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War's Teeth

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War's Teeth Shani Miller

It's Saturday morning, and the Starbucks at the grocery store buzzes with commotion. Two homeless guys bicker in the corner, while another man talks loudly on his phone. The cafe smells like roasted coffee beans and fried chicken from the nearby deli. Our three kids sit around the table with bagels and chocolate milk, and my husband Nathanael hands me an Americano with steamed heavy cream. It's piping hot, just the way I like. This is our Saturday morning tradition, snacks before grocery shopping. Cassandra and Elijah cheer their milk together and wash down bites of bagels. Baby Hadassah kicks her feet in the highchair while playing with goldfish. Relaxing in the wooden chair, I sip my coffee and smile at Nathanael. I know I only have moments before I'll be wiping up spilled milk or taking a child to the bathroom.

"It's going to be hot today. Make sure you wear sunscreen," A man announces as he comes around the corner. Others in the coffee shop ignore him. The Veterans Affairs Hospital is fifteen miles from here, and locals are accustomed to disturbances from homeless veterans.

"Thanks," I say looking him in the eyes.

"Cassandra," I tell my five-year-old daughter. "Go tell him thank you for your service."

"Why mommy?" Cassandra blushes as she hides behind my three-year-old son, Elijah.

Cassandra twirls her long, dirty-blond hair and glances at the man reading his newspaper. Short and thin, she leans into her sturdy brother who giggles.

Working up some courage, she gently says, "Thank you for your service, mister."

He continues reading his paper.

"A little louder," I coach Cassandra.

"Thank you for your service," she mutters, but he doesn't hear her.

War's Teeth Shani Miller

Baby Hadassah throws her goldfish on the ground, and Elijah spills his milk on the table. Cassandra and Elijah tickle each other, and more milk spills. The moment has passed.

Nathanael grabs some napkins, and I scoop Hadassah into the shopping cart. Before I leave Starbucks, I ask Nathanael if I can catch up with him and the kids in a minute.

He puts down his newspaper, pushes his shoulders back, and reaches to shake my hand. His fingers are calloused, and his grip is tight. The palm of his hand feels warm, but the bones in his fingers are cold like the eeriness of war. In his eyes, I see pain.

He mutters something about the newspaper. I can't quite understand what he's saying.

"You can't trust anyone," he rattles. "Not the government. Not your pastor. Not your family. Don't even trust your husband."

I listen intently to his every word, not breaking eye contact. I'd been on my own search to understand the Vietnam War for years. *What was it like in the jungle? What was it like to return home?* My own transition home from Afghanistan in 2016 held its own nightmares. I'd returned to friends who knew nothing about the horrors of the Taliban. Chanting propaganda music and violent images plagued me, and comrades' deaths lingered. PTSD, loneliness, and grief led to my own suicide ideations. Just like this Vietnam vet, I had lost trust. I had cried out for help, but my friends weren't there. They abandoned me. When the bloody nightmares intensified and my body wracked with the horrors of war, I suffered alone.

"The Gulf of Tonkin," this man says, insisting I research the incident.

War still fills his eyes.

"It was all a farce," he rattles. "The Vietcong had bamboo rafts. It was all a farce."

War's Teeth Shani Miller

I try to ask a question, but he keeps going.

“The leaders were screwing those Vietnam girls.”

The veins in his arms bulge. He bangs his fist on the table.

Memories of shenanigans from Afghanistan return.

“We hooked you up with the operation, now you owe me sex.” A leader’s words still throb through me. War brings out the worst in people.

“There was that day in the shower.” The gentleman in the coffee shop brings me back to the present.

“We all-all-all stood naked. N-n-naked in the shower. Vulnerable as hell.” He choked up.

Moments pass. War reflects off his eyes.

“We heard the whistling of the bombs, but we had nowhere to go. We fell to the ground and covered our heads. There was no-no-nowhere to go-go-go. We were n-n-naked.”

I grab his hand. He weeps. I weep.

He is stiff. His feet touch the ground of this grungy Starbucks in Virginia, but he’s still in Vietnam.

“Bloodied body parts flew. We-we-we. We-we h-h-had n-n-nowhere to go. Me and Johnny ran in the open field. It was the only way to get to the bunker.”

I feel the sticky stench of his words. He grabs my hand tighter as the earth shakes, metal thrashes, and I feel the wide-open nakedness of the field. Our stories intermingle as my body remembers the rattling of my containerized housing unit in Afghanistan. *Incoming, incoming,*

War's Teeth Shani Miller

incoming, I hear reverberating in my ear drums. I drop to the cool floor shoving my helmet over my head. *Boom, Boom, Boom.*

Then, silence. I wait for the "All Clear."

"God pulled me out of the enemy's teeth like a shark," this Vietnam vet tells me.

Chills run down my spine. "Amen."

Every part of him shakes, but our eyes lock. His words are true, to the depth of my soul. My body still remembers booming metal from Taliban mortars and screeching sounds of ISIS propaganda music. I feel the lustful gaze of US soldiers and the agony of friends' suicides. Nightmares still haunt me. I survived. War's teeth had tried to crush me, but just like this veteran, I am still alive.

He leans closer, "Jesus loves the shit outta you."

I sob from my chest. That's the kindest thing anyone has ever said to me.

"Don't trust anybody, but Jesus, he loves the shit outta you."

Wiping my eyes, I see the tears on his cheeks.

"What's your name, Sir?"

"Ed Brown." He snaps his shoulders to the position of attention. "Corporal Ed Brown."

"Nice to meet you, Corporal Brown. I'm Shani."

"It's very nice to meet you too, Shani. Your children are beautiful."

"Thank you."

War's Teeth Shani Miller

We both stare out the window watching shoppers load groceries into their cars. I search my purse to hand him some Kleenex.

I pray quietly, "Thank you for Ed, dear God."

I may not have experienced Vietnam like Ed, but some things about war are the same. Ed had endured the jungle; I had endured the desert. He fought the Vietcong; I fought the Taliban and ISIS. We both lost comrades to enemies in combat and to the demons of the soul. Returning home felt like hell for both of us. Scars on our hearts remained. But we survived the teeth of war.