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The Things We Carry

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I always say that marriage is like erosion--you wear each other down, but slowly, gently. Passing years soften the jagged cliffs of differences rounding them down to more compatible rolling hills, making it easier to navigate. But, in the beginning, after saying "I do," it is mercifully impossible to see too far down the road.

Every individual has a unique set of mismatched baggage. Worn train cases carry treasured, oft-thumbed memories. Tote bags are stuffed with skills, accomplishments, and college degrees. And smaller, darker duffels hide half-remembered hurts, grievances, and disappointments. In combining lives and emotional luggage, eventually the spouse is allowed into the more secret compartments. Like old postcards and souvenir maps, these private memories point the way, revealing some of the where and when, and, to the discerning and loving eye, a bit of the why of who you are.

We had not been married long, a twenty-something mother of one and a Vietnam veteran, when I was startled by a few single sentence, epiphany-producing comments about firefights and walking point. I was young and believed always what had been posted on classroom walls: Knowledge is Power. I had not yet learned the corollary: Contentment requires acceptance. So, I forged ahead, asking questions: "What happened when you were wounded?" and "How did you

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earn your Bronze Stars?” It pains me now to admit that it took years to realize I would never, could never, know. He met each inquiry with a roulette of three responses: “I just did what I was supposed to.” The similar “I was just following orders.” And the one that kept me asking for years:

“I’ll tell you someday.”

Eventually...eventually, I came to understand that someday would never arrive. By that time, however, I had noticed baggage that traveled with us but was never opened. Heavy cases, locked and tightly secured bearing seals from far-away places in Southeast Asia. Most of the time, these dark trunks went largely undisturbed and unnoticed. But occasionally, suddenly, unexpected swerves and abrupt turns in our journey caused them to break free from their taut fastenings, the weight of them thumping and knocking into the more fragile fixtures of our marriage.

Realizing, somewhat belatedly, that, as a veteran’s wife, I was both ill-equipped and uninformed, I launched my secret start-up career as an amateur archaeologist and archivist, collecting and categorizing shards of information. I am the curator and only visitor of a mental museum of the Vietnam War. Like most museums, only a fraction of the inventory is available for display and some topics are more comprehensively covered than others. Flora and Fauna, less fraught, is

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one of the more complete, including information on the danger of elephant grass, the prevalence of leeches in bodies of water, and the alarming and aggressive meanness of water buffalo which paradoxically prove wondrously docile under the direction of the smallest of Vietnamese children.

Military lingo is a collection that casts no shadows, with first-hand information supplied matter-of-factly to questions. This category is subdivided into several sections. Vehicles include: Hueys, Chinooks, Deuce-and-a-halves, armored personnel carriers, C-130 cargo planes. Weapons represented: M-14 and M-16 rifles, M-79 grenade launchers, Claymore mines. Military jargon consists of basic terms: MOS , AIT, and the “very important, never to be lost” form DD-214. A subheading in this category includes cadence songs and sayings not repeatable as well as some funny-frightening sayings such as “Never shoot at a tank” and “Never show up late for an ambush.”

Other areas of investigation are skimpy or completely devoid of information. The box labelled “Combat” contains nothing except a couple of comments concerning Cokes and a firefight and the fact that “No nineteen-year-old should have to choose someone else to walk point.” No other first-hand accounts have ever been made available for this collection. However, this topic has been supplemented by information gleaned from documentaries as well as the films

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Platoon, Hamburger Hill, Full Metal Jacket, and We Were Soldiers Once. In my former, non-veteran's wife life, I protected myself from war movies. Too intense, too upsetting. It's been a long time since I was that girl. I cannot justify that careless ignorant-innocence I previously cultivated. Only the craven crouch, eyes averted from the screen while ensconced safely on a suburban sofa. I know now that my concept of patriotism was inadequate. I came to understand that fluttering flags and hands put over hearts to honor our country's warriors, the survivors and the fallen, is merely entry-level love of country.

Whatever I may add, this collection will never be complete. But all I have accumulated informs my understanding, provides a dim illumination, and often, though sadly not always, provides a measure of patience.

Sometimes, I feel those heavy, unopened footlockers shift and bump as we visit the VA Hospital. We pass the revolving doors, rarely used, too difficult for most, which have come to symbolize for me the constancy and cost of our country's ongoing wars. We enter the doors that open wide revealing the motto: *The Price of Freedom Is Visible Here.* Yes. I walk among heroes, some assisted by sons and daughters, but most accompanied by spouses. Measured steps match those with walkers; purposeful strides push wheelchairs. I am amidst a roll call of role models. Wives (only a few husbands yet) who strive to know and accept what

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they cannot possibly understand. Hurts visible, also, often, invisible. We all help carry those sealed and locked cases. I know, now, they come with us always. All the way to where they will be relinquished at last. At Arlington.