

SWAC

SHORT STORY 1C
'WINTER BRANCHES'

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‘WINTER BRANCHES’

In the dark hour before dawn, the thunderstorm had drifted into silence. From within this silence, Jonah awoke in fear; fear formed into rivulets of sweat. The anger laced alcohol consumed that night now pounded his temples and parched his mouth. He was stranded back in that accursed creek. He was surrounded by the silent jungle, where dangers unseen were menacingly present.

Jonah was a Vietnam Veteran whose stark, lean and crevassed face reflected an angry and unsettled post Vietnam life. It was a life fuelled with excessive alcoholic episodes yet one held together by a strong and supportive wife.

“That damned punch! Bloody Vietnam!” Jonah cursed to no one but himself.

In the cauldron of his awakened fear and anger, his agitated thoughts travelled back to Vietnam, on a morning in 1969 on the outskirts of Long Binh, an American army base 33kms north of Saigon.

Long Binh: an amphitheatre of Nissan Huts, dirt and dust; of the constant movement of vehicles and helicopters; of ubiquitous noise and of ghetto blasters setting rhythms for languid, swaggering strides.

Jonah was then a regular soldier, 25, over confident, brash and recently promoted to Lance Corporal. He was part of a transport unit sent to Long Binh to supply Australian Fire Support Bases (FSB’s) which had been established to help defend Saigon during the Tet Offensive of 1969.

On that fateful morning Jonah was in charge of a convoy of trucks carrying artillery ammunition to a ‘FSB’. He was standing beside his truck, waiting on the side of a dusty road for Armoured Personnel Carriers, ‘APC’s’ to escort them into the ‘FSB’.

The last two miles into the ‘FSB’ started at a creek crossing and then became a very narrow, winding track, bordered by thick jungle. APC’s always positioned themselves at the front and rear of a convoy’s trucks and gave their radio frequency to the convoy’s commander. However on this occasion, they only slowed down and yelled at Jonah to follow them. As Jonah was in charge, his truck was ‘tail end Charlie’, now with no accessible radio frequency and driving ‘blind’ into the dust clouds being thrown up by the other trucks and the APC’s.

Jonah’s driver was Greg Metcalfe, a ‘nato’ (National Serviceman), several years older than the other ‘natos’ in the unit; a nervy type, always complaining and not very popular. He was pissed off at being sent to Long Binh as he was close to serving out his two years and being discharged.

Greg’s tentative driving led to them falling well behind the other trucks. When they came around a sweeping bend Greg just caught sight of the last truck in front of them driving out of a creek and disappearing into the narrow, winding track leading into the ‘FSB’.

Greg seeing the truck disappearing from view, panicked and while still in 4th gear, drove straight into the creek. Jonah, realising what was about to happen yelled at him to stop and change to a lower gear. It was too late; the truck stalled, the engine drowned. Jonah knew that they were in serious trouble. At the ops briefing that morning he had been told of several contacts around dawn, with enemy patrols at this creek crossing. Jonah had no way of making any radio contact. He knew that it would take nearly an hour before the convoy reached the 'FSB', realised they were missing and were able to return to rescue them. Any hope of Greg and Jonah starting up the truck themselves were dashed when Greg's trembling hands dropped the rotor button into the waters of the murky creek!

The stark memory of Greg's trembling hands brought Jonah back to his still pounding temples, parched mouth and the chill of a Melbourne winter's morning.

"Peter, I must see Peter again" Jonah resolved.

Peter was a retired psychologist, who had lately returned to the church and faith of his early years. Peter had served with Jonah in Vietnam and had maintained regular contact. Peter had heard a sermon about the biblical 'Jonah' at a recent church service. He was surprised with some unexpected connections into Jonah's troubled life and was motivated to pursue these insights with Jonah.

Jonah did contact Peter and later that week they were standing in the presence of a majestic oak tree, near Peter's home in Blackburn.

The oak tree was especially significant for Peter. He always felt calm in its presence, particularly now with the beauty of its stark winter branches.

A flock of currawongs were clustered around the tree. Their melodic warbling was in stark contrast to the agitation in Jonah's voice as he spoke of his disturbed night's 'flash-back'.

"Mate, I was back in that bloody creek with bloody Greg. That was bad enough but you know it was the silence that really got to me the silenceand then, in the distance, our artillery at the 'FSB' 'opened up'. I cocked my rifle, took the safety catch off but what the hell for? We were sitting ducks!" His words echoed the remembered fear which had invaded his guts and bowel, from the jungle screaming its menace.

"Peter, I was that scared I just wanted to toss my rifle away and piss off out of there. But something kicked in and I got so bloody angry at Greg, and that bloody APC commander."

Unfortunately for Jonah, the anger which had controlled his fear at the creek exploded that night in the unit's 'boozers'. It exploded in a punch from Jonah to Greg's jaw, breaking it! As a consequence, Jonah was charged, demoted and sent home to Australia, his career in tatters.

The army had meant everything to Jonah: he belonged; he was accepted and was viewed as a potential leader. This was in contrast to Jonah's home life prior to the army. He had been brought up within the boundaries of a strict, religious family. His parents were cold, distant and regularly reminding Jonah of God's constant judgement of his so called sinful life.

“You know what, I lost everything that day,” Jonah continued resentfully “I lost my rank, my status, my career; all because of incompetence, weakness and stupidity.”

Peter turned to Jonah, “That may well be the case but for how much longer do you intend living out of that anger and bitterness? Do you really want to keep living this way? God knows it has placed an enormous burden on your family and your health. For heaven’s sake, isn’t it about time you were fair dinkum about starting some form of detox and rehab. Look at how supportive your wife has been all these years. She has maintained her strong faith which must have been severely tested at times.”

“I know”, Jonah responded wearily and then more angrily, “but what about that damned God of my parents? Where the bloody hell has he been for me, over all these years?”

“Jonah, does that really matter anymore? Just get over it. God is probably the most verbalised entity since the beginning of time! Look at your wife’s faith, how it has supported her and her love for you. What if her love and care were truer of God’s nature than the religion of your parents? What might be the source of her love?”

“Bloody hell; just give me a break will you!” Jonah exclaimed.

“Well call it a break or not but I have contacted Greg Metcalfe. I have had a long chat with him and he is willing to meet with you. So if you want to, here are his contact details.”

“Meet with him?” Jonah questioned incredulously. “And what do you suggest I say to him?”

“Look” Peter responded, “I am sure that it will be fine; just try to understand who Greg was in Vietnam and what it must have been like for him.”

And around the oak tree, the warbling of the currawongs drifted into the cloudless, sunny sky.

Greg and Jonah had agreed to meet at the pub in South Melbourne which hosted their Anzac Day lunches.

Greg was semi-retired, having built up a successful business as an insurance broker. He was now a man, ‘easy in his own skin’.

“Jesus Greg, what in the bloody hell got into you that day at the creek?”

“Bloody S...T! Give it a rest. You broke my jaw and it still causes me grief!”

“But that night in the boozier you just didn’t seem to give a rat’s arse that your panicking could have got us killed.”

What Jonah never saw nor understood was that Greg was still in shock that night, trying to control his fear of what had happened and what could have happened. What Jonah also didn’t know was that Greg had spent most of his time in Vietnam trying to control his fear; and for what? Greg viewed the war as nothing more than a futile, politically motivated exercise to which he had been very reluctantly conscripted. All he was focussed on was getting back

home. He had been married for three years and had one son who was disabled; his wife was pregnant again, following his R&R leave.

“You know we both came home as losers, Jonah. I came home with chronic anxiety which resulted in years of endless troubles for me and my family.”

Greg’s anxiety was exacerbated at that time by his bitterness towards the attitudes of society and the government to the returning soldiers. The government had been elected in a landslide in 1966, on the platform of conscription for Vietnam and the ‘natos’ had done their duty as ordered. Yet upon their return they had been abandoned by government and society which metaphorically and actually spat upon them. Greg felt the same for regular soldiers who were just pursuing their army careers but who came home to the same stigma. They were all scarred with stigmata.

“But you know what, I bloody well got on with life as best I could, dealt with the issues and managed to build a good life.” Greg stated forcibly.

“Well bloody good for you but you’ll never know how it has been for me.”

“Maybe so,” Greg responded “but you still have no idea what really caused that punch, do you?”

“So what the hell does that mean?” Jonah exclaimed.

“You may have been drunk and angry but I saw an inner fear within that anger. And you saw your own fear when your eyes were fixed on me!”

“Jonah, you didn’t punch me, you punched your own fear!”

The impatient plea of, “which one of youse ordered the corned beef?” jarred them back into the stares of other patrons.

Several days later, Peter and Jonah met in the late afternoon at the oak tree, its winter branches starkly imposed upon the setting sun.

“Try and understand who Greg was in Vietnam, eh Peter. Well he understands that very well thank you. And not only doesn’t he hold a grudge against me, he knows more about how it was for me in Vietnam, than I knew!”

“So what is that supposed to mean?” Peter asked tentatively.

Jonah recounted to Peter how Greg had come to accept that in Vietnam he was never able to keep his fears and anxieties under control; that it was a flaw in his personality. However, because of that flaw Greg was perceptive to fear in others and he was aware of fear deep within Jonah. It was fear which had been embedded in Jonah from the very start of his time in Vietnam. Greg reminded Jonah that a few days after arriving in Vietnam, Jonah had been sent to Long Binh at the time of the first battle for ‘FSB Coral’. There were constant convoys to ‘Coral’ during three days of ferocious fighting where the living and the dead shared common

ground. Greg told Jonah he believed that the embedded fear of those early convoys simmered in denial, until they boiled over into the anger of that punch.

While listening to Jonah, Peter relived memories of his own night time fears which would wake him at night to a pounding heart and surging of adrenalin; fears shrouded in ghosts of what was and what might have been.

Quickly bringing his focus back to Jonah, Peter responded with, “That’s a powerful insight by Greg. Maybe what he is saying is that perhaps you can view your anger as a wound: a wound which has been bleeding away your life and your family’s life but a wound now ready for cauterisation and healing.”

Over the years Peter had found it frustrating that in his work as a psychologist wounds were mainly spoken of as wounds to the body, of punctured flesh. Whereas he had been with many patients whose wounds were of a punctured spirit, of the inner being; inner wounds which bled over many years. However, it seemed to Peter that Greg had been able to transform his fears, his wounds into a broader and more shared experience. It was as if he had found within himself a place something like a farmer’s home paddock, an inner paddock, where his fears and his wounds could, ‘safely graze’.

Jonah’s cry of, “Oh God Peter, how do I start to make up for all of the bloody crap I have heaped upon my wife and my family?” brought Peter’s focus back to Jonah.

Peter responded with words sculptured from alabaster, “Maybe they are a lot more understanding and forgiving of you than you have been of yourself. Try being more open with them about how you feel. Allow them to love you and maybe start loving yourself.”

And around the oak tree, the currawongs noisily prepared for their nestling into nocturnal rest.

It was a fortnight later, early one sunny morning. Jonah was standing before the oak tree. It was the first time Jonah had been there since he had last met with Peter. Jonah’s mind was still reeling from the events of this past fortnight, for Peter was dead. He had died from a massive heart attack. In fact Jonah was the last person Peter had been with, as Peter’s heart attack had occurred while Peter was walking home from their meeting.

As Jonah stood before the tree he was a man alone. He was alone still from his family, alone from Peter and Greg both of whom had made something of their lives. ‘Why have I been this way for so long; can I really change after all these years?’ he thought. He knew well and truly that the answer lay with rehab, detox and making amends with his family; he knew there would be no ‘APC’ coming to the rescue on this occasion. But he was consumed with doubt about his ability to break free from what Peter had called his entrenched tombs of angry remorse, of bitterness. Tombs which can be so deeply earthed, Peter had said on occasions, that they become so much easier to stay within rather than to rise from.

‘What was that image he used to prattle on about, or did he call it a metaphor?’ Jonah reflected. ‘Yes, a metaphor; a metaphor of how the life which flows unseen through this

tree's winter branches, represents the hope which can flow within the scars of war', Jonah recalled.

And as he was standing there the tree became engulfed within the morning sun. It seemed for a moment as if the tree was on fire.

Jonah's eyes embraced the glowing tree and within that radiant light his very being pleaded, 'Peter, tell me, can I live my life out of this hope? Do I want to?'

"God knows," he muttered to no one but himself.

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