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The Real Thing

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The Real Thing Sheri Clark

“Sometimes, after a firefight,” my husband said, almost casually. My suburban, sheltered, oh-so-civilian psyche stopped, only for a heartbeat, then raced about in all directions, pinging against possibilities. Without fanfare, my calm, reserved husband continued the sentence, never realizing that his young wife had been dangling, Wile E. Coyote-like, over a cliff.

“Sometimes, after a firefight, a mama-san would appear selling Cokes.”

In trying to process this preposterous-sounding scenario, I latched onto the lone familiar item.

“A Coke? Really, a Coke? So, did you buy it?” I continued as if this were a normal dialogue, one that traded trivialities, the conventional conversational give-and-take. Except. Except that what he had given, I was unable to take in. After a firefight.

“They told us not to drink them. Said they might be booby-trapped. But we always did.”

I clung to the one identifiable feature, like a Shibboleth which would unlock the indecipherable.

“Well, were the Cokes cold? Where did they come from?” I was beyond the looking glass.

There have been many other circumstances—quick moments of recognition, slow times of tears and tension, and long, idle hours in VA waiting rooms—many ways in which the Vietnam War has marked our marriage. Looking over the decades, I realize that not with “I do,” but with those words, “Sometimes after a firefight,” did I become a veteran’s wife.