

## The Parlor

The unforgiving bamboo floor was sentient misery. In an unconscious but deliberate motion, Sam awkwardly, but silently as his body would cooperate, rolled his half naked body from side to side in the squared bamboo cage, helping to ease the pain of the rock hard cylindrical tubes that seemed determined to wear away at his protruding bones that pressed steadily outwards against his tightly shrinking skin. Rolling back and forth helped relieve the bone bruising, even if it was temporary. But it couldn't sooth the hundreds of pestilent bites from the ants and insects that continuously feasted on his malnourished, skeletal thin body. At times, his scratching at the torturous itching would rival that of a mange infected, unloved dog, if his hands weren't bound behind him. As the dead of night came alive with every insect and rodent that inhabited the lush, steamy, impenetrable jungle, fending off the biting critters was a never ending and exhausting battle. He struggled to remember what it was like to get any longer than fifteen to twenty minutes of continuous sleep without being awakened by a large fur covered arachnid, or some multi legged arthropod, or just the spasmodic reflex of a dream induced imaginary insect crawling across his body in the oppressive and sweltering humidity. The continual buzz of enormous malaria carrying mosquitos was insanity delayed. If he wasn't scratching, he was slapping. But always he welcomed the thick, warm, heavy monsoon rains. Tilting his head as far back as he could, mouth opened wide, eyes closed, he lapped at every drop of the pure cascading water through the narrow openings of the bamboo slats with a fervid tongue. It was

God's way of sending Sam fresh water, saving him from the gastrointestinal torment of dysentery and everything else that came from drinking the parasite infested waters of the nearby Mekong river. He had long ago given up any hope of someone looking for him, let alone finding him. Helplessly, he watched the hurried, cockroach like shadowed movements of the numberless enemy from his cage. He'd watch as they would disappear, and reappear from beneath the ground through the camouflaged entrances that lead to their massive subterranean tunnel system. He also watched as the enemy gathered in small groups and prayed, as they prepare for battle against his fellow soldiers and the anti-communist citizens of south Viet Nam. Though he wondered what God they prayed to, as he prayed every day as well, sometimes all day. He knew of only one God. The nights were blacker than anything he had ever remembered. Apart for maybe the one time when he was nine years old, when he and Tommy, his younger brother discovered an abandoned well on the family farm, that had been mostly covered over by time, but not filled in after it went dry. As they pitched rocks through the small opening in the ground, eagerly listening for echoing sounds of the rocks splashing in any water below. Without warning, the unstable sod edging broke away, dropping Sam feet first towards the bottom of the lightless well. For Sam, the collapse came in a slow motion as the cylindrical brick walls narrowed as he descended through thick, entangled layers of undisturbed spider webs to the bottom, landing with his feet embedded in the soft mud, below a shallow water surface. He was surprised he wasn't hurt, nor felt any fear. He heard a slight suctioning sound from the mud as he pulled his entrapped feet free from below the frigid knee deep water. Tommy started to cry as he peered into the darkened well, just before he ran off. Sam was thankful it was him at the bottom of the well and not Tommy. Confined to total

darkness, save for the small opening above him. Sam could see blue sky fade to darkness as the hours passed, as he leaned against the cold damp wall that was home to every air-breathing insect and spider and an occasional wandering water snake. It was hours before his parents returned from town and Tommy informing them what had happen to Sam, and before Sam was pulled from a cold, wet, blackened would be grave. Sam never cried, even as a child, not that he could ever remember. Any movement from his cage, *or parlor*, as Sam thought of it - *A reminder of home, when guests visited, Sam's mother would usher everyone "into the Parlor" as it was an emotionally comforting and peaceful sanctuary to receive valued friends.* would get the attention of one of the Viet Cong soldiers, who would inevitably blindly slice a rifle bayonet through the pitch-black night air into the bamboo slats yelling unfilled threats, to keep Sam's mind teetering on the edge of madness. They wanted him alive, or to die on his own. The parlor was his bamboo sanctum. Not from physical abuse, or the elements, but a shelter to collect mental strength. When he was caged, the Viet Cong left him alone, most of the time. Colonel Po's orders. Sam was the lone American prisoner. His thoughts of Lip were constant. Sargent Philip Whitney and Sam made a great team, they feared little, but not death. At night, in the darkest part of his parlor, he honed his mental strength, and psychological courage. Drawing from an enervated memory that would subjectively flash him home, to his family, the farm. A life that he sometimes thought was just an illusory fantasy of an unhinged mind, but always returning him to the jubilant reflection of his last day at home.

As the sun warmed a magnificent late spring Sunday afternoon, Sam sat tightly wedged between his classmates on the over-crowded wooden bleachers at the fifty-yard line of the

Bensenville High School football field. Robed in the cumbersome midnight blue academic costume, a small stamped "sixty-eight" clutched the yellow chrome braided tassel that danced back and forth in Sam's face as he mindlessly followed the marching band on a freshly mowed field. Irresistible impatience's controlled his awakened thoughts, and sometimes his dreams. Inspired in part he thought since the fourth grade and the weekly air-raid drills of a cold war. With an entry level introduction to the evils of an unseen communist menace and their threatened world oppression, a blasting claxon from the public-address system forced Sam and his classmates beneath their school desks for cover, shielding them from the imaginary communist dropped nuclear bombs. But it was also Miss. Greenfield, his fourth-grade teacher, who unwittingly etched into Sam's psyche an eternally erotic and enraptured memory. When she once suddenly appeared from behind and knelt next to him as he sheltered under his desk, gently touching the top of his head with a calming palm and softly whispering an affectionate caution, "don't bump your head Sam!". Instinctively, Sam swiveled his head in reflex, coming inches from the alluring, full, firm, and silky smooth breasts, restrained by a sensuous pure white laced bra, half hidden beneath a sheer translucent blouse. Her soft touch and infusing fragrance held his lusty eyes bound to a perfectly consuming chest. The striking, twenty-six-year-old Miss Greenfield reminded Sam that it was impolite to stare, as she stood and gracefully drifted towards the blackboard. Sam wasn't quite eighteen, requiring the mandatory parental signature-- his mother wouldn't even discuss the military, other than to say "God bless those boys"! After what he considered compelling arguments, based on lineage justification, (A McCord in every American war, since the epic revolution of 1776), his demurring but

emotionally tore father yielded and lastly gave Sam his blessing, not as a loving father, but as a supporting soldier. Sam's envisioned military achievement would be a position in the historically elite 75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment, following his father from WWII. With accolades, and achievements conveyed, plans and pledges of staying in touch were made, with the best of intentions. As the marching band's final passing of the bleachers played a touching salute of John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes forever".

"Sam! Sam!" his mother called from the bottom of the bleachers.

"come down here! we have to take pictures" she added, as she turned around and began nudging brother Tommy and sister Peggy together for another grudging photo. His father smiling, as he assumed his ever-present guardian position behind them patiently waiting for Sam to join in. From a distance, Sam eyed Karen's rhythmic prompt towards them, after her friend's final farewells and remembrance photos. Sam and Karen had been inseparable since the ninth grade, since just after her mother's long but courageous battle with cancer ended. Karen was accepting of Sam's aspirations in the military, somewhat reluctantly, but never the less she understood, or so he thought.

"Sam! you and Karen stand together", I want more photos his mother insisted, as she herded them closer together with outstretched hands. After almost eighteen years of posing for family photos, he silently and obediently followed the directorial skills of his mother, who was armed with the family Browning box camera. Distantly, he realized the emotional effects that his first prolonged detachment from the family and Karen would be, as he somehow felt the importance of each photo. Sam's mother promptly finishing off two rolls of black and white

135mm film. "I'll meet you at the house" Sam said to his family. Taking Karen's left hand in his right and interlocking their fingers. In a slow and intimate stride, they crossed the less crowded athletic field towards the open door of the school gym, obligated to return the caps and gowns.

"Sam?" Karen whispered softly.

"Yes" Sam replied.

"I had a dream, that something terrible happened to you" Karen said, as she slowed her pace.

"I'm going to be OK, don't worry" Sam assured her.

"No Sam, I don't think you understand, how much I'm going to miss you!" she said, as she stopped and turned to face him.

"I do; I understand!" Sam countered in a reassuring tone.

"I love you Sam! more than you know" Karen said as she squeezed his fingers between hers.

"Sam! I know what it's like to lose someone you love!"

"I'll wait for you forever Sam! but I won't be there in the morning, I can't watch you get on a train, knowing that it may carry you out of my life forever." She stated, glassy eyed.

"War is not benign Sam McCord!" she added harshly, as she started to cry, quickly pulling away from him and disappearing through the open gym door and fading into the ceremonious turbulence of students and their families. Sam couldn't explain it, nor did he understand why. The soulful depth of a mystically ardent drive to keep America's enemies away from her shores.

Maybe it was the air-raid drills from the fourth grade that had instilled an unconscious burden, or maybe because it was his deep family devotion to guard them from the communist, or maybe it was because of Miss Greenfield, or just maybe, a little of everything. Whatever it was he thought, it was in his head, and soul. He would take the fight to the enemy, to protect his family from the ravages of war and the oppressive communists, at whatever the cost.

Sam guided the rebuilt 1947 Knucklehead Harley around the large circular entrance between the house and the barn, kicking up a lot of dust as he came to a sliding stop on the grass edge by the back door of a beautifully maintained three story Victorian, that had been called home to his family for four generations. Leaning the bike on its kickstand, he ran up the wooden steps of the back porch that lead to the kitchen.

“Don’t come in here mister, your father wants you in the barn” his mother yelled through the screen door.

“OK, Mom!”

Sam strutted across the driveway towards the two-story red barn. Seeing his father’s silhouette moving around the stalls, a familiar sight that evoked a deep sensation of comfort and protection for his family, and the reason he needed to leave. Stepping into the barn he saw his father in the bibbed overalls and sweat stained, faded yellow straw hat look up.

“Sam! come here, and sit for a minute” he said, with a fatherly expression, as he stood in front of a wall of neatly stacked bales of hay. Bales stacked the past fall together with his brother

Tommy, (Tommy was eleven months younger than Sam, Irish twins, as everyone joked). Sam's father removed his worn leather gloves, laying them neatly on a bale of hay next to him, "have a seat Sam!" he said as he padded the hay bale with his bear paw sized hand.

"everything OK?" Sam asked nervously, as he sat next to him.

"yes, just needed a minute with you alone, while we have some free time" he said, as he placed a strong hand on Sam's shoulder.

"I know we have talked about you going into the Army, and that your mother doesn't approve of it, she didn't approve of me signing the papers either."

"Is she mad at me?"

"No, son, she isn't mad at you. She's already lived through a war; that took the lives of her two older brothers. Now that she has her son going into the Army, and another war! well, that changes a lot of things for her, she's having some emotions about it."

"should I talk to her again?" Sam asked, feeling bad that his decision was upsetting her so much.

"you can, but unless your prepared to change your plans, I wouldn't bring it up, it may just make things harder on her" his father added.

"I can! make a difference Dad"

"yes, Sam! I know. I know you think you can.



“you’re only seventeen, you have three weeks until your birthday, you don’t have to leave tomorrow, you can change your mind” he said wishfully, as he considered Sam’s eyes.

“yes, I know” Sam said, secretly hoping the war wouldn’t end before he got over there.

“Sam, I just don’t want you to have any regrets, life’s not easy to begin with, it’s even harder with regrets, and nothing good ever comes from war” his father uttered as he stared down at his boots.

“Sam, this is one of those times in life that there is no turning back, no do overs!

“I know, I’m good with it Dad! and thanks again for signing the enlistment papers, and letting me leave all the farm work to you and Tommy” Sam answered jokingly.

Standing, their matched six foot frames leveled their eye contact, as his father wrapped the over worked, and powerful arms around him, “We love you Sam! don’t ever forget that! I’ve been where you’re going son, don’t ever, ever, give up! And God be with you!”.

As the train sluggishly pulled away from the station in the predawn hours. Sam waved from the yellowed smoke stained window, as his mother wiped away the tears from her eyes. Sam Loosened the uncomfortable and slightly choking neck tie that he worn at his mother’s insistence.

The train making all its scheduled stops, few people boarded. Aside from a small town about two hours south of Bensenville. Sam watched with uncertain curiosity as a tall, long haired, bearded, disheveled looking stranger boarded the train and struggled towards the back of the train car half dragging a well-worn and tattered suitcase, ricocheting loudly as it deflected from

seat to seat. With the train seats facing each other, the stranger fell into the empty seat across from him, pulling the small suitcase close in behind, as Sam moved closer to the window.

“sorry man!” the stranger said.

The stranger withdrew a bent and twisted, almost empty package of cigarettes from his coat pocket, carefully straightening one with his fingers, as he lit it, he leaned back into the seat.

“where you heading?” the stranger asked.

“Fort Polk” Sam said, without taking his eyes off the fast moving country side as the train picked up speed.

“me too” the stranger added.

“Fort Polk Army Base?” Sam questioned in amazement, turning to study him.

“yep” the stranger said, exhaling smoke towards Sam.

“Philip Whitney! my friends call me Lip,” the stranger boldly announced, with a friendly smile,

Thrusting an inviting open hand towards Sam.

“Samuel McCord, my friends call me Sam” as he pumped the extended hand.

“Get your letter?” Lip said, searching through his suitcase.

“what letter?”

“Your letter from the draft board!”

“Draft board?”

“How old are you Sam?” Lip asked as he pulled an unopened pint bottle of Blackberry brandy from deep within the old beat-up suitcase.

“I’ll be eighteen in a few weeks”

“you signed up for the Army kid!” Lip said laughing, before taking a very early, but long swig from his pocket bottle.

“Yes, and you?” Sam stated proudly.

“Not me, my friends and neighbors signed me up” Lip said, offering the bottle.

“no thanks”

The long train ride afforded the needed time to measure each other, and share their lives.

Lip was drafted, “won the lottery” as he would say.

They leaned on each other throughout basic training, and their friendship grew, despite being referred to as “Kid “, (Lip was four years older) whenever Lip addressed him. Their ages and life styles were worlds apart, but they soon found themselves in the same orbit. Ranger training was a lifelong bond.

landing in Cam Ranh Bay, Viet Nam with the 75<sup>th</sup> Rangers Regiment was Sam’s dream come true, his nineteenth birthday fewer than a month away. Sam and Lip were in Bravo company, second battalion, and wasted no time engaging the communist enemy. Firefight after firefight in the first three months strengthened their bond, closer than family. Then on May, 16 their Platoon was missioned for a 0400 hours’ low altitude support jump just north of hill 937

(Hamburger Hill) in the A' Shaun Valley. The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division was engaged in a fierce battle with three divisions of the North Vietnamese Army, and taking some heavy casualties.

The mechanical vibrations and loud whooping sound from their circling helicopter two thousand feet above the drop zone didn't drown out the fierce firefight raging below. Lip was the first one out the door, Sam followed him into the Gothic darkness. The sounds of battle grew louder with their rapid decent. Seconds later Sam was jerked to a quivering bounce, his chute snagging in a large tree, dangling him precariously off the jungle floor. The whistling of incoming mortars, the red and green tracers from machine gun fire made it look like Bensenville after dark on Independence Day, times one thousand. He managed to cut himself free from his chute, falling to the soft jungle floor. The barrage of enemy fire was relentless. Gun smoke permeated the breathless humid night air as Sam searched through the darkened chaos for the rest of his unit. He hadn't covered more than fifty yards, when he stumbled over Lip's lifeless body. The rush of sad emptiness, instantly turned to a fog of loneliness as he lifted Lip's ethereal body onto his shoulder and scanned for cover. Without warning, the punctuated and deafening whistle of an incoming mortar exploded in front of them. Lip and Sam were propelled backwards through the air by the fierce and forceful mortar blast. Lip's body cushioning Sam's landing. In a painless but mesmeric like state of consciousness, he saw that his left thigh had been blown open exposing a blood-filled cavity of muscle and bone. Disconnected, he had a nebulous sensation of floating horizontally above the ground, hovering over the tall buffalo grass. Sam was stripped of everything he carried, even his clothing. His hands tied to a wooden pole behind and above his head, he strained to open his eyes through swollen, blood crusted eyelids, as local villagers

sought out their anger. While mostly old men and women, their hoes and rocks were no less painful than the strike of a North Viet Nam soldier's heavy rifle butt. Sam was their war trophy: submissively paraded by his proud captives, through the many different tiny grass shacked villages of the north Viet Nam's southern border. The mortar shrapnel had cut an eight-inch gash into his left thigh, embedding an otherwise priceless piece of rusted Chinese steel next to his femur. He was often tied naked and stretched by his limbs on the ground, as the pain of thousands of ant bites forced him into unconsciousness. The communist Viet Cong commander Colonel Po, stood five foot five, and enjoyed the privilege of rank as evident by the pot belled outline of his always fresh uniform. The spaciouly fake smile on his full round pumpkin face boasting a complete set of off white teeth below an extensively wide nose that consistently balanced a pair of thin wire rimmed silver dollar sized sunglasses. Colonel Po's entertainment was executing South Vietnamese prisoners and forcing Sam to watch. With his perfect English, Colonel Po would frequently visit the parlor to re-tell his egotistical story of being a scholastically gifted foreign exchange student in America, a graduate of the University of Villanova, "Phi Beta Kappa fraternity brother" he gloated. Without exception, and always angered at Sam for not showing that he was impressed, the "fraternity brother" ordered immediately afflictions.

His dream state was abruptly returned to reality by an unnerving gang of large jungle rats gnawing at the slats of his parlor, as he madly kicked them away. Food was scarce, for everyone. Sam had immediately and desperately moved into a survival mode, learning how to catch the occasional snake or vermin that wandered to close to the parlor, eating it raw.

At times, his chasm of despair was deeper and hurt more than any abuse from his captives. Though in the end, he knew it was far better for him to suffer through this, something he would gladly do, fight the communist on their soil, even if it meant dying in the jungles of South Viet Nam, to protect his family. At first, he gauged time by the growth of his hair and beard, but ended that when his hair fell beyond his shoulders and his beard touched his chest. He wasn't even sure how old he was anymore. A young, high cheek boned Viet Cong female soldier, called An, often tended to him, sometimes giving him extra rice, or treating his infected insect bites, trying to make it a little more bearable for him with his wound damaged left leg. An would consider his eyes and say "*Xin Loi*" (I'm sorry) revealing a compassion in the deep black opal, almond shaped eyes. Just before dark every night, An marched him down the footpath to the Mekong riverbank to carry buckets of water back to camp. Never without her AK-47 and always without speaking. An would untie his hands at the riverbank and place the long bamboo pole across the back of his bony thin neck with a heavy water filled bucket balanced at each end, as he struggled back to camp. Then one afternoon he overheard American voices squawking from a Viet Cong soldier's radio, the radio antenna pointing south. Sam knew radio transmissions were only good for about twenty-five kilometers. It was time he thought, before they moved him again. He knew he could never escape on land with his limp leg. So Later, at the riverbank, he stood behind An as she knelt at the riverbank filling the water buckets. Picking up a baseball sized river rock from the mud, and with all the strength his weakened body could muster, he drove the rock deep into the back of An's head. A hollow thud, was followed by squirting crimson blood from her long thick black hair as she slumped softly into the muddy water. He glided his languished body onto hers and with the full force of his body weight held An's head

below the water's surface. As blood colored the dirty brown water red around her head, he waited for less bubbles to percolate to the surface. In an unexplainable but benevolent move, as An's life was rapidly disappearing, her body going slack underneath him, and knowing he was losing precious time, he grabbed An's shirt collar and pulled her unresponsive head out of the muddy water. Her face pale, eyes closed, blood mixing with the dirty water gushing from her open mouth, he was too late, she was dead. With an arm wrapped around the stomach of her comatose body he feverishly looked around to see if anyone saw them. Just as he was about to drop An back in to the river, Sam heard a slight gurgling sound as An's chest began to move, her eyes opening and filled with fear. She was weak and unable to struggle. Quickly, he removed his thin wet cotton peasant shirt and wrapped it around An's bleeding head, and helped her back onto the river bank. Testing her eyes, he simply said "*Xin Loi*" (I'm sorry). Without getting out of the water he pulled the bamboo poles from the muddy riverbank into the water and pushed himself out into the swift moving river current. He glanced back at An as she watched him being ferried swiftly away, never reaching for her AK-47. By sun up the river narrowed, and dumped Sam's enervated, and cadaverous looking body onto a small mud caked landing. A passing U.S. Army search and destroy patrol finding him. After a month in a military hospital in Japan, Sam was released and shipped home.

Grabbing the lone taxi at the Bensenville train station, and as they passed the local car dealer, Sam noticed a freshly printed banner.

"The 1973 Models have arrived"

As the taxi turned into the driveway, seeing a small red, white, and blue service flag with two faded gold stars, hanging inside the bay window puzzled him. He also couldn't help noticing that the grass needed mowing, the house and barn needed paint and repair, and the fences had seen better days.

"does anyone live here?" the taxi driver asked

"I'm not sure, you can drop me off here though!" Sam said

"do you want me to wait for you, soldier?" the driver asked.

"no, I'm good" Sam said, as he paid the fare.

The driver took Sam's duffle bag from the trunk, and laid it on the compact gravel driveway.

"good luck to you" he said, as he pulled away.

Leaning on the cheap wooden government issued cane in the driveway between the house and the barn, he looked around at what he remembered to be one of the finest farms in the county.

Sam felt lost, like an intruder, but with a pitiful sorrow for his once elegant home.

"can I help you?" a weak voice called out from inside the half open sliding barn door.

Pivoting to face the barn, unsteady on the cane, he saw a thin hunched over elderly man emerge from the darkened barn into the bright morning sunlight, holding a bladed right hand over his eyes, blocking the glaring sun.

"can I help you?" the elderly man repeated.



“Dad?” Sam questioned softly.

The elderly man shuffled a couple short steps towards him, lacking the confident and authoritative gait he had remembered. Sam also had to remind himself that being three suit sizes thinner, he barely recognized his own image in the mirror, a gaunt 110-pound broken man, in a uniform his father had never seen him in.

“Dad! it’s me Sam!”

“Sam?” his father repeating softly as he dropped his arm and somehow managed the strength to shuffle a little quicker, stopping in front of him.

Silently, visually absorbing each other, Sam watched as the disbelief drained from his father’s face. They hugged, like he was five years old again, both a little weaker.

“where is everyone?”

Dropping a sad and tired face towards the ground, “Let’s go into the house, son, we need to sit”

Stepping into what felt like an old abandoned house with thick stale air, the kitchen table littered with unopened mail, dirty dishes piled high in the sink. His father gently pulled out a wooden chair from the head of the century old wooden table. Taking his childhood place, Sam eased into the chair, as he watched an old man with a deep somber expression, sit across from him, looking years older than he should.

” Sam” he said, staring into the table. “This isn’t going to be easy” as his voice

broke with revisited grief from a broken heart.

“The letter from the Army saying you were missing in action, body not recovered and presumed dead, was devastating. Especially heavy on your mother and Tommy. Tommy suddenly joined the Army the next month, to go looking for you, he couldn’t accept that you were dead. In the meantime, your mother suffered in a painful silence, she needed to know what had happened to you, as we all did.” he said shifting uncomfortably in the wooden chair. His voice growing softer as he continued, “Tommy, was killed in the A’Shaun Valley a year later” he said, as his eyes glassed over and his words thickened from a drying mouth.

“Losing her only sons to war was too much for her fragile heart. Mom died a year and a half ago.” he said, with clasped hands shaking on the kitchen table as tears streamed down the weathered face.

“Peggy’s in her last year of college; she comes home every couple of weeks to check in on me” his father added.

“But Karen!” his father continued.

“Is married, and is expecting a baby in the spring, she married a guy from Pennsylvania, he’s a Phi Beta Kappa from Villanova” he added.

As muted grief sucked oxygen from the room, Sam struggled to his feet, and limped painfully towards the Parlor, his tears falling like rain.

