excerpt from the memoir

Home Before Morning

by Lynda Van Devanter

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Just Another Warm Summer Night

Three A.M. Sometimes, when the nights are not easy, I can lie here alone in this big bed for hours, listening to the ticking clock or the sound of the crickets in the bushes beneath my window, part of me wanting desperately to get back to sleep, knowing that if I don't, tomorrow's meetings will be filled, for me, with little more than exhaustion.

I hate dragging myself through the deadening days that follow these long nights. I hate that sick morning feeling in my stomach that comes from being too tired. I hate the thought that, in my half-awake state, I will lose some of tomorrow.

But more than all that, I hate what I might face were I to once again allow myself the mixed blessing of sleep. It's not that I don't want to sleep, only that I'm afraid of tonight's kind of sleep, afraid of what it often brings.

In part, this night is my own fault. Lately, these difficult times have been almost nonexistent and, if I hadn't spent so many hours this afternoon reliving Vietnam with another

troubled woman veteran, I would now be resting quietly. But at a 3 A.M. like this one, that thought offers little consolation.

They flew him in by chopper and there were streaks of dirt along his face. His sandy brown hair was uneven, with patches pressed down where the sweat-soaked straps of his helmet had been. With his eyes closed, he might have been just another tired soldier resting. However, the bloody mess that was once his body told a different story. Maybe, if there were time, he could be saved. But there were too many others.

In some ways, the bad nights must have been easier when Bill was here. He used to tell me that I ground my teeth in my sleep. He would touch my cheek and I'd stop for a while, only to start again later. He told me about the talking in my sleep and the moaning sounds I would make before waking in fear.

I would put my arms around him and hold myself tightly against his body, trying to draw enough strength to make him understand all that I had seen. It was useless. He could listen to me, yet I hadn't figured out how to say all that was inside, and probably, like the others, he wouldn't want to know anyway.

What did he do to help me on nights like this one? Did he hold me, return my frantic hugs with reassurance? Did he tuck my head into the hollow formed by his shoulder and tell me it would be all right? Did he make me feel protected? Did he take away any of the pain? Could he? Could anyone?

Maybe the nights are worse since we separated. Or were they just as bad when he was here?

I don't remember.

The boy couldn't have been more than ten years old, the kind of kid who would have been sitting down by a stream, dangling his feet in the water, holding the end of a fishing line, enjoying a lazy summer day—if he hadn't stepped on the

land mine. When his mother carried him onto the compound, there were two bloody stumps where his legs had been.

Any shrink worth his ninety dollars an hour would probably say I should "face the pain and deal with it." In fact, I've heard those words more than once. They even sound like something I might say to the women who come to me for counseling, looking for someone to take away their pain, their voices breaking as they recount the horrors of their own personal hells while I sit there listening, trying to assure them that they are not crazy.

"I understand," I say. "You're not alone. Many of us have seen the same things. Together, we can get past the problems. It's hard work, but it can be done."

Occasionally, the words work. But it's on nights like this that they and I must face the realization that we are alone, that ours is a solitary pain, to be felt in hundreds of 3 A.M.s when those around us are sleeping peacefully.

There was a time when I didn't understand that, when I didn't know how alone I was, how alone we all were. It was a time when I thought I would be able to talk about—exorcise—all the memories of hours spent in the operating rooms of Pleiku and Qui Nhon, working with surgeons as we tried to save the lives of boys who would never again be whole. I wanted to tell someone I loved—my parents, a friend, a relative, anyone—about the rocket attacks and all the nights I slept under my bunk; about the weeks we had more casualties than we could handle and how hard we worked even when we knew it was hopeless; about the tiny children with their arms and legs blown off; about the terrible oppression of the monsoon and the nights we knew we would die. Vietnam was the worst time of my life, yet it was also, in many ways, the most important and the most intense. For years, I tried to talk about it. Nobody listened.

Who would have wanted to listen? Mine were not nice, neat stories. There was love, but no cute little love stories; heroes, but no grand, heroic war stories; winners, but you

had to look hard to tell them from the losers. On our battlefields, there were no knights in shining armor rescuing damsels in distress. The stories, even the funny ones, were all dirty. They were rotten and they stank. The moments, good and bad, were permeated with the stench of death and napalm.

And when that year was over, when the "Freedom Bird" took me back to "the world," I learned that my war was just beginning.

They wheeled her in on a gurney. She'd already gone into labor. With the bullet wound in her belly, a normal childbirth would be out of the question. So we cut into her, and found a perfectly formed live baby boy. He had a gunshot wound in his belly.

There are beads of sweat on my forehead. A few roll down the side of my face. With the back of my hand, I wipe them away, but not before a single drop rolls into my left eye and burns. These Virginia summers are unbearably hot. I can remember nights like this in Vietnam, nights when I couldn't escape the all-encompassing steam bath, my sweat-stained jungle fatigues clinging to my body while the heat slowly drained every ounce of life from me, making me far too miserable to cry. It was the kind of heat that goes all the way to your soul, a heat that makes you wonder if the prophets hadn't experienced their visions of hell on one of these stifling nights.

For some reason, tonight's heat seems worse than any I remember from Vietnam. Or is it? Have I been spoiled by all those years in southern California, where the ocean breezes helped to make the nights more comfortable?

I should call the air-conditioning contractor in the morning and ask him to finish the system. What person with any sense would try to get through these hot, humid Virginia summers without air-conditioning? Or maybe I should just forget the air conditioner and try to sell the house, move into an

apartment like Bill did. Do I really need all this room? Probably not.

We were going to remodel the place, take the paint off all the molding and bring it back to the way it must have looked a hundred years ago. We probably saw fifty houses before finding this one, and as soon as I walked in the front door, I knew this was it. At first Bill was reluctant to buy something needing so much work, but later he felt differently.

It's a special place. The floors are all hardwood, and there's the most interesting squeak when you walk in the upstairs hallway. We planned to strip the wood and refinish it. The cracks in the plaster were going to be fixed and the painted kitchen cabinets would be replaced with natural oak, oiled to a warm luster. I wanted hanging plants in the large windows. In the daytime, they let plenty of light in. A healthy Boston fern would look nice in the front hallway; maybe a couple of coleus plants in the living room, or a wandering Jew, or some baby's breath. We were going to fill our lives with growing things, maybe even a baby after we learned more about the dangers of my exposure to Agent Orange.

I remember the afternoon more than a year ago, after the spring thaw, when we dug holes in the side yard so we could plant fruit trees. We joked that day about spending our old age in rocking chairs under the trees, reaching up from time to time and grabbing another peach. Bill had said that sixty years from now, when we were long gone, there would be a young family in the house and they would make occasional references to "the old couple who planted the fruit trees."

That day was a happy one. For at least a few hours, I partly believed in our future and in my future. But I didn't have to wait sixty years to be the old woman who had lived in the big house on the corner. In my mid-thirties, I already felt far older than any chronological age I might ever reach.

It wasn't something that had developed recently, with the marital problems. I had felt like an old woman long before I'd ever met Bill. The feeling had been there at twenty-two, that bone-tired weariness that makes daily living an extreme

test of will. Maybe I thought that Bill could help turn back my emotional clock. It was too much to ask of anyone.

We never got around to buying those fruit trees. For a while, I left the empty holes, which served no function other than to create hazards when I tried to mow the lawn. Then, I filled them in.

About a hundred feet past the former holes, just beyond the hedges, two people are walking silently in the softness of the night. It's a man and a woman, both in shorts and T-shirts, probably other unfortunates without benefit of air-conditioning. As they turn the corner, the woman speaks quietly and her muffled words rise to my window. The man answers her. They seem comfortable together, happy to be alive in spite of this godforsaken heat. I envy their three o'clock in the morning intimacy and feel a dull ache inside as I wipe more sweat from my face.

When they disappear back into the shadows, I sit up and put my feet over the side of the bed. The sheets are soaked with sweat, partly from the heat and partly from the night. My T-shirt looks as if it just came out of the wash. I grab another from the dresser and remove the soaked one, throwing it into a corner.

He was only eighteen years old. I put his hand in mine. "I'm a nurse," I said. "You are in an American hospital. We're going to make you as comfortable as possible." It was what we said to all the ones we classified as expectants, those we expected to die. It was simply a matter of time.

Against my better judgment, I decide to try once more for sleep, hopefully a peaceful one this time. I crawl over to the dry empty side of the bed—Bill's side—and lie down. Eyes closed, breathing slowly, I attempt to calm myself. It works. I am drifting, resting normally, this time possibly until morning. It is peaceful, so peaceful.

The dreams come slowly. I can hear birds and the sound of water lapping against my air mattress as I lie in the middle of

a pool. The sun is setting, casting long shadows. Some men and women are sitting on the grass nearby. They are laughing and talking. Behind them, the top of a makeshift chapel rises above a wooden fence. The building is dwarfed by twin radar screens on the hill to the right. Near the screens, a soldier sits in a guard tower. I can hear the tanks rolling across the compound. Suddenly, it's all interrupted by a rocket attack and mud is oozing through the walls of the operating room, while we work frantically to put some soldier's leg back together. There's an explosion.

Everything goes black.

After a few moments in the darkness, I hear the insistent ring of a telephone outside my door. It's 3 A.M. in Pleiku. The fighting in the Central Highlands is heavy, with the continuous sound of rifles, mortars, and artillery off in the distance. I've been sleeping under my cot, having been awakened an hour earlier by a rocket attack. In my exhaustion, not even the concussion of explosions nearby could keep me awake. But the telephone sets me in motion.

Still half asleep, I hold the receiver to my ear. "Incoming wounded! Get everyone down here on the double." The adrenalin flows as I run through the hooch, waking the other nurses—"Mickie, get up!" "Oh, no! Not again!" Banging on their doors—"Coretta, casualties." "Don't those V.C. ever rest?" Racing against time, while the sound of the med-evac choppers grows louder—"Jill." "Leave me alone, Van. I'm tired." "Let's go, kiddo, we're on!" A groan, and I hear her moving.

Back in my room, I can hear running footsteps on the hall floor as I remove my nightgown and hustle into fatigues. *Bastards! Won't they ever let us sleep?* I throw my flak jacket over one shoulder, my helmet onto my head, and race to the doorway of the hooch, my untied bootlaces dragging on the floor. By the time I reach the outside steps, my fatigue shirt is buttoned and the flak jacket is hoisted onto my other shoulder, one snap fastened to keep it from flapping. Others are running ahead of me toward the emergency room, their silhouettes

sharply outlined by the flashing light of flares, exploding artillery rounds, and rockets. My heart is beating wildly. Miles away, red tracers rain down from Cobra gunships. The ARVN tanks are moving around the edges of our compound. Overhead, a helicopter begins its descent with more wounded as doctors, nurses, and medics push gurneys to the landing pad. The roar of the rotor blades becomes deafening.

I run to the ER, grab a gurney, and wheel it out. The first dust-off is already lifting off, heading back into combat for more casualties, while a second chopper comes in quickly to take its place. As soon as the bird touches down, the medical personnel and flight crew work frantically to unload the damaged human cargo. The pilot is a twenty-one-year-old kid nicknamed Shortstop, because he's barely five foot six. He has an oversized baby face that is usually dominated by his cute, puffy red cheeks. Those cheeks are now a pasty white as he yells from his seat, "Get those fuckers moving. We gotta get back there quick!" There's blood down the left side of Shortstop's flight suit. I notice it as I'm helping another nurse drag a litter from the chopper onto a gurney.

"Come on, assholes, we don't have all day!" Shortstop screams.

I jump back on the chopper and grab his left shoulder. I have to yell to be heard above the engine. "You're hit."

"No shit, Dick Tracy."

"Let someone look at it."

"Later, Van. It's a fucking mess out there right now. Get the fuck off my goddamned machine so I can go back to work." Although he protests, I quickly wrap a pressure dressing around his arm to stop the bleeding. It takes only a few extra seconds.

With all the wounded cleared out, I jump to the ground. Shortstop's chopper is lifting off even before my feet have touched the earth. It is the last time I will ever see him alive.

I run to catch up with a corpsman pushing the last gurney as another chopper lands behind me. More medical personnel start off-loading new wounded, but by now my full attention

is on the soldier at my side. As we roll through the doors of the ER, I am using my scissors to cut his uniform off so we can examine his sucking chest wound. The corpsman pushes the soldier's litter against a wall and I hang his IV bottle. In the light, it quickly becomes apparent that this guy has more than just a chest wound. There's a through and through gunshot wound in his left shoulder and hundreds of smaller wounds—multiple frag wounds—covering his entire body. They probably came from a rocket, mine, or grenade. Although he doesn't say a word, I can see the fear in his eyes. I give him a shot of morphine and try to offer some reassurance before moving along to another case. This one will survive. "Don't worry," I say. "We've got the best doctors in the world here. You'll be better before you know it." My words don't ease the pain, but I know the morphine soon will.

One of the ER doctors comes up behind me with a clipboard as I'm drawing some blood to be typed and crossmatched for later transfusion. "What do we have here, Van?"

"A sucking chest wound," I answer. "GSW T and T in the left shoulder and MFWs front and back. Blood pressure eighty over fifty, pulse one fifty."

"Okay, we'll send him in as soon as he's stabilized."

I begin moving through the seemingly endless flow of wounded soldiers, working with the doctors, making quick, superficial examinations to determine which will be first into the operating rooms, which ones can wait for treatment, and which ones will be left to die because we lack the time or resources to save them. The emergency room is filled with the moaning and screaming of boys and men who have been rudely confronted with their own mortality, their mangled and twisted bodies contorted by more than physical pain. Mixed among their cries are the urgent, but professional voices of the medical people.

"Get another IV into this one, he's shocky."

"Somebody help me!"

"They're only MFWs of the legs. He can wait."

"I want my mother."

"Type and cross this one for fifteen units."

"Don't let me die."

"Wheel that one over to the expectant room."

To the average person, the scene in the ER might appear to be one of absolute chaos. But the actual precision of this system is amazing, especially for the Army. Everyone knows exactly what to do and does it without question, giving the best possible care in the shortest amount of time, to keep as many people alive as possible.

As I finish one soldier's examination, a weak hand grabs my arm. "Hey, Van?"

I turn to find Bennie Dickenson, a twenty-year-old field medic from the 4th Division lying on a gurney. Almost every man in his platoon has been killed or wounded tonight. Bennie has a gaping hole in his left side, exposing half of his chest, another in his belly, and a bloody stump where his left leg used to be. Around the stump is a tourniquet that he probably applied by himself. He might make it, but he'd need to get to an operating room quickly.

In spite of his pain, Bennie's voice is calm and well modulated, sounding like that of a precise and highly trained medic, and not that of a man with half his body blown away.

"I apologize for the unexpected visit," he says. "I wanted to surprise you guys to see if you really work as hard as you say."

I am speechless—I've partied with Bennie, compared stories about our respective childhoods, and more than once, I've considered saying yes to his half-joking requests for a date. His best friend, Phil Conklin, is an OR technician here, and Bennie frequently spends his free time at our hospital, playing cards and chess with Phil or conning us out of extra medical supplies that he can take to the field. Phil and Bennie have gone through grammar school, high school, and basic training together. They even worked it so they arrived in Vietnam on the same day. But their different medical special-

ties landed them in different assignments, a problem that Phil had wanted to correct by having Bennie apply for a transfer to our hospital. By the time the skids were greased, Bennie was so worried about "his boys" in the platoon that he refused to budge. Like most field medics, he's been their mother hen almost since the day he arrived. He worries that no one can care for them as well as he can.

I wipe the sweat from his forehead. "Van, could you please do me a big favor?" he asks.

"Sure, Bennie. You need some morphine?"

"No, thanks. It's Petrocelli over there." He lifts his arm weakly and points to a brawny, dark-haired kid about five feet away. "I ran out of plasma before he got hit and he's lost at least three or four units of blood. He looks like he's going into shock. Could you get an extra IV into him?"

"Sure thing."

As soon as I take care of Petrocelli, I come back to Bennie. It's difficult to keep my hands from shaking as I cut away his uniform and examine his open belly. I've worked on friends before, but it's never easy.

"Don't waste your time on me, Van. Take care of my guys first."

I ignore his suggestion and continue the exam, trying to see him as merely another case, and not as a person who was telling me jokes only four days earlier.

"When you get to Spezak, you better turn him over," Bennie says. "He's got some frags in his back. And I think he might have something going on in his belly, because it was rigid. Better get a surgeon to open him up quick."

He continues, "When you get Mitchell into the OR, tell the gas passer to be careful putting him under. The crazy fucker just finished eating six cans of beans and dicks before we got hit."

I cut away what's left of Bennie's fatigue pants and can see a long deep wound down to the bone in the back of his "good" leg. I cover it and him with a clean sheet. I touch his

cheek before moving on to another casualty. He smiles weakly. He knows that his chances are not good. He probably knew it from the moment he was hit.

Five minutes later, with the choppers still bringing in wounded, I am called to scrub for surgery. On my way to the operating room, I walk past Phil Conklin as he pushes a dead body toward the morgue. He's muttering to himself and trying to hold back tears. "Stupid fucking hero."

I glance down and see Bennie's face. I too want to cry; to mourn not only Bennie, but the thousands like him who have come through this hospital. But tonight, neither Phil Conklin nor I, nor any of the other personnel at the 71st Evacuation Hospital will shed a tear for Bennie Dickenson. There isn't enough time to cry while so many others are depending on us to keep them alive.

When I wake again, my body is shaking and the sheets under me are saturated with sweat. I stare at the bedroom ceiling and try to tell myself that it's all over, that Vietnam is behind me. In spite of my best efforts, a single word keeps screaming inside my head:

Why?

There are hours left until daybreak. The sun is half a lifetime away. In a moment, when the tears stop, I will climb out of bed, head downstairs for a drink, and try, once more, to figure out where it all began.