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English IV
11 March 2018

The Veteran

Two black crows sat on the rusty barbed wire running along the top of the brittle fence, gathering small debris and leaves to build their nest. On the empty prairie full of wispy weeds and uncut grass, an ancient fence surrounded one lonely cottage against the pale blue sky. The ends of the green wooden panels that built the house had begun to rot like the frayed edges of a worn, tattered cloth. Forming one unending landscape painting, thelone cottage bravely stood hurdling the strong winds and fleeting time.

Blue curtains swayed to the rhythm of the breeze against spotted windows, the sun multiplying in its reflections on the glass. Not a single footstep could be heard for miles of hills in every direction. Through a window on the second level, an old man sat on a rocking chair while holding a cigarette near his slightly parted, wrinkled lips. Leaning against the chair, a gun laid still. He looked out the window with his emerald eyes and saw nothing but acres of the quiet Earth. His few receding gray hairs peeked out under the scratched, green helmet, the straps hanging down loose, following the direction of his droopy earlobes. From his forehead to chin, gravity pulled each drop of sweat down onto his faded green uniform as he anxiously tapped his right foot against the dusty floors. On his still left boot, an aged German Shepherd rested his coffee-colored head. With even the faintest movements of the birds or the creaks of the wooden floors, the German Shepherd’s ears perked tall.

The wooden curves of the chair’s rockers swung back and forth as the old man dropped his cigarette and violently rose up.

“*Giúp tôi!*” A distant, high-pitched shriek pierced throughout the weak cottage, into the old man’s consciousness. The German Shepherd’s ears lay flat on its head.

With his head stuck out and ears pointed towards the heart of the cry, the old man with widened, green eyes stood still. “Where are you?”

He peered out the window, searching for any hint of life, but instead he inhaled the foul stench of burning fire and fuel through his system. A gloom fell upon the sky as fires snaked through the thick wild plants and smogs of smoke outlined the horizon

“*Giúp tôi!*”

After hearing the same cry for help, the old man grabbed his gun, stepped over his calm German Shepherd, and hurried down the stairs with his frail legs and his heavy, torn combat boots. He opened the front door, leading out to the muted brown porch.

“Tommy?”

A young, blue-eyed soldier stood in his stonewashed uniform with his helmet buckled and gun in his hands. “Sergeant, we gotta hurry.”

Behind the soldier, the agony of the Vietnam War had erupted. Groups of fearless soldiers ran across the vast fields, camouflaging into the tall, green weeds. Roaring helicopters dropped supplies onto the ground and massive cannons aimed out into the menacing yonder.

“*Giúp tôi!*”

“Tommy, did you hear that?”

“Hear what, sir?”

“That… cry for help.”

“Sergeant, I’m not sure, but there are a lot of people countin’ on you right now, sir. We got to go.”

The old man and Tommy rushed to the other troops. Behind a small, bushy hill, they all laid flat on their stomachs and aimed their guns at the Viet Cong forces. The old man pointed his gun and pulled the trigger, but the bullet flew into the enemy’s body and out the other side. The enemy was unharmed.

“Sergeant, are you all right?”

Amidst the thundering sounds of war, the old man was frozen in dubiety.

“Sir, we gotta keep movin’.”

The troops continued to push forward over the hill near a muddy river. The once sapphire blue river and the luscious green countryside had become an expanse of misery and tragedy. The old man became dizzy as he breathed in the poor chemicals and exhaust that were infused in the pure air.

“*Giúp tôi!* *Giúp tôi!*”

 The old man could no longer ignore the cry for help. Digging his boots into the wet mud, he followed the faint, weeping call. He plunged into the frigid river and desperately swam across as the cry grew louder and louder. The old man’s feeble stamina was deteriorating as the jarring waves crashed into his delicate body.

 A young Vietnamese child hid behind a large stone with her arms wrapped around her legs. Her tan face was smeared with dirt, her clothes were stained with crimson blood, and her tangled, coal-black hair touched the ground. The old man rested his hand on her shoulder and, out of the darkness, a glimpse of the sun’s rays hit the young child’s glistening, caramel eyes.

 “*Giúp tôi!*”

 “What’s wrong--are you hurt?”

 “*Giúp tôi! Tôi cần đến gia đình tôi.*”

 “Your family?” While listening to the young child speak, the old man dug into his memories of training at the Defense Language Institute.

“*Tôi đã mất gia đình…*”

 “I’ll help you find them. Now c’mon.”

As he cradled the young child in safekeeping, she whimpered against the noises of brutality and eruptions. In her sickly state, her brittle bones shivered as the rugged wind touched her thin, scarred skin.

“*Bạn có biết họ ở đâu không?*”

 “No I don’t know where they are, but we’ll find them. Don’t worry… *đừng lo lắng*.”

 The young child’s chapped lips shaped a modest smirk as the ends of her brown eyes crinkled with warmth and comfort. “*Tên bạn là gì?*”

 “My name? Sergeant Johnson… but you can call me Alexander.” Because of the old man’s worn out lungs, his breath deepened with each step he marched. “*Tên của bạn?*” He pointed his finger towards her.

 “*Mai Anh*.”

 “Now, that’s a pretty name. *Đẹp*.”

 The old man and the young child drifted off into the unknown woods and away from the U.S. troops. Instead of charcoal haze and glowing, scarlet fumes, the lush forest hovered above their uneasy minds.

 “Sergeant Johnson!” Tommy and the other soldiers were striding towards the old man, but he did not glance back.

 “Yeah, I’ll be right there. No need to wait for me.”

 “No, sir. You really shouldn’t be leavin’ base.”

 The old man quickened his pace on the muddy trail, passing overgrown vines of untamable shrubs. As he ran and pushed into the ground, silt and sediment splashed onto his shabby cargo pants with each step and he embraced the young child like his own, shielding her from the potential commotion that may erupt.

 “*Họ là ai?*”

 “*Không ai*… they’re no one.”

 Eventually, the old man’s speed could no longer be outrun. He and the young child were alone in the boundless terrain of a Vietnamese forest. The countless crowns of towering trees with slender trunks formed a makeshift roof full of bristles and ferns. Through the gaps between leaves, beams of light flickered on their moving bodies and molded their outsized shadows against the dirt earth. Amidst the peaceful environment, the old man knew they were still in jeopardy of the Viet Cong.

 “Now, where would your family be… *Ở đâu*?”

 “*Thuyền*. *Thuyền đến Laos*.”

 “Boat-- oh yeah… the boat refugees.”

 For hours and hours, the old man and the young child wandered further into the fathomless forest. A chill began to intensify as the trees grew thicker and their shadows grew colder. Crystal dew glistened on the fresh leaves and crisply bloomed flowers as an petals of reds, purples, yellows, and oranges floated above the green ocean. Hand in hand, the old man and the young child continued to roam east of Saigon, in search of the South China Sea.

 “*Chúng ta gần như đã có chưa?*” The young child looked up towards the old man, while swinging their tightly held hands to the pace of their steps. Her hand seamlessly fit in the old man’s sweaty palm.

 “Be patient… *kiên nhẫn*… and we’ll get there before you know it.”

 As the young girl gazed to her right, she spotted a long, muddy river along the edges of the woods. She skipped over and the old man trailed behind like her permanent shadow. Together, the old man and the young child sat near the bank of the perpetually flowing river with lofty, yellow weeds surrounding them. With his old yet steady hands drawn of creases and ridges, the old man skipped a silver pebble across the smooth, calm waters. The restless young child watched the old man in admiration and tried to copy his effortless move. Just as her pebble plunged into the river, ripples of water began to fortify in size, becoming violent and rough. The old man peered beyond the big waves and spied a narrow, wooden sampan full of five Viet Cong soldiers drifting against the current.

 “*Hãy yên lặng.*” With index finger to lips, the old man grabbed the young child and together they hid in between the weeds. Beads of sweat formed above the tense old man’s bushy eyebrows and fell onto the young child. Never losing sight of the Viet Cong, his one, careful eye moved from right to left as the sampan meandered passed them.

 “*Họ đã mất không?*” the young child whispered.

 “Yeah, I think they’re gone… we can’t be fooling around anymore, we gotta get you to your family.” With his tired arms, the old man carried the young child back into the gloomy forest.

 “*Bắt họ! Bắt họ!*”

 As the old man glanced behind towards the shout, five men wearing blue uniforms and yellow leaf hats were rushing his way past the trees. The Viet Cong.

 The old man put down the frightened young child as he knew he could no longer outrun them. He fiercely rested his scarred hands on her shoulders while looking deep into her warm, brown eyes. “Run Mai… run towards the sea. *Chạy*.”

 One last time, the young child put the old man’s hand on her left palm and her right hand on top. “*Cảm ơn bạn*.” Amidst the near danger, she embraced the old man’s lanky legs and then sped off into the woods.

The old man watched as the young child shrunk smaller and smaller, disappearing into the hopeful future. “You’re welcome…”

 Suddenly, the old man heard a loud crack. He felt a bullet enter his weak body. He felt the stabbing pain of broken bones and ripped flesh as he collapsed onto the ground, but the muscles in his face never let go of the faint smile he made while watching the young child go free. Before the weight in his eyelids grew heavier, a tear found its way out of his forlorn eyes and traveled down his flushed face. With his eyes closed but ears opened, he heard the soft barking of his German Shepherd.

 Alone, the old man lay dead on the windswept grass of the silent, empty field with a fallen gun next to him. Instead of the forest, the dilapidated, lone cottage surrounded by a fence stood behind him. The front door swung open as the German Shepherd scurried over to the old man. With his tail down and ears up, the German Shepherd rested its head on his still body.