

*Learn to Move Quietly*

Nathan had trouble sleeping in the basement. When his family moved into the house in the summer of 1988, Nathan was only four years old but he was immediately convinced that something unsettling was lurking in the storage rooms and amongst the unpacked boxes. If he were in the basement, a lump formed in his throat and the hair on the back of his neck stood on end and the feelings didn't subside until he was climbing the stairs to the kitchen. As a little boy, he believed that monsters living underneath the old sofa were the cause of his agitation. However, at the age of ten, he realized that monsters were fictional and the culprits became the mounted animal heads and their empty stares. After the heads, it was hobo spiders, burglars, the darkness and extraterrestrials. The insomnia was perplexing and Nathan could not find the reason why in other basements, sleeping was easy. Surely, most of the other basements had mounted animals, spiders, and were poorly lit.

During the first semester of university, Nathan returned home for Thanksgiving. He believed he found the answer to the mystery of the basement, which had plagued him for the duration of his life. The basement was unnatural. It didn't follow the normal function of life. The Biology 101 professor said that all things started off simple only to grow complex; and Nathan affirmed that the basement was exactly opposite. When he was young, the stairs were a cliff face he had to navigate. Then the stairs became something insignificant, which he didn't think twice about. At first, the basement consisted of mythical ideas such as monsters living in the shadows. But once he solved the mystery of his basement, it transformed and slowly became reduced to a collection of rooms that were filled with boxes of junk and family oddities.

The reason for the basement veering away from the natural order of things was of little concern to him. The lump subsided and he began to sleep entire nights on the old sofa. Without the constant reminder of insomnia and the tightness in his throat, he simply forgot about the backwards basement.

During and after his university career, Nathan rarely reflected on his verdict for the basement. He once thought about the basement after being dumped by a girlfriend. She said that the relationship had started out simple and wonderful but it had become far too complex.

The weekend before Nathan moved abroad he was suddenly reminded of the unnatural order of the basement. His mom made him pack up his childhood room. He put everything into boxes because she had big plans to rip up the carpet and turn the bedroom into an exercise studio. While taking a box of books down the stairs, he felt a familiar lump straining against his esophagus.

Nathan assumed that the lump's return was in response to the fact that he was leaving. When he was at university he was a mere 300 miles away, a day's drive, from home. In a few days, the stretch would be the expanse of the Pacific Ocean. He contemplated the idea of living such a long distance away and how that distance made the house feel abstract. Perhaps to cope with the new feeling, his brain was subconsciously taking in minute details of the house: the peeling kitchen wallpaper, the orange water stain in the bathroom sink, and the scuffs on the hardwood floor. Stashing the details away for a time when he really missed home, and maybe one of these insignificant details had somehow awoken in him all the unanswered questions he'd had about the basement.

As he continued packing up his room and making trips to the basement, he wondered if it was nerves. In a week, he would be boarding a plane for a country he had only seen in movies

and books. The plane would take off and with each mile it went, he was afraid that all the walls, doors, windows, and furnishings of his house would fade. What would remain would be only a memory.

That night, he tried sleeping on the old sofa. Since the lump had returned, he wondered if the insomnia would as well. He endlessly tossed and turned, questioning his decision to move abroad. His childhood dream was to live in a foreign country. So, why was he reconsidering? After several hours, he finally surrendered and climbed the stairs to sleep in what remained of his old room.

When Nathan was twelve, his older brother, Ryan, started smoking marijuana and his parents found God. They began dragging Nathan to Sunday school and Wednesday night youth service. In the gymnasium of the local elementary school one Wednesday evening, the youth pastor slapped his bible energetically and Nathan became convinced that sin was the guilty party causing the annoying lump in his throat.

It suddenly made perfect sense. The basement was where sins happened. Ryan smoked drugs there and at night he snuck his girlfriend through a basement window. Mom hid a bottle of Baileys in the back of the pantry. Dad stashed playboy magazines in the file cabinet. Nathan kissed their neighbor's daughter, Rachel, and touched her chest while they sat on the old sofa. When everyone was upstairs, Nathan pushed down the lump, crept down the stairs, and sat in front of the TV where he repeatedly watched the sex scenes in 'R' rated movies. In the basement, Nathan had sipped beer, tried some dip, watched his first porno, and smoked a cigarette.

Even his first act of thievery took place in the basement.

Nathan didn't steal what most boys his age steal, candy, money or one of Ryan's Hustler magazines. It was just a simple photo. He was ten and his grandma and him had just watched an episode of 'Antiques Roadshow'. Some lucky fool had just gotten a couple thousand dollars for, what looked like to Nathan, a simple porcelain figurine. He started rummaging through boxes for anything he considered to be old and antique looking. His plan was to sell the antiques and buy a new bicycle.

Inside a partially collapsed shoebox was a yellowed Polaroid of Nathan's dad with four other men in a dingy café. At first, Nathan didn't see him, only five strangers smoking and drinking beer.

On the back was written, *Saigon - 1971*.

Nathan's dad was young, maybe 19 years old in the photo. His face was clean-shaven. He wore unbuttoned military-fatigues that revealed a torso shaped by jungle combat. The other men were slightly out of focus. Wisps of cigarette smoke hung motionless around their heads.

Nathan pocketed the photo. He didn't know exactly why he stole it. He justified the act of thievery by telling himself that he wanted to keep it safe. It was disgraceful that the photo was forgotten and stuffed away in some dusty box. He was upset that he only knew the man's identity and though that man was his dad, he knew nothing of him. The man in the photo was a stranger.

Nathan slipped the photo in a plastic sports card case. At first, he hid it in the box containing his most valuable sports cards, however, his fixation with the photo only grew. It wasn't long until he was keeping the photo under his mattress. He made frequent trips to the public library where he tore into the encyclopedias and rummaged through the stacks, devouring every bit of information possible about the clues written on the back - *Saigon, 1971*.

It wasn't long before Nathan understood.

Nathan studied the pictures he found in the history books: soldiers walking through jungles and rice paddies with heavy weapons slung over their shoulders, men sitting in helicopters while their feet dangled over the edge, stunning explosions rolling above the tropical trees, and defeated enemy corpses stacked at the feet of American soldiers.

Nathan constantly asked his dad to watch Vietnam War movies with him. Nathan wanted to watch his dad watch them. He wanted to see his dad relive those days in Vietnam. Nathan thought that if he could witness him doing so, he would get a true glimpse of the man in the photo. However, his dad always refused. Instead, he rented Jackie Chan movies or old Westerns.

Nathan paid Ryan two dollars to rent the Vietnam War movies for him. He watched the movies, envisioning himself, along with his dad, playing the roles of the U.S. soldiers. They would crawl through the mud and destroy the communists. Bullets would snap as they whizzed passed their ears.

Nathan's favorite movie was 'Missing In Action'. When he first watched the hero, Col. James Braddock, leap with grenades in each hand and destroy an enemy machinegun nest. Nathan immediately went out into the backyard and practiced the same maneuvers on the trampoline with pinecones.

In the vacant lot across the street, Nathan would quietly move through the overgrown weeds as if it was a dense jungle. He'd step over imaginary land mines, keep a watchful eye for tripwires, and wave his platoon forward. He'd emerge from the weeds as if he was Braddock himself, shooting from the hip with an automatic machine-gun, mowing down the enemy with ease.

Nathan's dad never mentioned the war. The few times Nathan inquired, his dad always said, "Don't worry about that stuff." All the while, never looking up from what he was doing.

During dinner, Nathan sat at the table and imagined his dad in the same situations as the soldiers in the pictures and movies. One evening, while pretending the chicken casserole was a C-Ration, Nathan realized that by finding the photo he had glanced into a previously unknown moment of his dad's life. The knowledge of that moment, in Nathan's mind, had produced an unspoken and covert kinship with his dad, one that extended far beyond the boundaries of father and son.

He was a brother in arms.

When Nathan awoke to the bare walls of his room, the lump was still in his throat. He found his mother in the kitchen making Belgian waffles with sweetened strawberries. She quietly hummed to herself while topping the waffle with a mound of whipped cream.

"I'm sure they won't have this over there," she said, handing over the plate and sitting across from him. "You look sick? Are you feeling all right? I heard all those vaccinations you had could have side effects."

"I'm fine. I'm just nervous," Nathan said.

"That's expected." She leaned over the table and looked at him silently for a long time. "I'm not going to tell him. It's your responsibility."

Nathan nodded.

"He's going to Lowe's later to pick up some wood to for the fence. Go with him," she said standing up. She came over and put her arms around him. "I'm going to miss you; but I know you're going to have a great experience." She kissed him on the back of the head and left the kitchen.

Nathan couldn't recall the last time he had been driven by his dad. They drove in silence and Nathan looked out the window at the passing buildings of his small hometown. The place was different from what he had remembered. He remembered a vibrant small American town with a population of around four thousand people, but it had changed and acquired a shoddy quality to it. Most of the houses were rundown and covered in peeling paint and the only shops that seemed open for business were pawnshops.

"Things have changed," Nathan said.

"Yep," Dad said. "None of you young folks want to live in small towns anymore. Just move to the big cities."

"You expect people to stay around here?" Nathan scoffed.

"You're from here. This is where you grew up."

They turned onto the highway and his dad settled in his seat.

"Mom says you have something to tell me," his dad said, looking at Nathan from the corner of his eyes.

Nathan nodded and straightened his back. "I'm moving."

"Moving where?"

"I'm going to live in Vietnam for two years."

"Why do you want to go to that country?"

Nathan shrank into the seat. "Work."

"Work?" his dad said incredulously. "You can't get a job here?"

"What am I going to do here? Look at this place," Nathan said gesturing to the landscape. "I want to travel. I want to see the world like you did."

"I didn't see the world," his dad said quietly. "I saw Vietnam."

“I’m going to be living in Ho Chi Minh City--”

“You mean Saigon,” his dad said forcefully.

“I will be living in Saigon, teaching at an international school. One of my friends from University is there and loves it.” Nathan said.

“Well good for him and good for his folks,” his dad said.

“I wanted you to be excited for me,” Nathan said quietly. “I’m going to see the same things you saw. Walk in the same streets.”

His dad grunted and shook his head. He didn’t respond and continued driving for several miles. After awhile, he let out a bitter laugh. “It’s all kind of strange, isn’t it? I fight a war, all the while thinking, ‘Dear God, when I get back, my kids will never see such a place. I’ll raise them right. College type kids so they never go through that type of shit.’ Then I raise those kids and one of them goes right to the place I spent two tours trying to escape.” His dad chuckled and shook his head.

“The world is changing,” Nathan said. “It’s getting smaller, changing faster each day.”

“Don’t start lecturing,” his dad said sharply, turning his head and glaring at Nathan. “I know plenty about the fucking world.” He turned his gaze back to road.

Nathan leaned against the door and pressed his forehead against the window’s cool glass.

“Jerry Schmitz was a great soldier,” his dad said slowly. “He was built like an All-American linebacker, but the fella talked a lot. I mean he was always talking, mostly about women—especially the Vietnamese. He loved those women. Anyway, we were walking along this path in some dense jungle and Jerry is in mid-sentence about some Vietnamese girl. He was talking about how she is so tiny that he can just pick her up and throw her around the room when



they're screwing and because of this, Jerry wants to marry her. And he can't even say her name the same way twice."

His dad laughed briefly. "I didn't even hear it," his dad said quietly with an odd disbelief. "You know what a bullet sounds like Nathan? It sounds just like a yellow jacket; buzzing past your ear, close enough to feel the beat of its wings. That's all."

His dad stared at the road. Nathan didn't say a word.

"I guess what I'm saying, is learn to move quietly. You never know what will find you in the jungle. One second, you're talking about screwing. The next, a yellow jacket flies by and the loud one gets it."

Nathan leaned against the door and pressed his forehead against the cool glass once more. He thought about the time spent in the vacant lot pretending to be Col. James Braddock. He thought about the yellowing photo. The lump in his throat swelled. He saw Jerry sprawled out on the bank of some rice paddy with his brain exposed. He saw tired and wounded men clinging to helicopters. He saw explosions undoing nature and flesh. He saw the rotting corpses of people, American and Vietnamese.

All at once, the unnaturalness of the basement became clear and the man in the photo was finally unraveled. The truth was that the basement was never backward. It didn't grow and change like an organism. It had always been complex. However, seeing the complexity was dependent on who someone was and where he or she was standing in life. A visitor or a child staying the night at a friend's house wouldn't notice the complexity. Perhaps in their own basement he or she would, but not in a foreign one. To notice the intricacies, the monsters, and the spiders, a person really had to invest, commit countless sins, and hide away mementos from a point in life that they wished to forget.

In the past, Nathan believed that if he understood the photo, he would gain insight and understanding to who his dad was. Nathan realized that the moment someone took the picture, it immediately teemed with camaraderie, horror, violence, and thousands of other complexities he would never understand.

Nathan thought about that statement: simple to complex. He looked to his dad, hunching over the steering wheel. His hair was gray. His body was old and deteriorating.

Nathan thought about the young man in the photo.

He didn't know either of them.

Simple to complex, Nathan thought, maybe the entire statement was flawed. Maybe everything was complex, from the beginning all the way up to the end. The only things that changed were the point of view and the silence of a person's movements.