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Content Warning: War, Gore, Violence, Animal Violence, Themes of Varying Prejudices, Swearing

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MacMillan's Journal¹²

December 15th, 1965. I take a deep whiff of the Alabama air outside Fort Rucker. Soil, skunk, and a little chicken shit. Home. I sling my rucksack over my shoulder and step towards the helicopter, noting how each step takes me closer to Vietnam³. In just a few minutes, we'll lift off towards the Da Nang military base, and I'll be trained and thrown into combat. At the very least, I have Dixon with me. He's already on the chopper, grinning at me from afar with his arm outstretched, beckoning me from afar. . .

A yell from downstairs interrupts my⁴ reading. "Janie⁵," I hear Mother's voice echo about the small shack we call a house. "Quit playin' around in Papaw's things and come help with dinner."⁶

¹ Premise: The premise of the story is a short, summarized version of what physically happens in a story in a sentence or two. In my story, the premise is a girl who gets transported to the body of her grandfather's brother in arms in Vietnam after an incident, and she learns more about her grandfather.

² Theme: Theme is the deeper meaning beneath the surface of a story. In my story, the theme is the importance of empathy.

³ Setting: The setting of a story is when/where the story takes place. MacMillan's journal switches between Vietnam during the Vietnam War and Janie's rural Alabama home in the 80's/90's.

⁴ Point of View: Point of View is the perspective of which a story is told. My story is told in the first person, specifically from Janie's perspective.

⁵ Protagonist: A protagonist is the main character, or who the story is about. Janie is my protagonist.

⁶ Audience: The audience for a work is whoever is reading or consuming the material. My audience is my classmates, but my target audience if I were to develop the story further would be for YA history buffs.

I huff. Dinner time since Papaw has moved in is never fun⁷. He needs help being fed and everything on his plate is mush, and it gets on the table and himself, and he drools. Ick. I start down the stairs, turn into the dining room and pop down on the seat next to Papaw. Mother serves peas and spaghetti squash with some meatloaf that's too soft for my liking, but Papaw accepts it as I help spoon-feed him.

Papaw doesn't say thank you, even after I wipe his shirt and face and pull his wheelchair away from the table and toward the TV. He doesn't say anything, actually, because he's a mute. Lost his speech sometime right before he was evac-ed from Vietnam back in the war, or at least that's what mother says. I remember him whistling to me as a kid, though, so I think he *can speak*, he just likes to be a problem.

As I put the brakes on his wheelchair, Mother kisses both our foreheads and snatches up her purse. "I'm runnin' late." She explains. "I'll be home before too early in the morning. Can you get Papaw bathed and in bed for me?"

"Sure." She smiles and pats my cheek, then she's out the door. Great. Papaw bath.⁸

After his bath, I close the door to Papaw's bedroom and head back up to the study. I fiddle with some of his old war relics: coins, bullets, medals, and the occasional gas canister. I don't know how he got away with keeping some of this stuff.

⁷ Conflict: Conflict is any altercation or issue between a character and something or someone else, and it can be internal or external. My story has mostly external conflict, with Janie and her grandfather, as well as between soldiers later on.

⁸ Wants vs Needs: Wants vs Needs is a sort of lesson a protagonist learns in a story, involving a balance of desire in contrast to a betterment of character. Janie obviously doesn't want to care for her grandfather, but she needs to, and so her transportation to Vietnam helps her to understand this need.

The journal looms on the desk, enticing me. Words written by a man who doesn't speak hold a real intrigue, I think. I imagine what his voice must sound like as I open the journal and hop up atop his desk.

Dixon is my best friend out of the training here in Fort Rucker. A real handsome fella, he's got a girl here who I'd imagine is devastated that he's gonna be gone for god knows how long.

I skip a few pages, all rambling about this Dixon guy. He seems to admire him greatly. He calls him his brother a few times. I shift my weight on the desk- which is a mistake, as a nail keeping the thing together pops.

I curse under my breath, when I suddenly hear a low hissing. When I look up, I see gas filling the room. Shit. I try and stumble to my feet, but darkness takes over in seconds.⁹

¹⁰My dream is odd. I'm in an army uniform and somewhere I've never seen before. It's oddly clear for a dream. I finish the cigarette I'm smoking and crunch it out with my foot, then turn to a young man who clasps me on the shoulder and grins.

"You ready, man?" He questions. I tilt my head.

"Ready for what?" I question in a voice unlike my own. The man laughs.

⁹ Inciting Incident: The inciting incident is whatever causes the protagonist to have to begin their journey. In my story, the inciting incident comes when Janie knocks over a gas canister and is sent on her Vietnam journey.

¹⁰ Separation: Separation is when a character's life is uprooted in some way, usually by the central conflict, initiating their involvement in the story. In my story, Janie is separated from everything she knows and is thrown into the role of a soldier.

“Don’t fuck with me, Chain,” he punches my side, and I *feel* it. Not just a phantom pressure. I wince a little and rub my side, and I *feel* my fingertips. Before I can comprehend, the man is drags me off toward a group of men, all in army uniforms. The terrain here is unfamiliar and tropical. “Squad’s ready to go. You had your smoke break, don’t wanna be late to head out.”¹¹

I open my mouth to protest, but a sturdy, commanding voice yells at the group of men.

“Alright, boys,” the voice shouts, coming from a large, burly man with a buzz cut and a mean look. “Da Nang to Tra Bong is about a four-hour hump. We’re marching to Than Khe then going down the coast. Pack your shit, say your prayers, then we move out.”

A hump, I quickly learn, in this dream is not what I thought, but instead when a bunch of sweaty army guys carry too many things from one place to another.

By the time I am ‘humping’ through the muddy marshes on the way to Than Khe, I’ve realized ¹²two things. Firstly, those are places in Vietnam. Secondly, I am not dreaming.

The man, whose name I learn is Henry, walks and talks with me as we go. He talks too much, actually, about his life and how hot it is and how he didn’t realize he’d gained weight when he told them the size for his uniform, so his pants are too tight in his crack and he’s starting to get “swamp ass.” He likes to talk.

The trip to Than Khe is full of dense jungle and lush grass. The heat is immense, somehow burning my skin through the camo. It’s uneventful except for a chicken that had strayed from the village, perhaps hoping to escape slaughter. Unlucky for it, the man leading us

¹¹ Call to Adventure: The call to adventure is whatever motivates a character to actually go on their journey. In my story, Janie just follows along with what Henry, a familiar face, suggests.

¹² Motif: Motif is a recurring idea or object in a story. I use a written motif of Janie stating what she has learned or what she knows now during her journey.

must've thought it was an enemy, because it was visible in the path for a split second before becoming a cloud of meat and feathers.

After that, we walk in silence. I don't know what expectations I had for a Vietnamese village, maybe mud huts and straw roofs, but I know it wasn't a desecrated village racked with gore and ash. Bodies and bits litter the ground. I feel sick.¹³ The smell is what really gets me. It had hit me before we even reached the village- the putrid aroma of rotting bodies baking in the sun. Bile rises in my throat, expulsing from my mouth before I can stop it. A few of the men look back at me. A couple laugh. The soldier leading us scowls.

"Man up, soldier." He snarls. "If you can't handle a few corpses, I'll send your hick ass back to 'Bama real quick."

I nod, then wipe my mouth and fall into line. A large sip from Henry's canteen helps me.

I see more than dead soldiers in the village. Women, children, *infants*, dogs, livestock, elderly. They're all just left to rot like roadkill.

Papaw couldn't speak when he left Vietnam. I didn't learn about it until last year in my US history class, and it was never described like this. It was described as *essential*, that the lives lost were to keep Americans safe. When we finally leave the village, I can't help but glance back. God bless America, I guess.

We start to go south to Tra Bong, and very quickly things go south as well. The leading man, whose name I learn is Sergeant Leavitt, splits the twelve-man group into thirds. Henry and I are paired with two of the soldiers who laughed at my hurling up chunks. We all walk together

¹³ Tests and trials: Tests and trials are minor conflicts in a story that prove a character's development. In my story, Janie has a few tests of her empathy to prepare for her final acceptance of her grandfather.

through a possible minefield, with myself second to a soldier named Private Greene with Henry behind me, and Private Sacks behind him.

Greene is a no-nonsense kind of man, dark, serious features, who must be in his late twenties. Sacks is the opposite, wry and small with prominent smile lines. As we pass through the field, Sacks jokes about the village distastefully.

“I’d heard ‘Nam food smelled bad, but that was ridiculous.” He cracks, the wide grin not leaving his face even after Henry shoots a dagger-sharp glare at him.

The mud below us sinks up past our laces with every step, and I have to pry myself as I walk. Bugs swarm us, tickling my cheeks and forcing me to scrunch up my face and wipe it on my shoulder. The heat buzzes loudly in my ears.

After what may have been an hour, or twenty minutes, several gunshots echo in the distance. We hear men shouting and freeze and drop in place. Greene pulls out his radio. It’s static, then Vietnamese shouting, then screams that curdle my blood and send a cold feeling rising from my toes to my neck. I listen closely, able to make out some words through the staticky pants.

“CO. . . Gone. . . ! Surrounded. . .” One more scream, then silence.

Henry and myself exchange a long glance. Greene scowls and motions with his head, beginning to trudge again across the terrain.

“Fuckin’ ‘Nam,” I hear him mutter as he takes a heavy step forward, before I don’t hear anything at all¹⁴.

¹⁴ Central Conflict: The central conflict is, at its basis, the conflict in the halfway point of a story. In my story, the central conflict involves a mine exploding, taking Janie and her small group off course.

I learn what the sound of nothing is. I lift my head from the mud and, bobbling like a sleepy puppy, begin to look around. All I see is sky. The sky in Vietnam is so clear, untouched by the dense light pollution we see in America. I grin up at the sky. It's peaceful for a moment.

Then the fog overtaking my senses clears, and I feel the shrapnel in my leg. I scream, of course. I scream so loud I'm sure they can hear me all the way in America. I feel a hand clamp over my mouth, and arms dragging me into the dense jungle.

This is it, I think. I'm dying. I'm dying and I'll be dead and I didn't even get to see my 18th birthday.

I scream against the hand until I can't anymore. I look closely at the arms gripping me. They're American camo. I pant and look back, and I see Henry. He's drenched head to toe in blood and sweat, and bits of metal and gore stick to his uniform, but he seems mostly unarmed.

"Shoot me," I beg as the pain in my leg pulsates.

"Maybe later." Henry retorts, lifting me up over his broad shoulders as he rushes deeper into the jungle, whistling at Sacks to follow. Greene is both nowhere and everywhere in sight, bits of his viscera decorating the landscape like some fucked-up confetti popper. I see a hand balanced perfectly on a rock.

Once deep enough that the jungle covered us, Henry has Sacks clamp his hands over my mouth while he yanks the metal from my leg, bandaging it tight with his ripped undershirt sleeve. After that, we note the sun's location in the sky, and begin to walk southward.

My leg injury isn't too unbearable, only when I put too much weight does it send jolts deep into my bones. I take the lead walking south, since I apparently have the most experience. (Spoiler alert: I don't. Chain does.)

There was a map of Vietnam hanging in Papaw's study that I used to stare at when I cleaned. I have a vague idea of where we are. I thought about taking us straight down the beach, but I imagine it would be occupied and rather open, which doesn't sound the safest.

Eventually, the sun falls to the west, and we set up camp beneath a dense banyan tree. We cover ourselves with brush and debris and wind between the branches, getting close to comfortable. Henry and I lay with our feet next to the others' head, staring up in the center of the tree.

"Tell me more about yourself, Henry." I invite, craning my aching neck slightly to catch a glimpse of his features in the moonlight.

He laughs. "Like what? I like long walks on the beach, poetry, a rum and coke by the fire."

I kick him. "Seriously. Tell me something."

He thinks for a long moment. "I was born in Rainesville, Alabama. My Pop works A/C. My middle name is Albert." He cracks a grin.

I roll my eyes, gesturing for him to continue.

"Henry Albert MacMillan¹⁵. Ham. My Ma and Pop named me ham."

¹⁵ Reversal: A reversal in a story is a moment where a plot twist of some sort happens, and the protagonist is led to view things in a new light. In my story, this occurs when Janie realizes that the strong, respected soldier that has been helping her is her young grandfather.

He continues to joke about his initials, but I just stare at him. Henry Albert MacMillan is my papaw's name.

"Henry." I mumble. "What's my first name?"

"What?"

"Just humor me."

"Dixon."

In the morning, when the sun is just barely over the horizon, we grab our things and continue south. I can see Vietnam for what it is now, a beautiful land wracked by a war it didn't start. Birds chirp high in the trees. I spot a water buffalo and a calf grazing in the weeds.

Henry whistles as he walks, a tune vaguely familiar to me. I whistle with him as we walk. Sacks drags his gun in the mud.

"Hey Songbird, Chain," Sacks grins at his new nickname for Henry. "Smoke ahead."

We both lift our heads, and sure enough, smoke rises from a spot a mile or so in the distance.

Henry turns serious all of a sudden. If I didn't know he was my papaw, I'd think he looked rather handsome. He drops low, and Sacks and I follow suit, crouching low as we approach.

It begins to rain, the smoke dying out in front of us. Henry presses a finger to his lips as we draw our weapons. We crawl around the exterior of what seems to be a temporary Vietnamese base.

Henry peeks around corners. He taps me and tilts his head toward a bamboo cage. Inside is our CO, Leavitt. Sacks, without thinking, crawling toward the cage. I reach out to grab him, but Henry tugs me back. We watch as Sacks breaks the lock and frees Leavitt.

Leavitt steps out and stretches. He grins.

It all happens so fast. Sacks is on the ground, blood staining the clay. Leavitt stands above him, knife in hand.

Henry pushes me to run, but it's too late. Vietnamese soldiers surround us on all sides. We're grabbed and ushered toward a large circle, fenced in with sharpened bamboo. Leavitt is brought with us.

"Treacherous bastard!" Henry spits, hawking saliva and spewing it in Leavitt's direction. "Those men trusted you, you son of a bitch!"

Leavitt rolls his shoulders. The Vietnamese soldiers abandon the circle, a few men standing around the exterior.

"Vietnam is a different world, soldiers. It's a lawless land. We're all just trying to survive." Leavitt draws a knife from his waistband. Henry and I follow suit, huddled close.

¹⁶A shot rings through the air, and Leavitt bolts straight for me, intercepted by Henry. The two tussle in the mud. I do what I can, kicking and clawing at Leavitt. My injured legs causes difficulty getting momentum.

The three of us thrash in the mud. Leavitt knocks Henry in the temple, hard, and with him down, I'm the next target. I scramble backward, searching for my knife in the mud. I feel a hand

¹⁶ Climax: The climax in a story is the moment of truth, when the protagonist must face their main conflict and either overcome or succumb. In my story, the climax involves Janie, her previous CO, and Henry being forced to brawl to the death.

grab my injured leg and yank me back, fingers digging deep into the wound. A strained yelp escapes me as the searing pain kicks in. Leavitt licks sweat from his lips and raises his knife, then digs it deep into my gut. Then, slowly, he crumples on top of me, knife in the back of his skull.

Henry, panting and bloody, falls to his knees. I wrap an arm around him to support him.

The soldiers surrounding us yell enthusiastically. One points his gun at Henry and I, gesturing between the two of us. The message is clear, even if we don't speak the language. They want us to fight now.

I look at Henry and smile sadly. "You've got a better chance."

"No."

"It's okay."

"No."

I sigh and struggle to stand. Henry backs away. He raises his arm and, in a circular motion, flips off the surrounding soldiers.

Angry yelling follows, then a gas canister is thrown between Henry and I. I cough and struggle. I didn't think they had canisters like ours. I reach blindly for Henry amidst the gas, ducking low as I hear shooting and yelling around us, along with a distinct whirring noise. Before long, the exhaustion and pain overtakes me.

When I wake up, I'm in a cot, surrounded by a few medics. I don't feel any pain anymore. Henry is to my right, gripping my hand tightly. He doesn't speak, just looks at me with hard, sad eyes.

I squeeze his hand back, weakly. We're in a helicopter, must be a med-EVAC. We can see the sky outside. Vibrant red-orange with dusts of white and pink.

Henry's expression says more than any words could. *I'm sorry* and *thank you* and *please*. I just tilt my head toward the window.

"Watch the sunset with me."

Hesitant, he nods. We watch together as the sun disappears from the sky, and when the sky is dark, I rest my head back against the cot, and I relax, allowing sleep to take me.

¹⁷I learned a lot in Vietnam, a lot more than most girls my age probably know. I learned that the sky is clear there, and the air is thick, and the heat is buzzing hot. I learned that Henry Albert MacMillan was a man to be respected.

I wheel Papaw away from the dinner table and give him a kiss on the cheek. He smiles at me, a light in his eyes that I don't know how I didn't notice before. I bring him to the front porch and sit on the wood next to him, his hand ruffling my hair. North-east Alabama is beautiful in the summertime.

¹⁷ Rebirth: The rebirth in a story is when a character emerges from the climax and inhabits their world in a new light and is free from whatever conflict was binding them. Here, the rebirth is shown through Janie's new attitude and companionship with her grandfather as she returns home from Vietnam.

¹⁸I look up at Papaw, at the soldier who I fought with in Vietnam, and watch as he purses his lips together, licking them. He whistles softly, and I close my eyes, humming along to the tune as I watch the sun set over Vietnam.

¹⁸ Dénouement: The denouement is the ending of a story. Here, I have Janie and her grandfather enjoying a sunset together and whistling, just like they did back in Vietnam.