

## A VIETNAM WIFE

I arrived early for my appointment. As I walked through the front door, I thought maybe today would be a short day. It was 8:30 A.M. I was surprised to find there were at least 10 people sitting in the waiting room. Methodically one by one the nurse appeared and called a name. Someone would stand and follow her to get weighed and their vitals taken.

Then they returned to their seat as she walked past the line of doors and dropped a folder outside one of the doors. Over and over it was repeated as she returned to her room and appeared, holding a folder and calling another name. The look on her face stayed the same. Almost like the order she continued to call names, deposit folders, and return to her room only to appear again. I wondered if she even looked at their faces, or did they just remain names. Another name that she could cross off of her list for the day.

I looked around at the people who shared this room with me. An old man in his 80's was sitting across from me. I saw him when I entered the building. He was standing in the hallway staring into a picture of a war scene that hung on the wall. He didn't move when I passed. I don't think he even heard me or knew I was there. I must have been seated a half hour before I looked up to see the elderly man appear. He was walking with a cane and moving very slowly. I wondered if it took him all that time to get here, or if he couldn't tear himself away from the images in the painting? Were they the same images he held in his mind after all these years?

He sat in his chair, holding onto his cane as if it was a part of him. I wondered how many years his fingers grasped that worn piece of wood that steadied him. He never removed his overcoat. His eyes scanned the room. His hands shook, more like a tremor, but he didn't seem to even notice or care. His eyes met mine and I smiled at him. His expression remained the same, but his hand seemed to wave to me. His eyes moved onto another person. Again his expression remained the same. Then I realized that his hand continued to move as in a wave, his lips forming silent words. His hands moved with the unspoken

words. I don't think his eyes ever met mine. I don't know if he ever noticed anyone as his eyes scanned the room.

His doctor appeared and said his name. Still, there was no movement. The doctor touched his arm and he willingly followed him, slowly. As he left, I looked into his eyes. His eyes held an almost total emptiness, as if they had stopped seeing many years ago. All I could see was a look of far away. I thought as he left, he reminded me of a robot. Somewhere he found the strength to keep moving through life but not really living. His eyes were looking but not seeing. His body in this room but he lived somewhere in the past.

As each one returned to their seat, they all reminded me of programmed robots. Sometimes their seat was already taken by another. Nobody sat beside me. I almost wanted to laugh and say, "Hey I don't bite." I just remained silent. One man had no other chair so he grabbed the back of the chair beside me and yanked it over about a foot and sat down. I could hear him murmuring to himself. Once I thought he was talking to me and I looked at him. His eyes were expressionless. He wasn't talking to me, and he wasn't seeing me. Another thousand yard stare.

I looked around the room. I paused to look at each face. A thin man with a pony tail, probably about my age, was wearing a leather jacket that said SCOUT. Under it were the words, Vietnam. He talked nonstop yet nobody seemed to be listening, or at least they didn't acknowledge it. He sat for a few minutes talking and then walked around the room only to return to his seat and start talking again.

Beside him was another man about the same age. Clean shaven, handsome, and dressed so much different from the man beside him. My eyes moved to look at his eyes. They were so big, almost frozen like when you have been scared nearly to death and staring straight ahead. He didn't even acknowledge the words from the man in the biker jacket. He sat there waiting for the expressionless nurse to call his name. While he waited, he must have been visiting another place because his big round eyes made no contact with anyone in the room.

He was starring, but not seeing.

Another man was reading a book that he brought. I think he was just covering his face to shut out his surroundings. His hat lay beside me in an empty chair, it was covered with pins. I recognized the crossed rifles of the infantry. I recognized the pins that all Vietnam Vets wore. No reason to move the hat, nobody wanted to sit there anyhow.

A heavy set man appeared. I looked at him and he smiled. He sat beside the only other woman in the room. My only impression of him was that he was talkative. He started a conversation with the lady. I looked at her. She appeared uncomfortable. She returned his questions with one word answers, trying to turn away, like she didn't want him to ask another question. After a while he seemed to give up. Then he looked at her and said, "Did you serve?" She said, "Yes, Navy." He said "Welcome Home." There was only a nod in return and then her eyes also seemed to cloud over and take her to another place and another time. The man stood up and said he was going for a smoke, the first of many.

I didn't want to look around anymore. I didn't want to see eyes that didn't see and people that were there but they weren't there. I had seen it all before. I see it many times in the darkness of night.

As I sat there, I wondered if they knew I never walked on foreign soil. Never served my country. Never held my buddy while he drew his last breath, or seen more hell than anyone should ever have to witness. Did they know I wasn't one of them, or think I wouldn't understand? Is that why they chose not to sit beside me?

Then I asked myself if they knew how I did serve my country. Did they know about those who served in the aftermath? Did they know about the effects their nightmares had on the one that stayed by their side? Even with his anger raging, she stayed right there. She stayed right beside him in the darkest of nights when he returned to the hell of

War, in his nightmares?

There was no answer, just eyes that didn't see and minds that were only half way home. There were young men whose memories were of times not so long ago. There were men my age who still lived partly in Vietnam with vivid scenes forever flashing in their mind. Scenes that wouldn't let them see today. There were old men whose bodies were nearly worn out, yet the scenes of long ago were so fresh in their mind; fresher than what happened this morning.

You are not so different from me, but you don't know that. I am not your brother. I didn't walk where you walked, but I walk where you walk in your dreams. I walk amongst the screams that are the result of the hell you are witnessing as if it is now. Sometimes I am the enemy in your mind in those darkest of nights because I am the only one there. The one you think may kill you if you don't kill me first, because I am perceived to be the enemy when you can't wake up from your nightmares.

I am the one who refuses to give up because I know you are doing the best you can and because I love you. No, not really, I am only representative of the one who has loved you, stood by you, and refused to give up trying to bring you home. I didn't walk where you walked; I only walked in the aftermath. Yet I am here for the same reason, to survive the nightmares of my PTSD. I was the wife of a Vietnam Vet. Now I am a widow. An Agent Orange widow.

Yes I held one of your brothers in my arms and watched him draw his last breath. His nightmares have gone, but mine remain. You are our heroes. You are a special breed of men and women. We are a special breed too. We are the Vietnam Wives. They call our illness second hand PTSD, but it doesn't feel second hand. It feels as real and scary as yours does.

You are Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force. You are proud. You are a brotherhood. Sometimes we have nobody that understands what we have

been through, but even alone we know that we walked the walk. We didn't walk your walk, but we walked ours. We wouldn't have changed a thing, because we love you. We are the Vietnam Wives. We are struggling to survive, to overcome, to keep on loving. Then we ask ourselves, why couldn't our love bring you completely home?

Today I will see the same doctor you see. Today I will ask the same question you ask. Why can't I stop the nightmares? Then I will ask why my love was never enough to bring your brother completely home. I tried so hard to make him forget but I never could and now I can't forget.

No, I am not from any of the branches of the military, but I served. I was a Vietnam Wife, and now I am an Agent Orange Widow. My husband served until he drew his last breath. First he served beside you and then in his nightmares. I will serve until I draw my last breath, because I cannot forget. I will always be a Vietnam Wife.

I understand that thousand yard stare much more than you think I do. I no longer have my Vet. I wonder if you have any idea what you mean to me, and the attachment I have to you. You were my husband's brother. You are my brother and I would like to be your sister. If you cannot understand then just know that I was proud to be the Vietnam wife who loved your brother.

Until I finally draw my last breath and Heaven takes away the scenes of war's aftermath, I will remain a Vietnam Wife, and I am proud.

My attachment to you is strong. My love and respect for you will never end. I hear you say "Welcome Home" to each other. Only my God can welcome me home. I never left my country, or did I? I think I did, last night in my nightmares. That is where I served my country. I was not Army, Navy, Marines, or Air Force. I served in a branch that my country never recognized. I AM A VIETNAM WIFE.