Candy' asks.

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“To my bed. To find out if sharing this makes the nightmares worse.” I raise her hand and kiss the back of it. “Get a life, Candy. If you don’t, you’ll be having your own nightmares.”

I don’t stumble too much as I head for the door. I’m not as drunk as some nights.