Echoes

Buddy Westin went to Vietnam from a small town in Kansas where hunting was sacred. Buddy's father, Roy, had given him a .22 caliber bolt-action Marlin for Christmas three weeks after Buddy had turned eleven. The next year Roy gave him a single-shot .20 gauge Savage for Christmas. Buddy began to associate firearms with the sound of Christmas carols. He bought a copy of *The Shooter's Bible* and began to study trajectory and shot patterns. Soon Buddy was reloading his own ammunition and had begun to checker the field-grade walnut gun stocks with diamonds and beavertails—fine detailed work at 16 per inch. Roy was pleased.

Roy was a mailman who did rural delivery along Star Route Nine, west of town. It was the favored route—driving away from the sun as it rose in the morning and reversing direction as it descended in the afternoon. This was no small convenience. On the dry western plains dawn spilled over the horizon with authority. Every sunrise threatened to replace the darkness brooding over the land with blindness in those who observed it. Buddy's father felt the sun hot on his back, saw it light up the fields, and sometimes mistook its red glow in farmhouse windows for fire. To early rising farmers Roy appeared as a shadow moving away from first light.

In summer, gravel crunched beneath the oversized tires of Roy's pickup truck, and dust would billow up behind him as he started and stopped, then would settle down over the alfalfa and corn like face powder. In the early morning the light would be clear and golden, and Buddy's father saw pheasant between the corn rows and fox at the edge of the woods. Although Roy delivered mail, he thought of himself as a hunter. He felt the direction of the wind in the hairs on the backs of his hands; he saw the faint bending of the grass where a deer had passed through a pasture; he sometimes stopped in the middle of the road to watch red-tailed hawks hunt in pairs. He taught his son to shoot.

Buddy started with cans down at the gravel pit. Roy showed him how to pace off the distance, locating one every 25 yards, soup cans stripped of their labels and flashing sunlight like signal mirrors. Inside the gravel pit the rifle made a cracking sound as it was fired, and its echo delivered a slap to the ears a split second later. At first Buddy heard it as one sound. Gradually he felt the echo more than heard it. In Vietnam he realized every shot has a unique echo, and reading it can tell you where you are.

Roy sighted in the Marlin for fifty yards, teaching Buddy how to raise and lower the blade sight to adjust for other distances, how to judge the wind and correct his aim, how to keep the sun at his back. Buddy learned slow, deliberate firing—standing, kneeling, sitting, prone. Later he practiced snap shooting until hitting a target became as simple as pointing his finger. Cans worked better than bottles. They didn't spray the ground with shards; they danced under fire without breaking. When Buddy pointed, the cans skittered over the gravel as if blown by a fierce gust. Later he would pick up the cans and shell casings and go home with his father.

All the farmers knew Roy; he didn't have to ask permission to cross their fences, to hunt their land—not because he was their mailman and delivered their bank statements and messages from sons and daughters at college or even Sears & Roebuck catalogs to dream over, but because he shared their most fundamental belief. Nothing was more important than a man's connection to the land and the creatures on it. The land was meant to be managed. Delivering mail or going to school involved little more than words being passed, a pretense that something was being done when you were only stirring dead air. Hunting was a physical struggle with living creatures. And because it was life and death, hunting had to be treated with reverence, practiced according to rules and rituals. On the great plains where enormous distances made law enforcement almost a matter of luck, shooters disciplined themselves, following a code of personal honor. Without such, hunting would become senseless slaughter. While no man spoke of this, it was the way men had lived for generations on the land in Kansas.

Buddy's father would come off his route about 3:30, pick him up after school at 4:00, and they'd drive out toward the Walnut River. Father and son would walk through corn stubble as the shadows of Fall lengthened across the rich bottom land cluttered with husks and chaff beneath their boots. Pheasants would run before them, cackle, and explode into the air. Rabbits would spring up beneath their feet and cut zig-zag toward distant tree lines. Along the river Buddy and Roy could smell the sweet musk of wild grapes.

Before the first hard frost, Buddy and his father would dig pit blinds along the edge of the winter wheat fields and plan where to scatter their decoys before the Canadian geese migrated. In the new year, they would track white-tailed deer in the snow. Or they would stalk the bends of the Walnut River, gray-edged with ice. Blue-wing teal and wood ducks would jump into the air beating their wings, skimming the open water of the channel, and disappearing into the willows and oaks along the shore. In the off-season there was target practice in the gravel pit and reading *The Shooter's Bible* and reloading.

Buddy's mother, Martha, could cook any kind of game from possum to bear—not that Buddy or his father shot either. There were some things you just did not shoot. Martha's specialty was waterfowl, ducks and geese, which she would debone, marinate, and smoke on the grill in the carport. She experimented with different hardwoods to coax out the most delicate flavor. It wasn't a skill one expected to find cultivated in Belle Plaine, Kansas, where putting pickle relish on corn dogs passed for gourmet cooking.

Buddy's mother didn't care much for guns, but she grew used to them. The TV room filled with the sweet, metallic reek of Hoppe's #10 cleaning oil. The blue shag rug was flecked with lint from round cleaning patches that were hard-finished on one side and cottony on the other. Martha got so that from the kitchen she could identify the sound of a bolt-action .22 being opened from a pump-action .12 gauge being closed or the breech of a lever-action .30/.30 being cleared even when the TV was blaring the latest disaster on the evening news. Buddy's mother didn't care for guns, but they had become as much a part of the family's life

as the old red Chevy pickup now faded by sun. Roy and Martha had bought the truck because of an advertising jingle sung by Dinah Shore: "See the USA in your Chevrolet/America's asking you to call." Dinah looked like the All-American Girl—clean, bright, wholesome, and energetic. They thought it was unfair when her TV show was canceled.

Buddy felt about school pretty much the way his father did about delivering mail: you did it because it was expected, but it didn't make you what you were. Two weeks after he graduated with a C average from the regional high school in 1967, he came home from his temporary job at the Texaco station to find a draft notice in the mailbox. He hadn't wanted to go to college. He wasn't particularly interested in girls. The closest he had come to thinking about work that suited him was moving to Colorado and starting a guide service for hunters, but he didn't know how to begin. So when he got drafted, it was all right with him.

The controversy that was boiling up over Vietnam had not yet spilled into Kansas. To small town folk in the Midwest the mounting U.S. casualties and the protests against the war in Vietnam seemed to be the invention of broadcast journalists living in the cities of either coast—a kind of twilight unreality foreign to their experience. Buddy's boss at the Texaco thought Chet Huntley and David Brinkley were communists, and he had begun to worry about Walter Cronkite. All that national network reporting seemed designed to make people sad and uncertain about the United States of America. Finally Buddy's family stopped watching all but local news from Wichita. And sometimes they skipped that and turned to Rowan and Martin's "Laugh In."

Every day the American flag flew over most of the businesses in town and many homes as well. Buddy was content to go into the army. His parents were proud to send him. Roy thought Buddy's hunting experiences had prepared him better than most. Buddy remembered how his parents smiled and waved the August morning he boarded the Trailways bus for basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. They both stood in front of the True Value hardware and squinted after him down Kansas Avenue. When the bus turned north at the end of the block and passed behind the Farm Home Bank, Buddy knew

they found themselves staring down an empty street directly into the sun.

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Buddy Westin is working alone in the mountains, the Annamese Cordilla which comprises the geologic spine of Vietnam. He is squatting in a small thicket of bamboo two hundred steep yards up hill 512 slightly south of the Phuoc Son 3 village complex in II Corps. The sun sits on the edge of the world behind him and casts long shadows over third platoon encamped to the west along the small brown stream in Signal Valley below. Through field glasses Buddy watches them, unseen. American soldiers are scattered over a fifty-yard radius, small clumps of men eating and talking in low voices like music, familiar but distant. They are all young. A big mongrel puppy eats daintily from a corporal's dirty hand. A red-haired, sun-burned sergeant coaches a Chicano private in the finer points of sharpening a K-bar. Three black privates sit together on sandbags, smoke cigarettes, and watch; the tallest one wears a thick scar across his neck like a rope.

A .30/.06 bolt action sniper rifle rests across Buddy's knees. It is an off-the-rack Winchester Model 70. With a match-grade 173 grain load it is accurate to one thousand yards. Buddy is looking for targets. Officers are favored. Kill the head, and the body dies.

Buddy analyzes telltales: extra space, postures of superiority and deference, paths that point to where orders are issued. He guesses the lieutenant is the lone letter writer dug into the perimeter center, but can't be sure yet. He spots the RTO a little to the south where the shadow of a whip antenna falls like a snake across a line of sandbags. Sooner or later the lieutenant will have to use the radio. That's a shot-maker for a sniper.

Buddy raises his glasses and scans hill 513 west of the platoon, then pivots by slow degrees to study the slope behind his thicket. The hills are pretty much the same—his, the enemy's. Shades of green become visible, sun-spotted foliage glimmering in patches of darkness. Vines hang like cords. He would like to pull them, peel the jungle back like a stage curtain; he would like to stand in the wings and watch the show like he had in high school—not quite player, not quite audience. Buddy

knows this is not possible. So, he waits to see what will be. He looks for some reflection, hostile metal or glass that will give back and multiply the light beginning to pour over the horizon behind him. He has become a shadow now, indistinguishable from other shadows overlooking the valley.

During the past week, Viet Cong snipers have shot two American officers in Signal Valley. Colonel Billings had choppered into LZ Stud to give a pep talk on the value of the search-and-destroy tactic. Shot in the head as he stepped past the door gunner, Billings was dead before his polished boots touched the scar of red earth beside the chopper skids. Three days later and five clicks north, Lieutenant McCarthy had been hit in the lungs while squatting over a slit trench. As Buddy's CO put it during yesterday's briefing, VC snipers were killing the good guys coming and going. Send a sniper to shoot a sniper.

Officially, Third Platoon doesn't know it is bait, doesn't know Buddy is there to spring the trap. They don't know why they have been ordered to sit at these coordinates outside Phuoc Son 3 until 0930, then march seven clicks up the valley to sit again. Like many of their missions it makes no sense. Buddy thinks it is as if they are caught in the crossfire between two gunfighters in the Old West: Dodge, Wichita, Tombstone.

The letter writer stays in his foxhole and away from the RTO. Still, Buddy knows the lieutenant can't put off the morning situation report much longer. That's prime time.

To the north a hedgerow separates the American soldiers' camp from the villagers in Phuoc Son 3–a complex of thatched hootches and cooking fires clustered around a well. If you drew a line along the hedgerow, it would cut Buddy in half. He sweeps the village methodically with his field glasses. The Vietnamese are inside eating breakfast. He smells smoke, fish, rice, dung. Dew drips from the bamboo, spotting his Ghillie Suit. Long strips of green and black burlap hang from his fatigues and break up his human outline. He looks like part of the thicket he is sitting in. Buddy decides there is no clear field of fire from the village; it is no place for a sniper. He lowers his binoculars, fumbles in his left breast pocket for a StarBurst peppermint, something to suck on, something that tastes clean.

Buddy studies the jungle across the valley. His learned method is to look at nothing in particular. He is trying to register movement the way a tape recorder picks up sound, a seismograph vibration. His empty stare falls across the jungle like just another shadow thrown by the dawn. He concentrates on the area 300 to 400 yards west of the American perimeter. With an old Chicom, a VC sniper would have to get lucky beyond that range. There are no clear breaks in the foliage, no reflections, no obvious way to line up a shot from 513 except by climbing into a tree top. Buddy's eyes do not move; he does not blink. He imagines how it will happen. There will be no reflection, only a small puff of smoke and the lieutenant dead. Then, he will take out the VC sniper across the valley, balance one loss with another. If you can't win, at least don't lose.

To his right there is a ripple in the jungle canopy on hill 513. Two parrots break from cover, flashing red and blue as they plummet toward the village. A gust of north wind brings a faint rustling. Behind the parrots Buddy notices branches bending, one held down, then one higher and another higher yet. Someone climbing.

He raises his binoculars. A dark shape behind the foliage is working its way up the trunk hand-over-hand. Buddy rests the field glasses on his rucksack, picks up his rifle, and kneels, bracing his left arm on his left thigh. He places the cross hairs of the 12 power Unertl scope on the black shape and tracks it upward.

The Winchester is sighted in for 800 yards; he figures the distance at 600. At the top of the scope is a small bare spot along the trunk. He lifts the cross hairs to it and waits for the head of the climber to appear. He sees dark hair on the back of the head, large protruding ears. Buddy flicks the safety off, takes a deep breath, releases it. He holds steady on the target and begins squeezing. The head turns and looks out through the opening directly into the cross hairs. Buddy finds himself staring at a simian face divided into four quadrants. It is a Rock Ape.

The animal bares its teeth–smiling? snarling? Last week another sniper asked the briefing NCO if monkeys qualified for the body count. The sergeant, who chewed tobacco, leaned over and spit as he considered the question. "It ain't official policy,"

he said, "but I figure if they're good enough to be astronauts, they're good enough to be gooks."

Buddy lowers his rifle and flicks the safety back on. He can still tell the difference between Vietnamese and apes.

Inside the American perimeter the letter writer has finished and is marking coordinates on a map. The corporal is roughhousing with the puppy. The sergeant is demonstrating how to disembowel gooks. The Chicano private has been ordered to play the gook. The tallest black soldier runs an index finger along his ropy scar as if tracing a road on a map. A smile flickers across his face. He hollers, "No offense, Sarge, but why you showin' a Mexican how to use a knife?"

Before first light, Buddy scouted the area immediately behind him. Now he worries that a VC sniper might have slipped into position later, especially a local. He turns and stares up the slope behind his hide. The hill is flooded with light, the rim a white hot edge. He shades his eyes. First light is hard to look at. He turns back toward Signal Valley.

There are signs of life in the village. Something has emerged from a hootch along the northern edge. It squats in the dirt beside the entrance and picks at the grass thatch. Buddy raises his field glasses. It seems to be a girl about five or six. He notices a woman framed in the doorway. The girl's mother? The woman balances a small wooden yoke over her right shoulder. A pot is attached to either end by a rope sling. Buddy sees her teeth are black from chewing betelnut. The child stands. The woman places the yoke over the girl's right shoulder and steps back into the darkness.

The girl doesn't seem much troubled by the load; she trudges along, the yoke flexing under the balanced weight of the pots. She passes several huts, moving steadily toward the well at the center of the village. Buddy thinks maybe she is going to get water. He sees no one else in the village. The little girl passes the well, disappears behind a hootch. Buddy hears pigs grunt, a water buffalo bellow in its pen. He reaches slowly and crushes a mosquito on his cheek with his left hand. At the south end of the village a boy about ten darts from a doorway then stops suddenly as if on a tether; looking to his right, he ducks quickly

back inside. The girl appears behind him. She passes through the hedgerow into the American soldiers' perimeter.

Buddy wonders if she is booby-trapped—if he will be required to shoot a child. It isn't a question of can. It is a question of will. He knows others have.

The Americans look up warily at the child. They have heard the stories about Vietnamese kids carrying grenades. They prefer not to believe these particular war stories. Because if you believe them, what do you do? Shoot the kid? Pick up your weapon and run from a child? Act like your father in WWII and shower the kid with candy?

The sergeant interrupts his demonstration of how to gut the enemy. Setting his K-bar down, he rummages in his ruck for a stick of Juicy Fruit. By the time he finds it, she has passed and cannot see the gift he offers. The puppy barks, flips over onto its back and paws the air. The corporal grabs it and holds it high over his head. "Hey, kid, wanna pet the dog? He don't bite." She veers away from him, trudges steadily toward the lieutenant's foxhole.

Buddy realizes that she should not have gotten this far and that no one will stop her. He raises his rifle. It is an easy shot, 300 yards down and to the left with the sun behind him. Long shadows stretch down hill 512 toward the camp; Buddy's outline is lost in the clutter of the bamboo thicket. He appears to have become jungle, a dark thought in a dark shade.

The lieutenant makes a mark on his map, lays a straight edge down and sketches a line with his pencil. It traces the distance between where the soldiers are and where they are going that day. The map is damp. The line is faint, a halfhearted gesture. Maybe that is where they are going; maybe it isn't. In the jungle it is hard to tell for sure. This is why there are casualties from friendly fire. The lieutenant redraws the line heavier. He pauses, looks up for a moment as if thinking and notices the child, two burdens balanced across her shoulder.

Buddy assumes she is booby-trapped. She has no good reason for being in the American perimeter, a place where innocence no longer makes sense. Buddy sits above it, hiding. He does not want to become part of that place where the only gift is death. Death is something he would not choose to give a child. It is,

after all something sent by her mother. He decides to frighten the child back into the village.

At the edge of his scope Buddy sees uniforms dark with sweat against a light blanket of green. In the center he sees the child's face; her eyes are black. Buddy follows the yoke back from the head until the cross hairs lie along the bottom of the rear pot. He waits for the background to clear. He sees body parts then sandbags. The shot comes together. Buddy blows a hole through the pot top to bottom, upending it and sending a shower of rice into the air. The slug buries itself in a sandbag between the legs of the sergeant. The sergeant feels a sharp wind just below his genitals, hears the rifle's crack. He falls backwards into his foxhole, still holding a stick of chewing gum up with his right hand like he is pledging allegiance.

The lieutenant watches the sky above the little girl turn white. He flinches at the sound of the shot and feels sharp fragments rain down on him. When he opens his eyes, he sees pot shards and grains of rice everywhere. Little white clusters like maggots have rearranged the topograply of his map. He tries to figure out where his coordinates are, what his course of action should be.

No secondary explosion. Buddy lowers his rifle and chambers another round automatically. His shot has turned the kid 180 degrees and put her on the ground. She gets up slowly, facing back toward her village. Perfect. With her butt jutting into the air, she reminds Buddy of a fawn pushing up with its forelegs. Through the scope he can see her face wrinkle, lines of fear, red dust, tears. Now, run, he thinks and puts another round into the dirt behind her. But she doesn't run. He can see her shy away, take a few steps back toward the village. He chambers another round, looks down from his hide. Everyone in third platoon is down behind sandbags. "Westin," he whispers, "you goddamned miracle; nobody's getting hurt don't deserve it. Go back to momma, little darlin." He raises the rifle again. His scope isolates her movements. He sees her knees bend, her hands slide around the remaining pot, her scrawly legs push up. As she turns, she looks back over her shoulder toward her village. It seems empty. Clutching the pot she staggers toward the lieutenant. Buddy chambers a third round.

The lieutenant shakes his head as if trying to awaken from a nightmare: Americans shooting at children. He can't believe it. He drops his map. Little grains of rice fall to the ground around his feet, and he kicks dirt over them, scrambling from his foxhole. He stands up waving his hands frantically. "Cease fire," he shouts. "Cease fire." The little girl holds the pot out to the lieutenant. He will accept her gift, pull her to safety.

Buddy thinks the lieutenant must be an FNG or stupid. Maybe both, because there aren't really any gifts, man, just surprises. The lieutenant beckons to the child, reaches out. She runs unsteadily toward him now, a big American with his arms open. Buddy aims to put a round just in front of her, warn her off. As he fires, she stumbles. Buddy's shot enters the pot just above the thumb of her left hand turned palm up.

A sharp flash fills his scope. It is like looking directly at the dawn—white hot clarity, then red and hazy, then dark. Buddy lowers his weapon and tries to rub the black spot from his right eye. Squinting through his left, he sees that the child has become a hard rain of blood and bone, something her mother made. All the same, Buddy feels like the unwilling father.

The lieutenant has been blown backwards over the sandbags surrounding his foxhole. His arms no longer reach out. Through his field glasses Buddy can't even tell it is the lieutenant for sure. It looks more like a pile of rags–somebody's bloody laundry. But it is hard to tell. There is a kind of red mist hanging in the air. Buddy's ears are ringing from an echo which has its own echo.

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Buddy Westin keeps rubbing his eyes. He sees everything through a red mist. When he shuts his eyes and looks within, it is still there. His nightmares are red. The rubbing does not help. He rubs anyway, using the heels of his hands, like erasers. But the red handwriting stays on the wall.

After his mission at Phuoc Son 3, Buddy knew America would lose the war in Vietnam. What kind of country sent its children on suicide missions? But how foreign from his own? On his eighteenth birthday, as he sat in a Saigon bar drinking boilermakers with his comrades just out of high school, the answer came to him. He saw the hard eyes of old men in their baby faces and realized it wasn't so much a difference in the

country as in the age of the children. He saw the code of behavior which he had inherited from his father, ideas of self-control and duty and honor which he had clung to blindly, wasn't enough. It was like carrying a life raft through a desert. But he kept carrying it. By the end of his tour he had thirty-three confirmed kills.

One month after he turned eighteen, Buddy spent six hours, crawling through elephant grass one blade at a time to take out an NVA colonel at a remote base in Laos. Then he lay motionless for three hours while a whole regiment hunted him in the dark. In his mind he became smaller and smaller until he was invisible. That feeling began to last for days after a mission.

When he was six weeks short, Buddy went back to Saigon on R&R. It started out badly; he got drunk alone and stayed up all night in his room feeling sorry for himself. At dawn he went down to breakfast at a French cafe two blocks east of his hotel and lingered over a pot of black coffee.

His waitress was pathetic. Even in a country of small women she was absurdly tiny: Four-foot-five and eighty-two pounds; short hair and small breasts, a little girl with a sad face and nothing to say. At first Buddy thought she must be mute. But that was okay; he was invisible. Anyway, he was sick of the chatter he had heard pass for conversation between American soldiers and Vietnamese women. Buddy and his waitress shared the silence of early morning and found it welcome. As she filled his cup, Buddy realized she wore a uniform too, had a name written above her breast pocket—*My Lin*. When he tried to pronounce it, she laughed. He practiced it over and over until he sounded sober.

My Lin had been a complete failure as a bar girl. Now she was a waitress in a sad cafe. When My Lin finished her shift, she came from behind the counter and looked at Buddy's face for a long time. Then she reached up to cradle it in her tiny hands, like a book. When he looked into My Lin's black eyes, Buddy thought he saw someone reflected there. That night in his hotel room she leaned forward slowly and kissed him. Buddy began to think if he could stare into the darkness of those little-girl eyes long enough, that a man might come back out of there. He might even be someone worth seeing.

Buddy remembered the face of everyone he had killed in Vietnam. He figured most had deserved it. He could live with that. But he also had killed the lieutenant and the little girl. Buddy knew they would have died anyway. At most he had taken only seconds off their lives. Still, he had killed them by trying to save them. That was the whole war right there.

With his tour almost over and so much destroyed, Buddy didn't feel like he had rescued anyone from anything. But he thought he might save My Lin, marry her and take her home.

My Lin liked the idea. She had nowhere else to go.

At first Buddy's commanding officer objected. Then the whole U.S. military chain of command objected. We were fighting to save Vietnam, they argued—a whole country all at once, not just individual Vietnamese one at a time.

"How many American soldiers want to marry Vietnamese women?" Buddy asked his CO.

The CO looked at Buddy quietly for a minute, took a stub of cigar from his mouth and looked at the ash. "I don't know," he said. "I suppose it's every horny bastard from hell to breakfast."

Buddy stood at ease on the dirt floor of the tent and watched a crooked rivulet of water slowly trickle under the CO's cot. A heavy rain beat on the canvas overhead. "There it is," Buddy said. "And I ain't even particularly horny."

The Department of Defense created a paper trail for American soldiers who wanted to marry Vietnamese. The secret was to take each form with its myriad blank spaces and fill in one-word replies. It was something Buddy learned from his father who was familiar with government paperwork.

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Buddy Westin met My Lin at the Wichita airport. She emerged from the gate last, an orphan. Her eyes were wide and uncomprehending; they brushed by Buddy then skipped back again. He looked taller without his uniform. The gift of a smile flashed across her face. She held her arms out and tottered toward him burdened by an enormous flight bag. Buddy pushed through the crowd, took her into his arms and held her tightly as if she might explode and he could hold her together.

They drove home in the early darkness of Fall. Beyond the outskirts of Wichita was an emptiness. My Lin saw yellow lights in distant farm house windows and smelled wood smoke. The rest was dark fields and dark sky separated only by a scattering of stars like bright grains of rice, a harvest of stars in which she tried to read her future. The headlights of Buddy's pickup pushed back the night from the two-lane highway, yellow arms embracing an invisible horizon.

The first time My Lin saw the prairie was the morning after her arrival. My Lin stepped onto the front porch and stared at the flat land which stretched to meet the sky in a sharp thin line. Later she often sat in the porch swing, looking out over a small cluster of new ranch houses that surrounded this place to which Buddy had brought her. What used to be a pasture was becoming a raw new housing development, Bluestem Acres. My Lin would watch the clouds boil up on the edge of the world to the west. She would pretend they were mountains until they turned dark and swept down upon their home with flashes of lightning and bursts of thunder. When the storms hit, My Lin would retreat inside, close the blinds, and turn on the TV. She liked game shows best. Her favorite was "The Price is Right."

During her first week in Kansas, My Lin discovered that she loved Jell-O, its cool slipperiness and tart taste on her tongue, the way it quivered in the bowl when a truck rumbled by on the highway. Lime was her favorite. Its color reminded her of a plant with a heart-shaped leaf that grew on the mountain sides near her village in Vietnam. My Lin made Jell-O with fruit, Jell-O with celery and walnuts, Jell-O with Cool Whip topping. She cut it into cubes, dipped it with ice cream scoops, and poured it into molds shaped like the Muppets. My Lin took Jell-O to welcome new neighbors, to potluck suppers at the Baptist church, to children's parties.

Buddy went to work hauling freight for Kinsman Trucking Company. Bill Kinsman had been in the army with Buddy's father in Europe during WWII and wanted to help a vet get back on the right track. So Buddy went to driver's school in Wichita, got certified, and went on the road.

Buddy discovered his life now was pretty much on automatic. He wasn't ready to tell anyone that part of his life had not played out as it had been written. There had been nothing in that script about killing children or your own men, nothing about doing what you had to do and having it turn out no different than if you had done nothing at all. But My Lin knew. And now, she was here where she listened to his nightmares and set wet face cloths over his eyes when the red mist came.

Buddy took up his life again to discover that everywhere he went there were papers–bills of lading, weigh station forms, inspection reports, tax tables, fuel bills, log books, the occasional speeding ticket. Whenever he felt a little lost, Buddy looked at these papers, and they told him where he was and what he was doing.

Buddy refused all invitations to hunt. His father brought out the guns which Buddy had used as a child and which he had kept safe for his return, but Buddy told him he didn't want them now. At first Roy thought Buddy was too busy—busy starting a family, busy working, gone too long on the road to be away from his new wife for any other reason. Buddy finally told Roy that he'd had a lifetime of shooting in Vietnam.

Buddy had a steady job, a wife who looked like a little girl, and, within two years, a son. He had hoped for a daughter. Buddy knew what came with boys in the Heartland: baseballs, footballs, basketballs. Later it would be guns. That was the part which worried Buddy most. Otherwise it was easy to follow the script, to go through the motions and imagine he was living his life and not somebody else's.

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The week before Buddy's son, Chris, celebrated his twelfth birthday, Roy went down the basement and found Buddy's old .22 caliber Marlin. He carried it out to his workshed behind the garage and pulled it from the leather case. The plaid wool liner was saturated with oil. Here and there varnish had been scuffed from the stock and the bluing had worn thin on the steel. Roy broke the weapon down and stripped away the mottled surfaces with steel wool and emery cloth. Then he re-blued the steel and

put five coats of hand-rubbed spar varnish on the walnut stock. Roy wanted it to look like new because he was ready to start over. He knew he couldn't start over with Buddy. It would have to be Chris.

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June fifth is windy and unusually hot. The new leaves on the cottonwood tree in the backyard are dancing when Chris Westin wakes up at 7:30. He remembers he is twelve. He looks to see if he has any pubic hair yet. He smells coffee brewing, and decides to ask for a cup at breakfast. Chris pulls on Levi's and a Kansas State Wildcats sweatshirt. He is tying his sneakers when he hears gravel crunch in the driveway. From the window he can see his grandfather's Chevy pickup stop alongside his dad's big Peterbilt cab-over. Chris is at the front door before his grandfather can ring the bell. The foyer smells like chocolate cake.

Buddy is drinking coffee and eating scrambled eggs and raisin toast at the breakfast bar. My Lin is drinking tea while she makes white seven-minute frosting. A package of red birthday candles stands next to the light Karo syrup. A stack of wrapped presents waits on the kitchen table like puzzle pieces. My Lin bought most of them while Buddy was on a run to Dodge City and Great Bend. Buddy wonders what he is giving his son.

It is not unusual for Roy to be up early whenever presents are concerned; he has always been the first one stirring on Christmas morning. Roy cradles an oblong box with his left arm; white with a large blue bow, it looks like something long-stemmed roses might come in. It can't fit on the table with the rest, so Roy hands it to Chris.

Buddy watches his son place the package on the breakfast bar, untie the bow, lift the lid from the box. Roy flushes with pleasure as the rifle emerges barrel first—dark blue steel, glossy walnut stock. Chris holds it up for his father to admire. Buddy kneads his eyes with the heels of his hands. He takes the weapon from his son's hands

Roy's voice is full of pride. "You recognize it, Buddy? I restored it." Roy slips both hands into his hip pockets. "Thought I'd start Chris out the way I did you."

Buddy handles the rifle, traces the checkering on the hand grip, rubs the hand-rubbed varnish. The bluing is flawless, a dark mirror. "It looks new, Dad. What's it sighted in for?"

"Fifty yards."

Buddy sees where his father has installed a small white bead at the tip of the blade sight. It looks like a grain of rice. Just past the end of the barrel, Buddy can see My Lin staring at him.

Roy clears his throat. "Course fifty yards ain't no distance at all for you, but it's a good place for Chris to start."

Buddy looks outside. The explosion of dawn is past, and he accepts its echo of morning light as a gift. The sun has risen above the cloud cover along the horizon and washed it the color of blood. The whole eastern sky is a misty red hanging up there like laundry for everybody to see. All they have to do is look. □

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