Seeing the Elephant:
Learned helplessness and Vietnam War fiction

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Murdoch University, 2014.

Portland Jones
B.Aarts (English), M.A
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Portland Jones.
Abstract

The major part of this dissertation (70%) is a work of fiction titled *Seeing the Elephant*: a novel set mostly in the Vietnamese Highlands in the period 1962-65. In 2009, Minh, a Vietnamese refugee who is recovering from cancer in Australia recalls memories of his work as a translator for Frank, a member of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV). The two men work closely together and, through their shared experiences, form a relationship that will have a lasting impact on both of their lives.

The thesis, *Everything will always do nothing: Learned helplessness, trauma and the Vietnam War novel*, argues that the concept of learned helplessness adds to the scope of what is currently perceived as traumatic response in literary theory, contributing to resolving the tension between literary trauma theory and the study of trauma within other academic disciplines. Learned helplessness is a condition that can affect trauma sufferers, leading to the belief that “no amount of effort can lead to success” (Eggen and Kauchak, 412). The thesis analyses several Vietnam War novels and examines the issues that are foregrounded by reading representations of trauma through the lens of learned helplessness. The thesis offers insights into the role that culture, gender and place play in traumatic representation. It also examines the role of silence in the text, not as a neurobiological symptom of trauma, but as an outcome of cultural censorship. Finally the thesis examines how, when the concept of learned helplessness is employed in literary analysis different representations of healing allow the analysis to move beyond abreactive, linguistic methods to encompass all behaviour that leads to the restoration of contingency.
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Seeing the Elephant
Prologue

Dak Thay, Viet Nam 1955

My mother had more stories than a famine has mice. She stitched them to our clothes, stirred them into our rice and tucked them into our beds with us at night. She told stories to comfort, to feed and to teach us about the corners of a world that might otherwise remain mysterious to a child. She could weave words into bandages, my mother. She could speak the coolness of dark green shade and the crumble of cinnamon-coloured loam between your toes.

Words were sweet between my mother’s lips – the names of our ancestors, songs for planting and for harvest, lullabies. She could find the meaning in bird calls and cloud shadows. She knew the names of all the animals and plants in the forest. She knew which leaves to stew into a tea for fevers and which ones would help a dying man pass swiftly and without fear to the next world.

When I was a child, death was only an occasional visitor to our village. After someone in the village died an elder would decide on the exact location of the grave by throwing an egg into the air and digging where it fell. My mother would throw her eggs with particular care – not too close to the well but near enough to the sweeping fruit trees so that the blind tangle of their roots could feast on the body beneath.

She had a story for every season, my mother, but my favourite was one that she told to each of her children while we were still at her breast and the entire world was contained within that small sphere of warm skin and sky.

“A long, long time ago,” my mother would say. “When the earth was still warm and soft like just risen dough, our country was ruled by giant reptiles. They had the thin-membraned wings of bats, these creatures, and their skin was scaled and cold. Those were troubled times and the reptiles were quarrelsome masters. Their dragon claws tore at the surface of the
newborn earth and their harsh cries spilt the sky like lightning.” As she spoke my mother would draw her hands through the air, her fingers sharp.

“One day,” my mother would say in a low voice, “the king of the snakes rose from his home in the sea to make war with the serpent queen of the mountains. They circled one another with venomous fangs bared, looking for the other’s weakness. Their angry voices shook all but the sturdiest trees down and tore the fledgling rivers from their beds. The world held its breath in anticipation of the terrible battle to come. But something strange happened. As they reared into the air preparing to strike, they looked into each other’s eyes, peering through the glassy blackness to the core of one another.”

My mother smiled and stroked my face with gentle hands. “In that instant they fell in love and nothing would ever be the same again. In their cold, reptilian hearts they found the truth denied to many. That love is love. Beyond that nothing matters.”
Chapter One

Perth, Australia 2009

Last night I dreamed my mother flew over our house and her long hair drifted behind her like our ancestors’ ashes on water. Her face was pale against the darkness – the smell of cold smoke and a rustling sound of feathers.

Until I got sick I believed that I had perfected the art of amnesia. I swapped memory for silence, packing it into the small, damp spaces inside where darkness flourishes. I slept fitfully – without dreaming, and at day break woke to sadness, soft and grey. Forgetting wasn’t easy, behind the silence that I had made there were slivers of light and the memories of once-familiar voices. The sounds of night birds and insects; the warm smell of sunlight on skin. But I learned that happiness is just a Trojan horse for sadness and memory is the hand that opens wide the gate.

In the end it was the cancer that brought the memories. Chemotherapy sleep cold like reptile skin. The smell of bile, the bone-deep ache and – for the first time in decades, dreams. My mother was just the first dream of many. She floated over me, and her hands were small stars stretched out against the night. I could hear her whispered stories, the words spinning slowly through the darkness in ever widening circles like smoke. My heart lifted with a quicker beat and I smiled.

It was as though she had come to walk me home.
I was tired for a long time before I realised I was sick. It crept on like shadows – there was never a moment when it seemed so much worse than it had been the day before. There was no pain, just a dragging feeling in my stomach, as though it were tied to the organs around it with string. I blamed it on the passage of time, on my job and on my shallow, dreamless sleep until one day I looked in the mirror and it was like looking at myself through yellow glass. My face, my hands and even the whites of my eyes were yellow.

In the hospital I wore a blue gown tied up at the back. A young woman with a smiling face badge on her chest rubbed my stomach with oil then ran a small, plastic box over the skin. She watched the shadows shift on a computer and her fingers pecked at the keyboard like hungry birds. I tried to watch her face for clues but her lowered eyes were turned toward the screen.

Later that afternoon my wife and I watched while the oncologist held the images against the light.

“Minh, do you have any significant history of illness in your family?” Dr Benson asked.

“No,” I said.

“No history of a particular disease? No relevant medical history?”

“No,” I smiled to reassure him. “No family history of disease. Just a history of dying.”

He looked at the image in his hand and then back at me. In the window I could see our reflection, Mai’s as still as though painted, mine dark, small and smiling. Dr Benson’s reflection filled most of the window, his white coat and the sleek squareness of his head.

He cleared his throat and spoke slowly. “Your relatives in Vietnam ... did they suffer from any diseases that you know of?”

I shook my head.

“And when they passed away – was there an underlying reason apart from age? One illness or issue that was common amongst them?”

“Yes,” I said, my reflection nodding. “It was mostly from the same thing.”

He nodded back at me, smiling, encouraging. “And that was?”

“It was the war,” I said.
Dr Benson looked at me and smoothed his tie. His hands were white and the tips of his fingernails were perfect half moons. He looked over at Mai but she stared out the window, her back straight, hands folded in her lap. He spoke a little louder.

“And how about your living relatives? Do they have a history of any particular illness?”

I shook my head. “We have two children, they’re adults now. They had the usual childhood illnesses – chickenpox, measles, ear-ache – but they’re both healthy now.”

“Yes, I see. And what about your other living relatives?”

“There is only our children,” I said. “Everyone else is gone.”

I was sixty-five years old when I started chemotherapy and I had spent half a lifetime forgetting. I thought that I had left my memories in Viet Nam, under the fleeting shadows of clouds and the warm weight of the dark, dark earth. But they followed me across the ocean and waited until I weakened, slipping through my consciousness like schooling fish. They came without warning and with little provocation. The smell of smoke, the sound of lowered voices or the shine of sunlight on wet grass; instantly I would be taken to a time that I thought I had managed to forget.

On the reception desk of the oncology ward there was an orchid in a pot. As I waited for treatment I could smell it – faint and sweet like oranges warmed in the sun. My eyes closed and I was fourteen again, on the long walk home from the market. The sun was in my eyes, my legs were tired and the dirt path was hot beneath my feet. Just before our village the path narrowed and the trees on either side arched across the sky and formed a tunnel of dark shadow. It was here in the sudden cool that the wild flowers grew, in the hollows of old logs and the cracks between tree branches. In the welcome shade the sweet smell of them was the smell of home.

With the scent of orchids at the back of my throat I was there, my feet in the dirt and the shiver of damp grass in the light breeze. When the nurse called my name I opened my eyes, surprised by the sight of my thin-skinned old man’s hands and the worn, blue cuffs of my shirt. I pressed my palms against my face and, though the scent of flowers faded, the image remained.
In Dr Benson’s rooms bright outback prints hung on the walls, drawing the light. He smiled and his grey eyes slid off my face like rain drops on glass. In a silver frame on his desk was a photo of a white yacht, red spinnaker aloft. I told him that since beginning treatment I had lost control of my memories and he nodded thoughtfully. Flavourouracil can have some unusual side effects, he told me, but this was not one that he had ever seen documented, even in elderly Vietnamese gentlemen. He leaned across his desk and offered me a prescription for Diazepam. His smile left faint white lines beside his mouth.

“If you’d rather not take a sedative,” he said, “perhaps you could write your memories down. Many people find that writing is therapeutic. If that doesn’t help I can refer you to a psychologist.” He showed his white and even teeth. “Seeing a psychologist is nothing to be ashamed of, Minh. They’re just there to listen to you talk.”

“You mean like paying someone to be your friend?” I said. He nodded, smiling. “I guess you could say that. Someone who will listen to you remember.”

I imagined Dr Benson’s memories as sea glass, edgeless, tumbled smooth – they would be warm and feel like skin to touch. He would remember sailing down the Swan River and out through the heads into the light translucence of a summer morning – red sail aloft. Mooring behind Rottnest Island and watching the bay change from turquoise to deep green as the shadows darkened the sea bed, tasting salt on the breeze, feeling the thrum of a following sea beneath his bare feet on the way home. He would remember the sweaty grit of beach sand on the car seat, the hum of lawnmowers on Sunday mornings and the smell of clean bed sheets. The snug feel of a just-ironed shirt and the scent of jacaranda and freshly dug garden beds.

I wanted to tell him that memories are for people like him. I wanted to tell him that people like me forget. Until the forgetting is so big it becomes the most important part of ourselves. But I smiled again. On the bus ride home the weight of the past was on the backs of my eyes like a migraine.
In the days that followed I thought often of death. I was dizzy and sick, the sunlight hurt and my bones were sharp against the inside of my skin. Long nights of broken sleep followed listless, empty days. One afternoon, when the sickness was at its worst I lay down on the bathroom floor, cold tiles against my cheek and the faint smell of bleach. I was too tired and weak, no longer able to defend myself. At least, I told myself as I struggled to rise, in remembering there would be moments of happiness. There would be the memories of laughter, familiar faces and the smell of sunlight after rain.

It hurt to stand and my hands left damp marks on the walls. My soles hurt as though just skin lay between the bones of my feet and the ground. I walked slowly into the spare bedroom and pulled an old shoe-box from the back of the wardrobe. The cardboard was warped and grey. Inside was a bundle of letters, thick and held together with elastic gone starchy with age. The paper thin like a moth’s wings and dusty, the writing like the blue, scribbled tracings of tiny veins. I held them to my face.

I knew exactly how they would feel if I pressed them between my chest and shirt, that the paper would be smooth beneath my fingertips and as brittle to the touch as dry skin. That each page would look as though its author wrote in a hurry with the paper on his knees and a cigarette in his free hand. Most of the letters were addressed to a man that I had never met and written in a hand that was not my own, but looking at them was like gazing into the face of a friend. With careful hands I smoothed the first one out on the table.
Frank, Saigon 1962

Dear Granddad,

I hope this letter finds you well. By now you should have had some good rains and hopefully the tanks are filled up to overflowing. I never did manage to find that dead magpie in the bottom of the second tank, so if the rains are late I reckon you’ll be tasting him in your tea and cursing me.

It’s just gone 22.00 hours here and I’m sitting in my shirt-sleeves sweating like a fat hack in a picnic race. The air is so thick with humidity it’s like trying to breathe underwater. Sadly it doesn’t deter the mozzies – the bloody things are as big as flying bandicoots and almost as hungry. Still, it’s better than Canungra and no bastard’s shot at me yet so I’m not complaining.

As you can tell by the post-mark we’re in Vietnam. They tell us we’ve been sent here to protect the world from Communism. Can’t see much problem with the red peril myself, but I do what I’m told. They call us the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (or AATTV to those in the know) and we’re supposed to be here teaching the locals how to fight this war. But the funny thing is, we’ve been issued with weapons and live ammo, which is a lot like giving a jersey to the footy coach and telling him not to play. Still, it’s a good bunch of about 30 diggers over here and some I’ve served with before so I’m pretty happy. The Yanks are out in force, but they didn’t get to Malaya so they don’t have the jungle hours that we do. Apart from the blokes that did time in Korea most of them have never seen real action so they’re itching for it. I don’t want to sound like an old man at the grand old age of twenty three but I reckon they’ll change their tune once they’ve been out amongst it a few times.
At the moment we’re in South Vietnam, stationed in the main city, Saigon, which is a bit of a strange place for a country boy. Imagine a smell like petrol, fish, rotting leaves and last night’s frypan all mixed together with dirt and burning incense thrown in for good measure. And it’s so hot and wet that you can’t escape it, the smell clings to your clothes and skin and fills your lungs.

People here don’t seem to sleep or maybe they just do it in shifts so the streets are never empty. I wish you could see it Granddad, it’s crazy but beautiful in a way. It’s so full of people that every hour is rush hour. There’s so much traffic that you take your life in your hands every time you step outside and half the town drives around with their hand on the horn and the other half rides a bike or goes in a sort of taxi bike called a cyclo. These cyclos are pedalled by little blokes that stand no higher than my shoulder, smaller than Gran was, all wrinkled up and the colour of tea. The first time I rode in one I felt like I should offer to pedal and let the poor chap lay up for a while. But they speed along, in and out of the traffic like flies in a pig’s ear. Even though it’s well over a ton in the shade they don’t even seem to sweat, it’s amazing.

Anyway Granddad, I’m out of page, so I’ll sign off. I don’t think they’ve got censors operating here yet, but I don’t fancy the army reading my letters so I’ll get one of the local kids to slip it into the civilian post for me. Also, I don’t want you to bring the crop in on your own again this year. I spoke to Stan before I left and he’s going to lend you his young bloke for the week – I’ve already fixed him up for it, so don’t let the greedy bastard charge you
twice. Tell Mum that I love her, for what that’s worth, and look after yourself.

With love,

Frank.
American missionaries arrived in my mother's village ten monsoons before my birth. My mother told me that they drove in on the back of a flat-bed government truck and the gathering storm clouds hung above them, the shadows thick on the hungry ground. The missionaries smiled and handed out boiled sweets while their many wooden boxes were passed hand to hand into the building that would become the village school.

The Reverend Tanner and his wife Marie bore their god before them like a cherished only child and my mother was impressed. The day of their arrival was just weeks before the birth of my eldest brother and she was anxious. The child within her, pressing hard against the taut skin of her belly, beat like her second heart. Suddenly, with so much to lose, she felt she could not trust her own knowledge and could not chance the child's existence to fate or the inconstant whims of the gods.

She knew well the limitations of the mountain gods and the spirits that lived in the darkened corners of the village. The village's gods were numerous and my mother's knowledge expansive but despite endless placating and much spilt chickens' blood, babies still died, crops failed and storms still tore down the village's longhouses. She wanted a god more mighty and worthy of sacrifice. The missionary's teeth were white and evenly spaced and their possessions were so plentiful they required a truck with which to carry them. And it seemed to my mother that their god harboured knowledge, not just of the lineages, the seasons and the best time to plant dry land rice but the kind of knowledge that burned away ignorance like mist in the midday sun. Change was gathering over the country like the monsoon and my mother was frightened. She wanted the missionary's knowledge and their new god was the gatekeeper. So, she went to them with her small hands held wide, palms upward.

By the time I was born my mother had two sons and three daughters. Each morning I'd watch my brothers and sisters leaving for the mission school, fresh comb lines in their hair, faces wiped clean and shiny. In the
afternoon they brought home their books and pages of learning from the small wooden school, and I straddled my mother’s hip and watched them come. When they had hurried through their homework my mother would take their books in her small hands – hands that were strong enough to skin a pig with a broken-handled knife and soft enough to soothe away our strangest dreams. She pored over the books while we slept and in the small spaces between feeding, clothing and farming she taught herself to read and write. By the time I was making the daily trip across the village to school she would watch over our shoulders as we practiced our letters pointing out our spelling errors with a clearing of her throat and a finger tapped against the page. If we asked her for help she would start by saying, “I’m just a village woman ...”, and then she would show us the way.

At school, cross-legged on the hard dirt floor, I balanced my slate on my knees and wrote with great eagerness, the words and numbers flowing like water. Sensing a soul ripe for harvest, the missionaries praised me warmly. I could see the patterns in language and mathematics, like bones beneath skin. By the time I was ten I spoke and read English fluently and was helping the other children in the school with their study, even those much older than myself. Everything seemed possible and the world was full of opportunities. At night I carried my school books home, read until the fire burned out and woke at dawn with the book bruising my shoulder or the imprint of its spine along my cheek.

Reverend Tanner ran his school with a bible in one hand and a pocket watch in the other. When he walked it was with a slightly forward tilt, as if his head was leading and his feet struggling to keep up. He was tall and his pale face was carved into unsmiling creases. He had light brown eyes that my brothers swore could see around corners and a voice that could silence a classroom full of children in an instant. His wife Marie, however, was the day to his night. She had a pale, oval face and the fine-boned neatness of a deer. Her long hair, the colour of a dove’s wing, was pulled back and tied at the base of her neck in a knot. She wore pleated skirts that fell below her knees and a white blouse with many tiny buttons. She didn’t laugh often but her voice always sounded like she was smiling.
When Reverend Tanner and Marie learned that there were no Vietnamese translations of the gospels they devoted the rest of their lives to the task. One evening, long after the chickens had taken to the trees, my brother and I went through the village looking for a pair of sandals lost during our afternoon game. There was a light on in the school house and we moved closer, our bare feet silent on the hard-packed village path. The Tanners were seated at the only desk in the room, Mrs Tanner was writing and the Reverend dictated, his brow contracted with concentration. Page after page of neatly written lines. My brother laughed silently at the Tanners, working long after their students had left, but their sacrifice left me feeling empty, as though I had been served a meal but left the table without eating.

As I reached adolescence I waited and waited for God to send me a task. I wanted to be called as they had been. But, though I kept my heart open and my ears alert, I saw nothing and He remained mute.

Luckily for me the Tanners’ God required his subjects to be well versed in the academic arts and Mrs Tanner, fascinated by science and a lover of fine literature, wrote away to her relatives in America asking them to send us all their old books. Months later, maybe a year, a large, roughly sawn wooden crate arrived in the village. As the class gathered around, Reverend Tanner took an iron bar and prised off the planks one by one. I remember the dusty, damp smell of old books, the planks coming off and the covers emerging one by one – Joyce, Eliot, Dickens, Tolstoy. I stood nearby, hopping from one foot to another, willing the Reverend to go faster. And that night and for the next few weeks there were new books. Books that we hadn’t already thumbed and read and folded and slept on. And words that burned with newness.

I read every book in the village and begged the Tanners for more. In the classroom Mrs Tanner would draw me back to the world from the pages of a book with a smile and a gentle hand on my shoulder. As I looked up from my page, her face would appear as if through binoculars held back to front. I don’t mean to sound vain, but as a teacher I can count on one hand the students who have been as eager, or perhaps as desperate, to learn as I
was. A mind that leaps from crag to jagged peak like a mountain goat craves the freedom of ideas, not caring where those ideas might lead them.

I could have become vain of my abilities at school if my mother had not kept a tight rein on my pride. One day I sat near her while she, ever busy, drew strands of bright cotton together on her loom, and I told her about my day and my excellent test results. My mother’s fingers were quick across the warp like birds or scurrying insects. She said, “Minh my son, in a village just like ours there were two roosters. Both of them were beautiful with long fine feathers and backs that shone like river stones after rain. Each rooster believed that he was the most beautiful, had the most musical voice and was the worthiest leader of the flock.”

The fabric grew beneath my mother’s busy hands, she paused only to wipe her forehead on the back of her arm. She said to me, “One day, to prove his worth the older rooster decided to fight with the younger one. They fought a terrible battle that lasted for hours. Feathers flew like dust and blood dripped onto the ground until at last the younger rooster conceded defeat. At this the old rooster flew up onto the roof of the nearest longhouse and began to crow about his victory.” My mother looked at me and her eyes were bright, “Just then, a passing hawk, alerted by the smell of blood and the rooster’s loud cries swooped down and killed the boastful rooster for his dinner.” She put down her work and the soft hug she gave me took the sting from her words.

As the end of my school years approached it wasn’t only my mother’s words that held my attention. Two families in the village had radios and we would listen whenever we could. The news reporters spoke of war and although the old men of our village told us not to worry, at night when they gathered around the fire their mouths were tight and their long shadows writhed darkly on the ground.
Chapter Three

I was born in my mother's village in Viet Nam in 1944. During the American war I worked as a translator and after the Communists arrived I left, frightened for the future of my small family. Like many others, we swapped our life savings for the chance to escape, for the opportunity to beg refuge from another country. We turned our backs to the land and cast our lives and all that we knew into the open sea. For days we huddled in a small wooden boat with nothing around us but water and endless wind. There was time then to think about dying and nothing but empty hours with which to hold back the fear.

Just when we thought our lives were lost we were spotted by an American cargo ship. Later, when the sailors scuttled our small boat I watched it sink and willed my memories down with it, beneath the waves. For the next thirty years I too lived as though under water, with the cold pressure of the fathoms sitting heavy on my chest.

All that I had then was my wife and child, the clothes on my back and a small bundle of letters that I wore taped to my skin beneath my shirt. We lived in a refugee camp in Indonesia for three months while the authorities looked for a place for us. Mai would have chosen to stay as close to home as possible and in my mind I knew she was right but my heart chose Western Australia.

When we arrived it was 1977 and the paint was barely dry on the anti-war banners. Mostly we were treated with kindness. We were partners, with the citizens of our new country, in a past that both were eager to forget. The government worker who processed our documents wore a peace symbol around her neck. When I lied and told her that my teacher's papers had been destroyed in the war she shook her head sadly and her hands rustled the stack of close written forms and carbon papers on her desk. When she asked me, “What subject?” I answered, “Mathematics” because I no longer believed in history.
And so I became a maths teacher. There is a kind of peace in working with numbers, symmetry, a measured sameness. I’d like to think that I did my job well. A sculptor with, at best, indifferent clay; I laboured diligently nevertheless.

I was a teacher for many years until one day I realised that, not only was I the most senior teacher in my department, there were no teachers more senior in the school. As I grew closer to retirement age the other staff would ask me about my plans for the future but I found comfort in the routine of working and the classes occupied my mind. And then I became ill and work was no longer possible.

In the long days between medical treatments I had only enough energy for thought. I realised then that some memories survive the passage of time without altering. Like river stones they roll, hard and perfect, while others burn up and leave nothing behind but thin smoke. Some, like the memory of my father’s death, could pierce skin and make you shiver, sharp and cold.

When I was seven my father caught a fever. It was dry that year and I remember being surprised by his dust-covered sandals outside our house when I came home from school. Even though it was cool beneath the wooden roof of our house, sweat formed bubbles on his skin and from his throat a deep, low sound like an animal trapped. That night I woke to hear him calling for our ancestors in a voice that was not his. “Nuoc! Nuoc!” he demanded and my mother cradled his head in her lap and held a cup of water to his dry lips. In the firelight I watched as a sudden spasm drew his spine upwards like a bow. Spit, in foamy pillows, gathered in the corners of his mouth and from his bedding rose the sweet, earthy smell of decay.

My mother did her best to placate the spirits. For two days she burned secret herbs until our sleeping area was filled with bitter, black smoke that caught at the back of my throat and left my eyes raw. She depleted our chicken flock with sacrifices until a pile of multi-coloured heads gathered flies by the wooden chopping block. But still the fever burrowed through him until all that was left was a pair of yellow-rimmed eyes and hands that lay like monkey paws on his chest. His eyes were like
those of a fish left too long in the sun and he breathed as though he had swallowed dirt.

When my father died the other families in the village wanted to burn our house down so that he would have a place to live in the after-life but my mother was a practical woman and she dismissed them with a toss of her small, neat head.

We buried my father on a day when the sun was hard in the sky. Our shadows sharp on the newly broken ground – the damp sods drying to dust beneath our feet.

Not long after my father’s death I went to bed crying, remembering how he used to pick me up in his long arms and kiss my face all over like a bird pecking worms. The familiar warmth of his chest and the smell of tobacco on his skin. My mother sat on the floor beside me. She kissed my forehead, took my hands in hers and lightly rubbed my tears into the skin of my cheeks. But still I could not stop the tears from coming. She reached over and pulled me onto her lap, though I was much too big for that. And she spoke to me in her most gentle voice. “Minh, my son,” she said. “Let me tell you a story.”

“You know there was once a very beautiful young woman whose first and only child died before he could walk. The mother’s grief was so heavy that she could not live with the pain of his passing. She went to the village healer and asked her to take it away. The wise woman replied that she could weave a blanket that would ease the woman’s grief but could only weave it on the loom of a family that had not known death. So the young mother went around the village looking for such a loom, she knocked on every door and asked each family if they had evaded death. It was a large village and the task took her all day to complete. By the end of the day she realised that not one family was free from the memory of death, and her broken heart began to heal.”

Then my mother smoothed my hair from my forehead with her small hands and added, “You cannot bring your father back with tears, no matter how many you cry. It is the memories that count now. That’s the way it’s always been and the way it will always be. You must honour your father’s
memory, as one day your children’s children will honour your memory, as the children of their children will one day honour them. And so it goes on, each generation giving life to the next.”

The weeks without my father turned slowly into months and then into years until, one day, ten had passed. By my seventeenth year I was a head and a half taller than my mother and, when arm wrestling, could beat all but my eldest brother, Han. In that year two of my sisters were married and my brother’s wife had her first child. It was also in my seventeenth year that American soldiers arrived in Dak Thay, the town nearest our village. A convoy of canvas-topped trucks wound up the narrow mountain roads, the sound of the engines like rock fall, the wheels churning the loose gravel shoulders of the road. In the village we spoke of their arrival with excitement and were eager to catch sight of them, their shiny black boots, their light coloured hair and their large, bony noses.

The day they came to our village it was hot, and we were pressed between the sky and the earth like bugs under glass. By midday even the birds had grown silent and the tops of the growing yams bent down as though in submission. We were seated on the floor – the door propped open to catch the sluggish breeze. Mrs Tanner was reading to us. From my post by the doorway I could see well beyond the village out onto the winding dirt road that leads to Dak Thay and beyond. As I watched, a column of yellow rock dust plumed skyward, taller than the highest tree. Beneath it I could see a car that rippled in the heat like water on a mirror. As it got closer I could see that there were two soldiers in the front seats. When it was almost at the village I could see from the dried grass colour of their hair and the width of their square shoulders that the soldiers were American.

The engine noise filled the silence and we all looked to the doorway. Mrs Tanner continued reading the Bible, her quiet voice and her fine, white hands. The two men climbed from their vehicle and walked up the path towards us, stopping only to light cigarettes. They were giants, the tallest men that we’d ever seen, broad and wide through the shoulder like upright water buffaloes. Their boots were shiny and they carried wooden-handled revolvers in black holsters on their hips. Cigarettes dangled on their lips,
they squinted through the smoke and spoke to each other as though their teeth were glued together.

When they got half way from their vehicle to the door Mrs Tanner sighed, marked her place in the Bible with a thin, crimson ribbon and walked quietly out of the classroom, pulling the door closed behind her. We sat looking at each other, the hot air of the classroom seeming to collapse in upon us. Mrs Tanner must have led the soldiers away from the room because we could hear their voices but not their words. Several minutes later she returned, reopened her Bible and resumed reading. We heard the car start and listened as it made its way back down the road and away from the village. When the sound of the motor had faded Mrs Tanner closed the Bible and sat in stillness. She reopened it, and as always when events troubled her, turned to the New Testament and read. “But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

As we ran home across the village later that afternoon we asked each other what the soldiers’ visit meant and it did not take long for us to find out. The soldiers had not driven back to town but had gone to the fields where our fathers worked. Handing out cigarettes and chewing gum, with sign language and a few phrases of each other’s language they made the men an offer. The soldiers needed translators and the village school was filled with students that could speak and read English fluently.

My mother decided that I should go to work for the Americans and I readily agreed. The Reverend and Mrs Tanner pleaded with my mother to change her mind but she was steadfast. Mrs Tanner stood with my mother outside our longhouse, her hands shaking and turning over themselves. She called, “Minh, come out and talk to me.” And her gentle voice was sharp and high. “Minh, don’t be fooled by their money. Your place is in the village.” But I stayed inside and covered my ears with my arms. My mother turned to walk away but Mrs Tanner grasped her arm, “It’s the devil’s work, I tell you. No good can come of it.” But I was seventeen and the money the soldiers offered for a month’s work would buy a radio, metal pans and enough cloth for a year.
My mother could see that I was upset by Mrs Tanner's reaction and she hugged me close. “Minh, life is over too quickly to spend it worrying about what other people think. When something is wrong you will know it here,” and she pressed her palm against my chest, “because in here is good and wise. And because,” she smiled, “you’re my son and I have taught you well.”
Frank, Saigon 1962

Dear Granddad,

Still in Saigon, cooling my heels and waiting for the army to find me an assignment. I feel like I’m back at school, spending my days studying the history of the place and trying to learn a few words of this crazy language. I’ve also had some meetings with an American bloke called Mike Langley, I think he’s from the CIA because he’s never in uniform but I don’t know for sure. Everything military is a secret in Saigon. Mike’s been quizzing me about the Malay campaign and I guess they are looking for someone to do a bit of training in the jungle north of here but when I hear more you’ll be the first to know.

The Vietnamese people seem pretty nice despite the way their country is being run. The French kind of squatted here for a couple of centuries. Then, when they got the boot, the country was split in half. The top, northern half is being run by a Communist bloke by the name of Ho Chi Minh. He’s desperate to get the two halves of the country back together as one big happy Communist family. It’s a pretty terrifying prospect to some of the locals, especially those who are doing all right for themselves. The southern half is being run by a joker called Diem who’s having his strings pulled by the US. He came to power in about ‘55 and pretty soon half of his family had jobs in the government and some of them are as mad as cut snakes. His sister-in-law, Madame Nhu, is the craziest. She’s a Catholic and dark on Buddhists so the people hate her.

The Yanks, beefed up on their own propaganda, reckon we’ll be going home in six months. They say Ho Chi Minh will run back to the north with his tail between his legs once he sees them here, but I
wouldn’t bet on it. I get the very definite feeling that there could be tears before bedtime. The French underestimated the Vietnamese and they got ripped to shreds in a valley called Dien Bien Phu. There were over 80,000 Frenchies in that valley and no doubt they felt fairly safe with the rest of Europe on their side, but the few hundred that survived came out crawling, waving a white flag. I reckon there’s a lesson in that. In Dien Bien Phu the Vietnamese army got the locals involved, the women and the children too, and they secretly carried guns and ammo to the ridges around the valley at nights. They carried it on bikes or buffalos or even on their own backs. They did it for months, all in secret, digging themselves in to the sides of the hills and getting the guns into bunkers. The French had no idea what was going on until they were outnumbered and surrounded. And that was the end of that.

These people aren’t Westerners, Granddad, they’re different. They might be small but as they say, it’s not the size of the dog in the fight that counts, it’s the size of the fight in the dog.

Anyway, don’t worry, I’ll keep my head down like a good digger should. You’ll be getting a parcel soon if Gloria at the post office gets off her arse and sorts the mail out. It’s just a few little things I thought you might like. There’s a scarf in there for Mum. When I saw it in the market I pictured her sitting on the verandah wearing it and looking really pretty. Take care of yourself.

With love,

Frank.
Frank, Dak Thay 1962

Dear Granddad,

Thanks for the socks and the chocolate, both much appreciated. Sorry for the lack of letters. I’ve been settling into my new assignment and a new town so I’ve been buzzing about like a blue arsed fly and I completely forgot to write.

I was really sorry to hear about old Dusty. He was a good horse in his day and I know you’ll miss him. Remember how we used to leave him in the paddock by the road so I could ride home after getting off the school bus? What about the day you busted me having a quiet smoke on my way home? There I was on Dusty, puffing away, thinking that you were at work when all of a sudden you came over the crest of the hill in the old Morris. Jesus, just thinking about it makes my eyes water. You dragged me off the horse by my hair and made me smoke every last cigarette in the pack. I was as crook as a dog! Still, I guess some of us just can’t learn from our mistakes, because it didn’t take me long to take up the smokes again. But anyway Granddad, I won’t dwell on my many bad habits...

They don’t use horses here, they use water buffalo - little, fat-bodied cows with horns that sweep out sideways, and big wet noses. They’re round-shouldered, grumpy things, they always remind me of Aunt Marjory with her good hat on. They also use elephants for the heavy work, but they’re not nearly as common. I’d prefer a Massey Ferguson myself, but the locals make do with what’s at hand.

I feel like I’m finally on my way and it’s about time, I thought I’d go mad staring at the walls in Saigon. Remember I told you about Mike Langley? Well, he is from the CIA alright and it’s all so Boys’ Own and covert you have to have security clearance before
they’ll tell you how they take their tea. But I must have impressed them with my wit and charm because I’ve been seconded to the agency so I’m now in a village in the Central Highlands of Vietnam trying to work out how to rent a house, buy a car and hire some staff when the only things I can say in Vietnamese are, “Can I have another beer, please” and “No thank you, Miss, I’m on duty.”

When I go into town I use the half a dozen words of Vietnamese and French that I have learned to get by with but it gets pretty lonely. When I come home from a trip into town I’ve got a crick in my neck from nodding and a face stiff from smiling. Despite my best efforts and acting skills none of the locals seem to get my jokes.

I’m staying in the local hotel and it’s clean enough but by most people’s standards pretty basic. For me it’s still a luxury and something of a novelty to sleep between sheets, when you add a mosquito net and a fan it makes me feel like a king. I love the food here but I’m not sure how much it likes me. I won’t go into details except to add that I’ve become well acquainted with the local latrines.

Dak Thay is pretty comfortable and home for quite a few thousand locals. There’s already a reasonably big contingent of Americans and you can see what’s left of the French occupation too. All the Frog toffs and the well-to-do used to come up here for summer so there are some pretty flashy buildings, but sort of crumbling in the damp way that things deteriorate over here, slowly and tinged with mould. It’s about 500 yards above sea level and much cooler here than in Saigon but you couldn’t put a decent crop in, everything’s up or down and good paddocks are rare as chicken’s teeth.
When I flew in over the mountains it was like something from a postcard with the tops of the hills poking out of the mist. It’s very nice but I’m still homesick for red gums and jarrah trees. It’s a bit challenging being so far from everything that I know. In Malaya I was with all the other blokes and there’s strength in numbers. I’m on my own here and at the moment I feel that quite keenly.

Still, there’s no point blubbering like a baby when there’s a job to be done and it’s a fair old job. I’m to have a hand in training the local tribesmen to resist the Communists. Mike’s given me a big wad of money and licence to do as I please so I’m a free agent until he returns. He’s convinced the locals will take more kindly to me if I stay away from the Americans so I guess that even the CIA has worked out there’s a fair bit of resentment towards the Yanks and all their big talk.

I’m going to work like a navvy for the next few weeks and try not to make an arse of myself till I get a handle on what’s going on. I really need an interpreter because not talking the language makes me feel like I’m blind, deaf and dumb. Tomorrow I’m getting along to the local church. Before you choke on your sandwich, I’m not going to polish my knees, I’m going to see if I can squeeze some intelligence out of the Reverend. I figure he’s bound to know a bit about what goes on in this place. Anyway, it’s worth a try and might see me in good stead come judgement day.

I miss you, Granddad. You made me the man I am today, for what that’s worth. Discipline and honesty was something I was never learning from poor old Mum. I’m sorry you had to bury Dusty on your own, it’s another one of the many jobs I should be there to do for you. One day I’ll come home for good and we’ll sit
out on the verandah and watch the sun go down over the scarp. Until then, take care.
Your loving grandson,
Frank.
Chapter Four

For months after my father died I would return home and step over a bundle of yams or a bowl of rice left at the entrance to our house. I asked my mother why our neighbours would give to us so generously when they had little for themselves. “Minh,” she said and smiled, “I have a story that might help you to understand.”

“One day there was a small scorpion who travelled to the edge of a river to get a drink. While he was drinking he got swept up by the current and it seemed certain that he would drown. A crane, flying overhead, heard his cries for help, swooped down and picked him out of the river with his beak. The scorpion was grateful to be alive and he thanked the crane and went on his way. Later that day as he was travelling through the forest he saw the crane struggling in the jaws of a tiger. The scorpion rushed up and stung the tiger on the paw. When the tiger opened his mouth to roar in pain the crane was able to get away. So you see, good actions are often repaid with more good actions.”

My mother was to her family as rice is to every meal. After my father died she raised us on her own and though I was often tired I never went hungry. There were six of us children and somehow there was almost always a little meat on our plates. When there was no meat we ate eggs from the chickens that pecked the ground beneath our house or fish that my mother trapped in the stream.

My brothers, sisters and I helped where we could but my eldest brother Han shouldered the greatest burden. In our small village a strong back and a steady hand were of more value than an affinity for books, so Han’s childhood and his education ended the day of my father’s death. Luckily for our family Han could read the scents of animals on the wind as though their passage was written on a page. He always chose the straightest wood for his arrows and at night, when other men were smoking, he would smooth them fine with sand until each shaft shone like the back of an eel.
When I was a child I used to like to hold Han’s arrows, to feel the cool weight and the smoothness of them in my hands.

When I went to work as a translator I was grateful for the opportunity to help my family but I was also alone for the first time in my life. My first nights on the base passed slowly – the silence was thick and louder than a summer storm. No-one lay next to me breathing quietly, no-one stirred to tend the fire and the wind did not lift the branches on the roof. I had a small room with a bed, a concrete floor and a square window, high up in the wall. Balancing on the thin, metal edge of the bed I could just see out onto the road that wound past the compound and up through the hills, toward my village. I walked that road in my mind so many times that I could picture each dip and curve, feel the gravel underfoot and smell the dampness where the shade was thickest.

Most of my days were spent waiting. Some days I went to a village with two of the soldiers so that they could ask questions. Some days I listened to radio transmissions or translated letters. Some days I did little else but wait, standing on my bed watching trucks grind slowly up between the hills and out of sight.

The American soldiers that I worked for walked with purpose and authority, as if their boots grew naturally out of their legs. I wore sandals that scuffed a little on the hard dirt paths – they planted each foot square as if they meant it to stay there. But they treated me well and went out of their way to make sure that I was comfortable. I read their books, translated for them and at night missed my family and home so much that by morning my eyes ached with the effort of staying dry.

My sister Trinh also had a job in town, working as a house girl for a wealthy Dak Thay family. On Sundays she would walk to the American compound and sit with me. She was older than me by three years but her homesickness was just as great and together on the edge of the bed we would sit, speaking little and leaning into the slight but familiar weight of one another.

I had been in Dak Thay for four Sundays when Trinh suggested we visit the local church. On Sundays at home in the village we would squeeze
into the school house and sit on wooden benches made from packing crates while Reverend Tanner read his translations of the gospels. On our school house wall hung a crucifix carved from an unfamiliar wood, shiny and dark. I used to wonder what God would think, looking down at the villagers, knowing that straight after service most of them would return home and sacrifice a chicken to the old gods. I was sure to sit straighter and stiller than anyone so that He could see I was different.

The church in Dak Thay was built from stone and wood and had a window fitted with coloured glass that bent the sun and threw rainbows across the floor. It smelled like candle smoke and beeswax and the wooden seats were smooth and polished. For a while I was filled with hope as it seemed a far more likely place for the Tanners’ God to visit than the rough-sawn lean-to of my village. But even in the town God’s silence was absolute. The first time Trinh and I visited the church the early service had just finished and the next was not scheduled to begin until after lunch. I held Trinh’s hand, we slipped out of our sandals at the door and stepped quietly inside. We walked slowly, not knowing if we should be there.

It was darker in the church than outside and we had to pause to let our eyes adjust in case we slipped on the smooth, polished floor. Down at the front two men were talking. One was a soldier and the other wore a dark grey western suit with a white collar snug against his Adam’s apple. The soldier sat with his back to us, his long legs stretched out in front of him and one arm draped over the back of the pew. The Reverend was standing and, like a smoker without tobacco, he looked as though he wasn’t entirely sure what to do with his hands.

The Reverend looked up at us and the soldier, without turning his head said, “It’s alright, they’re just kids”. He stood up, shook the Reverend’s hand and walked out of the church, his boots quiet on the shiny floor. Trinh and I shuffled sideways to let him past. He looked at us with wide set eyes, oval like a cat’s. His shoulders hard, wrists ropey and tanned below the neatly turned up sleeves of his khaki shirt.

When I was young Han would take me hunting in the forest. We would set our snares, made from wire and bamboos stalks, and wait for
monkeys, antelopes or gaur to wander into them. One day, as we returned to our village in the midday heat we saw a young tiger resting on a tree branch, paws dangling. It must have killed recently because it did not bother with us but opened its wide almond eyes and blinked slowly while we backed away, our feet quick and slipping on the rough ground and our knives in our hands. We kept our faces turned to it long after the low trees had hidden it from sight. Our faces twitched with listening – waiting for the crack of twigs or the pad of thick, hungry paws in the dirt.

We watched the soldier leave the church and I remembered the tiger and my breath was quiet. As he left the opening door let in a burst of sunlight that lit to tinsel the dust particles floating in the air. With him went the feeling of stillness and a vague unease that resonated like a tuning fork struck against a table leg.

The Reverend’s face folded into a wide smile and he greeted us, first in our language then in English. He told us that he knew the Tanners well and that he would write and tell them of our visit. Over the next months his church became the closest thing to a home that I had. Sunday service was the highlight of my week and the familiar words and sounds of prayer enfolded me like warm arms and soothed like the smell of my own blankets. After five weeks in town I went back to my village for two days. I discovered that home had been tilted on its axis, still the same but everything just a little bit to one side. It took several visits for me to understand that home was unchanged and that it was my eyes that had altered. On some visits I felt like a stick snagged on the river bank, watching while everyone else flowed straight down towards the sea. Eventually I learned to pretend that nothing had changed and that I was still the same boy who had left the village. This way was better for everyone, especially my mother who watched me when she thought I couldn’t see, looking like she did when she sewed in poor light, with a crease between her eyes and her tongue pink against her bottom lip.

On my first visit home I spent some time with Mrs Tanner, helping her with the small children in the classroom. I watched her closely for signs that she forgave me. I told her of my visits to the church in Dak Thay and didn’t speak about the work I did for the Americans. Her face was smooth
but when she looked at me her grey eyes were flat. Her indifference wounded me. For her I was like a full basket at harvest. She was polite and gentle but her attention was already on filling the next basket.

A few months after I began work I returned to Dak Thay after a night with my family just in time for Sunday evening service. I slipped into the back of the church and breathed the smells of beeswax and closely packed worshippers. Over the low murmur of voices I could hear the muted sounds of birds in the tamarind trees outside. I was tired and by the final prayer my eyelids felt slow and thick. Only the hard edge of the pew kept me from sleep and I felt my shoulders sinking with every breath. I made my way out at the end of the service stifling a yawn.

From nowhere, the soldier that I had seen weeks before in the church appeared at my side, his hand outstretched, “Hi, how are you? My name’s Frank and the Reverend has told me all about you.” Seeing my startled look he added, “Well, not everything, just the good things.” I took his hand and shook it, and he smiled.

His hair was longer than the Americans I worked with and the light tan colour of sapwood shavings. He wasn’t many years older than me but his eyes were creased in the corners as though he had spent a long time looking into the sun.

“So how do you like working in the big smoke, Minh?”

“The big smoke?”

“The town.”

I laughed. “It’s fine, thank you. It’s not home but it’s fine.”

“Yeah. I grew up on a farm and I don’t mind the city but it’s not home. Never will be either.”

His voice was different to the Tanners and his uniform was not American.

“Your home is in England?”

“No, I’m West Australian. Born and bred.”

He smiled and watched my face with eyes the deep green colour of a river in flood. He laughed and his face folded easily, the skin tanned and thin over the bones.
I had never met anyone from his country. I had seen an Aboriginal once in a book and I thought all Australians were natives with matted hair and strange spears made from wood, hardened in fire. Australians, I believed, could move through the bush like fish through water, catch birds with their hands and eat them raw. I imagined they would leave their unwanted baby daughters in bark cradles for the wolves and settle their arguments with savage spears.

The man in front of me looked nothing like a native. He was half a head taller than me and leaner than most of the foreigners I had seen. I could sense the shape of bone and sinew beneath his clothes, the angular sharpness of elbows and wrists. I didn’t forget that he had made me uneasy when I first saw him, there was something about the way he held himself, a hard sharpness. But his face was open and he smiled and I found myself smiling back.

“The Reverend tells me you’re pretty good at translating. Can you type?”

“At home my teacher has a typewriter. I’ve used it but I have not mastered it.”

“I hate the bloody things myself and it’s not important really. The reason I ask is because I’m in the market for a translator and I wondered if you’d think about jumping ship.”

“Jumping a ship?”

“You know, swap jobs.”

“You would like me to come and work for you?”

“Yeah. I’ll match your current pay and make sure you get home to see your family as often as possible. I can’t promise you much in the way of perks or promotions but I can promise I’ll try to keep it interesting.”

I was young and homesick. There was trouble coming and I didn’t want to watch it standing on the edge of a metal bed, looking through a high-set window. He asked me to meet him at a house in town the next day and when he stuck out his hand I took it and agreed.
Dear Granddad,

There’s nothing like Christmas for making you miss home. On Christmas Eve I sat on the verandah of my hotel and raised a bottle of the local brew. I thought about you taking the chicken out of the oven at lunch time, with peas and the gravy in a boat and the good tablecloth brushing your knees. When I’m away I miss everything about home, I even miss Uncle Barry’s endless war stories. So there I was, sitting outside watching the night creep up the side of the hills — I had a drink in my hand, the birds were roosting and I had just about convinced myself that I’d missed sitting down after lunch to watch the Queen’s speech on the telly. I must be getting soft.

But, despite the odd slip things are really looking up here since I last wrote. I’ve found myself a translator so finally I can make myself understood wherever I go. I feel like I’ve come out from under water. Everything is easier, I can hear again and speak too. I feel like a man with a job to do and not the slowest, blindest fish in the sea.

My translator Minh is just a young bloke but his English is great — a couple of teachers I’ve had would say it’s better than mine! I’ve got to hand it to the missionaries, they might be god bothering bigots but they sure can teach. They’re turning out English speaking villagers by the dozen and, if you’ll pardon the pun, it’s a godsend for us foreigners.

Minh is Rhade, a tribal race from up in the mountains. There are several different tribes up here but no-one differentiates between them, except the tribesmen. Mostly they’re just called Montagnard or even just villagers because they live in small villages in the mountains. They’re different to the
Vietnamese, a bit darker and somehow wilder looking. They are a bit of a law unto themselves – they don’t like any interference from Saigon but they don’t want the Communists in their patch either, so they’ve had to pick a side. Luckily, for us, they’ve picked our side because they are supposedly some of the fiercest soldiers around and their bush skills are second to none. Their ability to speak English makes the deal even sweeter for us.

For someone who’s never been further than a day’s walk from home Minh’s strangely wise in the ways of the world. He tells me he’s nineteen years old, so five years younger than me. He’s a bit taller than your average Vietnamese but still four or so inches shorter than me. I wouldn’t want to offend him so I would never tell him this but in size he’s more like a tall kid than a bloke. It’s not that he looks weak, but he’s built kind of fine.

He’s pretty shy too but no doubt that will change as time passes. With his help I’ve arranged some builders to patch up the old house I’ve rented, hired a housekeeper and bought a truck to drive around in. It’s just in time too as every other day there are reports of Communist raids and attacks on outlying villages. The North Vietnamese Army is a big, well-oiled machine and it wouldn’t go to the bother of killing off a couple of villagers and a handful of pigs. But there’s another group of Commies up here that are causing some trouble. They call themselves the NLF but the locals are calling them the Viet Cong and these are the guys responsible for the raids. The Viet Cong are obviously pretty keen on the idea of a reunified Vietnam. For now, they are the guys we have to watch out for up here in the Highlands.
I’m spending Mike’s money hand over fist renting houses and buying trucks and there’s plenty left to spend too. I need to make some changes to the house and then I’m going to work on the perimeter a bit. I don’t want to be paranoid but then I don’t want to be a sitting duck either.

Pretty soon I’ll get my first group of local men to train and manage. Apparently there’s fifty or so guys based at the local police station who’re already on the CIA payroll. Mike wants me to get down there and take control of them. I even got a letter from the CIA’s top brass to give to the local police chief, letting him know how it’s going to go down. I can’t imagine the chief is going to be very happy about me marching in there to take away what he has assumed is his very own private army, so wish me luck! I must sign off, Granddad, I’ll write soon.

Cheerio,
Frank.
Chapter Five

About three weeks after I began chemotherapy I rubbed my eyes with the back of my hand and the lashes fell, like stubby bristles, onto the skin of my cheek.

That night, in the fluorescent light of the kitchen, Mai shaved my head. I sat on a hard-backed chair with a towel around my shoulders and she cropped it short with scissors then shaved it smooth. She had come home late from work and she smelled like flour. We didn’t speak much. The hair fell silently in tufts to the floor, small clumps of black and grey. Her hands were cool and firm against my skin. Her feet bare on the tiles. She stood at my back and drew the razor slowly across my skin, washing the blade in the kitchen sink between strokes. My head grew cold and light as she worked, I closed my eyes and felt her fingers following the dips and hollows in the bone.

Behind my left ear her fingers found a small, oval scar, the edges ridged.

“Such a long time ago,” she said, “and still here.”

She smoothed the scar with her thumb, then picked up the towel and dried my head.

I put my fingers where hers had been. The scar was no smaller than I remembered, still there after so many years.

“A thumb-print,” I said.

I could feel her body still, her hands on my head. She sighed so lightly that it was almost breath.

“A thumb print that lasts forever,” she said flatly.

When Mai left for work in the mornings I would find a place in the sun and smooth one of the old letters across my knee. Sometimes I was too sick to read and sometimes so tired that I would start reading and wake hours later in the shade, cold and cramped.

One day I pulled an old kitchen chair close to the window to catch the first warmth of the morning sun. I sat down with a letter and opened it,
easing the paper smooth with my fingertips. Mai was getting ready to leave for work, shoes and car keys in her hands.

“Why do you bother with those old letters? What good will they do?” She sniffed.

“I don’t know. They seem to help me.”

“You can’t go back, Minh.”

“No. And I don’t want to.”

“But you want to remember it?”

“I didn’t let myself remember for a long, long time but now I think that if I die and I don’t remember, it will be as though it never happened.”

She sniffed, more loudly than before.

“1976. That’s as far back as my past goes. That’s you and me and the children and this country. Nothing else.”

“I wish it was that easy, Mai.”

She strode out of the room and I heard the front door close behind her. I turned back to the letter. Frank’s handwriting was sharp and familiar, at the sight of it something turned over deep inside my chest. I held the letter to my face and although decades of dust had erased the once familiar smell, the feel of the paper was enough. I was back in Dak Thay on the first day of my new job, looking at a hastily drawn map with directions written in a sharp and scratchy hand. When I arrived I pushed open a rusty gate and walked through a yard thigh high with weeds. When I knocked Frank came to the door holding a small ginger cat that hissed, its lips drawn back against its teeth.

“Oh don’t mind her,” he said, seeing my look of concern. “She doesn’t mean badly, it’s just that she’s a stray and her leg’s broken.” He looked down at the angry cat in his arms and said, “She was in the yard this morning and I could see she was hurt. I couldn’t just leave her and I didn’t want to shoot her, so this is the only option. Maybe she can catch the mice when she’s better.”

I looked at my new boss and then at the cat. And he looked at me and said, “I’ve never actually set a broken leg, but it can’t be that hard can it? ‘Specially as you’re here now.”
I followed him into the house, between columns of boxes stacked against the wall. He pushed at a pile of paper on a table with his elbow and said, “I've got some bandages here somewhere and I thought we could use a pencil as a splint. As soon as I find the bloody things we can get started.” He nodded towards a paper wrapped bandage and smiled. “Now, do you want to hold her or do the bandaging?”

Eventually we got the small cat’s leg bandaged, though we were both scratched and bitten many times in the process. “I’m going to call her Blue,” he said, smiling at the cat in his arms while she hissed and arched her back. “Because she’s a red head.” And he laughed. And I looked around at the untidy house and at Frank and wondered what the next few months would bring.

I soon realised that my new job was going to be nothing at all like the one that I had just left. It felt like I was learning an entirely new vocabulary. Amongst other things I learned that the arvo was some time between lunch and dinner. A smoko was a short break, usually for drinking tea and smoking a cigarette and a bastard was an unpleasant person.

In my new role there was no waiting, no boredom, no time for anything except work. If I had taken the time to feel homesick in the first few weeks of my employment I certainly would have done but there were no empty moments left for wishing or pining. I followed Frank, trying to keep up, until the sight of his back was as familiar as that of his face.
Frank, Dak Thay 1963
Dear Granddad,

Two letters in a week – you won’t know yourself! Anyway, I hope all is well and that the summer is not treating you too badly. I wanted to tell you that Minh and I went and saw the local tribesmen that Mike told me about. There’s about fifty of them that have been living away from their families in a bare earth compound behind the police station, and it’s a bloody awful place. When the sun shines it’s baking hot, when it rains it’s knee deep in mud as thick as pea soup. There’s very little shelter and only two pit toilets for fifty men. Can you imagine?

These blokes are stuck between a rock and a hard place. Their villages are on the verge of starvation because the government has sold off their land – so they need to bring in some wages. But the only person who’ll hire them is the local police chief and he won’t unless they agree to sign on for a two-year stint. He pays them badly and treats them like animals but they’ve got no choice. Minh reckons that in the poorest villages two, and sometimes even three, families might depend on one man’s wage.

The police chief’s got a proper racket going on. The CIA pays him good money to recruit the locals, but he pays them pittance and skims the rest. Meanwhile he’s got a private army of local tribesmen to do with as he pleases. I’m guessing he hires them out to local plantation owners as guards or sends them down to Saigon with shipments of coffee. It won’t matter to him that the Viet Cong are picking up the pace out here, or that the men are half starved – I bet he’s only thinking about lining his own pockets.

Anyway, Minh and I made our way down to the station, I introduced myself to the fella in charge,
gave him the letter from Mike and explained my mission. The police chief was in Danang, so we saw his deputy. The deputy rolled over as soon as he saw the letter. He would have handed them over then and there. He’s only making policeman’s wages so a bloody great tribe of men in the back garden is just a gigantic headache for him.

Minh let the men know who I was and why I was there. They stared at me but after a while most of them seemed pretty pleased. I said that before we could train them we needed to get them out of the compound and find them better lodgings. I let them know that they were my men now and I wouldn’t have them living and working in those conditions.

I’m making getting the men out of there my most pressing priority, so we’re working pretty hard on that at the moment. But when I let myself stop and think I’m also pretty excited about the prospect of having fifty men to train and command. Not bad for a captain. I could use an old digger like you by my side – I’m just making this up as I go along.

Love,

Frank.
Chapter Six

When I first started remembering it seemed to me that the smallest memories were like splinters, working their way out from under my skin and emerging, slippery but intact. One day, while in the garden, I let myself think about my sister Trinh for the first time in decades. I heard her laughter and saw her clap her hands together, as she always did when she was pleased. I heard again the jingle of her silver bracelets and saw the dark braid of her hair hanging down her back. I remembered her playing with a tan and white puppy, the smell of dry earth and long fingers of afternoon light.

It was hot in my garden. The cabbages harbourd grubs and the sweet potato vine was threaded through with kikuyu grass, but Trinh was with me once more. I stood up to stretch the ache from my knees and realised that two hours had passed. I felt like a child who had eaten jam straight from the jar, savouring each spoonful and sucking the sweetness through my teeth.

Another day, taking the bus home from the hospital, I saw Frank as he was when we first met. Our first handshake outside the church, the energy beneath his skin like heat and his easy laugh. I remembered the sound of his voice and the smell of tobacco.

I remembered a day not long after I started working for him. I went out for supplies and when I got back he was sitting, writing in the shade behind the house. His chair was tipped back on two legs, his boots on the railing. He had a cigarette in one hand, a pen in the other and a thin-papered writing pad on his knee. As he wrote, he scowled and ash fell, forgotten, from his cigarette. The little cat with her bandaged leg sat beside him on the grass and as I watched he reached down and scratched her head with his pen.

“Bloody hell, Minh,” Frank said turning to face me with a crease between his eyes that I would come to know meant he was angry. “Bloody police chief is as crooked as a dog’s hind leg and just as dirty. Mike just sent word from
Saigon. He says we have two weeks to find somewhere for the men to live and work.” He shook his head and frowned. “The police chief is bleeding those men dry. And the CIA are letting him do it – the mob of spineless bastards. We’re pandering to the whims of a dirty copper in the back of nowhere because we don’t want to offend anyone. Meanwhile those blokes are rotting in a yard not fit for cattle. It’s bullshit.”

The next evening thick clouds multiplied on the horizon. Thunder galloped on the roof and the low sky was split by lightning. The air felt like an animal, heavy against my skin and hot. Frank paced from window to door and back again, then breathed out suddenly through his nose, like a horse.

“When this breaks it’s gonna piss down. We can’t leave those men out in it.” I looked out the window as the first, fat drops hit the ground. “This is going to be a big storm,” I said, “and there’s hardly enough shelter for ten men, let alone fifty.”

“And they won’t have had a decent meal,” said Frank as he patted each of his pockets, pulling tobacco out of one and papers from the other. He squinted out the window at the gathering darkness and rolled two cigarettes. He lit his own and passed the other one to me with the still lit match cupped in his hand.

“We’re going to...” he paused, then laughed and when next he spoke it was like an American in the movies, “Minh, we’re going to expedite the rapid extraction of those men.”

“What?” I said. “What are we going to do?”

“C’mon. We’re going to bust those blokes out of there.” He had grabbed his hat and was half out the door, before he turned to look at me.

“Where will we put them?” I said. There were no extra beds in the house and most of the floor was covered with boxes and piles of equipment.

“They can bunk down on the floor here and in the morning we’ll get them back to their villages for a while. We can’t do anything with them ‘till we’ve got a base.”

“Fifty men ... in here? With two men and a cat it seems crowded.”
“It’ll be tight but dry. There’s a crate of American C rations out the back, we can eat those. I don’t know that you’d call it food but it might keep the wolf from the door.”

“What wolf?” I said, confused, and Frank laughed.

It was a ten minute walk from the house into town and as we walked the clouds split open and the rain fell in thick sheets.

“Perfect,” I said, pulling my hat down around my ears.

“At least there won’t be any witnesses,” Frank said, cheerfully. “Though I can’t imagine they’ll have much trouble figuring out who’s responsible for the break out.”

We skirted the station and at the back, in the compound, we saw the men huddled under a leaking shelter. I pulled two pairs of khaki-handled pliers from my pocket and handed one to Frank. He raised his eyebrows and laughed.

“When I said we were going to bust them out I didn’t mean literally. You can get arrested for that kind of caper.” He put his hand on my shoulder smiling, rain sluicing off his hat brim, his eyes bright. “But I have to say, Minh, I’m damn impressed by your attention to detail.”

He pulled a wad of bank notes from his pocket. “We’re going in the front door. We’ll see if we can’t find that deputy and offer him an incentive for giving us the key.”

We walked back to the front of the station and pushed open the heavy door. The deputy was at his desk, bent over a pile of papers. When he saw us he sat up and wiped his head on his sleeve nervously. I spoke to him and explained our concerns. Frank put his hand on the desk as though leaning, the roll of notes visible between his fingers. The deputy’s gaze flicked between Frank’s hand and his face several times before he nodded slowly and pushed a key across the desk towards us. Frank put his hands in his pockets leaving the notes in a pile on the desk and turned away. I picked up the key and we walked through the station to the compound out the back. At the gate Frank bent down to work the key in the lock. “Nice work mate,” he said in a lowered voice and winked.
The men in the compound looked out from under their shelter. Frank pulled the gate open and gestured them over.
The first one to come through was the head man. He was wary, “Does the new boss have a job for us already?”
“No. We have a place for you for the night.”
“What?”
“The new boss is worried about you out here in the rain. He wants to take you back to his house for the night. There are no beds but you’ll be dry.”
“Is he crazy?”
“I’m not sure but I don’t think so.”
“Does he have a fever?”
“No.”
“Perhaps he has been drinking?”
“Not that I know of.”
“Why is he helping us?”
“He thinks you’ll get sick if you stay here.”
“He’s probably right but why does he care?”
“He’s been sent here from his country to help fight the Communists. If you die he’ll have to do it on his own.”
“Good point, though he looks like the kind of man who might try and do it on his own.”

I gave the men directions to the house as they came through the gate. They looked at me with puzzled faces but they seemed pleased. The head man watched the last man leave and then turned to me. “Why is the new boss so happy?”
“I think all of the people in his country are happy. They have lots of food and no Communists.”
“He doesn’t look like he’s come from a country with lots of food.”
“No, he doesn’t. He forgets to eat, he smokes too much and he doesn’t sit down very often.”

When the last man disappeared down the street Frank looked at me with his wide smile, “A job well done, I reckon!” he said. He held his hand out to me and I shook it. Then he patted his pockets distractedly, eventually
pulling a sodden packet of tobacco out of his top pocket. “Damn it all,” he said, “my smokes are wet.” As we walked off down the road together he put his hand on my shoulder. “Well, Minh, apart from some tobacco killed in action, this has been a successful mission. I think we might open a bottle of that cat’s piss that passes for beer in your country. What do you reckon?”

Frank smiled often in those days, his face patchy with stubble from a rushed shave, shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow and hair that had received scant attention from a comb. To me, drilled in the rites of cleanliness by the Tanners, whose God loved straight lines and neatly pressed hems, his untidiness seemed like a rebellion. And his handwriting was less ordered than his hair. One day, not long after I went to work for him, he held out a letter for me to type saying, “I’m sorry, Minh. It’s bloody messy, I hope you can read it. Looks like it was written by a dog, doesn’t it? A left handed dog.” “Or maybe a left handed dog with only one eye,” I replied shaking my head at the page in front of me.

From the beginning I could see that he was not the sort of boss who gave orders then sat back to watch others carry them out. Once he started working on something, it was easy to get drawn into his slipstream. I remember one Sunday, frustrated at the speed of the tradesmen he had hired, he decided that he would fit the new front gate on the compound. It was Sunday and, as was our habit, I met Trinh in the church for early service. I returned home just before lunch and followed a trail of discarded nails, matches and tools to where Frank was squatting, working on the gate. He was whistling to himself, hatless and shirtless in the bright, hot sun. He looked up at me and smiled. “You go and have the rest of your day off, Minh, won’t you. Don’t hang around here, I’m alright.” He stood up and wiped his hands. “But before you go, could you just pass me that screw driver and also, do you know where I left that small roll of wire that I was using to fix the truck?” The afternoon passed quickly and the book that I had been looking forward to remained unopened. Shadows were darkening the weeds in the yard as Frank opened and closed the gate, swinging it silently on newly oiled hinges. “Bloody good job, Minh. Time for a beer I think.” He opened a large brown bottle, filled two glasses, took a sip and winced. “Ahhh, the
refreshing taste of formaldehyde with an after-taste that lingers like the smell of last week's socks.” He smelled his glass with a pained look. “This is a beautiful country. I love the food and the people are just great, but the beer is bloody awful. And that’s a fact.”

For quite a while, perhaps months, it felt to me as though the problems with the Communists were happening to somebody else, somewhere else. We knew of skirmishes and raids but Dak Thay was never a target. In those early months it felt as though death was merely numbers on a page or words dredged with static on the radio. It was only later that it ceased to be abstract and I came to know it, the smell of burning, a patch of darkened earth and a terrible stillness.

The day the first shipment of weapons arrived I had, for the first time, a sense of foreboding, a tightening in the belly and a tingle in my finger tips. The pine boxes with numbers stenciled on their sides resembled Mrs Tanner’s school shipments. Instead of books, when the lids were prised open there were guns cradled in pine shavings.

Frank and I drove out to the hard-packed dirt strip near town as dusk was gathering. The dark, wet underbelly of the clouds hung close to the ground, swallowing sound and light. A small plane stood idling at the head of the runway, waiting. We pulled in behind it, swinging wide of the spinning propeller. I stayed in the cab while Frank talked to the suited man waiting near the wing. They must have spoken fewer than five sentences to each other before Frank signalled for me to come over. Two more men disembarked. They wore no uniforms, but their eyes had a flinty lack of depth and a watchfulness that marked them as soldiers. Together we wrestled the ten rectangular boxes across the wing and onto the flat bed of the truck. Each box was coffin shaped with knuckle-grazing rope handles that creaked as we hauled them into place. They were heavy and afterwards my hands smelled of machine oil and metal. By the time we turned the truck around the plane was half way down the runway. As we watched it lift into the grey sky, Frank sighed. “And so it begins,” he said, his eyes watchful. I thought of my family bringing the animals in for the night, my mother at her
loom and the smell of cooking. The last of the day's light lit the plane against the dark shadow of the mountains and my stomach turned over in fear.
Frank, Dak Thay 1963

Dear Granddad,

After piles of paperwork and a fair few bribes we’ve finally taken control of the men. Minh knew of a small abandoned village twenty miles out of town and it’s ideal, stuck onto the side of a great big mountain that the locals call Mo Nang. The villagers left because all the ground around it has been over farmed, so it’s pretty bare. Not so good for them but great for me because it saves us clearing it. We moved the men in last week. Minh and I will stay on in the town, which is probably not the way I’d do it if it was left up to me, but those are Mike’s orders.

We’ve had to do quite a few repairs and build a perimeter for our new base. Business over here is done differently, but it works in its own way. At home, we’d call a backhoe operator to get the work done, but most machines are useless in the mountains. Minh and I hung around the markets until we ran into the local builder. A few days later we were in the village and I heard a thump thump thump and the sound of branches being ground to kindling beneath something really heavy. I had no idea what it was and was about to reach for my sidearm when I saw that no-one else seemed the least bit bothered. Just then, down the road, like they were off for a Sunday picnic, came a pair of elephants ridden by two of the most ancient jockeys you’ve ever seen.

Those elephants must have been over twenty hands high and the jockeys not much more than about five foot three. But the elephants were like kittens in their hands. Standing next to them made me feel like a little kid at the circus. The power in them has to be seen to be believed. They got the job done quick smart
and I soon learned something very important – after elephants have been by, watch where you’re stepping!

The men’s families are arriving in dribs and drabs. We’re just getting to know each other at the moment so I’m taking it slowly, but these guys are natural soldiers. They’ve hunted all their lives so they understand cover and the lay of the land instinctively. Mike’s sent a ton of hardware, so we’re training in earnest. I’m showing them what modern weapons can do and it’s lucky I can shoot well because I get the feeling they’re hard to impress. Anyway, the fact that I can hit a target at 400 yards seems to do the trick.

The political situation here is deteriorating. The Communists are pressuring the natives to fight for them and they punish any resistance. Two weeks ago an entire village not far from here was destroyed and every man, woman and child was killed, except for one poor little girl. She was shot in the shoulder, passed out and left for dead under the bodies of her family. She should be skipping and singing songs with her sisters, but now she’s all alone. When the Americans found her she was brown from head to toe with dried blood, most of it not her own. She still hasn’t spoken. I couldn’t look at Minh when we heard the story, it’s families like his that are right in the firing line. And I get the feeling the situation is going to get a hell of a lot worse before it gets any better.

Things have got so bad that even the Buddhists are becoming violent – and that’s something no-one expected. They’re riled up with Diem because he’s trying to turn the South into one big Catholic church, or so it seems. The other day a monk sat down at a busy intersection in Saigon, got his mates to pour
petrol on him, and lit a match. He lit up like a bloody barbecue. They reckon his mates kept the crowd back so no-one could put him out, and he sat there, not moving or yelling until he keeled over. It’s beyond belief. This is desperation on a scale that I haven’t seen before and it doesn’t bode well. Put it this way: I’m unlikely to be home for Christmas.

I’m sorry to hear about the verandah roof, those sheets have been loose for years. I’ve wired you some money and I won’t hear any protests. There doesn’t seem much point in being here if I can’t help you out. Ring up Joe and ask him to send his boy over. Don’t go getting up the bloody ladder yourself. Who’d look after Mum if you karked it? She’s hardly likely to welcome me home with open arms and I never did fancy myself as a nurse.

Don’t forget to call Joe. Let’s call it an order shall we, mate?

Cheerio,

Frank.
Chapter Seven

A couple of weeks after I started working for Frank, we drove a winding gravel road to a French coffee plantation about eight miles from town. It had rained at dawn but by midmorning the air was clear, the edges of the fields, marked by white-washed rocks, hard against the openness of the sky. Ahead of us, between two hills we saw a house, a rolling sweep of lawn before it and behind, a cluster of outbuildings.

The lawn was strewn with boxes and packing crates and three farmhands were stacking them onto a shiny, red truck. Another truck was parked in front of the house. A tall man with thinning grey hair hurried over to greet us.

“I'm sorry, we're in such a mess. It is chaos.”

Frank shook his hand. “Please, don't apologise. We'll try not to keep you. I hear you're selling your truck?”

“Yes, yes we're selling everything.” He shook his head, “The Communists. You understand?” He looked at Frank and then at me.

“You're going back home to France?”

“France, yes, but this is my home, I was born here. In this house.” He waved his thin hand towards a large, white stone house. Wide steps led into the shadow of a deep verandah and beside them ran a carpet of flowers, white and green.

“My three children were born here too but already, further north, the soldiers have killed farmers like me.”

“I'm sorry. It's very worrying.”

“Yes, my wife is frightened and my children also. It's hard to leave here but, with a family, it's harder still to stay.” He paused and looked up the driveway behind us as it curled between the two hills, neat fields stretching on either side.

“I'm sorry,” said Frank again and the man shook his head as though to wake himself.
“But, of course, you’re not here to listen to me, you’re here about the trucks. We have two for sale. One is old, but still runs well, and the other is over there.” He pointed to the new truck, the shine of new paint glowing beneath the dust. “If it doesn’t sell, we’ll take it with us, to an agent in Saigon.”

“That one’s a beauty but the older one might be more within our budget.”

The tall man nodded. “Please take a look, it’s in the shed behind the house.”

It was obvious that the truck had travelled many miles. The once red paint had faded to a dusty pink and in the cab horsehair poked out of the splitting canvas seats. It whined, coughed and then caught, filling the air with petrol and engine noise. While Frank propped open the bonnet and rolled his sleeves up, humming under his breath, I looked out across the fields to where the newly washed sky dipped between steep hills. Although Frank had said he would teach me to drive, it was books I knew best, not engines. I had only travelled in a vehicle a handful of times and the thought of driving was daunting. I waited outside with the sun on my face and the smell of the earth drying. A little while later Frank closed the bonnet and wiped his hands on the front of his untucked shirt. He smiled at me and nodded. “She’ll do us just fine.”

“She?” I queried.

“Yeah, trucks, cars, boats – all she.” He paused, his head tilted. “I haven’t really thought about it before but back home we always name them after women because ... well actually I don’t know. I suppose I know more about trucks than I do about women. Maybe they’re called she because they’re nice to look at.”

“Well maybe in your country things are different,” I smiled and nodded at the truck, “but I think you’ll agree that in mine women look nothing like this.”

We drove it home that afternoon. From my seat high above the road I watched the scenery go by. Feeling the truck lurch in the washouts and slip in the mud slicks left after the rain.

In the weeks that followed I learnt to drive it. My fingers in the indents on the steering wheel, the gear lever polished smooth by years of other hands. I had a sudden realization of how Jonah might have felt in the
belly of the whale, for the truck seemed unlikely to ever bend to my will, but rather to take its own path, despite my vain attempts to control it. With time, I learned to enjoy wrestling the old truck around, feeling the kick of the wheel in my hands and bouncing high on the hard bench seat over every pothole. We got a local carpenter to build a canvas cover on the tray back and some weeks, it seemed, we were rarely out of it.

Although I learned to drive I never had the easy way with machines that Frank had. He could run his hands over a gun that had jammed or a broken generator and the answers would come to him. He said his grandfather had taught him three things well – how to fix things, how to shoot straight and how to swear.

Frank often spoke about his grandfather on our drives from village to village or on rest days in the town. Each story was like a picture or a window to a time that had passed. Unlike my mother’s stories, Frank’s did not wrap themselves around a meaning like a python, but painted pictures that were themselves the centre. He would string together images from his past that seemed unrelated and it was only afterwards that I could piece it all together and discover the reason for their telling. Sometimes he told his stories over, talking to pass the time and the distance, and then I would tell him mine. His stories soon became part of my own memories, woven tight together, and dense with detail.

Frank’s father, like mine, had died when he was young and I think now that our friendship grew from roots that reached into this common fault line. We grow to manhood less visibly when fatherless. I have watched my own son tread the path to adulthood, millimetre by painstaking millimetre, as if through a magnifying glass. But to the rest of the world boys appear to shake off their childhoods and emerge as adult men, in the way that awkward, down-flecked fledglings depart the nest with their feathers smooth and ready for flight.

Frank’s grandparents took him in the day they buried his father. Years later his grandfather would also give a home to his dead son’s wife, though by then she was little more than an invalid. Frank’s grandparents grew a small crop and sent a few dozen of their rangy cows, wild eyed, to
market every year. Theirs was not a big farm or a luxurious life but Frank said it was mostly happy. Frank told me that Granddad had fought in the Australian war against the Turks and still lived his life as though men went to war on horses; as though honour and courage still counted for something. Frank’s grandmother died while he was still at school. We had been in the country for two years before I tried to find his grandfather but by then it was too late – he died in 1975, just before we came to Australia. I visited the farm once, drove a borrowed car out along the Great Northern Highway, rocking in the wake of roadtrains passing, trying not to look at the lumped up carcasses of kangaroos on the side of the road. The wind off the hills blew the trees into angles and the brown grass in the paddocks was flat and sketchy. Later, standing at the base of some low gravelly hills, I looked out at the paddocks and tried to imagine how it would have felt to grow up surrounded by the scent of eucalypts, gravel dust drying on your hands. But all I felt was a painful emptiness as though I was being eaten from the inside. Frank told me that his grandfather came home from the war with a limp and a love of horses that he would never lose. As he got older his joints stiffened, his legs would neither bend nor straighten and he was unable to ride. But he would still walk amongst the small herd of horses in the paddock, feeling the heat of their dusty sides, running his crooked hands along their backs and breathing in the grassy, sweet smell of their bodies as they bumped against each other and nudged at his pockets with their soft, blunt muzzles. In the slow, amber evenings he would watch them at the water trough jostling like fretful siblings, stamping the dry ground and lifting clouds of dust that caught the lowering rays of the sun and tipped the edges of their bodies with gold.

Frank said that Granddad never forgave himself for ageing. That he was happiest with the reins in his hands, the smell of horse sweat seeping through woollen saddle blankets and the rhythm of shod hooves crunching gravel. Over time he grew less able to care for them and he let the little herd dwindle as they grew old and died. And they did, one by one, slowly and peacefully in the place that they had played out their whole lives. He folded their long legged bodies into holes dug out of the hard clay and mounded the
red soil above them. From the house he could see them, seven miniature hills fringed with weeds and the long, stiff stalks of wild oats. Each one he buried took a little more of him into the ground with them and the bridles in the shed became unrecognisable under their mantle of cobwebs.

The last of them, a grey coated pony called Dusty, died just before I started working for Frank. I know it pained him to think of his grandfather on his own, working to add the last small hill to the row, but he had been away for so long that the old man must have been used to the solitude. Frank knew that his mother would have been small comfort, as by then she did little else but write long letters that were never sent and sit staring out the window of her bedroom at the hills and the rocky scrub that covered them. She kept a bottle of brandy in the top drawer of her dresser beneath her underwear. Granddad told Frank he made sure it was always a third full for, although it was the drink that had ruined her, it was her one source of pleasure and her greatest joy.

Frank told me that all he had ever wanted to do was join the army, see the world and return home to the farm. I would come to realise that some men are born to till the soil, raise livestock or haggle over prices and others take a gun into their arms for the first time and it settles into the bend of their elbow and the hollow of their collarbones like it has always been missing from them. Stillness comes to these men naturally and an instinct for wind, scent and the cover of darkness. I understood his longing for the farm but I also came to understand that he was not a farmer. Like a night insect he was drawn to the flame, the burn inevitable.
Frank, Dak Thay 1963

Dear Granddad,

I don’t want to worry you but things are hotting up out here. We’ve had a few minor skirmishes — no casualties on our side, luckily, but we’ve taken out a couple of Commies. Being in combat is like ploughing a paddock — you turn up all kinds of stuff that you didn’t know was there. In my case it’s not old horseshoes and bits of scrap metal but memories and feelings. I think of it as a reminder — it lets me know what used to be important, what used to hurt, what used to make me smile. One day I’ll need that to remind me who I was before all of this, so I can be that person again.

Take care,

Frank.
Chapter Eight

I sat on a vinyl covered chair and a young pony-tailed nurse pressed the back of my hand until the blue bulge of a vein appeared. Her fingers were light and the sting of the needle quickly faded to a bruised ache as she taped it into place. The drip was cold and my hand tingled as though I had been sitting on it. It was the second of four treatments. As they predicted, I had been sick and tired since the first one but my mother’s presence in my dreams, and the memories of my old friends, had helped with the discomfort.

Mai looked after me, as she always has done. The rice cooked, the floor swept and clean before the sun came up each day. I told her that we should buy breakfast cereal like other people. That the floor could go a day without sweeping, but she just snorted and kept cleaning. Our children came and went; talking into their phones as they kissed me, leaving their shoes on in the house. Their voices loud, their friends’ cars dripping oil on the driveway.

Mai and I never spoke about my illness because we never spoke about the things that mattered – we built our lives on the surface. Mai was never one to speak about what was on her mind, she kept her hands busy so that her heart was not. A better man than me would have coaxed her from silence after so many years, but I never tried. By the time I got sick, the silence between us was bedded down deep.

Unlike Mai, Frank was not someone who let silence settle like the smell of last night’s cooking. In the evenings when we had finished eating we would talk – the easy sound of Frank’s quiet voice and the click of flying beetles butting their heads against the light bulb. I spoke too, back then. Stories from my childhood, thoughts and ideas, books that I had read. There was nothing I told Frank that I wished I hadn’t. He was a careful listener and I can still hear him – the smoky deepness, the rounded edges of his voice.

One night as we sat together with empty dinner plates balanced on our knees, he told me the story of his father’s death.
“You know,” he said “my dad died when I was just a young bloke. I’m not complaining because my grandfather has been great, but I guess it made things pretty hard there for a while.

“The day of dad’s funeral was the first time I’d seen my grandparents for over twelve months. Mum and Dad were drinking hard by then, and we’d moved from Perth to Carnarvon to Albany, following work. Dad took whatever jobs he could find and his last job was at the whaling station there, a stinking, filthy place. In the mornings he’d have the DT’s so bad he’d shake like a leaf, by afternoon his temper would do a cornered scrub bull proud.

“Mum and he lived on gin, beer and brandy and I lived on baked beans and yesterday’s bread. I knew it wasn’t that they didn’t love me, it was just that I was somehow surplus to what they needed – each other and the grog. I was nine, going on forty, and I knew that the wheels would fall off one day, but I didn’t know how soon it would be. When bad things happen I think it’s easy to trace back the sequence of events and try and find that one moment, the instant when everything around you turns to shit. I’ve done that more often than I care to admit but it doesn’t change things, does it?

"It was April and the winds were coming in hard off the ice at the bottom of the world. You could feel the briny bitterness in them, like a curse. We’d been in Albany for over a month. It had taken us four days to drive from Carnarvon. Four days of breakdowns and grimy mechanics in roadside towns, roadhouse burgers and me on the back seat perched on bags of clothes, almost buried under a house full of stuff. In Carnarvon I’d played with blackfellas, running barefoot and stuffing ourselves on fruit we’d pinched from the plantations, eating the fish that flung themselves out of the warm muddy sea into our small nets. But Albany was different. You had to wear shoes or you’d freeze and in the ocean white pointers, mad with blood, followed the whaling ships into port.

“We rented a weatherboard house, the planks buckled and grey with age, and the wind coming in through the cracks and shaking the windows from the inside. Next to the house grew a Norfolk pine tree, huge, with a long trunk bare of branches from the ground to a point about fifteen feet up. I would wrap my arms around the trunk and look up into the resiny spokes
above me and I knew that if I could just get up that first fifteen feet I could be three or four stories high in no time.

"It took me four weeks to muster up the courage. First I climbed onto the roof of our house, then with a big deep breath and my toes hooked over the edge of the rusty tin roof, I jumped, grabbing hold of the lowest branch. It didn’t take me long to shimmy up the branches until, at last, I could see the sea, feel the tree moving in the wind between my legs, and smell the pine oil warming beneath my hands. I felt so light, like the white caps I could see on the harbour, like the gulls that wheeled and hung on the salty wind.

"Eventually the cold got to me and the rain slanted in from the ocean in thin, grey sheets. When I jumped from the lowest branch to the roof my feet slipped out from under me on the wet tin and I dropped like a stone onto the cement path. I knew my arm was broken because I heard it snap, like dry kindling sticks when you break them over your knee. For about a minute the pain was so bad I couldn’t stand it, then it went numb and I sat there feeling queasy at the way my arm sort of bent, just behind the wrist. "When I went inside Mum was asleep on the couch. I went back out and sat down on the front steps, holding my arm like it was made of glass. The numbness didn’t last and soon it started hurting and swelling, a beetroot-coloured bruise rising from beneath the skin.

"Dad always stopped off for a jar or two in the public bar on his way home, and it was dark before his car lurched into the driveway. As he came up the path I held my arm out to him and he nodded, “I’ll just get out of my work clothes, mate and then we’ll get you to the hospital,” he said. In the kitchen I watched as he poured himself a tumbler full of something that looked like water but smelled like the dentist.

"The nurse who walked me down the hall to have the x-rays, made sure Dad was out of earshot before asking, “Are you sure you fell out of a tree, son?”

"The Doctor told me that I would need to stay in hospital overnight. Dad called, “Cheerio, cobber!” as he zigzagged his way down the hall. I was relieved that he was going and that I had the stiffly-tucked sheets of the
hospital bed, the clean white walls and the shiny expanse of shoe-squeaking lino, all to myself.

"I've thought about that night a lot since. Perhaps if Dad’d stayed longer at the hospital he wouldn't have hit that tree on the way home. I wish I’d asked him for a hug instead of wishing him gone.

“At the funeral I stood between my grandparents with the heavy white cast on my arm. Only ten or so people showed up – two of his drinking buddies and a couple of men that he worked with. Mum didn’t look at me as she passed my grandfather a bag of my clothes. “I need to get away for a few days. You’ll take Franky, won’t you?” she said. I knew then that she blamed me. And I knew, somehow, that she wasn’t coming back.

“The next time I saw her there was no sign of the brittle, funny woman who used to sing Broadway hits and dance around the cracked Formica table, saucepan in one hand and a sloshing jam-jar glass in the other. When she finally turned up to collect me I was twelve and wouldn’t go with her. The next time I was seventeen and my grandfather bailed her out of the East Perth lockup. She was still drunk when he picked her up and smelt like piss and vomit. She was filthy and as thin as a camp dog. The cops caught her stealing smokes from the supermarket. God knows how she’d been feeding herself.

“I'm still not sure why Granddad took her in. I mean, it's not like he owed her or anything. His dead son’s wife, her brain rotted with booze and drugs. If she’d had to choose between Dad and me, I’d have been long gone. I still see it in her eyes.

“But anyway...” said Frank and his voice sounded like a small boat running aground, low and gravelly. “There’s no use crying about it now is there. You can choose your friends, hey Minh, but not your family. You’re stuck with them.”
Dr Benson sat down in the chair next to mine and put his hand on my arm. “How are you, Minh? Are you sleeping alright? Should I write you that prescription?”

“I’m sleeping much better, thank you, Doctor.”

He looked down at the folder in his hand then back to me. “And your memories?”

“They are plentiful, but I’m not so worried anymore.”

“Are you writing them down?”

“No, these memories are just for me.”

He reached up and adjusted the drip. Under his white jacket he wore a crisp white shirt, with thin purple stripes. He had gold cufflinks and the sleeves of his shirt were crisp and perfectly clean.

“I’ll see you in a fortnight, Minh,” he said, standing up. “But if you’re worried about anything before then, you can call me.” I smiled at him. “I’m sure I’ll be fine, Dr Benson, but thank you. I’ll see you in two weeks’ time.” As the liquid slowly dripped into my hand, I closed my eyes and drifted back to the mountains.

Frank knew many of the American soldiers; big men with forearms like thighs and close-cropped hair that bristled squarely on the tops of their heads. One day when we were driving past the base, a soldier waved us down. He leaned against the truck door, filling the cab with his shadow and sweet cologne. As he spat his gum onto the road, he reached in and shook Frank’s hand.

“How’re you doing?” he said.

“I can’t complain. How about yourself?”

The soldier sighed, “To be honest, I’ve been better. I’ve got myself into a bit of a spot with money. You know how it is.”

“Yeah, I sure do.”

“I’ve got a motor-bike to sell, a real beauty. I thought you might be interested, seeing as how you’re here for a while.”

“Maybe.”

We followed him into the base and behind a large shed. An odd-shaped bundle covered in a khaki tarpaulin was propped against the wall.
Underneath the covers was a motorbike unlike any I had ever seen. This bike was built for beauty. To me they were for work, to be hung with panniers, overloaded, dented, scratched and kept running with second hand parts and bits of wire. But this was shiny, everything chrome and new paint, with thick black tyres. The word “Triumph” was scrolled across its fuel tank and its lines were like a bird, everything smooth to slice the wind.

We were to cover many hundreds of miles on that bike, Frank and I. Frank, who had grown up riding motorcycles on the loose stone tracks of his grandfather’s farm, would send it down the roads outside the town with a laugh, the four stroke motor screaming like a carnivore. On the first few rides I would peer over his shoulder and watch with horror as the speedometer climbed to over one hundred miles per hour. Later, I learnt to enjoy the wind tearing with needle sharp fingers at my face but, in the beginning, my knuckles would ache after every ride from clutching at the back of Frank’s shirt.

Later the bike became mine but by then it had lost its shine. The tyres were patched and the seat was torn in several places. It never lost its speed, though. It always had acceleration that could lash your face and empty your chest with a fierce, sucking rush. There were days, those last days in Saigon when everything seemed to crumble, when I opened the throttle, bent over the front wheel and sent the world, blurring, to another place. The bike would carry me from the Highlands and eventually buy our passage out of Viet Nam, but when I remember it now, it’s always those first few rides.

The day Frank bought the bike we rode it, shiny new, through the streets around town and the close-set houses caught the engine noise and threw it back at us, until my chest rumbled. In Dak Thay the streets wound out from the centre with no plan or structure. Like snakes they twirled out, looping here and there, sometimes turning back on themselves, and sometimes returning to the place where they began. Dak Thay changed often in those days; new streets were carved into the red clay and shanties rose hastily from the earth to house the low-land farmers that the government had relocated. Any ground left uncovered by houses or crop would soon be reclaimed by the jungle and covered in vegetation, lush and tangled. You
were never sure if a street had been in place for years, or if it had only just sprung up.

The house that Frank rented was in the oldest part of town, at the very end of a street that turned and turned again, before dwindling into a muddy path. We lived down the path, surrounded by a high stone wall and shaded by several large plane trees. Moss grew on the cracks between the large, weathered bricks and dampness flourished in black patches where the shade was deepest. From the outside, the house looked abandoned, the grass grew long and rank along the outer walls and broken branches soon rotted where they fell. Our defense was a thin crust of broken glass that we cemented along the top of the wall. In the afternoon, when the light slanted, the green and amber glass shone like the window of the church in Dak Thay. “It’s an old trick, but a good one,” Frank explained to me as we finished it, “it’ll stop local lads from popping over the wall and pinching our provisions.” “And the Viet Cong too,” I added.

Frank snorted. “It’s going to take more than just a bit of glass to stop those sneaky bastards.” And he shook his head, the crease deep between his eyes. The outside of the house was the only part to escape the builders. For several weeks we lived between piles of dusty, broken bricks and rough sawn timber. The carpenters installed a radio in the office, fixing the long antenna to the crumbling roof with wire brackets. On still days we could hear Radio Saigon and, even on days when the wind pressed the trees over towards the ground, we could just make out words in the crackle of static, it was like plucking drowning men from a stormy sea.

The local tradesmen built an armoury with thick stone walls and into it went the wooden gun boxes. Later it would house claymore mines and grenades, radios, medical supplies and replacement uniforms. Boxes were stacked three deep along the inside walls.

The kitchen was left alone. As Frank said, “Neither you or me can cook to save ourselves, Minh, so we’ll have to hire a local girl. If we ask her to use a pressure cooker or an electric toaster she’ll think we’re mad.”

I met Mai a month after I started working for Frank. She was seventeen years old. Her father was a local shopkeeper and Frank hired her
to go to market, clean, cook and wash for us. She was so shy it was weeks before she would speak to me and many more weeks again before she could speak to Frank without stammering. Her father arranged the details of her employment and it was through him that we gave her instructions for her week of work. Indeed, it was her father who collected her pay each week. It’s hard to believe that such shyness is possible but, back then, girls in strict families often reached adulthood having only conversed with the men that they were related to.

Mai was small like a fawn. Even among her friends she seemed fragile. In Australia our primary school children look taller and more robust than Mai did when she came to work for Frank. I remember she would leave her shoes side by side outside the kitchen door, showing the pink soles of her feet beneath her skirt when she knelt to light the fire, or scrub the tiles. She liked to tie her hair into a knot on the top of her head and there was a shadowy hollow where her neck curved into the dark weight of her hair.

From a distance Mai smelled faintly of soap and incense. Her hair was smooth and when she laughed her cheeks blushed pink. Every other girl I knew I had known since childhood. Growing into manhood alongside them was easy in our small village. We swam naked in the river and watched each other grow, season by season. On festive nights, when the adults drank rice wine together we would sneak away in pairs to where the darkness was thickest and try out our strange, new bodies. Girls smelled like wood smoke and clean sweat, their small hands strong and their breath hot against your skin like steam. The thought of swimming naked in the river with Mai made the back of my throat contract with shame.

The pinkness of her skin, her small feet and the way the damp warmth of the kitchen carried the smell of her hair made it hard for me to look at her. One morning early, when I was still slow with sleep, I was so careful to avoid looking that I failed to see a bucket of water steaming by the doorway. My foot went down into the bucket, water flew everywhere, the mop crashed to the ground and I went sprawling onto the kitchen floor. Frank walked in to see Mai dripping water, the kitchen floor awash and me, rubbing a bump the size of a dove’s egg on the side of my head.
Outside as we climbed into the truck, he put his hand on my shoulder.
“Perhaps over here throwing dirty water all over a woman is a sign of affection. But I reckon it might be better just to ask her out for dinner.”
“Mai?” I said. “Oh no, I don’t want to eat dinner with her. It’s just. I don’t know. I try not to look at her. Well, not really, not too closely. It seems wrong, too close. It’s not polite. I’m not making sense but it is hard to explain…”

And Frank nodded, laughing. “I don’t know much about women but I do know they’re quite complicated. Not at all like horses or dogs.”
“Or trucks, or motor bikes.” I added, glumly.
And we laughed, our shoulders shaking and our eyes shiny.
Frank, Dak Thay 1963

Dear Granddad,

I apologise for not writing sooner. If you’ve heard the news, you’ll know Ngo Dinh Diem was knocked off by one of his Generals. The surprise wasn’t that he’d been killed, but that he hadn’t been killed earlier. The Buddhists hated him, the Dega despised him and the average bloke on the street didn’t much care for him either. Then he pissed off the Yanks and that was the last straw. Although most people saw him for what he was – an American lackey – he got too big for his boots. When he snuck off into negotiations with the north to scale down the war, he had to go I guess. The locals like the idea of a reunified Vietnam but, as far as the Yanks are concerned the whole point is to stop the Communists, not to open the gate and invite them down for tea. We all know Ho Chi Minh has no intention of conquering the world, but the Americans can’t back down now, it would be a loss of face, and we can’t have that in an election year, can we?

The CIA are denying it but this coup has their boot prints all over it. They’ll get their dirty work done by any group of disgruntled would-be rebels that they can convince to have a go. They say in Saigon that money will buy anything – the truth, a lie or silence – it just depends on how much you’re prepared to spend. They almost got him in 1960 when they shanghaied some ARVN pilots and got them to bomb his palace, but he survived underground in a secret tunnel. This time the rebels turned Diem’s own personal troops against him and laid siege to the palace. He escaped again but he knew the dice were loaded against him. He hid in a Catholic church while he tried to get his foreign mates to bail him out, but the Yanks refused his calls and I don’t suppose the
French were running to answer the phone either. The rebels ran out of patience and they probably weren’t carrying their copy of the Geneva convention at the time. They stormed the church, bundled him and his brother into a car, drove down a dark alley way and shot them. Rumour has it the bodies were riddled with bullet holes and stab wounds, so I guess whoever did the dirty work was looking forward to a change of government.

My men are pretty pleased to see the back of Diem. He was never popular with the mountain tribes on account of the laws he passed. The tribes here practice shifting farming – because the top soil here is pretty thin they use a paddock for a couple of seasons then move on, leaving the old one to lie fallow for anything up to a decade. Because they don’t fence the farmland Diem practiced a bit of shifting farming of his own by shifting in a heap of lowland farmers and dividing the land up amongst them. Now the hill people are short of paddocks and the place is full of lowlanders that have no idea how to farm up here. It’s a bloody mess really. Diem also forced the villagers to abandon their tribal laws so now they get tried in court and end up in prison. In the past they would have been disciplined by their own people and the punishment might have been harsh but they stayed in their village. Now the whole village is punished because while Dad is in prison the family is one hand down. And a man is worth a lot in a small village.

Diem also stopped the villagers schooling their children in the native languages and he outlawed many of their customs. He caused a lot of trouble out here and Minh reckons some of the villages are nearly starving. If they have a bad season it could get really serious.
We’re all waiting to see what Diem’s successor does. I reckon his government will be riddled with chaps just waiting to topple him. I hope he’s smart enough to realise that he’s going to have to tackle the Dega’s problems, because there’s trouble brewing out here. Until recently the tribes have stayed pretty separate but now their discontent is drawing them together. If they ever got organised they would be a force to be reckoned with. There’s rumours of course and talk of a guerilla group that’s going to force the government’s hand but for now I think it’s mostly just talk. They’re on our side for now but if they turned, I wouldn’t want to be here to find out the result. They’d have to go down in a head-to-head with the Vietnamese because they don’t have the numbers, but they’d take a lot of men down with them. Surely the government can see how important it is to keep them on side. They could be a powerful ally for the Viet Cong if they decided to go that way. Still, I don’t suppose that’s going to happen as the Viet Cong aren’t making any friends out here. They raid the villages for food and weapons and if the villagers resist they kill them. Sometimes they just kill them if they don’t resist, they kill them because they suspect they have links to the Americans or they kill them as a warning. Either way the mountain tribes are the meat in the sandwich, persecuted by their own government and hounded by the enemy. You can start to see why they might want to start a revolution. So, stay tuned Granddad because there’s never a dull moment out here. Chao Ong (that’s good bye) Frank.
Chapter Nine

One day when I was working Frank came into the office and cleared his throat.

“Minh, now I don’t want you to worry and I know you’re not a soldier, but I think it’d be best if you had your own gun.”

I looked up at him slightly puzzled – my work was not dangerous. I only acted as a translator for Frank during training. If he went out on patrol with the men he went without me and used hand signals and the few words of our language that he could speak.

“It’s just that being here, with me, makes you a target. Not that I think we’re in danger, it’s just I’d feel happier if you were armed.”

“Alright, Frank,” I said. “If you think it’s necessary.”

“Look – I hope it’s not necessary. I hope you never have to fire a shot in anger but this is going to make me feel a lot better.”

Later that day we took the bike to some wasteland acres out of town. Frank passed me a gun and wrapped his hands over mine to show me how to hold it. “This old girl has looked after me and I’m hoping that if you ever have to use her she’ll do the same for you.”

I’ll never forget that day. The thud in my palms that resonated down my arms and deep into my shoulder sockets when the gun fired, the weight and the smell of hot oil. My ears were attuned to the sound of a bare foot on a dirt path, the click of a sharp clawed paw on a rock or the gentle grinding of a water buffalo chewing cud, so the sound of gunfire was brutal, shocking. When I fired the gun it left me feeling as if my ears were stuffed with coals and the burning made my head feel light and fragile.

Over the next few weeks we would often drive out to the rutted dirt of our range. I would carry the Browning pistol and Frank the American rifle that he had been issued with. He had trained on Australian army weapons, but the M14 was American and, to Frank, as different as brothers to sisters. We used sandbags and plywood as targets, Frank loading his gun with bullets that looked the size of chickens’ eggs. I could hit a target fifty paces
away once for every two shots, while Frank could hit a saucer-sized piece of plywood at 400 yards. At that distance I had to walk to the target to see if it had been hit, or look for splinters through the scope. It never failed to amaze me but the skill brought Frank little pleasure. Sometimes he would look at the ruined target and nod, on his face an emotion that I couldn't read. Something close to anger.

When I asked him he said, “It's nothing to be proud of, Minh. I'm a freak – like the bearded lady in the circus.”

“But to be so good. You must enjoy it.”

He held a shattered piece of plywood in his hands. “I suppose I used to. Back on the farm we'd put tin cans on fence posts and knock them off. Take a spotlight into the paddocks at night and shoot rabbits to feed the dogs. But now, there's no pleasure in it. It's not about tin cans and rabbits anymore.” He dropped the wood, turned to me and his face was that of a stranger's. “There are things that I've done, Minh. Things that I'm not proud of – awful, cold blooded things. And the worst thing is, I'd do them again – if I had to.” And in him the stillness and the light on his wide-set eyes.

As time passed it seemed to me that the Viet Cong raids became more daring and more regular. Each week stories reached us of lives that had been lost, villages raided. If a village within four or five hours' drive was attacked by the Viet Cong we would take the motor-bike or truck to get out there. The memory of the first of these trips came back to me in a rush, every detail intact, my heart tripping over itself and the smell pasted thickly on the back of my throat.

The sky was grey that day, still and the smoke rose in thick columns from the charred buildings. Frank walked through the ruins, stooped to pick up a spent shell, and to look at a sandal print in the drying mud. We squatted in the middle of the village with the old men that were left and questioned each one. With a stick Frank drew the outline of the village and asked them to show him where the attack came from, how many men there were, and what weapons they carried. The old men shuffled on their haunches, spat in the dirt and their smoke deepened voices were flat.
When he was done Frank stood up and wiped his hands on his shirt. He turned around slowly on one heel, taking in the charred buildings and the huddled shape of a dead dog. He sighed. “Maybe you think I’m being too hard on these old blokes, keeping them out here when they’re obviously tired, but it’s not as heartless as it seems. I’ve got to get inside the head of the guy that ordered this raid, Minh. I’ve got to work out why he did what he did, why he shot who he shot. Is he full of hate or is he acting under orders? If I can work that out I might be able to guess what he’s going to do next.”

The old men hobbled away and Frank strode into the fields, pacing out the approach that the soldiers had taken to the village, walking until he found the depressions their bodies had made as they lay waiting to attack.

“I’ve got to get to know this guy from the inside out. When we arrived I had lots of questions and very few answers. But now, I can start to see him.” He squinted back at the village and stood quietly. The battle was being played out before him, the footprints and blood stains as telling as photographs. He turned to walk back to the truck, then spoke, so quietly that I never knew if what he said was to me, or to himself.

“The more I understand about this fella the more I realise he’s just a soldier, like me. If we swapped sides would we do things differently? Probably not. The main difference between us is that he’s fighting for what he believes in and I’m just on the payroll.”

In the months to come there would be many villages, many raids. Sometimes on the trips home he would be silent, I think he was turning the information over in his head. But at other times he would talk and his words rolled away like dead weeds in the wind.

We were driving home in the truck one day from another raided village. It was dusk and the rain had cleared, leaving drying slicks on the red gravel tracks. I could smell warm leaf litter and brown soil, pocked with hoof prints. Away from the charred village and the trail of smoke still thick and rising greasily through the air, the world was beautiful. There seemed a promise of better things to come. The jungle would grow again lush and glossy, the scars would fade and one day we would bring our water buffalo into the village at night because of tigers, nothing more.
Frank, who had been quiet as he drove, shirt sleeves rolled up past his elbows, his bush hat on the seat between us, started to speak, "When we were in Malaya we said that when a man first kills another, he’s ‘seen the elephant’. I’ve never seen a wild elephant in the bush. Never turned the corner on a path and come face to face with an animal so large it could crush me under its foot without breaking stride. But I can imagine.

“They kill a lot of people, wild elephants. The sheer weight of an animal that big. And its size. If you saw one and you survived it, you would never forget.

“The first time you kill a man knowingly, well that’s something you’ll never forget either. You look down the sights at him. And you know that if you don’t kill him he’ll kill you or one of your mates.

“You steady your breathing. Not holding your breath but taking one in and letting it out, just a little bit till you come to a place where your whole body stills for half a second. You can hear your own heartbeat in the pulse of blood behind your ears. You stare through the sights till they seem a part of you and level the rifle at the top of his breastbone. Not the head, not the heart, but that place on your chest that rings hollow when you tap it with a stiff finger. And you aim there because in training that’s what they’ve screamed at you, over and over. A head shot is too easy to miss and if you aim for the heart and shoot low all you’ve got is a belly wound. But this, this is the place – too high you get the head, too low you get the gut.

“Your trigger finger feels light and you’ve shot that weapon so many times by now you know exactly how much pressure it will take to send the bullet that’s up the spout spinning out at 850 yards a second.

“There’s a pause while you take up the slack in the trigger. Every nerve in your body is centred in your finger. You listen for the space between heartbeats. And then the air splits and the gun takes your shoulder backwards, smooth like dancing. You can’t hear anything over the ringing in your ears. Next time you look there’s no man in the sights, just a bloody pile of clothes that used to be someone.

“And after that adrenaline pumps your heart against your ribs like a dog at a fence and sends jolts of electricity down your arms into your fingers till they burn. And your breath, sour and sharp in your throat and you’re panting like
you’ll never get enough of it into your lungs because this time – this time it was him and not you.

“And later, back at base some blokes vomit, some blokes cry and some sit on the bare, hard ground and roll one smoke after another, smoking till their fingers look like tanned hide and their skin folds like cardboard into creases. Because you know, without a doubt, that the world will never, ever be the same place again. You’ve seen the elephant and it’s big, so big it can block out the sun forever.”
Frank, Dak Thay 1963

Dear Granddad,

Today I saw a newspaper photo of Kennedy’s successor, Johnson, he sure looks like a grumpy bastard - probably make a tough President. I’d love to see him scale down the American involvement here but something tells me if he’s going to jump it won’t be that way. The more time I spend out here the more I think that we should just get the hell out of Asia and let them sort out their own war. America is like a spoilt, fat kid poking an ant’s nest with a stick, just because no-one else will play with him. But those ants are going to hurt like hell when they bite.

Anyway Granddad, no-one’s handed me a plane ticket to Perth so I’ll do my job as best I can. Maybe some people would think I was sent out here to exploit the natives but I don’t see it that way. I’m getting them to come and work for us, but I’m protecting them too. If they have training and weapons they can protect their own families and their villages and down the track they’ll be in a better position to bargain for their futures. I suppose you could say I’m dragging them out of the jungle and into the twentieth century except I’m not pulling. They are pushing me to give them all that I’ve got. It’s keeping me so busy that the only time I ever stop to think of the moral implications of what we’re doing is when I sit down to write to you. So, I hope this doesn’t sound too much like madness.

Keep your head below the parapet Granddad, these are crazy times we live in.

Yours,

Frank.
Frank, Dak Thay 1963

Dear Granddad,

I had a bit of a fright last week, nearly lost Minh to a very nasty strain of malaria. He went down so fast it didn’t seem possible that he could make it back. But he’s a tough bugger and I’m damn grateful because he’s my right arm out here. And even more than that, he’s my friend and you don’t get many true friends in life.

Anyway, I won’t get all sentimental on you. Hope all is well at your end. Please let me know if you need anything for Mum.

Merry Christmas or as they say over here, chuc mung giang sinh.

Yours,

Frank.
Chapter Ten

My mother once told us a story about a one-eyed man who, through an act of good fortune, came to own many, many sacks of rice. But the rice did not bring him happiness. He spent his nights worrying that a thief would sneak up on his blind side and steal the treasured sacks. After much deliberation he came up with a solution. He moved the rice to the edge of a cliff so that he could keep his good eye trained on the jungle and protect his rice from attack. But one night, despite his precautions, some resourceful thieves scaled the cliff and stole his rice.

And so it was for the sons and daughters of the mountain. While we were focusing on the North, our government climbed the cliffs and stole our farmlands and our language. No change came from the government that followed Diem’s death, or the one that followed, or even the one that followed that. In Saigon the generals fought for power like dogs over scraps of meat. My family were forced to watch as our farmland was whittled away and the mountains filled with government-funded refugees from the coast. Crops started to fail in the overused fields, and the rivers that had once churned with fish began to run barren.

I am ashamed to say that I had begun to see the problems of my village as no longer mine. Living in the town for so many months, it was easy to imagine that the hills around us were uninhabited. On market days, I would see people from the villages walking the streets with their woven cloth and vegetables in baskets to sell, but I no longer thought of the village as my home. I had moved away from them to the perimeter of an exciting world, and I no longer wanted what was mine.

When I went home my mother would look at me with her eyes narrowed as if trying to gauge the changes within. She had a sense for what was going on beneath the skin that made it hard to lie, a divining rod for emotion and illness. When I was growing up she would only have to rub her fingers on my arm or across my cheek to know that my homework was unfinished or the pigs without water. When, as children, we were sick she
would diagnose our illnesses by smelling our skin and touching our faces with her cheek. Then she would send us to bed, the soles of our feet bound with herbs and our bellies full of bitter tea.

When my sister was six she fell out of a tree and was carried home screaming with her arm crooked and the jagged edges of the bone blue beneath the thin skin of her wrist. My uncle and Han held her shoulders while my mother, with her knee against my sister’s chest, stretched the arm until it was straight then bound it in straight sticks and wrapped it in cloth. I watched from the shadows as my sister sobbed, my mother’s face set like a footprint in clay. Afterwards, while my sister slept, I cried and my mother held me against her chest. When she turned towards the fire I saw tears on her own cheeks.

I had been in Dak Thay several months before it occurred to me that I might be vulnerable without the talisman of my mother’s skill. When I got sick it came on slowly, creeping through the afternoon, my head fragile and the world swinging past me like a door on broken hinges. I watched Frank’s back and the straight line of his shoulders as I followed him around the base; the afternoon sun was strong but my teeth chattered like dead boughs in the wind. He stopped at each longhouse and smiled at the children as they crowded the doorways. He pointed and gestured to fill the gaps in his vocabulary, asking the men about their families, their health, their chickens and the small patch where they grew vegetables. The men smiled and nodded. He smoothed the hair of the nearest child.

We had been in the village since daybreak and a knot of pain had settled deep in my belly. At the last house on the base my legs buckled a little and the sweat started to run through my hair like lice. I closed my eyes, took deep breaths of cool air and felt the ground roll like waves beneath my feet. Behind my eyes blood pulsed and my bones hurt.

When I opened my eyes I saw Frank, out of focus as though I was looking at him through water. “Minh,” he said in surprise, “you’re sick.” I tried to smile but the fever had taken a firm hold and shook my body. Frank laid his hand on my arm, “You’re really sick. Why didn’t you say something?” The world spun then, around and around, getting darker and grainy, as if I
were sinking into the ground. And then darkness. Time lurched and swayed past me with spastic steps. I felt as though I had fallen into the bottom of a deep, dry well, my body a heavy mass of bone and flesh. I tried to lift my head but the blackness was thick and it smothered me. I could not tell which way was up and I was so tired.

When the darkness lifted, it did so slowly. My throat felt dry and daylight chafed my eyelids. I was in an unfamiliar room with a shiny clean window and a blanket tucked tightly around me. A man that I did not know smiled down at me. “Back with us now, son? That’s good. You had us all worried.”

In a voice that I hardly recognised I asked him where I was and he answered, "You’re in the US Special Forces Hospital in Dak Thay. Not quite regulation, you know, but your boss insisted, and he’s..." he paused and frowned, “a persuasive man.” I asked him how long I had been there. “Just over six days, and I have to tell you it was touch and go there for a while. We thought we might lose you.” I thanked him and he told me to rest, patting my arm with his cool, dry hand.

“You must be a damn good translator, son. Your boss has been here at least once every day.”

Later that afternoon Frank arrived. He must have come straight from the base, his face smudged with dirt, and he brought to the room the smell of crushed grass and tobacco. He grinned at me and I sat up slowly and grinned back.

“Decided to join the land of the living, hey?” he said.

“Yes, I’m much better now.”

“That’s great news.”

“Can I come home?”

“Well, Doc says you should be in here for another week and I don’t want to take any chances. You had me worried. Good translators are hard to come by ‘round here.” He was grinning, and I nodded, smiling.

“I’m sure you could manage. Your Vietnamese is pretty good. You must speak at least ten or fifteen words.”
“Ha! You cheeky bugger, it’s not that bad. Well, ok, it’s pretty bad, but I reckon I know at least fifty words – especially if you count numbers.” And we laughed, and inside my heart felt light.

As Frank and I talked dusk lengthened the shadows outside my window. Frank perched on the foot of my bed, his long legs folded at the ankle. A nurse bustled into the room with food on a steel tray and Frank stood, brushing at the dusty mark that he had left on the sheets. He turned to me and winked.

“Well mate, I’ll be off, you know how it is – things to do, people to see.”

He held out his hand and I shook it. His skin was warm against mine and, for a moment, I didn’t want him to let go. His eyes searched my face. “Same time, same place tomorrow?”

“I’m very busy,” I laughed, “but I’ll try and fit you in.” I took the cover from my dinner, and pulled a face. Frank leaned over.

“Army logic, Minh. If the malaria didn’t kill you, the food just might. We’d better come up with a plan to bust you out of here before you starve to death.”

Each week I caught the bus to the hospital, to Dr Benson’s large office on the fourth floor. On the garden paths around the back of the building people smoked, women straight from work, men in workboots and patients in their hospital issue pyjamas. The air in the lift was always stale and the steel walls smudged by many hands. In Dr Benson’s office the shelves were adorned with models of internal organs. When pressed and twisted they opened to reveal arteries and veins smoothly formed in industrial-strength plastic. Mine was the last appointment of the day and the doctor looked tired, his sleeves rolled and his collar open.

Outside the window summer heat had turned the city grey, and the sweat on my skin had dried to an oily film.

“Minh,” said Dr Benson with a weary smile, “come in and sit down.”

“Dr Benson, forgive me. You look as though you have had a long and tiring day.”
“Yes, it has been been. But I’ve been looking forward to seeing you. The results of you last ultrasound are here. Your tumor has shrunk, and your blood work is good too.”

“That’s good news, and I’m sleeping better as well.”

“And the dreams? Your memories?”

“They still come. I’ve given up trying to control them.”

“Why would you want to control them?”

“For me, remembering is a sword with two edges, both sharp.”

Dr Benson nodded. “If you would like to talk things over with someone there are psychologists at the hospital that I would be happy to recommend. It’s good to talk these things over. What does your wife think?”

“Mai? The past is something we don’t ever talk about. Sometimes you make choices, afterwards it’s best not to look at them for too long.”

“You know, Minh, I’m not a psychologist but there is some evidence to suggest that suppressing emotions can be detrimental to your health in the long term.”

“My mother would say that sometimes it is better to skim the soup from the surface and leave the bones at the bottom of the pot.”

“Because you might not like what you find?”

“Yes. Sometimes it is best not to look.”

Dr Benson nodded, but I could see that he was distracted. The white yacht in its silver frame on his desk was sailing past him.

“Dr Benson, please don’t concern yourself too much with the problems of an old man like me. Besides, I’m not even sure that my memories are problems any more. Maybe they are solutions dressed up as problems.”

And I stood up to leave, “I’ll leave you to your work now, doctor, and I will call Mai and let her know the good news. She always cooks when she is worried and she has been worried a great deal lately. And one old man can only eat so much…”

“Let her keep cooking, Minh. Doctor’s orders.”
Frank, Dak Thay 1964

Dear Granddad,

It’s hard to believe that we have come to the end of another year. To me it feels as if ten have passed. This job is bigger than anything I’ve ever done and the weight of the responsibility is more than I ever imagined. I’m glad I came here as a combat veteran or I doubt very much that I’d have had the stomach for it. My men put it all on the line for me every time they step outside the camp and I know their lives depend on the training and advice I give them. I tell you Granddad, it’s a lot easier being sent into battle than it is to send someone else. But we’ve got a job to do and we are doing it well.

In fact, we are doing it so well that we have attracted the attention of the powers that be in Saigon. Mike Langley was up here the other day and he told me to increase the size of the force to one hundred men. It shouldn’t be too hard to recruit the local blokes as they are all keen to get in on the action and get their hands on a gun. I’ve already been approached by several of the village elders from around these parts who want me to take their young men on. They want the extra protection and I can’t say I blame them. Mike has increased my spending allowance too and when he flew up here he came with a bag stuffed to the brim with money so I can pay wages and enlarge the base. He’s also told me to order whatever I need from the CIA warehouse in Saigon so now I can kit the troops out like regular soldiers. It’s a big relief to know that they will have the wherewithal to take on the Viet Cong because they are slippery bloody bastards and they are getting pretty damn bold.

The Viet Cong aren’t regular soldiers, they’re a bunch of peasant guerillas whose main task is to
strike fear into the hearts of the locals, thereby turning them into good little Communists. They spend their nights killing civilians, burning down villages and busting up roads and bridges that might be useful to the non Communists. They have been recruited from the local population so they’re devilishly hard to catch as in the daytime they just pack up their guns and turn back into the local baker, farmer or farmer’s wife.

They operate in small squads of about 8 men and women and they use darkness and the element of surprise to cause the maximum amount of chaos with the minimum number of Communist lives lost. I’ve spent a lot of time in the places where they’ve been, asking questions and going over the ground. They’re very clever and utterly ruthless. It also seems like Ho Chi Minh is giving them the hurry up from Hanoi as they are getting mighty antsy up here and it seems like every day there’s more casualties, although no more of my men thank God.

In other parts of the Highlands there are local troops being led by American soldiers and they dig themselves into outlying bases and spend their time trawling in platoon-sized or bigger groups through the bush looking for trouble. The Viet Cong just avoid them during the day – and it’s not hard to do as you can imagine that the noise of twenty or thirty men patrolling through the jungle is quite hard to hide. Of course the Viet Cong know where the bases are so they wait till night time when there’s little or no moon and they attack them while they’re sleeping. The Americans lose a couple of men here, a couple of men there and then – just when they get themselves organised and ready for the big staged battle that they have been hoping for all along, because they know
with their fire power and artillery support they can’t really lose that one – the Viet Cong have disappeared back into the bush and it’s all over.

I don’t think the Viet Cong will ever front up for a face-to-face fight as they have nothing to gain from it. They are outmanned and outgunned and they’re far too clever not to see that so I can’t see the point of waiting for them to somehow turn into the kind of regular army that it would suit us to fight. Of course we’re yet to see the North Vietnamese Army, or NVA as we call them, in action so that may change once they get mobilised. And there is an awful lot of activity west of here on the border with Laos, so I don’t think we’ll have long to wait.

I’ve split my fellows up into eight man squads and I send them back to their villages to live as normally as possible between jobs. Of course most of them are on the job a lot of the time so in reality the Mo Nang base is usually pretty full. Security did worry me for a while because I was scared I was making the place into an easy target but I think we’ve got around that by using small squads for reconnaissance. The small squads pick up on any Communist activity in the bush surrounding the base a lot more quickly because they fit into the land better than a whole platoon would. These guys are expert trackers so the Viet Cong find it hard to fool them for very long. I reckon if someone with Communist tendencies farts within five miles of the base, one of my men will know about it.

Mo Nang looks like a typical village now, a lot of the men have moved their families in here with them. We have a school house and a small hospital too. We train there every day and that’s where the men come to be issued with ammunition and instructions. We’ve
also built cells for any prisoners that we might take – but none have made it back to the base alive yet. I’ve been trying to impress upon the men the importance of the Geneva convention. It’s their instinct to kill, even people who surrender and it’s hard to explain to them that treating prisoners properly is part of what keeps you human. Sometimes there’s a fine line between being a soldier and a murderer but it’s a line nevertheless. It’s something I’ve thought about a lot.

We operate at night mostly. A lot of our work is surveillance – trying to work out what the Viet Cong are up to. We know Ho Chi Minh is going to try and establish supply lines from North to South and we’d like to find and strangle them as quickly as possible. Of course if we find any Viet Cong we want to make their lives pretty unpleasant – so we try to beat them at their own game. Hitting them hard and legging it back into the bush before they can retaliate. Our eight man squads can even hide in a village amongst the locals if they have to. I’ve found that sending the men out on operations in areas around their own village works really well because they fit back into their village like they’ve never been gone and no-one is any wiser as to what they’ve been up to.

Minh is as invaluable as always. I couldn’t get the job done without him. At first he was pretty wide eyed about the whole situation but now he runs the place when I’m preoccupied and you would never guess that he is just twenty years old. He’s my right hand man and a bloody good friend too. Sometimes I forget we’re both bloody young and life won’t always be like this.

Last week we headed out to his village because some Viet Cong had been spotted nearby and we wanted
to take a patrol out around the area. I decided to go and turn it into a training exercise and Minh asked if he could come along too. I wasn’t sure because he’s not a soldier but he was really keen so I agreed. The standard issue M14 is just over a yard long and heavy with it and Minh’s not a big bloke so it must have been a bit of a struggle lugging it about all night but he never shirked. I’ve taught him to shoot with a hand gun and he’s pretty good - I suppose having spent his childhood shooting birds and monkeys with a bow and arrow would have helped out there.

Anyway, morning came and no sign of any Viet Cong so we wandered into the village for a cup of tea and some breakfast. Most of Minh’s family still live in the village so it was good to meet them after hearing about them for a year. I’d already met Minh’s brother, Han. I suspect he’s taken a bit of a shine to our house-keeper as he has visited us a few times and I always find him in the kitchen, staring at her. Anyway, he told me that the situation in the outlying villages is so desperate that many are pushing for some kind of uprising. Han seems to know quite a lot so I’m guessing he’s involved somehow. But the bottom line is this - the Dega villagers are getting organised and one of these days there’s going to be some trouble. I’m going back out to Minh’s village to learn a bit more in the next few weeks because that sort of information is vital to my operation. You never want to go off half cocked when men’s lives are at stake.

Yours,

Frank.
Dear Granddad,

Last week one of our patrols came across a group of Viet Cong and one of my men was hit and killed. He was a young bloke, not married, just a really good kid. We took his body back home to the village the next morning and his father took my hand in his and told Minh that he knew I was doing my best. I haven’t slept much since, all these lives in my hands. It’s a terrible weight on me Granddad.

My memories of home are like north on the compass now, a fixed point that I can use to take my bearings. They remind me of who I was before I joined up. What I thought was important and why. I tell myself that if I can just remember everything about the person I used to be, the good and the bad, one day I’ll be able to use those memories like a map to find my way home again. So I try to remember everything, even the things I’d rather forget.

I miss you Granddad,
Love,
Frank.
For many years when the village men had gathered to drink rice wine or trade their surplus livestock there was much talk of uniting all of the villagers in the mountains and forcing the government to hear the complaints of the mountain people. As there always is, there were some who saw only the possibility of armed conflict while others wanted compromise and negotiation.

When I was ten years old the men of the village decided that the time had come to send a delegation to Saigon. They sent the head men of the two biggest villages in the Highlands together with their eldest sons.

It was a long and difficult journey to the city; the men went by canoe, by foot and by car whenever one could be persuaded to stop for them. They wore their finest, most decorated clothes and took with them many gifts for the President - hens’ eggs and highly polished copper bracelets.

When they reached the Presidential Palace the two men and their sons mounted the white marble steps and entered the lofty entrance hall with deference on their faces and gifts in their arms. Their journey had been long and the men were dusty, tired but they believed that as leaders of their own men Diem would excuse them this small breach of good manners.

Two armed guards met them at in the doorway but instead of welcoming the men into the palace they pushed them aside roughly and ordered them to leave. The men were surprised, for in their own villages no visitor would be treated with such bad manners. They tried to plead their case; the road was long and the mountains steep and treacherous in places and they had travelled to see the President as they felt sure he could right the wrongs that were being carried out in the Highlands. But no, the guards were insistent, men must leave and the President would have no time to deal with the filthy savages now cluttering the palace entrance hall.

The men decided that they would try again the next day. They took shelter under the sweeping, ornamental trees in one of the city’s parks overnight and in the morning presented themselves at the palace once again.
This time the men had washed their hands, feet and faces in the Saigon River so that although their clothes were dusty their skin, at least, was clean.

The morning guards were waiting for them and turned them away more roughly than before. The headmen were insistent but the guards remained unmoved. They decided to sit quietly on the white marble steps as they felt sure the President would leave the palace regularly throughout the day in order to meet with his people. But when the guards saw them they became enraged.

“Go back to the mountains, you filthy savages,” the guards said. “No-one here cares about you or your problems.”

One of the guards strode from the palace and kicked out at the men as they sat on the steps awaiting the President. His shiny toed boot caught the son of one of the headmen on his shoulder and the boy cried out in pain and surprise. The men jumped to their feet to remonstrate with the guard and they all began to yell. The other guard, who was already nervous, pulled his pistol from its holster and began to wave it around in the air.

It wasn’t long before other guards came running from the far corners of the palace. Luckily for the men the guards were unwilling to shoot their pistols in case a stray bullet damaged the fine stonework of the palace or chipped the white marble steps. The village men were polite but steadfast, the guards were adamant and their yelling increased in volume.

After five minutes of angry yelling a window in the upper floor of the palace shut with the sound of a cleaver on a wooden block. Not long afterwards the President’s secretary came hurrying down the hall to determine the cause of the cacophony. After a whispered consultation with the guards the secretary approached the men and their sons.

“You may have five minutes of the President’s time at 5pm tonight. Clean yourselves up and don’t keep him waiting.”

The men were relieved that finally they would be able to see the man who could solve their problems. They waited anxiously for the time of their appointment to arrive, smoothing their hair and brushing the dust from each other’s clothes with spit dampened hands.
At 5pm they were shown into the President’s office by his tight-faced secretary. The President’s desk was as smooth as the surface of a lake and bigger than a bed. Behind the desk the President was small, his round face shiny and his clean fingers drumming the polished wood like a herd of antelope galloping.

The men approached with their eyes downcast as was proper and lowered their gifts to the floor. The President seemed not to notice.

“What do you want?” he asked.

The eldest headman spoke. “Esteemed Uncle Diem, I hope that you are well and that your family and your sons are also healthy. I hope that your crops are bountiful and your flocks producing many eggs. I also hope that your wife and your water buffalos are plump and fertile. My name is Suoc, this is Hui and these are our first born sons.”

The President looked as though his dinner had already been served in another room of the palace. He leaned forward across his desk.

“Let’s get on with it, shall we.”

The headmen glanced at each other in surprise. In their village it was proper that all conversations with a stranger should begin with a mutual accounting, an assessment of the other’s status and a hope for future prosperity.

“We would like to discuss the concerns of our people with you, great and noble Uncle Diem. There have been changes in the Highlands and our people are suffering.”

“What kind of changes?”

“Our fallow lands have been given over to strangers. Our schools are no longer allowed to teach the children in their own tongue and the police have abolished our village courts.”

“You will have to learn to adapt, I’m afraid.”

“But Uncle President, while we don’t mean to sound ungrateful or critical of the government, the changes have meant that we can no longer live as we have always done.”

The President sucked a deep breath of displeasure in through his nose and sighed loudly.
“What you so quaintly call changes, we call progress. There’s nothing you can do. Go home to your muddy villages and your dirty families and learn to live with it.”.

The men’s faces hung open as if they had been slapped. As headmen they were accustomed to politeness, if not respect from other men. “But...” they said with surprise wrinkling their foreheads, “but there are many of us who feel the same way, Sir. Many of us who are suffering.”

“So what you are actually saying is that you are a delegation?”

“Yes Uncle Diem, we were chosen by the people of our villages and the villages nearby to make the long trip to Saigon to talk with you. In our villages we are the headmen and these are our first born sons.”

“So are you telling me that you mountain villagers have got yourselves organised into some kind of faction? A rebel movement?”

“No Sir, we have been sent by our people to talk with you.”

“Because an organised rebellion is a very serious crime. A serious crime indeed.”

“But Sir, there is no rebellion, we are here simply to ask for your help.”

“And threaten me with your organisation.”

“No Uncle President, there is no threat in what we have to say. We never meant to imply that we were threatening you or the government. We are just humble farmers, trying to raise our families.”

“I’m not sure that your visit is as innocent as you proclaim it to be. My advisors have told me to watch the Highlands for signs of rebellion and it seems that they were justified.”

“No, not at all, Sir. We are begging for your assistance. There is no rebellion.”

But President Diem, who had been waiting for the mountain people to revolt against the treatment that they had received at the hands of his government, was certain that the men were merely the visible, just grown tips of a weed that spread its roots far underneath the soil of his country. The President was distracted by fissures developing in his own government and troubled by a toothache that just would not go away, he was hungry, it was late and his sister-in-law was pressuring him to make legislative
changes that he felt sure would anger large sections of the population but he did not want to anger his volatile brother by refusing her.

“Are you telling me I don’t know a threat when I hear it?”

“No, Sir, not at all, Sir.”

The headman who had spoken first stepped towards Diem’s desk and bowed low.

“Honourable Uncle President, we can see that we are wasting your valuable time and that we must leave you alone so that you might continue with more important duties. We apologise deeply for any inconvenience we might have caused you and wish you good health and prosperity.”

“So now you think you can scuttle off back to your villages and build up your little rebellion. Well, I don’t think so!”

The headmen were sent to one of Saigon’s overcrowded, festering jails and their sons were dismissed so that they might make their way homeward with the news. The sons, in shock, set about the long trip home and, without the guidance and wisdom of their fathers, were lucky to arrive safely. When they returned to their villages, filthy and half starved, their news was met with horror.

The two headmen consoled each other with the knowledge that their sons had escaped the anarchy of jail. They awaited trial but no trial date was appointed and the days bled into months, the month into years. The two men of the mountains forgot the smell of rain on the warm back of a buffalo, they forgot the sound of their children’s bare feet on the hard packed clay of the village and they forgot the feel of a warm back against their chest on a cold night. They fought the other men in the prison for the scraps of food that were tossed amongst them irregularly and unpicked the coloured thread from their clothes to make snares for catching rats.

The seasons in the city were unlike those of the mountains. The men watched the rainy season come and go through cracks in the prison walls and sometimes, just sometimes tasted a salty breeze skimmed off the river or inhaled the mushroom scent of warm, wet soil. But mostly they lived with the stench of others and the mould of decay.
The men had been locked in a prison cell for almost nine years when President Diem was assassinated. His successor, alarmed at the prospect of maintaining several thousand men in jail, delegated three of his secretaries to examine the papers and court documents of those packed into the damp and reeking cells of Saigon’s largest prison. When the three men came across the records of the headmen they paused; amongst the injustice and cruelty that they had uncovered their case seemed particularly unjust and cruel.

The two headmen were released onto the streets of Saigon late one afternoon in the middle of July. They stood blinking amidst the crowds and disorder of the city that they had watched through a tiny, sideways slit for so many months. Monsoon rain, like a river upended, poured into the air and over their bodies. It drenched their hair and covered the tears that they shed as they thanked the mountain gods for their release and contemplated the years that they had lost.
Frank, Dak Thay 1964

Dear Granddad,

I hope this letter finds you well. I also hope that you have managed to finish digesting Aunt Marjorie’s Christmas Pudding, although I’m doubtful that you’ll have managed it because, if my memory serves me well, I last ate it in 1960 and I’m not sure I’m done digesting it yet. That woman can turn perfectly good sugar, eggs and flour into something like a cross between well aged wood and dried cow pats. It’s a remarkable feat really.

I know you’ve probably only just received my Christmas letter but there’s been something on my mind. I’ve done things, Granddad, that I’m ashamed of. I wish I could sit down and talk this through with you but this will have to do.

When I was serving in Borneo the army used my skills to the best of their advantage. When the Sergeant discovered that I could shoot, he was like a dog with two tails. Suddenly I was the golden boy in our platoon. Every now and then they’d pull me off duty and assign me the sort of task you never read about in the army’s promotional brochures. I’d be handed a rifle and some guy that I’d never met would drive me out into the bloody wilderness. We’d hide the jeep and hike for miles to a vantage point somewhere, usually the side of a hill overlooking a village or a guerilla camp of some sort. The spotter would give me a photograph of someone that the army disagreed with, we’d hide ourselves in the undergrowth and then we’d wait. Eventually the poor bastard that the army had chosen for disposal would wander into range and I’d give him the old six cent solution. A bullet in the chest, two if he was really unlucky. Then we’d run like rabbits back to the jeep while the rest of the
village tried to work out where the shot had come from and why there was a dead man on the ground with a bloody great hole where his sternum used to be instead of the living, breathing chap that they’d been talking to five minutes previously.

Now I did several of those jobs for the army and I did it without question because I was a young bloke then and that’s what you do when you’re still wet behind the ears. But I didn’t like it then and I don’t like the fact that I did it now.

If you kill someone in combat it’s different, it’s kill him before he kills you or one of your mates. Your blood is up and you know that every move could be your last. But sniping is something totally different. It’s cold blooded. I don’t know, Granddad, but to be truthful it feels a lot like murder. And while I understand that the blokes I took out were not likely to be padres, saints or choir boys, they weren’t shooting at me. Who and what I shot was controlled by the army. Which means that I have to trust them. Therein lies the problem.

You’ve heard the joke about army intelligence, well it’s no joke really. Most of it is generated by pen pushers who live behind the safety of a desk in a well ordered city somewhere. They’re either making it up as they go along or they’re buying it from the local police chief and he’s probably got a list of grudges as long as my arm and is overjoyed to suddenly discover a way of working through them. My theory is this: if they have got close enough to the guy they want to get a mug shot of him, how come they didn’t kill him then?

I don’t know why but I think I had decided that the covert stuff I did in Borneo would stay in Borneo. That someone had forgotten to add that little detail
to the big file with my name on it at army headquarters. But no such luck.

Last week Mike Langley flew in to see me and bring up another bag full of money for the boys’ wages. I’ve now got about 150 men under me and we’re flat out trying to get the new ones up to speed. Mike turned up and told me the chaps in Saigon have approved another increase in troop numbers and asked if I’d step it up a bit and put on another 100 men. That will bring the number of men to 250. When I told him that, in the Australian army, it was highly unusual for a 25-year-old Captain like myself to be in charge of such a large force he simply smiled and said, “These are highly unusual times we live in, Frank. I’m sure you’ll do your best.”

Mike stayed up with us for a few days and I was pretty pleased with how his visit was turning out until the end. Minh and I drove him to the landing strip. Just as he was about to get into the plane, he turned to me and said, “There are a few specialist jobs that need doing out this way, Frank. A few people that need to be stopped. We’d like you to supply a man or two for us occasionally. I think you know what I mean.”

There I am on the dirt landing strip at Dak Thay thinking that all was going ok in my little corner of the world when suddenly the past has come charging back into my life, compliments of Mike Langley.

It crossed my mind to tell him to go get stuffed and then I suppose my army training kicked in and I bit my tongue. So I said, “None of my men are suitable, Mike. They are too inexperienced.” And he replied, “I’m sure you are wrong on that point, Captain Stevens, your men seemed to me to be particularly capable.”
He’d only ever called me by my first name before and once he called me Captain I knew I was up to my armpits in the shit.

“Oh of course,” he said to me, “If you don’t wish to risk one of your inexperienced men you could take care of it yourself. I understand you have quite the knack for it.”

“And if I refuse?” I said. The bastard turned to me and said, “Everyone is replaceable, Captain. Even a man with your unusual skills.” Then he saluted me and climbed into his plane.

I watched him fly out of sight over the horizon wishing with all my might that there were some Viet Cong in the hills with a mortar, a bloke with a good eye and a desire to piss off the Americans. But no such luck.

Up until then I hadn’t told anyone about the little jobs that I used to do for the army. I was ashamed I suppose, but I told Minh. I was a bit unsure about how he would take it but funnily enough he just nodded as if it didn’t surprise him at all.

So it’s a waiting game now, Granddad. We shall see what the New Year and my good friend Mike Langley have to bring.

Yours,

Frank.
Chapter Twelve

In 1964 I was twenty years old. Most of the men in my village were married by twenty but thoughts of marriage ran off my skin like water off the greasy hide of a buffalo. I felt as if I had gone from a small and homesick boy to a man. No longer was I the shy villager, afraid to walk too close to the busy road. Since my illness I had grown in height, I was strong and eager like a dog against the lead. I jumped at the chance to move the wooden boxes full of ammunition, happy just to feel the strength of my arms and the blood pumping beneath my skin.

In those days Dak Thay was the largest town in the Highlands and it bustled with soldiers and locals eager to trade with them. On almost every street corner in the centre of town black market cigarettes and whiskey were sold from hastily erected shanties and a girl could be bought for just a few dollars. The bar girls, brightly dressed like shiny parrots, hung around the places where American soldiers drank, throwing their heads back and laughing, their black hair falling like shadows between the delicate points of their shoulder blades. Their low cut dresses revealed smooth, powdered skin and when they walked to the bar their steps waltzed across the wooden floor and their hips swung like metronomes.

Frank avoided the centre of town when he could. “All that cheap perfume gives me a headache, Minh,” he said with a half smile and shook his head. “And besides, if I was a Communist commander and I wanted to send a warning and scare the crap out of the locals I’d plan something in the town on a busy night. In the bush a bloke with a gun sticks out like balls on a dog but that place is so crowded you could hide anything and no-one would ever know.”

Two months later a smiling shoe-shine boy who had once cleaned boots for bubble gum and American dollars walked into a crowded bar on a Saturday night and pulled the pin from a Chinese hand grenade, killing two Americans and four locals.
“How did you know?” I asked Frank when we found out. “You said this would happen one day.”

“Well, I thought it might. It seemed obvious.”

I shook my head in admiration but he frowned. “Minh, my Gran used to say that if you lie down with dogs you’ll get up with fleas. I’m already scratching and this war’s not over yet.”

After the explosion we never went into town at night, only in the afternoons when it was quiet and there were few soldiers about. One still, hot afternoon we rode home from an outlying village on the bike, road dust like flour in our mouths caked the sweat on our skin. As we drove into town Frank turned right instead of left towards the house and my mouth turned upwards involuntarily at the thought of a cool drink and shade. He chose a rundown bar at the end of the main street and parked the bike outside. “This’ll do us. I’m the only target ‘round here and quite frankly I’m so parched I’m willing to take the risk.”

We ordered two glasses of beer, poured over chunks of opaque, tea-coloured ice to cool it. Frank laughed and said, “This place smells like a brothel and the beer tastes like crap but the big chunks of frozen river make it all worthwhile.”

It was late afternoon and the fans on the ceiling turned the warm air while flies lazily butted the windows, dying. We sat down with our drinks and I sighed as the first cool mouthful slipped its way through the dust laid down in my throat. We sat on a rough wooden bench that rocked on the dirt floor of the bar. Frank rolled a cigarette and asked me for a light. “Steady on there, mate,” he said. “You’re going to singe my eyebrows off.” And held my cupped hand in his. Where the sun had touched him he was deep brown – his forearms and the vee of skin at his neck. He blew smoke into the air and sighed contentedly.

Two bar girls lounged at a nearby table, killing time before nightfall. They were pretty and clean, they held cigarettes between their fingers and their hands moved like the fins of small, shiny seals. One of them had her legs crossed at the knee and she snapped her brightly embroidered sandal against the sole of her foot absentmindedly.
I had seen Frank give the seated bar girls a long look as we walked past. His face was hard and I turned away because I didn’t want to see the look in his eyes. He had once said to me, “Sometimes it’s hard not to see everyone as a target. I look at people and I realise that I’m just sighting the scope... you know, looking for a line of sight, calculating the wind speed, mentally taking the shot. It’s not a great way to live your life.” And I had nodded as though I understood.

When we had finished two glasses each we decided that it was time to head back home for our dinner. We stood up and walked to the door. As we passed their table one of the bar girls called out, “Hey boys, want a nice time?”

The other laughed. “One each? All four together? It’s no problem. Whatever you like.”

We ignored them and made our way to the door.

One of the girls leaned forward to light a cigarette. She said to her friend, “No room in the bed for us between those two,” and they both laughed dismissively while their eyes slid all over us like eels.

Frank muttered under his breath, “Silly cows.” And we laughed as we walked out the door but my face was hot.

When we got home my brother Han was sitting in the kitchen, waiting for us. Mai had made him a cup of coffee and he held it with both hands. Han was eight years older and, to me, had always been an adult. He had married a girl from another village when I was twelve but not long afterwards she had died in the birthing house, her fingers frozen into claws and her eyes rolled so far back that only the whites were visible. Their child had lived for three days. My mother had held him just once – she stroked his soft, limp fingers with one of her own and cradled his head against her breast. “He will be company for his mother in the next life, my son,” she said to Han. “His time on earth will come but that time is not now.”

Han had been coming to town more often lately and I asked him why but he just shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

“Little brother, some things are good to know and some things are best kept a secret. This is one of those things.”
Frank laughed. “The more secret the better. As far as I’m concerned you’re visiting town for a haircut and a shave.”

And both men laughed the same note like flutes.

Later that night when we had eaten, we sat on upturned crates in the small courtyard and watched the moon creep out from the dark harbour of the hills. Han lit his pipe with short sucking breaths, one hand wrapped around the bowl and in the other a match held downwards.

He said, “Last month a man limped into our village. His back was bent with age and up and down his arms were scars like half moons, some old and hardened into ridges, some red and still weeping.

"His clothes were so dirty it was hard to see what colour they might once have been and he had bound his feet with strips of cloth because he had no shoes. Many of his teeth were missing and his face was hollow beneath the cheekbones like someone who has been ill for a long time.

“The children of the village were the first to see him. They were frightened by his strangeness and by the tears on his cheeks. They followed him at a distance, quietly, not knowing what to make of him.

“Our brother’s wife, Kie, came out of their house and saw the children following the strange old man as he shuffled his way slowly across the village. She approached him and asked him if he was looking for someone.

“His voice was broken, barely more than a whisper. ‘Don’t you recognise me?’ he asked her.

“She looked at him and tried to see beneath the dirt and the rags and the missing teeth, because there was something familiar, something that she recognised about his voice. And then she began to cry because she did recognise him. Standing in front of her was the man who had once been headman of our village - her uncle.

“Nine years in a Saigon prison will change a man so that even his niece does not recognise him until after he speaks. You think that beneath the crust of filth and the half healed rat bites and the gluttonous lice that infest his body he will somehow be the same man, but the man that he was is gone forever and less than a shadow of him remains.
“He has spent the past three weeks sitting on a small stool in the sun. He follows the warmth, moving his chair from the east side of our house to the west as the day progresses. He watches the chickens and the children and smiles at the clouds as they move across the sky. Kie feeds and washes him as though he were an infant as he seems unable to feel hunger or to worry about keeping himself clean. Sometimes we hear him laughing to himself and yet sometimes his face is wet with tears. I don’t know what he is thinking but I do know that there is nothing left of the strong, wise man who used to lead our village.

“When I look at this old man I see the fate of all of my people. If the government have done this to him, they will do it to all of us. They don’t need to throw us into prison, they can make a prison out of rules. They can issue legislation, they can sell our land out from underneath us, they can ban us from using our language and stop us from teaching our children. And one day we will all be like the old man who sits in the sun. We will be like empty shells. And inside us there will be nothing left.

“I know that an uprising will achieve very little. But the government didn’t listen to us ten years ago and they aren’t going to listen to us now unless we make them. I know that men will die and that frightens me but I know that I would rather die with a gun in my hand than sitting on a small stool following the sun around the yard.”
Frank Dak Thay 1964

Dear Granddad,

Last week Mike Langley flew into town. He normally leaves about six weeks between visits and it was only the second week of January so I knew at the onset he wasn’t here to chew the fat and down a beer or two. He was all smiles and compliments, as if our last meeting had never occurred. He couldn’t stop telling me how impressed the guys in Saigon are with our work up here in the Highlands. He told me mine was a model operation and an inspiration for men all over Vietnam. I’m convinced he thinks I’m stupid, as nothing else would explain him thinking that I would swallow such an obvious load of bullshit. In Australia we’d say he was brown nosing but the Yanks have another way of putting it. They would say that he was blowing smoke up my arse. Actually, because they can’t speak English they’d say he was blowing smoke up my ass but you and I both know that I don’t own a donkey.

I have tried before to ask him about the South Vietnamese Government’s plans for the Highlands and the villagers’ discontent but he seems perfectly happy to brush the whole issue under the carpet. His attitude worries me because I’m sure he’s just parroting the same ideas as his superiors which means there’s no-one in Saigon who’s prepared to listen to the mountain people and, as Gran used to say, it’s going to end in tears.

Anyway Mike seemed determined to hang around for the night so we all had dinner back at the house. He talks about Saigon like everything that’s there exists only for the entertainment and enjoyment of the advisors. He raves about the French restaurants as though they are some kind of great achievement and not just the remnants of another mob of bastards who
thought they could run the country better than its owners. If you’ll excuse my language Granddad this country has been well and truly rooted by every country that’s taken an interest in her and I can’t see this little occupation ending well either.

Mike also hinted that he had inside information about the American involvement over here. He suggested that the Yanks are thinking about increasing their commitment and that we might see combat troops (as opposed to advisors) in Vietnam before too long. I don’t know, I think that’s just splitting hairs. Every serviceman over here is armed; in my mind that automatically makes them soldiers, no matter how much they insist on being called advisors.

Anyway, Minh and I got to hear about all the fine dining opportunities available to the hard working desk jockeys in Saigon. But it didn’t bother me. While it’s been a long time since I’ve had anything other than rice for breakfast I’m not one who lives for what’s in the tucker box. The local nosh is just fine by me. That’s not to say I wouldn’t love a decent steak and an icy cold Fosters right now, but I’m not losing any sleep over it. There’s a wild sort of cow called a gaur that lives in the bush over here and we occasionally have a feed of that, or a bit of water buffalo and that’s fine by me.

So, after boring us all night with talk about baguettes and bouillabaisse Mike waited till Minh had gone off to bed and then he reached into his pocket and brought out a photograph. My heart sank because although I knew that this moment would come, some small corner of me had hoped that maybe it wouldn’t. He made a big show of unfolding and smoothing the photo out on his knee, pressing the creases out with his fingernail over and over. He knew as well as I did
what was coming and how I felt about it, I think he just wanted to remind me who was running the show. He pushed the photo across the table towards me. For a second I thought about picking it up and playing the fool by pretending not to know what it was all about but that would only have delayed the inevitable. It was a black and white photograph with four fold creases across it. The photograph could have been taken in any Vietnamese town, dusty streets, bicycles and a skinny dog in the shade. There was a bloke on the street facing towards the camera, he looked to be about fifty or so. He was wearing a loose fitting tunic of open weave cloth over baggy pants and his head was shaven.

I did a double take and then said, “This is the part where you tell me it’s all been a really bad joke, isn’t it?” Mike smiled. “I’m sorry Frank, this is no joke. Don’t be fooled by the get up. You’re looking at one of the Viet Cong’s most trusted advisors.” I had another look at the photo. “So you’re telling me that this bloke is only dressed as a Buddhist monk for disguise?”

“No. He’s a monk alright but he moonlights as an agent for the Viet Cong.”

I started to speak but he held up his hand like a bloody traffic cop. “This is a decision that’s been made by the upper echelons of the military in Saigon. The same upper echelons that could move you out of here tomorrow and replace you with a more conventional soldier. Think about that before you speak next, Captain.”

Well Granddad, Langley’s got my nuts in a vice and he knows it. I can’t leave now – anyone who replaced me would simply run the men in the same way
indigenous soldiers are being run all over the Highlands – like sacrificial lambs. They try and turn them into conventional soldiers, waiting for a conventional battle. Leaving them to that would be the worst kind of betrayal.

Mike then said, “This man is located in a village about two hundred miles north east of here. We’ll send a helicopter to pick you up and your second will have the coordinates. Alternatively we can give the coordinates to you and you can take your translator as a second.”

The thought of dragging Minh into a sordid mission like this one made my blood run cold. So I said to him, “This situation is bad enough. I’m not going to make it worse by involving an innocent man. Send me an army second.”

He went on as though I hadn’t spoken. “Next week a plane will arrive in Dak Thay. On it will be the supplies you have ordered. The pilot will give you an envelope and in it will be more instructions. I can’t tell you more now as we have yet to finalise the details. However, I will say this. I know that you have ordered M14s for your men. Make sure you are proficient with that rifle to at least 350 yards. I doubt you’ll need much more information, after all, you are the expert.”

And then he reached over, took the photograph from my hand, flicked his lighter open and watched it burn.

Well Granddad, now I know what a whore feels like.

Frank.
Chapter Thirteen

In 1964 the tension between north and south grew, violence became more commonplace and death was no longer something that preyed only upon the young, the old and the unlucky. Weapons of all kinds became easier to find - in Dak Thay the black market for stolen weapons flourished. Guns stolen from dead Viet Cong soldiers could be sold in town for enough money to buy a buffalo or build a small house. The squat, Russian-made assault rifles were ugly but virtually indestructible and highly prized by the men that owned them.

Frank bought one of the Russian rifles from an old woman who swore that she had found the weapon discarded in the bush. The old woman's clothes were patched and the patches were patched and her bare feet and ankles so thin that they looked like chicken’s claws sticking out of the ends of her pants. Frank paid the woman her asking price without haggling but as she was leaving he said, “Aunty, while I am very happy to have this rifle, I'm frightened for your village. Killing soldiers for their weapons is a very dangerous pastime.”

The old woman wiped her nose slowly on the back of her hand while I translated. She said, “Last year our crops failed because the land is tired. We can't use our other fields, the lands that have been ours since the beginning of time, because the government has sold them to lowlanders. The money from the gun will buy enough rice to feed my people for two months, maybe more. I am old – if the soldiers come to my village I will tell them that it was me who killed their brother.”

“Aunty, if you sacrifice yourself in this way who will teach your people about the seasons and decide the best time to harvest? Who will look after the little ones and watch over the gods?”

“I cannot tell you the answer because I do not know. But I do know we have no more choices left to us.”

Frank looked at her. “If your young men come to work for me as soldiers there will be risks but I'll pay them and that money will help buy rice for
your village. When we have more men we will be able to send more patrols out to the area near your village and they will help keep you safe from the Viet Cong.”

The old woman looked at Frank. She had seen so many rainy seasons come and go that her eyes had faded to the rusty colour of a dry season well. “It’s true then what they say about you.”

“What do they say?” said Frank

“They say that you are different to the others, that you care about our people and understand our struggle. That you are almost one of us.”

Frank shifted his weight. “I don’t know about that, but you tell your young men to come and see me and we’ll try and work something out. Until then, you leave the Viet Cong alone, it’s too dangerous.”

Frank shook his head as the old woman walked slowly away. “I don’t know, Minh. We can help them in the short term but what happens when we decide to leave is anybody’s guess.” I frowned and he laid his hand on my arm. “But I don’t think we’re leaving any time soon – so we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

Every week, for as long as I could remember the villagers would go to town on Saturday to trade. The women would lay out embroidered jackets and thin brass bangles, baskets of eggs, bunches of vegetables and chickens, their feet tied with twine. The village men would stand around in groups of two and three smoking, talking about the harvest and the government. It was at the market that news was shared, births announced and deaths commiserated. It was also at the market, over several months, that plans for an uprising were made using a carefully rotating system of messengers from each village.

My mother had told me that Han was part of the planned uprising and she was worried. “A mouse cannot fight a tiger without being beaten,” she said to me. “He can hide from the tiger and he can outsmart him but he cannot fight him - his claws are too small and his teeth are like the tiny stings of a baby mosquito.”
“Yes, but Mother,” I said, “Han is clever. He wouldn’t start anything that he didn’t think he could finish. He is a good man and he won’t take unnecessary risks.”

And she looked at me and sighed. “Sometimes the mouse dreams of being a tiger. And sometimes, if he dreams for long enough he starts to believe it.”

I started to speak but she held up her hand.

“Han is a good man but he is a man.”

I said, “What difference does that make? Someone has to stand up to the government. Would you stand by and let them take our land away from us?”

“Minh, women don’t dream of fighting tigers. We dream of a place where our children can play. Where every night there is meat for the pot and so much rice that we can feed the chickens with what we leave. If we have that does it matter what language we speak? If we have that the government is unimportant.”

One night we received word that a village near the border with Cambodia had been over-run by Communists. Some of our men had family in the village and they were anxious to get there. Their hands moved from their pockets to their cigarettes to their pockets, their voices rose and fell. Frank squatted in the dust and listened to them. He took a stick and drew in the dirt.

“So, here’s your village, and then this is the mountain. Right?”

They clustered around the map, pointing.

“Here is where I killed a tiger the week before my son was born. No more than fifty paces from the well.”

“My father’s house is here, it is a big house with two fires.”

“Here there is always shade after midday on the east side of the village, beneath the flat topped hill.”

He listened to them and nodded, his face thoughtful. He drew the map on the ground and then drew it again, rubbing out lines and redrawing them until he was satisfied.
“We’ll take eight squads plus me, that’s sixty five men. Each squad will have a man from the village in it. We’re going to need to watch the village and get a handle on what’s going on, so we’ll get out there and under cover while it’s dark.”

Then he paused and looked at each man in turn.

“You’re going to have to wait. We can’t rush in there and risk civilian lives. You know the score with the Viet Cong - what you see might make the waiting hard. But you’ll do it. We’ll attack on my signal and not before.”

The men nodded.

“We leave in two hours.”

The men hurried off to get ready and Frank was left alone. He stared down at the lines in the sand, his head to one side, a crease between his eyes.

“Frank,” I said, “I’d like to come with you tonight.”

“Nah mate, you sit this one out.”

“Would I be in the way?”

“No, of course not, it’s just that this one might get messy. You came on board as a translator – you didn’t sign up for this.”

“But I want to come with you. The American units take translators into the field.”

“I know that and I understand how you feel, but I’d be a whole lot happier if I knew you were at home, safe.”

“And I’d be a whole lot happier if I could stay with you.”

He looked at me with a faint smile on his lips. Then he sighed and nodded slowly.

“I can see I’m not going to talk you out of this. So stick close to me and keep your head down.”

The village was small and tucked into the shelter of a hill. We settled into our positions in the dark and watched the dawn light creep up the neighbouring mountain. The air was still, the trees etched upon the sky as if on glass. From our position we could see the open area in the centre of the village and the largest longhouses with slivers of smoke rising into the quietness of morning.
Near a pig shelter made from boughs and scraps of tin lay the body of a man. He was curled on his side as if sleeping, his back towards us, his hair and the rough cotton of his clothes washed with mango-coloured light. I sensed but could not see the other men in position around us. Lying on the hard rocky soil beneath a spreading vine I wondered whose uncle, brother or father it was on the open ground in the village. Which of our men would be in position watching as the sun rose slowly on a familiar back or shoulder, watching the chickens scratch the broken ground near the body and breathing through despair, thick as bush honey?

All day we waited, our ribs bruised against the hard dirt. Frank did not give the order to attack until the shadows were lengthening towards the night.
We ran towards the village. I carried an M14 and the heavy rifle was light in my hands. Each moment stretched to breaking point, each second a snap shot of unbearable clarity. The air pumped into my lungs in clear, open streams. The sounds of gunfire, the smell of sweat and burning oil, my legs like a deer's beneath me.

It wasn’t until afterwards, when the bodies of eight Communists lay side by side on the edge of the village that my heart beat slowed and I realised that I had not fired a shot. I felt then the coolness of the afternoon, my empty stomach and the sour taste of thirst in my mouth.
Suddenly I was tired, my strength evaporated. I felt myself sagging, sweat prickled my skin and saliva filled my mouth. Frank was beside me then, his hand on my shoulder and his voice low.
“You did well back there, Minh. You did really well.”
“But,” I said. “I didn't do anything.”
“You stuck with me and you kept your head down and that's all you needed to do.”
“But I never fired my weapon.”
“That weapon's for defence. You're not here to fight. You're here to translate.”
“So why do I feel so…”
“Tired? Sick?”
I nodded.
“It happens to everyone, the first time. If you go and have a bit of a sit down it will pass.” And he smiled as he turned to walk away.
“Frank,” I said to his back, “Next time I promise I’ll be of more use to you.”
He turned and walked back towards me.
“Minh, look around you, there are blokes with guns everywhere. Can you see another translator anywhere around here? Can you see anyone who would be able to do half the stuff that you can?”
“But...” I said
“Alright,” he said. “Do you really want to know how to be of use to me, Minh?”
I nodded.
“Then stay alive and stick with me, because I really need you.”
And he looked at me and said, “If you went and got yourself killed what would I do, Minh?” He put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close. Through his cotton shirt I could feel the heat of his body and the span of his ribs against mine. He paused for an instant and I felt him take a breath. Then he smiled, “And more importantly, who would fetch my smokes? Now go and have a sit down before you fall over, you silly bugger.”
Later, as we drove the truck home through a shadowed evening as deep and blue as a bruise Frank, who had been silent for several miles, turned to me and said, “It stirs things up – combat. It brings up to the surface things that you think you’ve forgotten.” He wound down the window, “And that’s not always easy, Minh.”
I found it hard to believe that there would ever be room in my mind for anything other than the stream of images that had played themselves out over and over since the morning – a barrage of sounds and smells, light and dark that excluded all else.
“You know, I’m not sure what I’d do without you to talk to,” said Frank and his face was still. Then he smiled slowly and said, “Drink more beer I suspect.” I laughed, “Or maybe you could talk to the cat?” Frank reached
over and pushed my shoulder with his palm. “And end up scratched to ribbons? No thank you. I guess I’ll just have to keep you around.”

We drove in easy silence. Frank lit a cigarette and blew the smoke upwards. “You know, I’ve got this one memory that keeps playing itself out in my head, over and over.” He drummed his fingers on the wheel. “I can’t get rid of it. There’s no rhyme or reason, but I just can’t shake it. I don’t know why.”

“When I was sixteen I was pretty awkward – all knees, elbows and anger. I spent more time nicking off from school than actually sitting at a desk. I suppose I was just biding my time till I was old enough to leave. My dad was dead and my mum had gone AWOL but my grandparents were there for me – old enough to seem permanent but a pretty steady foundation for a young bloke with a bit of a chip on his shoulder. When Gran got sick it didn’t seem quite real. I didn’t think she was dying till right at the end, till they stuck her in the hospital and I realised she wasn’t walking out of there on her own.

“The local hospital was more like a prison in those days. I can still picture the walls, a sort of grey-green – the colour of nausea. And lino with a swirl pattern that looked like vomit and the smell – even through the antiseptic you could smell the fear and the pain. I remember they stuck Gran down the end of the big public ward, out of the way with the rest of the hopeless cases. I used to go in after school and Granddad would be there, sitting on the edge of her bed holding her hand or reading to her from one of the romance books she liked so much. Sometimes she’d sleep and those were the best times because when she was awake all she did was hurt. In the beginning she tried to cover it but in the last weeks she would cry and rock her head on the pillow, side to side until she matted up all her hair at the back.

“‘Hush, pet,’ he’d say to her, his hands on her shoulders and on her face, gentling and soothing her like he did when he was bridling the young horses for the first time.
“Take me home,’ she begged, grasping at his arm. ‘Take me home, please. They won’t let me go here. I want to see my garden again and my house. Make them let me go.’

"And his face carved into solid lines and in his hands the sinews standing up like wires. Then one day I got there and he was cradling her in his arms. She was shaking and her hands were clawing the air and she looked like she was struggling to breathe past the pain. He was crying then, the tears shiny on his cheeks and his voice ground down to just a whisper. When he saw me he strode off down the hall, his boots clattering on the lino. By the time he found the doctor he had a full head of steam up and he must have looked eight feet tall in his work shirt with the sleeves rolled and his mended paddock jeans. I scurried off after him and heard everything he said.

“‘She wants to go home to die, and that’s where I’m taking her. Don’t try to stop me because you can’t and what’s more, you’ll regret trying.’ The doctor tried to placate him and explained that they needed to control her pain.

“‘Listen to me,’ he said and he bent down and looked into the Doctor’s face. ‘I’ve served my country and I’ve seen plenty of men die and I’m telling you that if you can take a man whose legs have been blown off in battle and give him enough morphine so that he goes to his maker calm and peaceful then you can damn well sort out the last few hours of a beautiful woman who never hurt anything’. And then he clapped one of his big, work stained hands on the doctor’s shoulder and steered him towards Gran’s bed. The doctor must have realised how serious he was because he summoned a nurse who came running with a fistful of syringes filled with clear liquid.

“‘Give her one of these every two hours and if she is still alive tomorrow you can come back for more,’ said the doctor before he turned on his heel and walked off with as much of his dignity as he could muster.

“Granddad reached down and picked up Gran, bedclothes and all. He held her head to his chest and dipped his face down towards hers. ‘It’s ok now, pet, we’re going home.’

“She died two days after, but she had heard the magpies carolling at dusk for one last time and watched the shadows lengthen through the
wisteria. He used as many of the syringes as it took to keep her comfortable, slipping them into what was left of the withered flesh on her thigh with a touch that was impossibly light for his big-knuckled hands.”

Frank’s voice was like a small boat running aground – a low grating sound then silence. He looked out the window with glassy eyes. And in my chest the tide coming in, slow and creeping coldly.
Frank, Dak Thay 1964

Dear Granddad,

Well, Mike Langley was true to his word. Sent a chopper to pick me up and some bloke to babysit me – a real US army type with a crew cut and pressed jungle fatigues. All spit and polish and no soul.

We headed out into the mountains and after a while the pilot brought the bird down in a clearing. The army bloke, who wore no patches and who never bothered introducing himself, gave me some coordinates and said, “It is now 1100 hours. The village is just over two miles north east of here. There is only one road in and your target will be on it, on his way back to town, in an hour. Do your job and get back here quickly, the chopper won’t wait for you. It leaves at 1230.”

I grabbed my rifle and a water bottle and was heading out when he said, “And soldier, don’t forget to pick up your brass.” As if I would leave a trail of shell casings behind me like a rank amateur.

It crossed my mind at that point Granddad that I could put him down with just one shot. A normal man might have. A normal man might have cut a deal with the pilot, flown the bird to Phnom Penh or Bangkok, sold it and split the profits. But a soldier’s not a normal man, he’s a body waiting for an order. So I just smiled and trotted off into the bush like a good little lap dog.

I knew I was going to really have to get moving after the job was done as I’d have to cover two miles in half an hour and that’s not always easy in the scrub but I believed him when said that the chopper wouldn’t wait. Anyway, I knew that it was quite likely to be a posse of locals on my tail which is as good an incentive for a run as any.
I found the village with no problems, it was a perfect day for it — no wind, but enough cloud to deepen the shadows. I never let myself think when I’m on a mission like this. I mean, when you say to yourself, here I am deep in Viet Cong territory, miles from any help and about to piss off a dozen armed men, you start thinking about all the things you haven’t done yet with your life and that’s distracting. I trust my training and my instincts to bring me home and try to hush up the voice in my head that’s screaming, “This is a suicide mission!”

Anyway, the job went off without a hitch. I found a good vantage point and from it I could see the village and the road leading in. I took the man out and was probably a mile through the scrub before the locals realised what was going on and started out after me. On paper a man wearing army boots, carrying a 9 pound rifle and running through ankle-breaking scrub should be kind of slow but in reality Roger Bannister never went faster. Especially once the bullets started slapping into the trees around me. I don’t think I was in any danger of being hit but the villagers could hear me running and were spraying some bullets around just in case one got lucky.

I made it back to the chopper with three minutes to spare. They already had her fired up and ready to go, so I guess they weren’t joking about leaving me.

It took me a good few minutes to catch my breath and by that time we were up and away. It was so noisy in that Bell helicopter that I couldn’t have held a conversation even if I’d wanted to, which I didn’t. I spent the ride home wondering if there was a special place in hell for hired killers and asking myself what the bloody hell I’m doing here.
You know Granddad, all my life I wanted to join the army. I grew up on your stories of the light horse in Egypt and Dad’s of New Guinea. The excitement and the honour of serving your country and the feeling of a job well done, despite the risks. But honour is pretty thin on the ground out here and I’m not sure this is a job that deserves to be done well.

I’ve worn this uniform for so long I’m beginning to dream in khaki.

Love,

Frank.
Chapter Fourteen

Frank returned home from Langley’s mission. He didn’t watch the chopper that delivered him rise into the air or smile at the children playing in the dust beside the office. He walked as though his shoulders were too heavy for his back and his hands hung loosely at his sides. When he got closer I could see that his skin had the slick of dry sweat on it and the edges of his lips ringed white.

“Let’s go home, Minh,” he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. “I’m sick to death of this fucking war.”

I climbed into the driver’s seat of the truck. We drove in silence and after a few miles I realised that he was asleep – his head loose against the seat and the breath rolling in the top of his throat. I had never seen him sleeping and I was worried, my heart screwed up inside my chest.

As we pulled into the driveway he sat up blinking and stretched. He yawned and said, “A day like today calls for a celebratory beer... Or two... Or maybe even ten.” He paused with his hand on the latch. “Let’s celebrate life shall we, Minh? Or to be more exact, let’s celebrate my life.” He nodded slowly. “Because tonight some poor bastard is without his – and it’s because of me.” He walked into the house and opened a brown bottle of the local brew. Wiping his forehead on his sleeve he raised his arm in the air. “To the fucking war!” And drained the beer without once taking his lips from the bottle. He passed me a bottle and opened another.

We sat outside in the gathering darkness and watched the stars follow the moon into the sky. Frank looked upwards and sighed, “My Gran used to say, ‘There will be signs in the sun and the moon and the stars, and on the earth distress.’ I think it’s from the Bible... I’ve never been really sure what it means but it sounds right.” He rocked back on his chair and lit a cigarette, his bare feet on the verandah rail and his cotton shirt undone. “There's distress on the earth, that’s for sure. Plenty of distress.” In the low light I could see the shadow of his ribs and dark curls of sparse hair on his chest.
Stars filled the sky and empty bottles collected under Frank’s chair. Eventually he got to his feet, his eyes slow to focus, his body swaying gently. “It appears that I’ve drunk myself sober, my friend. And tonight that’s not a good thing.” He took a step and stumbled slightly. “Well, perhaps, I’m not quite as sober as I’d thought.” Putting out his hand he steadied himself against the wall. “But, then again, I’m not nearly as drunk as I’d hoped.”

I stood up and pulled his arm across my shoulders to steady him. “Let’s get you into bed, Frank, it’s been a long day.” We shuffled sideways through the narrow door and down the hallway to Frank’s room. He stopped in the doorway, head bowed forwards, his eyes half-closed. He turned his face towards mine and I could feel his breath on my cheek. “Minh,” he said slowly, and the word dissolved into sadness in his mouth.

I put my arms around him and pulled his body against mine. There were no spaces between us and he drew a breath that shook his ribs from the inside. I closed my eyes and a coldness in my chest like I was swimming underwater. “Minh,” he said again and I lifted my face to look at him. His eyes were dark and I could smell the day on him, the heat beneath the fine skin of his chest. My hands pressing on his back, and my heart beating in my ears.

For a moment we were both still. Then his lips against mine. The warm pressure of his mouth and the taste of his breath on my tongue. Up close his lashes were thick and his skin like amber. I wanted to close my eyes but the light was in his hair and on the curve of his cheek and I could not bear to lose sight of him. We moved to the bed without letting go of each other. In the low light there were deep shadows beneath his ribs and the skin of his belly fine and pale. In the bends of his elbows and at his neck the skin was soft and smelt like bread dough, newly risen. My breath high and fast, as though I was running.

Later, as dawn pinked the shadows I lay beside him and watched his chest rise and fall. My body fit within the angles of his – each breath that he took felt drawn from my own lungs. I fell asleep with his leg across mine and woke only when the sun slanted in through the open window. The bed was
cool and empty. I opened my eyes. Frank was dressed, standing in the doorway with his eyes on mine.

“Minh, I’m so sorry,” he said.

I sat up, shaking my head. “Sorry for what?”

“For last night,” he said and closed his eyes. “I can’t talk about it. I can’t bear to. I just want you to know that I’m sorry. It will never happen again.” He opened his eyes and stared at me. “Please, Minh. You’re my best friend—help me. Pretend that last night never happened.”

I nodded slowly.

In our village, life went on as it had for generations. I visited my family less and less frequently and their lives came to seem strange. When I first left the village it seemed to me as though I had stalled and their lives were progressing, but gradually I came to believe that village life was the stagnant pool and mine the flowing torrent.

It seemed to me that in the village they yoked their days to the weather and the seasons, forever casting their eyes towards the sky. My sisters, as fecund as the warm soil after rain, were permanently anchored by the weight of infants—either suckling at their breasts or swelling beneath the smooth skin of their bellies. My mother was a grandmother many times over and at night her hands, like magpies drawing worms from the soil, drew thread and soft cloth together into tiny handstitched clothes.

Han seemed to me to be the only other member of our family who had not folded his life in around the village like a flower at night time, petals closed around the stamen. If I tried to speak of the outside world with my sisters their brows clenched and they shook their heads as if trying to dislodge my words from their ears. My mother was eager for news of the outside world but all news seemed to her to be an omen of ill fortune and her inability to see an American victory as inevitable maddened me.
“But Mother,” I said to her, “if the Americans fully commit to our struggle the North Vietnamese will cower their way back to Hanoi like mongrel dogs.”

And she looked at me in silence, watching my face with her quick, clever eyes.

“Mother, it’s hard for you to understand these things, living as you do in this small village. But I have seen things and I know that the Americans have more might in their little fingers than Ho Chi Minh has in his whole entire army. The Americans cannot lose.”

She looked at me with her head held slightly to the side and said, “As you know, in our village we do not keep elephants. The ability to master the most mighty and beautiful of all the mountain’s creatures belongs only to certain tribes and they do not share their knowledge willingly. They pass their secret trade from father to son. They know these animals like their own children, they dream of them. To wear bracelets made from the hair of their tails is the highest honour.

“Every few years these people must trap new elephants, so they set off into the bush to catch one. For several weeks before they set off they pray to the mountain princess and make sacrifices to many different gods so that their hunt may be successful. From the backs of tame elephants they track a wild herd through the forest, watching it closely and over many days choosing an animal that will be suitable for their village. They want one that is young, but not still dependent on its mother. One that is strong but not unwise.

“When they have chosen an animal they move in amongst the herd on their own mounts and catch the elephant around with ropes. It fights but they have many tame elephants and many ropes and it is soon exhausted. “The new elephant is tied between two trees and small fires are lit in a circle around it. They put green branches on the fires and the tethered elephant struggles to breathe through the thick grey smoke that they make. They take it in turns to beat the elephant with sharp sticks both night and day, over and over until the elephant is covered with hundreds of small, bleeding wounds. Many days pass in this fashion and when their captive is almost
dead with fear and exhaustion they tie it between their two strongest elephants and drag it through the forest until it learns to follow along beside them without fighting. When its will has been broken, it is tame and they lead it back to the village.”

I sighed with frustration. “Mother, I know this to be true, but the American army is not an elephant and the North Vietnamese are not going to wear them down by beating them with sticks and surrounding them with fire.”

“Minh, my son, the world is not as simple as you see it. What do the Americans know about our country? They are big but, like the elephant, they will give up in the end.”

I saw then that she would not be persuaded and I put my arm over her shoulders. “Mother, in the village you can explain life by watching the plants and the animals but the world of men is a bigger world and it has its own rules.”

“I know about the world of men and its rules, son. But this is not a time for those rules.” She stroked my hand where it lay on her shoulder then turned and gave me a small fierce hug, her smooth cheek against my chest. “I know about your man Frank.”

My heart beat faster but I smiled. “What do you mean?”

“Inside him there’s a place where it’s cold. He feels it, and he doesn’t know what to do. But you, you’re different. You’re warm through. Like me.”

Then she smiled and continued with her chores. With her back to me she bent over the cooking fire and I heard her grumbling softly to herself.

“Men,” she snorted, “so strong and yet so stupid.”

Every time I went back to my village I would stop at the small, wooden school – to visit with Mrs Tanner, to listen to the children reading and to breathe the familiar smell of books and chalk dust. The Reverend and Mrs Tanner had been in our village for many years. By day their work was with the children and they schooled in them a neatly flowing script, an ability to
multiply fractions and a knowledge of the Declaration of Independence. In the evenings they spent their leisure hours on a translation of the gospels.

One day a letter arrived. It came in a stiff white paper envelope with the emblem of a dove embossed in silver on the top left corner. "Dear Reverend Tanner," the letter began, "It has been decided that in light of the rapidly developing conflict in Vietnam, non-essential missionary staff will be withdrawn from rural areas to safer, urban centres. In the future it is possible that staff may be withdrawn from Vietnam entirely if the church deems that their presence constitutes an unnecessary risk."

The Tanners received the news with great sadness but they knew that any protests would be futile. I was in the village that weekend and spent some time with Mrs Tanner and the younger children. "I hope that one day it will be His will that we be allowed to continue with our life’s mission and complete the translation of the Gospels for the Dega people," she said. "I know that we will be able to do His work in Saigon but the Gospels are so close to my heart. You know, Minh, to know Jesus is to love Him. And for me the Gospels are the best way to get to know Him."

The Tanner’s church advised them to choose one of their former students to run the school until they could return. Nhung and I had grown up together, she was two years older than me and almost as eager for Mrs Tanner’s praise. As our school years progressed we developed a rivalry based on admiration and respect. My English speaking skills and my knowledge of history were greater than hers but her handwriting was beautiful and she had a very good head for figures. We were often together, helping the younger children or receiving extra work from Mrs Tanner.

One day when I was fourteen and Nhung was sixteen there was a terrible accident. Our village had an old and temperamental generator that took two men to refuel. Most of the village men would shut it down but Nhung’s father was hurrying that day, hoping to get a ride to the market with his brother-in-law and he called his daughter over to help. The family thanked their ancestors for the good fortune that turned Nhung’s father away from the generator, coughing, at the instant it exploded. That it was
Nhung and not one of her brothers that had been standing close by, watching.

The explosion blew the roof off the pump house, burned the shirt from Nhung's father's back and the hair off his head. The screams of the girl were heard by hunters an hour's walk away and so badly was she damaged that her mother did not recognise her as she lay writhing in the dirt, her face blackened. For many weeks my mother tended to Nhung's wounds with bark compresses and ancient songs while her family kept her alive with broth squeezed from a cloth into her mouth. Her survival seemed impossible and yet day by agonising day she improved, her hearing returned and her wounds covered over with new skin.

Although Nhung had survived her face was pitted and ridged with shiny scars that drew her mouth down, wetly at the corners. The heat of the explosion had fused the fingers on her left hand together so that it resembled the shrivelled fin of something that swam in the very deepest stretches of the ocean. The heat of the explosion also burned her lungs and she coughed and rasped like an old man lighting the first pipe of the day. Nhung's family was large, with many daughters, and the small stipend she would receive from the church as a teacher would free her from dependence.

The Tanners' goodbye ceremony was planned for many days. Although they tried gently to discourage the practice of animal sacrifices and preached temperance it was decided by the villagers that a water buffalo would be sacrificed and many jars of rice wine opened. Han told Frank and me about the planned festivities on one of his visits to town.

"You will both be coming of course," he said, as though there were no alternatives. "And I would consider it as a favour Frank, if any of your men that grew up in our village or attended the mission school could come as well."

Frank nodded his agreement, smiling.

"Are you sure that there isn't another member of my staff that you'd like to invite, Han?"
Han laughed. “Mai doesn’t work at night or on Sundays, so I didn’t feel as if I needed your permission to ask her. But you’re right, Mai and her family will be coming as my guests.”

We arrived in the village as the ceremony was about to begin. Everyone had gathered in the centre of the village where a glossy brown buffalo was tethered to a pole, anxiously churning the soil at his feet. He dragged at his short tether and bent his sinewy neck, chuffing through wet nostrils, trying to catch sight of the rest of the herd. His tail flicked from side to side and he grunted and sniffed the air, dark eyes rolling with fear.

As the light began to fade two men approached the buffalo from opposite directions, one walking towards his head carrying a large wooden bowl and the other towards the rump. The buffalo paused momentarily, his attention caught by the man in front. The buffalo stretched out his head and his tongue brushed over his lips, tasting the air hopefully. The man behind rushed forward. With two quick strikes he severed the thick ridged tendons on the back of each of the buffalo’s hind legs. A grunt of expelled air, a thud, and the buffalo’s hind legs folded, his quarters slumped to the ground. His neck bulged, veins rising beneath the skin like thick rope. The man with the bowl stepped forward and slit the thickest vein across. He held out a bowl to catch the dark stream.

The buffalo began to struggle, shaking his head, the heavy muscles of his chest straining and the tendons of his front legs taut beneath the glossy skin. Heavy droplets of hot blood splashed his hooves and the ground below. When the wooden bowl was full the man pulled a long knife from his belt. He pressed the tip against the skin of the buffalo’s barrel chest, and then, with the weight of his body behind it, thrust it between the ribs. The blade of the knife disappeared. The buffalo gasped, a sudden and futile intake, and then his front legs spasmed stiffly and he died.

The blood was shared out amongst the people. Sipping from the edge of the bowl we tasted the brackish, metallic liquid thickening in the cool night air, coating our lips and chins. I passed the bowl to Frank who tasted from its edge and then passed the bowl on. He bent towards me and in a voice that only I could hear said,
“I think I’ll give the second helpings a miss, thanks Minh. Might get myself a beer instead.”

I laughed. “You Australians are so squeamish. And we haven’t even bitten off the chickens’ heads yet.”

I sensed him stiffen slightly beside me and he turned to look into my face.

“All joking, Frank.” I laughed. “What do you think we are, savages or something?”

“You got me there, you bastard,” he laughed quietly as he wiped his mouth with the back of his arm. “I suppose it wasn’t too bad really. Kind of like a rare steak, without the steak.”

While the buffalo was being butchered and laid on the smokey cooking fires some of the older women in our village prepared the jars of rice wine. Every family had its own jars, made from the red clay at the bottom of the river. The women made the milky wine and kept the jars full for celebrations and feast days.

Rice was always women’s work. In twos and threes the women would hull enough for each day, taking it in turns to pound the grain with pestles in a rhythm that was as old as the setting sun. As each grew tired they would pause to winnow the grain, flicking it upwards until the air around their heads was golden with floating husks and rice dust.

To make rice wine they needed to hull enough rice for their families and then that much again. They cooked the rice with some of the discarded husks and a handful of herbs. Then, with special words and ancient songs the pot was scraped into one of the rice wine jars, some water was added and the jar was made airtight with a thick plug of fresh, green leaves. The jar was left in a corner of the longhouse for as long as it took for beans to grow over a fence and then it was ready. The smell was sharp and pinched high up in your nose, under the bone. The taste would change according to each woman’s recipe but most were hot on the tongue with a sweetness after swallowing that was something like over-ripe fruit.

On feast days, when the leaves were taken out of the rice wine jar the pigs in the pen below the longhouse would squeal and push their noses hard up against the wooden gate, snuffling and waiting. Not only would they get
to eat the lid of leaves but also, at the end of the night, the fermented rice from the bottom of the jar. In my memory festivals and feasts were always accompanied by the squeals of pigs as they waited for their share of the wine. When I was a child I would look forward to watching the pigs cross their pen in hazy, zigzagging paths almost as much as the special food that was served by the village women. It was not my favourite drink but it was such a part of my childhood – the smell, the memory and the rituals that surrounded it were part of me.

I took Frank's arm and pulled him to where some of the village women were opening up the jars of wine. We watched as they took big handfuls of leaves, pushing them to the bottom of each jar, packing them in tightly, their hands stained with green.

I leaned over to Frank. “The leaves will act as a sieve, just in case there’s insects and things at the bottom of the jar.” Frank raised an eyebrow. “That’s good to know. A real comfort.”

The women upended the jars and poured milky liquid into clay cups. I took two and passed one to Frank, grinning. He raised his glass to mine and said, “Bottoms up!” We drank through thick, bamboo straws, sharp, sweetness on the tongue and a tingling warmth in the throat.

As a visitor Frank was expected to drink first. He was also expected to drink freely and deeply. In the mountains a man who could not take many cups of rice wine was considered to be not much of a man, but I didn’t tell this to Frank.

He took his first sip of wine and smiled, nodding and smiling to the people around him. I spoke quietly in his ear.

“Try not to act too surprised if you get a maggot in your drink. They’re perfectly harmless and it’s believed that they bring good luck.”

“This party just keeps on getting better,” he laughed quietly. “If there’s any other weird stuff coming, let me know now. You know, clear the air.”

“I think that’s about it for now,” I said. “Although I haven’t introduced you to the Tanners yet. It’s possible that they’ll see you as being personally responsible for Ho Chi Minh’s actions. But I’m sure you’ve faced worse.”
As it was the Tanners were polite and careful. Mrs Tanner excused herself at about nine o’clock and the Reverend not much later. He shook Frank’s hand as he was leaving and bent towards his ear.

“There’s a rumour going around Saigon that Johnson’s going to get serious. They reckon there will be thousands of combat troops over here by this time next year. Do you know anything about that?”

Frank smiled and said, “If they’re sending combat troops over here Sir, they haven’t told me anything about it yet. I’m just a Captain, I expect to be the last to know.” But I noticed that once the Reverend had left, Frank’s face was thoughtful.

Cups of rice wine were passed around and the fires threw elongated shadows against the walls. The largest longhouse in the village filled with people and the talk flowed and filled the warm, still air. We ate when the buffalo was cooked, tearing the meat from the bones with our teeth, our faces shiny with fat in the yellow fire light.

Frank sat on the floor amongst a crowd. Although not perfect he could speak enough of our language to be understood and in the dense pack of bodies, children yelling and the sounds of the celebration, he seemed at ease. The night progressed and many jars of wine were opened.

Han sat with Mai. I watched him speaking to her, his hands quiet, his voice soft as though gentling a wild bird blown from its nest. She hid her mouth behind her hands and watched the floor. He told her about the village and his words made pictures that hung in the air around them. She laughed a little and her eyes sought his face. She spoke, her hands light like butterflies. She laid one quickly against the taut skin of his arm. Her small neat teeth reflected the fire light.

The warmth, the light, the smoke. The warm sweetness rising behind my eyes. The edges of everything closing in like a wound healing. I was the centre around which the room turned. Everything else I watched as though on old film, the images staccato, the edges blurred. I spoke to people and watched their mouths as they spoke back. Their lips moving smoothly, their faces soft in the velvet shadows. My body was light, my chest open. I smiled,
I laughed. I loved the sounds of people's voices, the smell of roast meat and tobacco and the feel of rough planks beneath my feet.

The fires burned lower, the crowd thinned. Children slept against the legs of their parents or in corners, pressed against the wall. My sisters carried their babies home, the older children trailing sleepily behind them. Eventually Mai and her family left and soon only a handful of villagers smoked, staring into the fire and talking in voices furred and soft with wine. Frank stood up and braced himself against the wall with an outstretched arm.

“I think we should bid these people good night, Minh, don’t you?” he said, speaking slowly and carefully, rolling each word like a smooth river pebble around in his mouth.

“An excellent idea,” I said, my whole body smiling. “But first I must say good night to my mother and my uncles.”

A just-hatched chick has more control over its legs than I did. My feet felt as though they had shrunk. My knees were unreliable. I made my way unsteadily to where my mother sat, her hand cupped around the bowl of the pipe she smoked on special occasions. Across the room I could see Han talking to Frank. Frank was nodding, swaying and Han spoke with urgency his face close. I hugged my mother and made my way back towards Frank. Han nodded to me and gently wrapped his work-hard hand around the top of my upper arm.

“Good night to you, my not-so-little brother. Tomorrow's sore head will remind you of the fun you had tonight. Take it easy, ok.”

The moon hung thick and fat in the sky and blue shadows lay in the dust at our feet. We climbed into the truck and Frank peered at the dashboard through narrowed eyes.

“God, I can’t see the bloody keys. Can you see them Minh? Where did I leave the keys?”

I laid my cheek against the cold glass of the window and closed my eyes to see if darkness would stop the world from rolling around in my head.
“Bloody hell, either that rice wine's got a kick like a mule or I've gone soft. I can't find the keys. Hell, I can’t even find the bloody ignition.”

I could hear him patting his pockets, fumbling.

“I can’t find my keys. Can’t find my smokes. Bloody hell, I’m useless.”

I heard him sigh and I opened one eye. His elbows rested on the steering wheel and he held his head with both hands. I closed my eye and lay still, concentrating on keeping the world and my stomach upright.

“You asleep, Minh?”

I shut my eye to keep the world still and stayed silent.

“Well, we might just have to sit here a while. Just until I get my bearings. I wouldn’t want to drive the truck into a bloody tree. Or run into a patrol.”

I could hear his breath against the skin of his forearm. From outside came the sounds of night birds and dark-winged insects. Frank sighed deeply and the exhalation was ragged at its edge.

“Minh,” he said, “are you asleep?”

I was silent, my eyes closed.

A little while later he spoke quietly and in his voice a tremor like a rock breaking the surface of a pond.

“This bloody country ... I never know whether to laugh or cry. It's like one of those antiques they try to flog you in the market ... If you squint it looks great but up close you can see the peeling paint and the joints gone all brittle with age. You can smell the wood-rot that three coats of new paint can’t hide. And nobody’s trying to fix it. Underneath the shiny surface ... it’s all shit.

”It’s like your brother, he’s a good bloke. He’s a really good bloke. But he’s gone and got himself mixed up with this bloody Dega revolution and it’s not good. It’s going to end badly. What do they think the government’s going to do about their piss weak revolution? The government won’t lose this one, not in the end. They’ll kill as many of the Dega as they need to and they’ll be happy to do it. And then who’s going to bring the crop in, Minh? Who’s going to hunt for the families and dig the wells and build the long houses?

”And in the long run it won’t matter how much the Dega do or don’t achieve because Ho Chi Minh is still going to march the NVA straight down
the guts of this country and waltz right into Saigon. And then the Dega will be truly stuffed. What do you think those Commies are going to think of the Dega demands for land and their own legal system? They'll be laughing all the way to the gas chambers or the firing squad or whatever it is that blokes like that use when they've got a difference of opinion to sort out. This country is so big and so wild that they could fill up ten thousand acres with the graves of your people and no-one would ever find them.

“And God help us all if the Americans send combat troops, because it's just going to prolong the pain – like tearing off a sticking plaster hair by hair. The Americans won't win. It's impossible. This terrain on its own is worth a million men. If the Protestant minister of a piss ant town in the middle of the boondocks has heard rumours that they're sending combat troops, there's probably a degree of truth in it. And it makes sense because this has always felt like a testing-the-waters kind of mission to me. They couldn't beat the Japs so they nuked them – there's no prizes for guessing what might happen here.

“It's a bloody disaster. It's like a truck out of gear on a gravel hill. It's rolling out of control and there's nothing, not a damn thing I can do about it. I'd walk away. I tell you I'd walk away tomorrow if I could. I love this place but, at the end of the day, these aren't my people and this isn't my war.

“But I can't leave here, Minh. I can't pack up and walk away. There's a big part of me that wants to bolt out of here and never look back. Settle down on the farm – live a normal life. It's the part of me that's hanging on to home. The things I remember, the details. The way I used to see things, the way I used to feel. But I'm not leaving here. Because there's a bigger part of me that doesn't want to leave. I've thought this through over and over. I don't want to leave here, Minh. And I don't want to leave here because I can't bear the thought of leaving you.”

He took a deep breath that caught in his throat and I lay very still. I could hear the sound of my own breath and though my head burned where it pressed against the glass I didn't move.

“You're the best friend I've ever had, Minh. But I'm pretty damn sure that what's between us is more than just friendship. I need to look at you. I need
to touch you. When we’re together, my body knows where your body is. What happened the other night... I’m so ashamed of myself. But I can’t stop thinking about it. Remembering it.

“I keep asking myself why I feel this way. I’ve chased it around and around in my head till I think I’m going mad. And I don’t understand it – because the only answer that makes any sense is that I’m in love with you.”

It was dawn when I awoke and we were driving. The sun was forcing shards of light under my eyelids and my head bumped against the seat. Frank had the window down and the smell of his cigarette filled the cab. I put my hands around my head and groaned.

“Big night, hey Minh,” he said.

I nodded and wound down the window to gulp at the cold air outside. Even with the cold wind on my face my body was varnished with sweat. I cleared my dried up throat.

“I’ll have to take your word for that, Frank, because I can’t remember much after they opened the fifth jar.”

I leaned my head against the window frame and though the sunlight burned against my lids and my stomach rose into my throat at every bump, I still felt like smiling.
Frank, Dak Thay 1964

Dear Granddad,

When things go seriously wrong the Americans have an expression that paints a pretty good picture of total chaos. You wouldn’t use it in polite company but out here it seems to fit like a glove. They say ‘the shit has hit the fan’. Well Granddad, I have a feeling that shit and fans are going to collide on a large scale in the Highlands in the next few weeks.

A heap of the locals, including Minh’s brother Han, have got it into their heads that the only way to make the government sit up and listen is through some kind of armed rebellion. They’ve been cooking up a scheme to take over the Highlands by attacking and then occupying the government buildings in the towns. The government is somewhat distracted at the moment because of the Communist presence so near to town and the blokes figure this will make it easier to persuade them to negotiate. My personal opinion is that the government, already on high alert, will over-react to any armed uprising and use the deteriorating political situation to justify an excessive use of force. Which means I think the villagers are going to get their arses kicked, well and truly.

This whole thing has been brewing for years but until recently I thought it was just the rice wine talking. You know, the way disgruntled blokes will talk it up when they’ve had a couple. But now they’ve gone and set a date, so it’s real. They have weapons, though I’m not sure how many, a few vehicles and, I’m guessing, well over four hundred men. I reckon that some of my men have signed on but the revolution is going to have to do without them. They are going to find themselves way out in the scrub and a good many miles from town when the big day comes. I need all
hands on deck for the real fight – the one against the
Commies – and I don’t fancy the thought of losing good
men to a hopeless cause.

Han’s gone out a long way out on a pretty shaky
limb to keep me informed, so I can’t violate his trust
by doing anything on my own to squash this thing, even
though I’d like to. I’m pretty sure his motivation for
talking to me stems from trying to keep his little
brother well away from the action. Mama still well and
truly rules the roost in their family. She’s a
pacifist and would be none too pleased if her precious
youngest child got caught up in his older brother’s
shenanigans.

Anyway, it’s just a matter now of wait and see
what happens. I hope I’m wrong of course, I hope the
revolution goes off without a hitch and that the
villagers get everything they’re asking for. It’s not
much by our standards – the right to own their farm-
lands, the right to school their children in their own
language and to manage their own judicial system. The
sorts of things we take for granted. But these people
have almost no rights and they’re hurting.

Life out here is raw. They really live each day
as though there may not be many more to come.
Sometimes this makes them seem like children and at
others like the wisest people I’ve ever met. I’m not
sure I’m being terribly clear, so here’s an example.
Han has just asked our housekeeper Mai to marry him
and she has accepted. At home we would wait. We would
wait to see if the war ended or the revolution failed
or for the crops to get better or to save enough money
for a fancy white wedding. But not here. He’s going to
take her home to a thatched hut in a bare dirt village
and a week or so after that he’s going to fight in a
half arsed revolution that may or may not kill him. In
the west we would look at that and see it as somehow naïve or primitive. But it’s not primitive, it’s real. They have found each other and that’s it. There’s no time to wait around in this life, no time to stand upon ceremony. No time to plan for the future. They plan for the here and now because the future is a hazy place that they might not get to.

It’s taken me a while to work all this out. This job didn’t come with a set of instructions or a handbook on village customs. Every day I get a little bit closer to understanding but it’s very much a process of look and listen. Of course, without Minh I wouldn’t understand anything at all. I’d be down at the local drinking beer with the Yanks and griping about the unreliability of the natives. I don’t know what I’d do without him.

Anyway, Granddad, that’s enough anthropology for one day. I’ll write again soon,
Love,
Frank.
Chapter Fifteen

Frank was continually pressed by the generals in Saigon to expand his operations. By the end of 1964 he commanded an army of just over three hundred men. Twenty of the first soldiers, the men who had been living in the police compound when Frank first arrived, now served as leaders. They wore no badges or epaulettes to mark their rank, in their weatherbeaten faces the battles fought and won and the years of hard service were as closely stitched as embroidery.

If an army marches on its stomach, the trail it walks is paved with paperwork. My fingertips were always carbon paper blue in those days and if I was not at my desk I had a pen in my hand. We worked from first light until after dark every day, covering many miles together. Most of our work was in reconnaissance and supply. Our primary role was to keep a close watch on the Viet Cong and engage and attack them whenever possible. We helped the local villagers defend their homes by supplying them with small arms and advice. And we also spent many hours patrolling near the Cambodian border, trying to find the supply lines that were being established from north to south – but they were as hard to see and as numerous as the tentacles of a jelly fish.

If we had many miles to cover we went on the bike because it was fast but I liked it best when we took the truck because then we would talk – patched canvas against my back and the warmth of the sun through the dusty glass. I remember those conversations now, the sound of Frank’s voice and the feeling that we were building something.

One evening we drove some of the men to a village near the border. Returning home it was dark – we were tired, the smell of oil and dust on our skin. I drove, Frank kicked off his boots and rested his bare feet on the dash. We were quiet for a few miles and then Frank said, “I’ve been thinking about home a lot lately, about my grandparents.”

He rubbed at a patch of grease on his knee and frowned. “And I keep trying to picture the world through the eyes that I had before, when I knew
who I was.” He drew a breath and looked at me. “Over here everything
seems upside down so I hold onto home to keep myself upright. I remember
everything, even the painful things because it’s a relief, like fighting heavy
surf and feeling the solid ground come up beneath your feet.

“In 1954, I was 15 and always in trouble. The head master of the local
school was ex-army and my grandfather worked that fact to his advantage
every time he was dragged down there to discuss my latest misdemeanour. I
don’t remember being angry but I must have been, my father dead and my
mother in a gutter somewhere. Gran was unwell, thin and getting thinner by
the day.

“The day of the fires was so hot that by midmorning even the birds
had shut up. The easterly wind was relentless, coming in off the desert and
cutting through the paddocks, laying the dry grass flat and sending the blue
gums sideways, branches creaking.

“I had an essay to write for Mrs Pritchard in the ninth form. I was
sitting at the kitchen table, library books spread out around me. Granddad
was tidying up after breakfast and Gran was resting on her bed. When I
looked up from my homework he was staring out through the window,
hands curled over the edge of the sink, eyes fixed on the horizon where the
thinnest, thin ribbon of smoke was trickling up towards the sky.

“We had this old, wall-mounted telephone and he reached for it,
ringing the neighbouring farms, trying to work out what was happening. Not
much later I heard the fire engine on the highway, by that time the smoke
was thickening into low clouds and I reckon only five minutes had passed
since Granddad had first noticed it.

“He told me to bring the car around to the front of the house and to
leave the keys in the ignition. Without letting Gran know what I was doing I
filled the water bag and laid the rifle behind the back seat. Granddad had the
old diesel pump out by then and water was flooding over the wooden
verandah and out onto the gardens that Gran had spent years tending. I
climbed up onto the roof and pushed wooden blocks into the down pipes so
that the gutters filled with water. By the time I climbed down the air was
tinged grey.
“I went inside and filled the bath tub and the sinks. I pulled the curtains and wedged wet towels under the doors. Gran sat up on her bed – her face had started to pinch in by then and folds of empty skin hung where her soft smiling cheeks had been. I helped her off the bed and sat her down in the kitchen. She was never one to panic, just told me what to fetch. She needed her glasses, her medicine, our birth certificates and the few photos that she had of my Dad. I can still see her sitting on her straight-backed chair, the small bundle in her lap, watching as the light outside changed and thickened. Bushfire sky – it’s not a colour you forget in a hurry. Like sunlight turned back on itself, the colour all gone and the edges of things unclear.

"When I went outside I heard the fire for the first time, distant cracks like rifle shots. The horses at the gate squealed and turned their rumps towards each other, their heels lifting. The dogs whined on their chains and the thick, shadowless light. My grandfather had his sleeves rolled up and his shirt was soaked with sweat and water. The pump was running and the ground around the house was sodden. ’If the wind changes you and I might have a chance to beat this,’ he said to me like I was another man and I remember feeling that I’d come of age.

"The fire came up the hill. It roared, so loud that the air seemed to be clawing its way into my head through my ears. It was louder than a plane taking off, worse than anything I’d ever heard. And the heat. The air so thin I had to open my mouth to breathe. Then, on the ridge, the trees started to explode. Bursting into flames with a crack and a hiss that sounded like some kind of hell.

"The fire was less than 500 yards away, coming faster than a man could run, flames shooting twenty yards into the air. Granddad looked from the fire to the house and back again. Then he shook his head at me and pointed to the car. I turned and sprinted for the house and to help Gran into the car. Granddad ran to the dogs and slipped off their collars. The young dog, still a slave and eager, jumped into the car but the old dog bolted under the house. He called her, bent low, his hands on his thighs but his voice was swallowed by the noise of the fire. He gave it his best shot but the fire was coming fast. ’Take the wheel,’ he yelled at me. ‘I’m going to open up the gate
– the horses’ best chance is in the garden where it’s wet. Wait for me by the water tank, I’ll cut through the yard and meet you there. Don’t wait longer than a minute.’ I put the car into first gear and crawled down the driveway through custard thick smoke wondering if I’d ever see him again – then suddenly he was there. He flung himself into the back seat and I pressed my foot down.

“None of us spoke all the way into town. On the footy field we gathered with others, blackened, weary and coughing. As other cars trickled in we started to count the missing. Where were the McLarty family? Where were the Jonsons? And what about their two little girls?

“The next morning the wind changed and the fire burned itself to a standstill. We left Gran, exhausted, at the local hospital and drove back the way we’d come. In the corners of the paddocks charred flocks of sheep were huddled together. Some of them were still alive, their necks stretched backwards and their blackened teeth exposed. We stopped and my grandfather shot them. Their bodies shuddered once and were still. His face was set and I stayed in the car.

“We didn’t speak as we drove. Smoke hung in the air like poison gas and rose from the trees. Here and there were pockets that the fire had not touched, green patches with burned and shrivelled edges. Here the animals congregated, kangaroos with the fur burned off them, bandicoots and rabbits, all huddled together. Everywhere else ruined and smoking.

“As we drove up the driveway my heart was going like a bird’s, all shallow and light. Smoke twisted up from the trees around the house. Half way up the drive we found the old dog, dead. Granddad stopped the car, got out and bent to pat her ruined head. His hands shook and I could see the muscles, hard, in his neck. As we edged around the corner we could see the house. The fence posts had burned out and the verandah posts were charred but the house was still standing. He got out of the car and started laughing for there, thigh deep in the blown, pink petals of Gran’s rose garden, were the horses, all seven.

“I thought he was still laughing but he was sobbing as he walked amongst them, stroking their necks, running his hands down their legs and
pressing his face against their shoulders. They nuzzled him and the tears on his face carved lines through the soot. 'They're here, mate,' he said to me, ‘and they're alright.’

"I remember thinking then that really loving something takes courage. A risk that you take without calculating because you don’t decide to love, it just happens.” Frank drummed his fingers against the wheel and was silent. I turned his words over in my head and my heart beat fast and light. “But,” he said, “it’s not always easy to love without fear, is it, Minh?”

“I think my mother would say that any love is a risk worth taking.”

“Any love?”

“She would say that love is love, it doesn’t matter how or where you find it.”

"Even this?"

"Even this.”

“And what about you, Minh? Do you agree?”

I nodded. “Others might not agree but she’s rarely wrong, my mother.”

I smiled. And beside me I could feel Frank smiling too.

One afternoon as we were turning out of the Mo Nang compound towards home we saw a figure approaching us along the narrow dirt road. We heard the tinny whine of the motorbike engine above the deeper note of the truck in gear and we both squinted into the lowering sunlight. As the bike got closer we could see it was being ridden hard, the rider hatless, shirt blown open by the wind.

“Well, what have we got here?” muttered Frank, almost to himself as we both recognised Han.

Frank stopped the truck and Han stopped next to us. One foot grounded, he spun the bike around himself in an arc, a spray of gravel from under the back tyre golden in the afternoon light. He looked around quickly but the road was empty.

“I shouldn’t be here. But you need to know this. The uprising will begin in four days time at three o’clock in the morning.”

He looked around again and I could see his face was sharp, worried.
“Remember, three o’clock in the morning. Most of the action will be north of here in Me Tho but there are some battles planned for Dak Thay. Stay inside, stay armed. As far as I’m concerned you’re one of us now but don’t go to sleep – there are some villagers who would like to see all foreigners out of Viet Nam”.

Frank stuck his hand out of the open truck window.

“I appreciate this, Han, I really do. I know you’ve taken a big risk coming out here to see us.”

“The signal to start the rebellion will be three short bursts of automatic rifle fire. There are only a few men who know when it will be. The rest of them know only what the signal is.”

The two of them shook hands and Han nodded in my direction.

“Stay inside, little brother, and follow orders. If you get so much as a single scratch our mother is going to whip me each day for the rest of my life.”

And then he grinned, twisted the throttle and tore away down the road with a rush that sprayed sand and loose rocks across the front of the truck.

Frank was silent for a while then he switched off the truck’s ignition and reached for his tobacco and papers. He rolled himself a cigarette and lit it in silence, his eyes on the road ahead.

“We’ll give him plenty of time to make a fair distance between us. Wouldn’t want anyone putting two and two together, would we now.”

Over the next three days Frank sent team after team out into the bush on patrol. The men that he guessed might be involved with the uprising he sent to the furthest reaches of our territory, basing them in villages so small and buried in jungle that they could only be reached on foot or by canoe.

As the men left for their assignments he took them aside and told them that he had heard rumours that the Communists were laying the foundations for a big push south. Their job was to find signs that they had been in the area, food stores, ammunition caches and well marked trails. When given their orders some of the men looked into Frank’s eyes with stillness and guarded faces as though trying to determine the real reason for their assignment but none of them questioned their orders.
By the time the night of the planned rebellion came around we were down to a skeleton force. Frank had what was left of the men on the range all day, and they test fired every weapon that we used and then began on other models that Frank had bought from tribesmen or taken from dead or wounded Viet Cong. Even those men who did not carry guns in their day-to-day roles were taken to the range and handed a weapon. Frank and I had plugs of candle wax and silk threads stuffed deep into our ears but still by the end of the day my head felt raw, the skull bones thin and tender. All sounds bar my own voice were muffled and unclear. The men worked all day without ear plugs and as they walked back to camp I could see the exhaustion in their shoulders and the pinched-up lines of their mouths.

“All’s fair in love and war, Minh,” said Frank as we watched the men stumble back to camp. “Those blokes will be so damn deaf tonight that I doubt they’ll hear the signal. And even if they do, their dreams will be so full of gunfire they’ll assume it was just part of a long, bad dream.”

He turned towards where the truck was parked and I followed him. “Australian troops in the field used to get issued with a rum ration. I reckon I’ve been short-changing these young blokes and I’ve decided to set things straight. Let’s fetch the crates of beer and rum out of the truck and go give them the good news.”

By the time we left Mo Nang the party was well under way. Frank had asked the cooks to prepare an extra quantity of rice, so each man ate his fill. Around the fires the faces of the men began to relax and their tight, aching shoulders to sink as they raised their cups and held their bare feet to the warmth of the fire.

“Come on, Minh, we’ve still got some work to do at home,” said Frank and we drove out of the compound into the bottomless darkness of the jungle night.

Dak Thay seemed darker and quieter than usual as we drove in. The ribby dogs that usually strayed along the weedy paths and dusty roads of the town seemed to have slunk further than normal into the skant shadows of the thin moon and the taxi drivers who waited for fares in the centre of
town had left their card games and were already asleep, curled on the backseats of their cars, windows closed.

Frank was quiet as we drove, in his hand a cigarette, his elbow resting on the window frame.

“I can’t imagine anyone is interested in you and me, Minh but if they come looking for a fight we’ll oblige them.”

When we arrived home Frank passed me a screwdriver and pointed to a wooden crate he wanted opened.

“This rebellion is going to be short of manpower so it won’t be you and me against a battallion – if anything it will be just a few guys with a grudge against foreigners. So, we’re going to set up a little surprise for anyone who tries to get in the front door. This trip-wire will trigger an explosive charge and while it won’t be enough to do too much damage it will set them back on their heels a bit.”

From one of the wooden packing cases stacked on the verandah, splintery and resin smelling, came the dark, oiled steel of a weapon that I had seen on the American base but had never used.

Frank drew it from the box and twisted the barrel into place.

“Ahhh,” he said slowly as he set it down, running his hands along its length. “The M60. Nasty bit of work this if you’re on the wrong end but beautiful if you’re on the trigger. So bloody heavy it usually takes two blokes to operate, that’s why we don’t use ’em. But it’s the perfect weapon for a night like tonight. A thousand rounds should do me and a spare barrel just in case.”

And he set the gun onto its tripod, swinging it through an arc that covered most of the yard.

“You can pick up the stragglers, Minh,” he said as he handed me the weapon that he carried on operations.

“We’ll bring a couple of chairs out here and catch some shut eye before the party kicks off. I reckon we’ll still be sitting here tomorrow morning wondering why we bothered but sometimes it’s good to be careful. One night of patchy sleep won’t hurt us.”
We settled into our chairs as the night deepened, the wind eased through the trees and the night birds squabbled on their branches. I was tired and my eyes stung with looking into the darkness. I could sense Frank beside me – a deeper shadow and faint warmth. I stretched my legs out and closed my eyes. Frank spoke and his voice was low and soft, his mouth close to my ear.

“I've been on plenty of operations like this one, Minh. The most important thing I can tell you is that they're almost always boring. You wait around for ages, swap stories, get cold – and then you pack up and go home. In my experience it’s a good time for catching up on thinking and remembering.” Frank paused, his head tilted to the sound of the wind in the long grass and the scrape of tree branches against the roof. And then he leaned close to me again. “Memory’s a funny thing, you know. It’s more vivid at night. I’m not sure if it’s the dark or the quiet or the fact that you’re awake and the rest of the world isn’t – but it seems so much more intense. You can live in the past for those few instants. You can taste the butter in the sauce, hear the waves rush up the sand or feel the rub of dry leather in the your hands – it’s all there.

“The first memory I have is from when I was about four or five years old. That’s a while back – but here, tonight, it’s like it was yesterday.” Frank leaned back in his chair and took out his tobacco. I could smell it, almost sweet. He rolled a cigarette in his long fingers and his face was lit for a brief moment by the match. “It was Christmas. Mum, Dad and I went up to the farm to visit my grandparents. We had no car of our own in those days so we got a lift out of town to the gate. The sun was high, the light speared the dry paddocks and the dirt road between them rose and fell in the heat. Mum took my hand and started walking, her skin against my palm, the tiny buttons on her blouse shining, pearly. Tut tutting over the grey dust staining her good blue leather shoes.

“I got tired with walking after about half a mile, my sandals rubbed and my collar was too tight, too scratchy. Mum’s hand was too hot and my fingers rubbed together with sweat. I might have cried or maybe I whined but Dad said to me, "It's just over the next little hill. If you make it to the top
I can carry you the rest of the way.” And sure enough from the top of the next hill we could see the house, shimmering like a mirage, green lawns and garden beds stretching alongside the crushed limestone of the driveway like gentle arms.

“I remember stopping and reaching my arms up to Dad, my feet sore and the gravel dust rough against my toes and a feeling of relief that the top of the last hill had finally arrived. But he said, ‘You don’t want Granddad to see you getting carried like a baby, do you? You want to show him just what a man you are and how much you’ve grown.’

“We walked the last half mile in silence and the sun on my face was hot and my mother limped, her stiff leather shoes rubbing her feet.

“They must have been drinking in those days but hiding it, even from themselves. A stale smell like old wine barrels or bar towels, the smell of my childhood. The smell of the bed when I squeezed between them to escape my dreams, so warm. The air between the bedclothes like our garden at the end of summer, the smell of the fig tree, juice oozing from the over-ripe fruit, rotting on the overloaded branches.

“Granddad flung open the door and came down the steps with his arms out wide. A jacaranda tree grew by the front door and the grass grew thickly in its shade, soft and spongy under my feet. The bees were in the flowers and they hung above us like a ceiling, humming, and the faintest smell of honey.

“Granddad grabbed me and bounded back up the steps and into the house, ‘Lilly! Look who’s here, Lilly,’ he called and his arms were strong and on his forearms green ladies faintly traced against the jarrah colour of his skin.

“And Gran was there, her cheeks soft and her hands around my face surprisingly strong. A streak of flour on her skirt and the smell of spice and almonds on her apron. She held me on her knees and the skin at the corners of her eyes was pleated into folds. At the Royal Show I had seen a man in a coloured suit playing a piano accordion and I laughed thinking of her face making music.
“We ate chicken and roast potatoes for lunch and while Gran made tea in her big yellow pot, I wandered through the rooms, exploring, as kids do. In the spare room there was a photo of a soldier on a horse, cavalry saddle, slouch hat and spurs. In the background sepia-coloured sand, like the beach, only endless. The soldier was smiling, one hand on the reins, one on the base of the horse’s neck.

“I can still see that photo in my mind, the old tint of the film, the way the horse’s hooves sank into the soft sand and the tufts of mane that stood up on her neck.

“When Granddad finished his tea I took his big hand and drew him back into the room. He lifted me up so I could get a better look.

“‘That’s me and Peggy,’ he said and I remember he touched the glass with a careful finger against the horse’s side. ‘She had a lot of heart.’ I looked into his face and felt that there would never be a higher accolade.

“He said, ‘When you’re old enough I’ll teach you how to ride. You’ll like it.’

“All through that afternoon he told me stories about the Great War and for days my head spun with place names – I rolled them around in my mouth and could almost hear the hoofbeats of a cavalry regiment and smell the gunpowder in the air – Damascus, Syria, Jordan, Egypt. From that day on there was never anything I wanted to be more than a soldier.

“Later that evening he drove us back into town, his hand wrapped loosely around the wheel and the green ladies dancing on his arms.

“He started teaching me to ride the next Christmas. He kept his word. He always has.”

I must have slept for two hours or so. When I opened my eyes the luminous dial of my watch showed forty five minutes past two. Frank’s eyes were white in the darkness and he held his finger to his lips. Then he leaned over and whispered,

“If there’s someone out there we don’t want them to know there’s a welcoming committee lined up. Shouldn’t be long now anyway.”

Time slows in the dark, each second elongates and lingers. When the first burst of automatic weapon fire cut the stillness I felt as if I had been waiting
for it for hours. Frank grinned at me, showing his teeth in the night. “We’re on,” he said.

I grinned back at him but my heart hammered so hard against my ribs that they seemed fragile and bird-like. If it hadn’t been for his presence beside me I would have been unable to sit still. I could feel each heart beat in my body, in my toes and fingertips, and my mouth was suddenly dry.

And then we waited, listening for the sounds of feet on rough gravel roads and sticks breaking underfoot. Across town there was gunfire, single shots and short bursts, then silence. Later, there was more gunfire and the sound of an explosion.

I turned to Frank and whispered. “The airfield?”

“Yeah and maybe the police station too I reckon.”

At five o’clock the rain started and the dawn, when it came, was the bloated grey of something that had rotted under water. We took down the wires and packed away the weapons, carefully replacing the nails in the packing crates, sweeping up the scattered shavings. When we finished there was no sign of our vigil. Frank picked up the telephone and from the office I could hear his exclamations of surprise.

When Frank came out of the office a little later he said, “There’s been quite a lot of action in Me Tho, quite a few of the government buildings there have been overtaken, and there’s been casualties on both sides. At this stage they’re still holding them. I don’t think the government wants to stir the hornets’ nest too much by sending more troops so it appears that there’s a bit of a stalemate there while they decide what to do. The situation is a little different here, there was an attempt made on the police station and the airfield, as we suspected, but it went nowhere.”

And then he smiled. “I’m just guessing now but maybe they were short of men and maybe the ones that they were counting on were too tired and pissed to hear the signal. But that’s just a guess and I wouldn’t swear on it or anything.”

“And have there been many casualties here?” I asked trying to keep my voice even and unworried.
“Sorry, mate, I should have told you first up to put your mind at rest. There’s been no casualties that anyone knows of here, so I’d hazard a guess that Han is ok.”

At nine o’clock the rain stopped. I watched the road through the warped planks of the gate and the sun turned to silver the rivers of mud in the open drains.

Later that day we took the bike out to Mo Nang to check on the men in the camp. Some of the squads were coming back in from the field and Frank was keen to see them. Although they had been sent out to keep them away from the rebellion almost every squad had seen evidence of Communist soldiers.

It takes many feet to make a path in the mountains, grasses spring back and broken ground is quickly covered by the small shoots and seedlings that wind their way up from the fertile soil. Each squad told us of new paths and trails in the spaces between the mountains, earth worn to bareness and sometimes the print of a rubber sandal.

“They’re moving men south and plenty of them, too, by the sounds of it. I think someone up north is preparing to escalate this situation and I think the rumours might be right, Minh. There’s only one reason the Communists would be turning this thing up now: they either know or they believe that the Yanks are going to get more involved. They must be listening to the reports of the uprising and rubbing their hands together with glee. Every distraction that the government faces now lets another company of men slip through the mountains unnoticed.”

Frank shook his head. “Divide and conquer, hey Minh. They must be smiling in Hanoi today.”
Frank, Dak Thay 1964

Dear Granddad,

It’s a funny old world isn’t it. I was sent up here to fight a war of sorts, and got caught up in a totally different battle. I’ve been telling you about the local villagers, the Dega. Well, they had a crack at a bit of a revolution last week but it never amounted to much. They’re desperate for change but they’re unorganised and out-gunned. It really is a miracle they didn’t get wiped out.

I suppose they’ve finally got the attention of whatever corrupt government is currently in power in Saigon, for what that’s worth. The government doesn’t care if they live or die because they have no use for them, not really. My blokes are holding their own and there are others out there doing ok too but they’re expendable. Their ways and customs and the special knowledge they have about the land means nothing over here. Nobody cares about these people. But I care, very much. Some days it all weighs very heavy on me, Granddad.

Yours truly,

Frank.
Dear Granddad,

They say you never appreciate what you’ve got till it’s gone. But I reckon a near miss works just as well. We were out on patrol two weeks ago and ran into some Commie scouts. It should have been a fairly routine contact. One of the blokes threw a grenade. I ducked, Minh didn’t. He ended up copping a fragment to the head.

As you can imagine, he went down like he’d been poleaxed, blood everywhere. I was in a cold sweat, thinking he’d been seriously injured. I was ripping open field dressings, trying to stop the bleeding with my fingers, swearing. And then he sat up, rubbed the back of his head and said, “Sorry boss.” If I say I was relieved that would be understating the situation dramatically. Back at the base the medic put in four stitches, gave him an aspirin for the headache and said, “Next time duck faster.”

Minh got the stitches taken out a couple of days ago and all he’s got left is an egg-shaped scar about the size of my thumb. He’s been joking about having my thumbprint on his head and it’s pretty funny actually. You see, because some of our blokes can’t read or write, we get them to sign their names with a thumbprint in ink. Minh’s always teasing me about my writing, so now he reckons I’ve signed my name on him the only way I know how. Cheeky bugger.

But all joking aside, I’ve lost men before and it’s something I’ve prepared for, but I couldn’t lose Minh. I call him my right hand man but he’s more than that. He’s most of the left as well. It’s led to a fair bit of soul searching. I must admit that I was surprised to find that even after all these years in
the army I’ve still got a soul to search. Although I’ve found precious few answers.
Yours,
Frank.
Chapter Sixteen

A few days after the uprising an American jeep, driven by a black soldier, pulled up at our gate. Although there were several dark skinned soldiers stationed in Dak Thay I still found them startling, the dusty blackness of their skin and their pink palmed hands. Although I never found out, I often wondered what their hair would feel like to touch, to me it seemed somehow impossible.

The soldier gave me an envelope for Frank and I watched him drive away. Like all Americans he smelled to me of toothpaste and aftershave. I don’t think I would smell it now but then the smell was so strong I almost expected to see it shimmer around him, like the haze that hangs over an opened drum of petrol.

Frank opened the letter, read it and passed it to me.

“Looks like I’ve been summoned to Saigon.”

He said frowning, “I’m going to have to take a little trip down south and explain myself.”

He tapped the letter with his fingers, thinking.

“This Colonel is the top of the tree in Saigon. And the only way you get to that altitude in the army is by climbing over the bodies of the poor bastards that came before you. Sometimes you can find a shortcut through the pile if you know something that no-one else does. I’m guessing that this bloke thinks I might know something that could be useful to him.”

I passed the letter back to Frank and he read it again, scanning it quickly, his head tilted.

“...interested to hear your opinion of the failed uprising... despite the close proximity to Dak Thay no soldiers from your force were, to our knowledge, involved... discussion with you regarding the political situation in the Vietnamese Highlands... congratulate you on your exemplary leadership... look forward to meeting with you at your earliest convenience...”

He frowned and thought for a moment.
“It doesn’t sound like they know we had inside information about the uprising. I think we covered our tracks pretty well there. No, I reckon the Colonel is just going to squeeze me for every bit of information he can about the situation up here. That way he’ll look good without ever having to get off his arse and leave the office.”

“So when will you go to Saigon?”

“He’s asked me to come ‘at my earliest convenience’. That’s army speak meaning it’s convenient for him now so I should get my arse down there as early as possible. I think I’ll go in the next day or two if I can catch a plane going that way. Everything is holding steady here at the moment so I can spare some time. And anyway, you must be due for some time off with your family.”

“So, you won’t need me to stay here while you are gone?”

“I think we can just lock up and leave the place, Minh. The older blokes out at Mo Nang can keep the patrols going out and keep the boys supplied with gear. You should go home and visit your Mum, you never know what will happen in the next few months and you might not get another chance for a while. Besides, I don’t want her saying that I worked you too hard and never gave you any time off – she might be small but she looks pretty damn tough.”

We rode out to the village the day before Frank left for Saigon. As we left home Frank threw the key of the bike towards me.

“Want to drive?”

By then I was happy to ride the bike on my own but the road was rough and with two people it took concentration.

“Sure. Are you brave enough?” I asked as I caught the keys.

“Maybe,” he laughed. “Maybe not.”

Halfway to the village the road levelled out for a few miles – a thin stretch of gravel that curved along the base of the mountain. Frank leaned over my shoulder.

“Alright, grandmother, you can give it some gas now. I promise not to be too scared.”

I opened the throttle a little.

“And the rest,” said Frank with a laugh.
I sent the bike forward and leaned in to the wind. The front wheel was suddenly light on the ground, the road smoothing out beneath us. The trees rushed past in a dark blur and the earth tilted through the bends.

The road followed the base of a rise and then dipped before zigzagging across a gully and over a creek bed. At the top of rise I eased off the throttle and although we slowed I hit the bend too fast, the back wheel slewing out, gravel flying. We almost went down but somehow the bike stayed upright and we bounced across the shallow creek, a crystalline wake behind us.

I pulled up on the other side to catch my breath. My face and finger tips prickled and my chest was tight. Frank put both his hands on my shoulders. He was laughing – his head tipped back and his mouth held open to the sky.

“What a ripper! That was the best bloody fun I’ve had in ages.”

I started to laugh then, slowly at first, wiping my hands on my khakis. But soon it overtook me and I laughed until my eyes ran and my chest shook. I leaned back. I could feel Frank’s chest against my back and it seemed to me then that the sunlight was like diamonds, so clear and bright did the world seem at that instant.

Our laughter subsided and for a long moment we were both still. Then, slowly, Frank bent down and leaned his forehead on my shoulder. I could feel his breath through my cotton shirt, his hair against my neck. I could smell his skin, shaving soap and tobacco. My chest worked the thin air, my heart quick like the wings of a small bird. The weight of his breath, the pressure of his body against mine. His thumbs drew small circles, my skin hot beneath his hands. I closed my eyes.

Frank cleared his throat and took his hands from my shoulders.

“We better get going, Minh. Wouldn’t want to be late.”

He sighed and I turned my face to his. His eyes shiny like green glass and his cheeks bloodless. For several seconds he looked at me, then he closed his eyes and, almost imperceptibly, shook his head. I reached forward and turned the key.
We didn’t speak until we reached the village and I was grateful for the silence. My thoughts followed one after the other, tumbling and falling like puppies. As soon as we arrived the men of the village surrounded Frank and drew him over to the shade of a tamarind tree. He rolled his sleeves and lit a cigarette. Dark from the sun and dressed the same way as our men in a black shirt and jungle green trousers, he could have been one of us.

I moved closer, he was facing my direction with several of the villagers between us. He rubbed his forehead on his arm and pulled a strand of tobacco from his lip. The men asked him about his trip to Saigon and he replied in a mixture of our language and his own. His face was careful and he spoke slowly, a crease between his eyes.

"The Americans will want to know if the Highland villagers are for or against the South. I’m not sure what they’re prepared to do to keep you on their side or what it’s worth to them."

He flicked the butt of his cigarette into the fire. “What I want to know is their long term plan for this country. Are they sending a large number of combat troops? Because as soon as they do we no longer have a ‘situation’ what we have is a war and ...” he rubbed his eyes as though tired, “in a war civilian casualties are unavoidable.”

His eyes sought mine in the small crowd. “If we end up with a full scale war in the Highlands well ... You’ll have to pick a side and then you’ll have to hope and pray that you’ve picked the right one.”

Han was sitting close to Frank and he dismissed his concerns with a wave of his hand. “The Americans will come and they will win the war. And we will be there with them, on their side. When it is over we will need someone in Saigon to bargain for us, to remind them of their little allies in the Highlands.”

“I hope that’s the way it goes down, Han, I really do,” said Frank. He stood up and nodded at the men around him. “Well, there’s a cargo plane leaving for Saigon in a couple of hours. I better try and get on it.”

He walked over to the bike and I followed him. “I reckon I’ll be home inside a week.” He held out his hand. “Take care, Minh, I’ll see you soon.”
eyes were troubled and I took his hand between both of mine and shook it.
“Take care, Frank, I’ll miss you.”

Near our village there was a pond, not far across but deep and cold. It was fed by the same subterranean river as the village well – our water was always sweet and clear, even when the rains were late and only dust grew in the fields. The pond was hemmed in by tall trees that sent their roots into the water, slippery and tangled. Tufts of reddish grass filled the spaces in between the trunks, hiding grey, plump bellied spiders and colonies of whirring crickets.

My brothers would set traps near the pond for the monkeys and wild cats that picked their way through the scrub and long grasses to the water’s edge for a drink. At the end of the dry season, on the rare days when the air was still and even the highest branches hung immobile we would wait for larger game, hiding ourselves in the shadows and blinking away the flies that clustered on our skin to sip the dampness from the corners of our eyes. I would watch the shadows on the pond through half-closed eyes, the leaves, stalks and branches reflected as though on darkened glass. The blue of the sky tinted the water and I would lose myself in this other world – this place of light and water and reflected land.

The pond was also where we learned to swim. Paddling in the sun warmed mud at the edge where the tree roots, fuzzed with algae, threaded their way through the weightless silt. The pond was deep at its centre and we could swim there for only a few minutes before our jaws would begin to shake and our teeth rattle against each other.

Some of my friends believed that there were evil spirits living in the black mud at the bottom of the pond and that if you went underneath the surface of the water they would enter your body through your ears and make you go mad. I was never frightened because my mother had told me that the story was told to children who couldn’t swim to deter them from straying too close to the water. We learned to swim early and on hot days I
would rush through my homework so I could race down to the pond with my brothers. My father used to say that we smelled like turtles when we came home from swimming. Turtle meat is especially delicious and he would chase us, sniffing deeply and licking his lips. We used to laugh and yell. Even my mother would stop whatever she was doing to watch us and laugh.

When I returned home to my village I would always walk down to the pond even if it was too cold to swim. I would sit on the edge and watch the reflection of the clouds sail across the surface of the water. The reflected world was so real, familiar but not the same. It was a separate world, a place that stayed the same while everything around it changed with great haste. In the other world the only sound would be bubbles arching upwards. The harshness of sunlight would not penetrate the surface and it would be cool even in the middle of summer. I imagined my father’s spirit living there and my grandmother’s too, silently gliding like fish through the water. Mother used to say, “Minh thinks too much, his head is packed with paper.” But she said it smiling. She would stroke my arm with her fingers and hug my shoulders, even when I was grown.

Despite Frank’s words of caution and the failure of their uprising my family were full of optimism. My sister Trinh said to me, “Now the government know we are serious. They are much more likely to listen to us now.” And all around me their happy faces and their bare feet. The village dogs and my sister’s children rolled together playing and they watched and their faces were content.

Before the sunset one afternoon I slipped away from the village and took the path down to the pond. The late afternoon light was grey with unshed rain and my feet, that had once been so sure, were now unsteady on the unfamiliar path in the failing light. I sat on my heels at the edge of the water and watched the wind pick tiny ripples off the surface. A bird called and I could hear the boys bringing in the buffalo. It was like countless other evenings, countless generations, a life that stretched backwards as far as anyone could imagine.
I wanted to believe that in years to come the children of my sisters’ children would sit by the same pond and watch the night creeping up over the forest. But my stomach was heavy and I was worried.

“I thought you might be swimming, little brother, despite the cold. But even you are not that crazy.”

I turned and Han was behind me, smiling.

“If there is madness in our family, big brother, it is not all mine.”

He laughed.

“I am nowhere near as mad as, say, someone who would take on the might of the government forces with a handful of men and some left-over guns.”

Han smiled and laid his hand on my shoulder.

“I see you have learned some wisdom now, that’s very good. But wisdom without courage is like a flock of chickens without a rooster.”

“Is that right, wise old Mother?”

“Ha,” laughed Han. “Maybe I am spending too much time here. Maybe I should run away to the town and get a job.”

“No-one would have you. They would see you coming and close their doors saying, ‘Quick! Hide! Here comes that crazy old villager.’”

“Maybe you’re right, little brother. All I know is here. Maybe that’s why I have to fight to try and save it.”

“Just try hard not to kill yourself. Our mother’s spirit would chase yours through eternity if you did something stupid.”

“Well, if I promise to try hard to stay alive will you promise to follow me back home? I’m being sucked dry by mosquitos, and Mai killed a fat hen today. I think I may be able to smell it cooking.”

We walked back to the village together. In the forest, dusk is a time of uneasy armistice, the day creatures take refuge and the night creatures are still quiet, groggy with sleep. In daylight our vision holds the other senses hostage, but in the slowly falling darkness we can sense the universe of smell and touch and sound. Like glimpsing a room that we have only ever dreamed about through a half shut door.

As the evening mist drifted in down the mountains I could smell the mushroom scent of cooling earth. I could almost feel the pressure from the
tightly curled tips of countless seedlings trembling, waiting beneath the surface for the light. At my hips my fingers spread like cat’s whiskers and I could feel the breeze on my palms.

The village was dimly lit by the fires inside each longhouse and I could see the blurred outline of the trees behind them. Han strode ahead of me and I could have been ten years old again, returning home, the square set of his shoulders black against the village fires, the smell of cooking and the sounds of children waiting to be fed.
Frank, Dak Thay 1965

Dear Granddad,

Thanks for the card, we’ve been so busy here I almost forgot it was my birthday. Twenty-six sounds pretty old from where I’m standing but I suppose age is just a matter of perspective, isn’t it.

I’ve just spent a week visiting with my superiors in Saigon and bringing them up to speed on the whole situation out here. While I was there they asked me to take a run down the river with them and have a look at the Mekong Delta. Looks like they’re scoping out the strategic spots.

We got a ride in an American helicopter to a town called Chau Doc, down by the Cambodian border. From the air the Mekong Delta looks like a nest of brown snakes curling in on each other. The amount of water on the ground in that place has to be seen to be believed. Most of the people have boats to get around on because if you want to get somewhere there’s a pretty good chance you can go by boat.

They grow just about everything in the Delta from rice to vegetables. They make silk too, and you could spend a lifetime learning the names of all the different kinds of fish and shellfish that they catch. It’s an amazing place and I only wish that I was there on a fishing trip and not as a scout, looking out for places that might be of use to the army.

Near Chau Doc there were these great big areas of what they call mangrove swamp which is not river and not land but a sort of cross between. Acres and acres of funny-looking trees growing in the mud and their roots a bloody great tangle that would be next to impossible to walk through. I pity the poor bastards that will eventually get posted down there and have to patrol through that muck.
On the way home we flew low over the rice paddies and you can see the ladies in there working with their pointy hats made from straw. They use water buffalo to pull a harrow through the fields, up to their hocks in water. They drive them with a twig and a bit of string through the nose. It looks like nothing has changed for centuries.

Most of the Vietnamese in the Delta are Buddhists. It’s not always easy to tell what is real and what is just a front over here but on the whole most of the Buddhists seem pretty harmless. Everywhere you go down here there are these brick tombs that they have made for their ancestors. They usually bury them out in the fields and you can see them working and the kids working and next to them are their great grandparents in their little brick houses, watching over it all. I think it’s so much better than our western way of burying the dead and getting on with our lives. They keep their connection to the past open.

We also spent another day over at a town that’s quite close to Saigon called Vung Tau. It’s a beautiful spot on the coast and the sea is just teeming with fish. We walked through the local market trying to gauge how much infrastructure there is in the town and the brass are striding off ahead clocking all the important stuff and I’m stumbling along at the back poking around in the buckets of fish and trying to have a bit of a chat in my very mediocre Vietnamese. Some of the locals speak French, which makes me wish I’d spent more time in class listening and less time flicking spit bombs.

Anyway, no-one tells me anything of course but I’m almost certain the Yanks are going to send combat troops in the next couple of months which means I
suppose that there will be some sort of declaration of war. For those of us on the ground it won’t make one iota of difference. They can call us advisors all they like but we know and they know and the Viet bloody Cong know that we’ve been fighting since the day we arrived. One of the Aussie blokes was killed here last week and I’ll be damned if I know how that would happen if this wasn’t already a war zone.

I suppose if the Americans send a whole lot of soldiers over here we’ll be right there behind them holding onto our big brother’s coat tails. It’s funny because I reckon us Aussies have more in common with the Vietnamese than with the Yanks. Most of us are either farmers or fisherman at heart and we just want to be left alone to get on with our lives. Problem is the North Vietnamese have got big brother China stirring up trouble.

Anyway Granddad, enough of the politics. I got to spend a few days in Saigon and what a crazy place it is. You can buy absolutely anything on the black market: drugs, weapons, girls, boys, you name it, it’s for sale. Let me tell you, it’s quite an eye opener for a boy from the country.

I flew back to Dak Thay yesterday and I’m happy to be home again. Minh’s back from leave too so it’s business as usual. There was talk of a promotion for me while I was away, which would be nice but I won’t hold my breath as you know the army moves with the speed of a one legged bandicoot. There was also talk of some proper leave in either Australia or maybe Singapore. I suspect they are a bit worried that I’ve been away from home for too long. They probably think I’m going to go native and turn up barefoot, with a bone through my nose and a native sheila on my arm.
Oh well, I suppose there are worse things that could happen.
I’ll write again soon
Love,
Frank.
Frank, Dak Thay 1965

Dear Granddad,

Well, as you no doubt know the Americans have sent combat troops over here and pretty soon it’s going to be on for young and old. As much as I think it’s a mistake I suppose at least we know where we stand now. The whole situation was a bit bloody funny really, the Yank troops rocked up in their giant ship and anchored off shore from a really big town called Danang. Now Danang is no Viet Cong stronghold but no-one told the Yanks that. So in they come, storming the beaches like it’s Gallipoli or something and there are the locals going about their daily business just as they have done for centuries. I mean it could have been pretty tragic if they’d started off shelling the place but as it was they were met by Vietnamese girls offering them flowers. I wonder what they thought when they got into town and saw all the French buildings and cafes. A perfect example of what we laughingly refer to as military intelligence.

Anyway, we’ve seen the knock-on effects already. The NVA are on the move and if I was Ho Chi Minh I’d be setting up supply lines for troops and weapons. We’ve had two serious attacks on local villages in the past week and it looks to me as if the Communists are going to have no tolerance for resistance. I think they’ve been told that if it’s in their way, it’s got to go.

Now so far we’ve been fighting the Viet Cong and doing pretty well I have to say. But they are just guerillas operating in small groups without a great deal of firepower. I reckon they’ve been sent in to clear the way for the big boys and the big boys are in a hurry right now because they’re itching to get into place in the south before the Yanks tighten it all up.
The problem is that the NVA operates battalion strength and that’s eight hundred men. So we won’t be taking them on. The best we can do is keep the Viet Cong in check and report on the whereabouts of the NVA troops.

My men have been itching for a bit more action and I feel as if they are as trained up now as they’ll ever be. There’s three hundred and fifty of them now and they can shoot, track, set ambushes and think on their feet as well as any troops I’ve worked with. I have to say I’m damn proud of them. Of course it’s a bit of a logistical nightmare trying to feed and arm so many of the buggers but Minh does a great job. It’s funny, I would have never thought two years ago, when I first hired him, that he would end up not only just about running the whole show but also as one of the best friends a bloke could ever have.

Anyway Granddad, I better sign off now, I’m going out on patrol with one of my units. I’ve wired a bit more money and it should pay for Mum’s new medication plus a bit extra for odds and ends about the place. Take care,

Frank
Dear Granddad,

Last week I was on patrol with one of our units and we got a report in over the radio about a village under attack. We radioed the other units in the area for support and tried to get over there as quickly as possible.

I heard the coordinates and I knew straight off that it was Minh’s village.

You get a sense about these things when you’ve been in the game as long as I have. I just knew it would be bad. I drove the truck with my foot down to the floor and it was bellying out on the corrugations, fishtailing the corners, sliding. Tyres spinning. Only I was too late.

Everything in the village was on fire. It was all burning and there was so much smoke I couldn’t see. People were running, crying. There were bodies on the ground. Some were small, like dolls, their little arms at funny angles. Through the smoke the smell of blood. It was in my throat: thick, metallic.

Even the dogs were dead and underneath the burning houses the pigs were screaming, burning.

My men laid the dead in a row. I could see Minh’s younger cousin, she used to tease him when he came home in his uniform. There was an uncle, he was especially skilled at growing things. The new school teacher with her ruined face, a little boy, no more than four years old.

The villagers came out of hiding, out of the few longhouses that hadn’t burned, out of the bush, out from behind their gardens. Minh’s sister, Trinh held onto her mother’s hand and they were both crying. We found Minh’s brother Han where he fell. The men laid him on the end of the line gently. Many of them
knew him and they were crying, silently like soldiers, their shoulders folded inwards and their chins on their chests. I was there for them Granddad, I had the right words. My hand on their shoulder, a cigarette offered. I was the man the army taught me to be – a real poster boy for detachment. But I couldn’t feel my face or the weight of my rifle and this pressure in my chest like someone was kneeling on me.

Minh arrived with the extra troops. He held his mother as she cried, her small body shaking in his arms. Her long hair was tangled and wild. Han’s wife, Mai was with them, her face was grey and streaked with dirt.

I stood between Minh and the line of bodies and I tried to stop him but he walked straight past me and stood perfectly still, staring down at his brother. Then slowly he knelt down next to him. He reached out and stroked Han’s arm. He wiped the dirt and blood off his face. And his hands were so gentle.

I wanted to turn away. I felt like something really important inside me was being split open. But I didn’t, I knew I had to stay, for Minh.

A moment later he was next to me, I felt his hand on my arm. He stood there looking at me. And then he started crying and I pulled him close and held him tight. And I was crying too and I didn’t give a damn who saw me.

Frank.
Chapter Seventeen

Frank had sent two trackers and their units out into the bush after the attack. They looked for blood trails left by the wounded or for the deeper prints of two men carrying another. They looked also for field dressings and bits of left over clothing, things that were often discarded when men were travelling quickly with wounded. The men the trackers followed had no injured amongst them but they were careless, believing (I suppose) that a small village was not worthy of retribution. They left boot prints and cigarette ends and, so certain were they that their actions in the village would go unnoticed, when the trackers found them they were cooking rice and allowing the smoke from their fires to travel straight up through the trees, like a beacon, into the sky.

There were fifteen of them. Sent to cut a trail for the North Vietnamese Army by frightening the villagers in their path. They were just soldiers, the illiterate sons of farmers and fishermen. Driven from their own land by poverty and two generations of fighting, most of them had no other way to feed themselves.

Our men waited until they were sleeping, cut the throats of the two left on watch and shot all but the four that appeared to be leaders. Late in the afternoon of the next day they arrived back at our base camp. On the flat bed of one of our trucks were the four shackled prisoners, their hands and ankles tightly bound and their bare feet cut badly by the jungle paths.

Frank watched them coming.

“Take them round to the cells. We’ll question them and then turn them over to the Yanks tomorrow.”

The men filed into the cells that had been built for holding prisoners. Although I was frightened to look at the face of my brother’s killer I had my job to do.

Frank started with the oldest prisoner and started asking him questions while I translated.

“What is your name? What unit are you from?”
The prisoners stared into the space in front of them, their faces smooth and
dull.

“Where are the rest of your men? What is your rank?”

But the men would not answer him.

“You are prisoners of war now. Your fighting days are done. Things will go
better for you if you talk to me.” But the men still would not speak.

“Tomorrow you’ll be taken into town and the Americans will process you, if
you talk to me now I’ll let them know.” Three of the men stared ahead,
expressionless, but one turned his head slightly and he smiled at Frank, a
small tight smile of victory.

As Frank continued his questions the daylight faded and darkness
began to creep past the shadows. Frank walked to the far corner of the cells
and motioned for me to follow him.

“Minh, I think I left my smokes over by the truck, I wonder if you could fetch
them for me.”

I offered him one of my own but he declined.

“Thanks but if you don’t mind, I think I’ve left my hat over there as well.”

I was almost at the truck when behind me four shots split the air. I dropped
to my knees ready to find cover but there was silence. I ran back to the cells.
The bodies of the four prisoners were slumped, dark blood and splintered
bone against the wall.

Frank was leaning over the bodies, cutting the ropes that had bound
the men’s hands and feet. He folded each piece carefully and, while I
watched, put them into his pockets. When he was done he wiped his hands
slowly and thoroughly on his pants.

Then he walked out of the cell, pausing by the door to look at me, his
wide green eyes unblinking. “The prisoners tried to escape. I did what I had
to do.”

Afterwards many died, so many that we lost count. But the day that
Han died it felt as though the world had halted in its tracks. As hard as it was
for me it must have been many times worse for those left in the village. For a
small moment or two in each day I was able to remember it as it had once
been. But for them the reminders – the charred skeletons of the longhouses, the darkened patches of sticky earth and the birdless quiet.

I stood with my mother as they buried Han. No woman should have to watch her own child buried. But she did. Taut with grieving and loss she chose the place where he would lie, she summoned the spirits to accompany him on his final journey and placated the gods of the village with chickens' blood.

In our village the women would prepare the dead, it was our way. But with so many lost there was no time for tradition. I helped my mother and Mai to wash Han and dress him in the clothes that he had kept for festivals and harvest ceremonies. We washed his body and my mother bound his wounds with strips of cotton. We closed his eyes and placed an areca nut in his mouth so that he would have something to eat in the afterlife.

Mother told us where to lay his body. We dug in a small clearing near the village. The canopy of the jungle was lighter there, the sun's rays fractured but not broken when they touched the ground. We lay him with his face to the east so he could watch the sun rise over the mountains.

“He would rather watch the dawn than see the sun go down,” Mother said. “He has always been more interested in what could be than what already was.”

As was the custom Mai stayed in my mother's house until the grass had begun to grow over the disturbed earth of the burial place. Then mother sent her home to her family in Dak Thay.

“There is nothing for you here now, child,” she said to her. “Go back to your family and forget this. You are still young, still beautiful. Marry again and have many babies. Maybe you can call your first son Han, for me, and to remember him.”

Mai would have stayed, she loved my mother and the village life, but Mother was right. There was nothing left for her in the village and in the end she would be just another mouth to feed.

About a week after she returned to Dak Thay I found her in the kitchen, scrubbing pots. For a moment it was as if nothing had ever changed, as if she had not met my brother and as if he was not gone.
Frank drew me aside. “I think Mai was going stir crazy in her parents’ house. I asked her if she wanted her old job back and she jumped at the chance. Anyway, it will be good for us to have some order and cleanliness. You know that as a widow she isn’t worth much around here, even though she was only married for a few months. She told me that her father will probably marry her off to one of his old business associates. She can’t be looking forward to that very much.”

I tried to talk to Mai. I wanted to tell her how Han had been as a child, the things he did for our mother and how patient he had been with me, but every time I approached her she would duck her head and I could see the tears pooling against her lower eyelid. Then she would hurry off to another job and I would be left with the story drying on my lips.

Mai cooked for us whenever we were home. One night as she passed a plate to me she said quickly, “It’s not that I am sad every single minute or that I don’t want to talk to you, it’s just you look so much like him. But you are not him. Every word you speak reminds me of how much is gone. For some people there is only one other, for me that person was Han. One day I know I’ll want to hear the stories about him. I hope that you can tell me then.” She walked back to the kitchen, her shoulders stiff and her gait uneven on the smooth concrete floor.

But we never did speak of those things. And over the years the silence grew. I think we have loved some parts of each other, but not the whole. Just the ease and the habits and the places where our lives touched together, like apples left too long in the bowl, skin yellow and gone slippery. Maybe we could have loved, could have shaken off the feeling when we looked at each other that there were others, more loved, but we never did. We turned instead to numbness and forgetting. We tried to pretend that we had never lost anything and in the process we lost everything, twice over.
Frank, Dak Thay 1965

Dear Granddad,

I want to tell you that things have returned to normal here but that’s never going to happen. I thought I had a handle on grieving but it turns out that watching someone else do it is a whole new ball game as far as pain is concerned. As you know, I did three weeks at Canungra before I shipped out and they work you so bloody hard there that you wake up each morning with sore muscles that you didn’t even know you had. Well, that’s sort of how I feel now. I hurt in parts of me I didn’t know existed.

Minh’s doing it hard but he’s tough. I can see him doing the things that I did when Dad and Gran died. You know what I mean because you’ve been there. You have to concentrate on everything, even walking – the left foot goes in front of the right foot, then the right goes in front of the left and so on. Working keeps your mind off what’s going on inside you but there’s not much you can do after midnight, when you wake up sweating and you’ve got time to go through every bloody “what if” over and over.

Most nights now we’re both awake. I’ll go and sit outside for a smoke and he’ll get up and follow me. We just sit there, don’t say much. We listen to the night birds or the sound of rain on the roof. If it gets past about 0400 I’ll brew up the tea. Then we’ll sit and watch the steam rise off our cups. Mai gets in at dawn and when we hear her key in the gate we get up and go back to our rooms. We have breakfast and we never speak about it.

Sometimes I want to be back on the farm so badly I can hardly stand it. But right now I’ve got a job to do. I couldn’t save Han and the rest and I’ll have to live with that but there are other families out there
that I can help protect. And there’s Minh too, I can’t leave him, not now. I wouldn’t have survived this bloody war without him to talk to and I’m not leaving him when he needs me most. It’s just... I’m not the man I thought I was and I hope you understand that. But I can do this, I can make a difference.

Love,

Frank.
Chapter Eighteen

Mike Langley flew into Dak Thay unannounced. He drove onto the base in a US army jeep with a tall sergeant at the wheel. Frank was out on operations with the men and I was in the office doing the paperwork for another shipment of ammunition.

He put his head in the door. He wore a hand gun in a shoulder holster over his ironed white shirt and his hair was prickle short and greying.

“Frank around?” he asked.

“I'm sorry sir, he's out on operations with the men. I expect him back around 1500 hours but if it's urgent we have occasional radio contact.”

“Let him know I'm in town, will you? And tell him to get down to the US base as soon as he can. Later today is fine.”

Later that evening Frank got back to base and I told him of Langley's visit.

“Fuck him,” he said. “I'll do his dirty work because I'll be court-martialled if I don't but I won't run after him like a bloody dog. If he wants me he can come and find me here.”

Two days later Langley drove into the base and this time he was unaccompanied. Frank was at his desk with the sleeves of his black shirt rolled to the elbow. Like most of the men he wore a long knife at his hip alongside his side arm. Langley paused, frowning.

“I've been waiting for you to show, Frank. I told your boy here to let you know I was waiting.”

“Minh told me you were here, Mike, but to be perfectly honest I haven't had time. I've got three hundred and fifty men under me and there's so much action at the moment that we need all hands on deck – and that means my hands too.”

“Yeah well, they are going to have to do without you for a day or so because I need you to do a little job for me. Is there somewhere we can talk in private?”

“We can talk here.”
Langley looked hard at Frank and then glanced over at me and grunted.
"So be it."

Langley sat down on the edge of my desk and faced Frank.
"There's a village way out by the Laos border and their head man's making nice with the other side. We've got aerial reconnaissance photos showing way too much activity for my liking for a little backwoods village. There are more men in that area than there should be. And anyway, this guy fits the profile; he's admitted being dissatisfied with Diem's government and he's got family in the north."

"Well, if that's your criteria, Mike," said Frank, "you'd better start getting up early because you're going to have to knock off every man, woman and child in the south of Vietnam."

Langley ignored him and continued, "Look, if you saw the gear that's landing in the Delta you'd be forgiven for thinking that Ho Chi Minh has a bloody freeway full of trucks running night and day. Of course we know that's impossible but he's getting stuff out of the north somehow and we reckon its because the route is peppered with these Communist sympathisers that help him out."

He paused and ran his hand over the top of his stubby head.
"Finding and strangling that supply line is going to be a huge part of what wins us this war. If we can't take out the key personnel one by one we'll bomb them to hell and their piss-ant villages with them."

He paused and lit a cigarette.

"Now we don't know a whole lot more about our target except for what I've told you. He seems to stay fairly close to his village most of the day, he's probably waiting for the next shipment to arrive. We think we'll just drop you in there and see what you can do. If you don't find him at least you can gather intelligence on the village. Problem is, there's not much action out that way so a helicopter is going to stick out in the hills like balls on a dog. Still, it's a risk we're going to have to take."

"Don't you mean," said Frank, "it's a risk that I'm going to have to take?"
“Yeah, well, you know the deal, Frank. We all make choices and you’ve chosen to stick out this war for better or for worse.”

Langley waved his hand in Frank’s direction.

“Besides, look at you. You’re almost a local now. I hear you’re a bit of a legend in these parts.”

Frank smiled. “What’s that old saying, Mike? I think its ‘believe none of what you hear and half of what you see?’ Don’t go and make the mistake of believing your own military’s intelligence, will you.”

Langley looked frustrated and then stood up saying, “Same deal as always. You take one of your own men or I’ll send one of mine as a second. The helicopter will be here for you some time next week, but I’ll get a message out to you the day before with more details and some photos.”

He turned and left the office and we heard the jeep start up and drive away.

I looked at Frank. “I’m coming.”

He looked at me and there was a silence between us that lasted for several breaths. He started to speak but I shook my head.

“I’m coming with you this time.”

The next time I saw Dr Benson he was as neat and crisp as usual and there was no sign of the tiredness of my previous visit. He wrapped the blood pressure cuff around my arm and nodded, looking at his watch.

“All good, Minh. You’ve had three treatments now. I think you must have been blessed with a very tough constitution.”

“Thank you Dr Benson. This week I have been very tired but not so sick. The beans and broccoli in my garden are very grateful as I have been able to weed them properly for the first time in quite a while.”

“That’s great. But take it easy, you don’t need to exhaust yourself.”

“No,” I smiled. “That is a privilege reserved just for doctors, yes?”

He laughed.
“You’ll learn that doctors are very good at giving advice, but not so good at taking it. That’s what the stethoscopes around our necks are for – not to listen to your heart but to plug up our ears.”
“Your’re young. When I was young I never listened either.”

Dr Benson smiled and said, “Blood pressure one hundred and fifteen over eighty. That’s great.”
He sat back down behind his desk.
“I was looking through your records before you came in. You served with the Americans in Vietnam, didn’t you?”
“As a translator, yes.”
“One of my uncles did a tour with our guys in the sixth battalion. Spent most of his time in Phuoc Tuy Province. He doesn’t talk about it much. Where were you stationed?”
“I mostly worked in the Highlands.”
“That would have been interesting work.”
“Yes, very interesting.”
“And dangerous, too, I imagine.”
“At times I was very frightened. I was very lucky though, I only received one injury and it was not more than a scratch. Just here, behind my ear, I still have a little scar.”
“How did it happen?”
“Not very exciting, I’m afraid. A fragment of metal from a grenade. Just enough to give me a fright and a headache. I didn’t let myself think about it for years until I lost my hair and then there it was, a thumbprint to remind me.”
“To remind you of what?”
“To remind me about love. To remind me that some things are worth remembering because a man with no past has no future either.”
Frank, Dak Thay 1965
Dear Granddad,
I told you before that the bloody CIA have got me by the balls, well right now they’re giving them a little twist. Mike Langley’s just been up to see me and he’s got another ‘little job’ for me to do. He’s sending me way out into the back of beyond to knock off some bloke who they think is helping out the other side. The poor bastard is probably just trying to stop the Commies from wiping out his village, but round these parts they shoot first and ask questions later.

No doubt you’ve heard about the domino theory, well I reckon they see this bloke as one of the Communist dominoes. A little, tiny domino to be sure but hey, you’ve got to crawl before you can walk in this game.

Anyway, it’s a tricky kind of mission. The bloke lives in a village that’s really in the boondocks – remote country and wild, too. They can’t tell me anything about his movements so I’ll have to get in close to the village and wait till he shows up. Of course all that lying around only increases the likelihood that I’ll get sprung. It doesn’t take a genius to work out that the place is probably crawling with Viet Cong – if it wasn’t it wouldn’t be worth the effort it takes to knock the poor sod off.

I’m taking Minh along with me which I vowed never to do but he’s determined to come. Anyway, things aren’t the same anymore.

You know, it’s crossed my mind that I might have become a bit of an embarrassment to the CIA and that this bloody suicide mission might be a way for them to ease that embarrassment. I don’t want to blow my own trumpet but my blokes are more than holding their own out there and doing it on a shoe string compared to
the gear that the regular army have got. I probably haven’t made a secret of the fact that I’m doing this my way, but the reason that I haven’t played by their rules is because, quite frankly, their rules don’t work out here.

I’ve been thinking long and hard about this. I can see that Langley reckons I’ve gone native, which means he’s not sure where my loyalties lie. If I was gone he could take the force that I’ve built and turn them over to one of his own and no-one would be able to question his decision. But if he tries to move me out now there would be quite a few people who would question his motivation. With his own man at the helm of my force he’d have a hell of a lot of power in the Highlands.

But maybe that’s just me being paranoid. Maybe the blokes in Saigon are right and I have been out here for too long.

Anyway, Granddad, the mission will have been over for weeks by the time you get this thanks to the snail-like speed of Her Majesty’s postal service. If it’s all gone wrong you’ll have already got the telegram. If you’ve heard nothing assume that I’m alright. If something happens to me the army will take care of everything and I have written a will leaving what I’ve got to you.

I don’t plan on checking out just yet but if something happens to me I hope you’ll raise a glass and toast the good times we had together.
Your loving grandson,
Frank.
Chapter Nineteen

Late one afternoon in the following week a US army jeep pulled up outside our gate and a soldier handed Frank a yellow envelope. “Helicopter arriving Mo Nang base tomorrow at 0700 stop,” read Frank. “Good to see Mike’s not frittering away his government’s money by wasting time on polite conversation,” he said. “Looks like we’re on tomorrow.” “Frank,” I said. “Yeah mate?”

There were things that I wanted to say to him. Words that chased themselves around my head and thoughts that tugged me, sweating, from my sleep. I wanted him to look at me. He smiled. In the half light his teeth were white against his lip. My words spun in circles. I drew in a deep breath and wiped my palms on my thighs. “We need to talk don’t we,” he said and I nodded. He sighed, “I’ve never talked to anyone as much as you, Minh. But now, suddenly, it’s hard.”

I waited.

“This thing between you and me. I’ve been running from it.” He lifted his head to look out the window. “To stop running now... well it’s a big risk.” “Neither of us planned this, Frank, but it’s real.” “It’s real alright. Right now it’s the most real thing that there is.” “My mother used to tell us a story about where we came from, how the mountain people are descended from the children of a serpent princess and a sea snake god. An impossible love – and she would explain it to us by saying that love is love, it doesn’t matter where it comes from, or who feels it, it’s still love. And you can’t run from that forever.”

Frank smiled. “Well, you can where I come from, Minh.” “But you’re not where you come from, are you? You’re here. And I’m here too.”
“I know. And I keep asking myself, what if this is it? What if this is the only chance we’ll ever have to feel this, the only chance to be who we are. I’m at the limit of my maps here, Minh. And I’m scared.” Frank looked at me.

“I’m scared too,” I said. “I’m scared for us tomorrow on the mission and the next one and the one after that. But I’m not scared of you and me, I’m not scared of this. We are the way that we are, Frank, it doesn’t matter how or why.”

“I wish it was that easy.”

“Nothing good is ever easy. But it is simple. These are our lives, no-one else’s. Look at us,” I waved my hand at the outside world. “We’re small, just two specks of dust. It matters only to us what we do.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“I am, Frank. Life is hard and then it’s over. Don’t make it harder by walking away from something that’s good.”

He was still and then he nodded, a small smile at the corner of his lips. I could smell rain, my heart stroking quick and strong. His eyes were dark like vines and glossy, they held mine fast. He put his arms around me, the warmth of his body and the length of his thigh against mine.

“I’ve thought about this every day since the first time,” he said and his voice was low.

“Every day?” I said. “I’ve thought about it every hour.” When I kissed him he was smiling.

The following morning we were both awake before dawn. I had his arm as a pillow and the smell of his skin like sunlight on freshly turned ground. We dressed, made coffee and watched the sun come up. The air was thick with damp and the first of the sun’s rays were golden on the long, wet grass. When Mai arrived for work we were ready to go. The old truck wheezed and turned over, then started. We didn’t speak much. I had the taste of dread in my mouth, dry and sour like food that’s been left too long in the sun. I rested my head on my arm as we drove, half closing my eyes, watching the world flow past through the dark net of my own lashes. I
looked over at Frank. His brows drew together like they did when he was angry or counting. For some reason it made me less afraid.

We pulled up at the base and sat in the cab, motor idling. Frank stroked my arm with his long fingers and my skin shivered at his touch. The dawn light hardened the shadows, and in the distance the sound of rotors. The helicopter landed and the noise filled the cab. Frank nodded at me slowly with his hand on the door. I winked at him and he laughed. Then I bent low and followed him at a run.

Inside the aircraft was a soldier. His hair was cut so short that I could see the shine of his scalp beneath and his uniform was bare. The skin of his face was dark like leather and his eyes were an empty brown. He had the lean body of someone who had never been any other way, sparse and hardened, purged of softness. It seemed to me that every fibre of his being lined up along the same lines as though magnetised. He was a soldier, there was nothing else.

It was hard to talk over the noise of the wind and the rotors so he simply passed me a map and a small scope and passed Frank a photo. With his finger the soldier pointed to the photo and yelled into Frank's ear. "He has a scar on his left cheek. It's hard to miss."

I looked at the map he had given me. It was just a fragment, maybe twelve inches square, folded into quarters. It was swirled in the green of light scrub and the darker green of jungle. I could see creeks, hills and clearings but there were no landmarks other than the village we were going to and that was unnamed. I knew that after today I would be unable to tell anyone where we had been.

On the map there were two crosses in red.

"Insertion here at 0900 hours," he yelled into my ear.

"Extraction here at 1300 hours." He nodded at me and I nodded back to confirm that I understood.

We flew high, it was cold and the jungle rolled beneath us like moss. As we dipped down from the sky my ears filled with air and for a brief moment the sound of the aircraft was muted. Then they popped one after the other and I could hear the changing pitch of the motor as it slowed. The
helicopter came in low over the tops of some trees and flared, nose up, for landing. The skids barely touched the ground and we were out, bent low and scurrying across the clearing into the shelter of the scrub. I looked back and it was rising, the soldier standing in the pinned-open door scanning the treeline, watching the bush dwindle below him.

I held my compass and the map in hands that trembled damply. Frank leaned over me and drew a route with his finger on the map that skirted the village and approached it into the wind. The bush was thickest on that side of the village and we had the high ground of some low hills at our backs. I nodded that I had understood. He put a steady hand on my shoulder and looked into my face for a moment. Then he gave me the thumbs up signal, winked and smiled.

Even though we had less than three kilometres to travel it took us well over an hour. We moved slowly, stopping every ten strides to listen and scan the bush for movement. When we were five hundred metres from the village I could smell the penned livestock and the cooking fires. It smelled like my own home.

When we were finally able to see the village for the first time my heart was pounding so hard I was frightened that it would give away our position. We found a thicket of scrub and settled down next to each other, lying on our stomachs in the leaf litter on a gently sloping hill that gave us a good view of most of the village.

Frank looked at his watch and whispered with his mouth close to my ear.

“I reckon we’ve got an hour for our guy to show. We’ll leave here with just over seventy minutes up our sleeves – otherwise we might be looking at a bloody long walk home because the chopper won’t wait. So if he doesn’t show up in that time we’ll just go home and have a beer.”

“What if we don’t make it back to the extraction point in time?”

“We’ll cross that bridge if we ever get to it. Right now I’m making that our main priority.” He looked at me and his eyes were dark and my heart against my breast bone like a fist.
Time moved like cold oil. In the village below us people came and went about their daily chores. I watched through the spotter scope and Frank through the scope of his rifle.

I lay stretched on my stomach next to Frank. I could feel my heart beating against the earth and see the shadows of birds, fleeting, on the ground. I could feel the heat of his arm next to mine, smell his skin where the sun touched it and the oil on his rifle. I wanted to close my eyes and fit my ribs and hips against his, feel his skin against mine, against the warm earth in the stippled sunlight and the gentle sound of wind and insects. Below me it seemed that the people moved as though drugged, slowly and with deliberation. I watched their hands as they talked, brushed away a fly or stooped to touch the head of a child.

When I saw the target for the first time he was walking from one long house to another and though he only turned his head for an instant to talk to a man walking behind him I could see against his cheek the pale, bent edge of the scar from the photo. He was tall – taller than the other men in the village by the span of one hand and I could see the thick muscles of his shoulders underneath his loose cotton shirt. Even without the scar he looked like a man who decided things. I nudged Frank with my elbow and he nodded.

The next time he reappeared he was carrying a small child on his hip, lifting its weight with one hand and carrying a small hessian bag of grain in the other. He walked over to another longhouse and we watched him speak briefly to a woman before she reached out and took the child and then the bag from him.

Frank looked at his watch, touched the glass and held up five fingers. I scanned the village with the scope but it was quiet and empty. I began to plot in my head our path to the extraction point and started to flex my fingers and wriggle my toes inside my boots to draw the sluggish blood back down my limbs. I swept my scope across the village for one last check and just as I was about to slide it into my pocket in preparation for leaving, the target climbed down from the longhouse and began walking across the middle of the village. I watched him through the scope, the easy way he
swung his arms as he walked and his bare feet raising small puffs of dust on the hard-packed clay. He stopped walking and looked in our direction. Maybe he saw the reflection of sunlight on the rifle barrel, or a shadow more dark and dense than it should be, but he saw something. He raised his hand to shade his eyes and at that very instant as I was watching, Frank fired. The air punched into my eardrums and the man crumpled.

It was my job as the spotter to make sure that the target had been hit as Frank’s vision would be obscured for a second or two by the gas from the round. I followed his fall and could see the spreading stain at the centre of his chest.

“Yes,” I whispered, still deaf from the noise.

Frank jumped to his feet, put the shell in his pocket and turned away from the village. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the villagers spilling out of their houses and then Frank’s hand was in the small of my back pushing me ahead of him and I began running as quietly as I could through the scrub.

We ran for about twenty minutes. The compass was slippery in my hands, the smell of crushed grass rising up from the ground. I stopped to check my bearings, chest heaving.

“We should probably slow down a little now,” whispered Frank. “We must sound like a herd of stampeding water buffalo. I’m betting the initial chaos has passed and they’re thinking about coming after us now.”

“Do you think they’re already following us?”

“I’d be very surprised if they aren’t looking but they don’t necessarily know which direction we’re headed in. On the other hand, if they hear our ride coming in to land they’ll be able to guess pretty quickly and they’ll also know all the paths so they’ll be quicker than we are.”

“So we should keep going then.”

“Well, we won’t pop the champagne corks just yet.”

We continued, jogging when the scrub thinned, and walking through the thickets. After another twenty minutes a sound carried to me on the breeze, the sound of voices. Frank looked over at me and held his finger to his lips but signalled that we should keep going.
I knew that we would be easy to track through the bush. There was no time to cover our tracks or try to hide our passage; it was a job that I would have been able to do easily, even as a boy. In the quiet of the middle of the day the sounds that we were making would travel over many hundreds of metres. Although I had consoled myself that they would have to travel faster than we were to catch us the idea began to grow in me that that they would have to know by now that we were headed for our onward transport. If there were enough of them they could simply leave a few men on us as a tail and send the rest to any nearby clearings to wait.

I checked the compass and at the same time heard the thudding of a helicopter in flight. Frank looked at his watch and said, “Go. As fast as you can.” And so we ran.

My memories of the next few minutes are like a film shown in fast forward to a soundtrack of my own breathing, high and fast. I could hear the sounds of sticks breaking under my feet and see Frank in the corner of my right eye a stride ahead of me. The sweat ran from my finger tips and down into my eyes, my shirt was wet and I could feel the straps of my pack cutting into my shoulders. But I could hear the sound of rotors hitting the air and they drew me forward. Up ahead I could sense the bush thinning, there was more light and the undergrowth was leaner.

Frank once told me that the bullets from an AK47 can travel over five hundred yards. In thick brush at that distance the rifle’s report is not terribly loud but the bullet will still kill a man and the man standing behind him too.

As we broke cover we heard the firing. Bullets hit the ground and the trees beside us. The helicopter was on open ground about one hundred metres away, rotors turning. My whole body felt crushed with breathing, my ribs burned and I wanted to throw up. But I ran and beside me Frank ran too, his rifle in his hand.

The rotors spun faster. The helicopter started to lift. I heard the metallic clunk of a bullet and then another hitting its metal skin. Next to me Frank stumbled. I reached out my hand, grabbed his shirt at the shoulder and pushed him ahead of me into the open doorway. I threw myself after
him and grabbed at the metal framed seats as the helicopter pitched like a fractious horse on its way up and out of the clearing.

I don’t like flying. It seems to me the earth surrenders her citizens to the sky with reluctance. Nowhere is this more apparent than in a helicopter. The rotors tremble, the floor shakes and the aircraft rocks like a boat on the ocean. I lay on the floor of the helicopter until I could breathe the cold rushing air and feel my heart returned to its rightful place in the centre of my chest.

I dragged myself into a sitting position and looked over at Frank. He held his arms across his body and his face was the colour of boiled chicken. I crawled over to him.

“Frank? Are you ok?”

“I’ve been better. I’ve been hit in the shoulder. Better tell the blokes up front.”

In my pack I had field dressings and I pulled one free from its plastic wrapper. I moved Frank’s arm aside and carefully opened his shirt. I could see blood on the thin skin of his chest, high up under his collarbone but there didn’t seem to be that much of it and I was thankful. I held the dressing in place and supported him with my other arm.

“They said they’ll divert to Danang,” I told him. “There’s a big hospital there. The doctors can look after you until you are ready to get back to Dak Thay.”

Frank tried to smile, beneath my hand his chest kicked and dipped, rising and falling like the shoulders of a child sobbing. He coughed and his head was heavy against my arm.

“Frank,” I said. “It’s just your shoulder isn’t it? You’ll be ok.”

“Sure, mate,” he whispered. “I’m ok. Just having a bit of trouble breathing.”

I held him against my body and pressed the dressing to his chest. His head was loose on his shoulders and rolled with every movement of the aircraft as he fought for each open-mouthed breath. The sweat had dried on my body but his skin was fever-damp and his eyes unfocused. I could see against his pale lips small bubbles of bright red.
I cried then. And I held him as if my pulse and warmth could be of consequence.
IT IS LEARNED WITH REGRET THAT YOUR GRANDSON 216604
CAPTAIN FRANCIS JACKSON WAS PLACED ON THE SERIOUSLY
ILL LIST 8 NOVEMBER 1965 AT 6TH FIELD HOSPITAL DA NANG
VIETNAM AS A RESULT OF WOUNDS SUSTAINED IN ACTION STOP
PROGRESS REPORTS WILL BE SENT TO YOU REGULARLY BUT IF
HIS CONDITION CHANGES YOU WILL BE NOTIFIED IMMEDIATELY
STOP ARMY HEADQUARTERS
Dear Granddad,

Sorry to scare you but as you can see, I’m ok. I can’t write myself because my shoulder is busted up a bit and my arm won’t work so one of the other blokes in here is writing this for me. He’s a bit of an ignorant bastard so you’ll have to forgive him for any spelling mistakes.

I can tell you more when I see you but suffice to say I was wounded doing that little favour for Mike. Minh and I had done what we were sent to do and were on our way back out when I was hit.

They tell me I was unbelievably lucky because the bullet missed my spine and my heart and only managed to shatter four ribs and my scapula and tear a bit of a piece out of my right lung. I can tell you Granddad, I haven’t felt unbelievably lucky yet but I suspect I will in time.

I don’t reckon Mike’s feeling unbelievably lucky either. Had the bullet been two inches lower and over a bit it would have been pretty much the perfect ending for my tour as far as he’s concerned. He gets his job done and gets to put his man in my place. Suddenly he’s the king of the highlands and no more whispers about the bloke that’s gone native on his watch.

Maybe I’m just grumpy because I’m still pretty sore and my arm isn’t working properly. They tell me it might be alright once the ligaments heal and I know I should be grateful that I’ve still got an arm. The thought of a life spent pissing left handed isn’t doing much for me. They are watching me for pneumonia at the moment because chest wounds like this one are prone to infection so I’m being filled up with antibiotics and such like. They stick a great big
horse needle into me twice a day and by joves she stings a bit. They send only the prettiest nurses round to give the blokes in here their daily shots otherwise they’d all kick up a bit more fuss I reckon. Worst thing is they’re talking about sending me to Tokyo to recover and then straight back to Australia. They won’t let me out of here. The last time I saw Minh he was covered in my blood and he thought I was dead. I need to see him before I ship out. There are things I need to talk to him about but they’ve got me hooked up to all sorts of things in here and I can’t breathe properly so I’m not going to get very far if I try to leg it. I’m not sure how I’ll get through this without Minh to talk to.

I’m going to push to get sent down to the hospital in Saigon to recover. I can’t see the point in them sending me all the way to Japan when I’ll be just fine here. But who knows what they’ll do Granddad. Whoever said the Lord moves in mysterious ways might have been talking about the army – its ways are a mystery to everyone, outside and in.

I’ll write again when I know what’s happening to me.

Love,

Frank.
Frank, Saigon 1965

Dear Granddad,

I’m here in Saigon and as you can see I’ve borrowed an old type writer so I can tap out my letters to you one-handed. I still feel pretty weak but each day I get a little better.

Mike Langley came in and saw me the day after I got here. Seems the CIA no longer need my services so I’m just a regular member of the Australian army now. Mike took great pleasure in telling me that my replacement had already been chosen. And do you know what that bastard said? He said, “You had developed something of a cult following in the Highlands. I have asked your superiors to deny your request to return to your position before being shipped out. I believe it would be too unsettling for the men to see you again.” If I’d had two good arms I might have strangled him. But then he said something that made my blood freeze solid. “And while we commend you for some of the work you did while stationed in Dak Thay we are concerned about the many breaches of army protocol relating to your staff. Particularly that they may have been privy to information relating to the CIA’s activities. They will require a thorough debriefing as soon as possible.”

Granddad, he will never know just how lucky he was that he gave me that message in public while I was banged up in bed.

I don’t know how I held my tongue but I did. Once he left the room I hauled my sorry carcase out of the hospital bed and kicked up such a song and dance that the nurses let me use the telephone in the hospital office. I couldn’t believe it, I got a call through to Mo Nang base straight away and there on the end of the
line, as clear as if he was standing next to me, was Minh.

I told him to get out of Dak Thay as soon as possible, just take the bike and go. I don’t trust Mike Langley at all and I don’t trust the CIA. I can only imagine what their version of a debriefing might look like and I don’t want Minh anywhere near them. Saying goodbye to Minh was one of the hardest things I’ve had to do. I feel empty, it’s bloody awful.

Yours,

Frank.
Chapter Twenty

The days that followed are difficult to describe; I was dislocated.

With my memories of that time comes the sense of my own weakness. Had I been older, had I been more of a man, I would have made other decisions. I tell myself that to live a life with no regrets is a luxury that few can afford. "What’s done is done," my mother used to say. "There is no use crying about the arrow that missed. You must pick up another and draw your bow again.” But in the darkness I am drawn to the small spaces, the gaps between trees and the moist grasses that grow beside streams, searching for what is mine, and missing.

I could have ridden through the night to Da Nang – turned the bike toward the sea and opened the throttle. I could have let my words fly between us like summer dragonflies, I could have felt his breath, hot on my skin and heard him laugh again, but I didn’t.

I went back to work in the office at Mo Nang. I thought about returning to the village but when I pictured myself helping my mother in the fields I felt as though my body was filled with mud. The coldness settled in my stomach and filled the spaces between my ribs with heaviness. It weighed me down and bowed my shoulders over.

It must have been a little over a week since the mission when I was sitting at my desk looking out at the yard through the wooden slatted windows. There was a pile of requisition slips on the desk that needed to be filled and a small heap of reports that awaited filing but I could not settle to the task. Every time my hand reached out for them my eye was drawn away. There was a spider that strung a web from two boards above my desk, a shadow that fell across the doorway and some ants that marched in a line along the floor.

We had a phone in the office that connected us to the town. When it rang I was watching the ants making their way across the room and its bell was sharp and loud. I picked it up.

“Minh?” It was Frank’s voice.
“Is that you, Frank?”

“Yeah, mate.”

“Are you alright?”

“I’ll be fine. A bit the worse for wear but I’m still here.”

I could feel him smiling at me and I was smiling also. In the background there were people moving, I could hear their voices. I imagined him standing as he always used to; the phone held to one ear, a finger in the other.

“Will you be able to get back here soon?”

“They’re not letting me come back, mate, they won’t even let me come back to get my things and see the men.”

“Why?”

“That’s the army. They think I’ve got the locals wrapped around my finger and they want me gone quickly so they can move in someone else. They’re shipping me out tomorrow.”

On the other end of the line I could hear the noises of the ward, nurses’ voices and the clank of metal wheels. I could sense him watching them. He took a breath and lowered his voice to just above a whisper.

“I’m not sure how good this line is, and we don’t have long. But I need to tell you this. Mike Langley is going to turn our operation over to another one of his staff and he wants to debrief you and anyone else who knew about the missions I did for him. With me gone you’re the only one who knows what went on. He wants to wipe the slate clean, Minh, and right now the only thing that’s stopping him from doing that is you.”

“I understand.”

“So, go through the office and burn anything that makes it seem like you knew what was going on. Burn anything that shows how much you did and leave the place looking like you were just a filing clerk. I just want it to seem as though you knew nothing. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“And then I want you to get on the bike and get the hell out of there.”

“Today?”
“As soon as you can. There’s money in the safe and the petty cash tin, take it. Go down to Saigon and stay for a while. I’m going to call a mate who works for an English-speaking news agency. With the war on now there’s bound to be plenty of work for translators. Langley won’t chase you once you’re out of Dak Thay, the locals all look the same to him and I doubt he even remembers your full name. I’m guessing he’ll think you’ve gone bush and that will be that.”

“And what about you?”

“I’ll get back to Vietnam. This war isn’t finishing any day soon and they’ll always need soldiers. It might take me a few months or even a year but I’ll be back.”

“And you’ll find me.”

“I’ll find you.”

There was silence. I held the phone tight in my hand and felt the dryness in my throat closing in. I could feel my heart beating and each stroke ached like a bruise. When Frank spoke next his voice was soft.

“I’ve been thinking about something that you said, about the dust, and you’re right. What we do, it doesn’t matter to anyone else. It’s just you and me. Our lives.”

“Just you and me, Frank. I don’t want to die without knowing who it is that I am. I’m not scared.”

I could feel him smiling. He said, “I’m not either, I reckon.”

Through the window I could see a corner of the sky and strips of tattered clouds like an old man’s beard. Frank cleared his throat.

“I can’t say goodbye to you, Minh, so I won’t. But promise me that you’ll be careful.”

“Just make sure you come back and find me, ok?”

My fingers found the small scar behind my ear. I fit my thumb into the depression and closed my eyes.

“Remember the dust,” I said.

I blinked and wiped my eyes with the back of my hand.

“Frank.”
“Minh,” he said, and his voice was broken but I could hear the edge of a smile. “I’m standing in a public place in a hospital nightie that ties up at the back and my arse is hanging out. I’ve got bandages and tubes going God knows where. I’m trying hard to muster up the small shred of dignity that I’ve got left so please don’t say good bye, I can’t bear it. Just say, see you later.”

I smiled. “See you later, Frank.”

“See you later, Minh.”

There was a moment when neither of us spoke. I could hear people moving and talking in the background at the hospital and I held the phone to my ear as if somehow that would help. I held the phone and listened to Frank breathing. I closed my eyes until I heard a click and the line went dead.

I knew then what I had to do; my mind was calm like the surface of the sea in the lull that follows a storm. I finished filling out the requisition slips, slotted the reports into their cardboard files and cleared my desk of anything that had not been issued by the army. Then I wrote a letter of resignation and left it in a plain envelope in the middle of my desk.

I went through the office on the base, with one ear turned towards the only road. The concentration and energy that had been denied to me earlier returned and my hands flew to their task. The pile of papers that I made in the middle of the floor grew by the minute and soon I had a large cardboard box full. I took them outside, weighed the papers down with rocks, covered them with branches and threw a match onto the pile. It burned with a strong heat that was quick and tinged with blue as though the earth approved. When nothing was left but fine ashes I kicked the pile to dust until only a grey stain on the red dirt remained.

Later that same day when I arrived home Mai was in the kitchen. Her hair was tied back with a red cotton scarf and the ends hung down her back like folded wings. She was sweeping, her small feet bare. The fire had burned itself out and already the house felt deserted. I had my duffel bag on my shoulder, keys in my hand.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?”
“Today.”
“Just like that?”
“It’s complicated, Mai.”
“You’ve spoken to Frank?”
“From the hospital. He’s worried that the Americans will come looking for me. I know things. Things that maybe I shouldn’t.”
“And what about your family?”
“It’s just for a while.”

She laughed sadly. “I envy you. You can leave here whenever you like. But me? I’m a widow. A constant reminder of things people would rather forget. Stuck here waiting for the Communists. Six weeks ago I had a husband and a home. Now I’m forced to accept charity from my family while my father figures out what to do with me. And do you know what he’s going to do? According to him I’m going to marry one of his business partners. An old man with grey hair and yellow teeth.”
“Maybe it’s for the best.”
“For the best?”
“You can’t waste your life being a widow. You can remarry, have a family.”
“You think that matters to me now?”

She turned away. Her shoulders were small and I could see how thin she had become. The shadows dark at the back of her arm in the hollows between the bones.
“Your brother would never have left me here. He would never have stood by and let my family auction me off in some kind of business deal.”
“Of course not, you were his wife.”
“Yes, but even so. Even if we hadn’t married. He would have helped me. He would have felt as if he owed me that.”
“Mai, I don’t know what I can do to help you.”
“Take me with you. Don’t leave me here.”
I held up my hands but she continued.
“I’m not stupid, Minh. I’m not expecting you to love me.”
“So what is it that you want?”
“A way out of here.”
“I'll take you to Saigon but that’s it. I’m not making any promises that I can’t keep.”

“And I’m not expecting any. Both of us have lost what we most wanted. But if you can’t get what you want, sometimes you just have to settle for what you can get.”
Frank, Kapooka NSW, 1966

Dear Minh,

Thanks for your letter. It made my day when I saw your handwriting in the mailbag. Sounds like you’ve got yourself a plum job with Reuters. From the village to a job with the biggest news agency in town in less than four years. Well done, mate.

I can’t say that my life is anywhere near as exciting as yours. My bloody arm is still no good and now they reckon one of my lungs is buggered too. They say I’m not fit for combat duty so they won’t send me back to Vietnam, though God knows I’ve tried to persuade them. I feel like I’ve been put out to pasture here. But I’m not giving up.

Training recruits is not a bad job but you’ve got so little time and so much to teach them. Most of the kids are city boys and now, thanks to conscription, we’ve got nashos. These young chaps don’t know one end of a gun from the other and they’re so young, just babies really.

A few of us trainers are from the AATTV, broken old diggers like myself that the army doesn’t really know what to do with. There’s George, we call him Peggy. He got his leg shot off in the Delta so now he’s got a plastic one. Bill was in the artillery so he can’t hear much anymore. Jim’s hands shake so badly he has to drink his coffee cold and Bob ate a handful of aspirin washed down with brandy and knocked out his liver, he’s so yellow the blokes call him Miss Saigon. Then there’s me. Can’t lift my arm above my head and at the top of the stairs I blow like I’ve just galloped two furlongs.

During the day we carry on and rib each other and it’s all good fun but sometimes the nights get a bit rugged. Our rooms are on the same floor in the
barracks. Some of the blokes, like me, don’t sleep much and the rest of them have dreams. You listen to them, it’s enough to make your hair curl. When I got here I wondered why they kept us separate from the young blokes. I get it now. If those recruits were to walk down the corridor sometime after midnight they’d be off, over the fence and away before the sun came up.

They’ve given me the job of teaching the boys how to shoot. Ironic, isn’t it. It’s the one skill I wish I didn’t have but the only one the army ever wanted. A few weeks ago some top brass came down for the day. He watched for a while then took me aside and asked me to identify any chaps that were especially good. There’s a few kids in each group that can really shoot. They might never have picked up a gun before but they’ve got it naturally. Anyway, I told him I’d never met a bigger group of dunces in my life and that they’d be lucky if I could train them to hit the side of a hangar at fifty feet. The army will always need someone to do its dirty work but they won’t be getting names from me.

Anyway, enough of that nonsense. I’ve bought myself a bike. It’s just an old Norton, but it goes alright. We get Sundays off and I’ve been touring around the countryside, just having a look. It’s pretty good country over here, plenty of water, though not nearly as much as you and I are used to! There’s a couple of big rivers nearby and they seem to be able to grow pretty much anything.

I do most of my riding off the main roads and sometimes I pull over and switch off the motor. It’s quiet out here, I can think. I’ve thought a lot about dust, Minh. And us. You know, after Han died, those weeks when we couldn’t sleep. When we’d sit up, just
waiting out the night. I realised then that there’s lots of things I want to do with my life, but none I want to do without you.
See you later,
Frank.
Frank, Kapooka NSW, 1966

Dear Minh,

Thanks for the letters mate. Sounds like things are hotting up in the Delta. I heard on the grapevine that Mike Langley got himself promoted and shipped back to the US. He’s such a slimy bastard he’ll probably end up going from the CIA into politics.

The blokes I’m working with like to break out the rum on Friday and Saturday nights. It’s funny, I used to like a drink but lately I can’t bring myself to it. I’m too scared that once I start I won’t stop. I’m frightened that it will get the better of me and I won’t be able to quit and I’ll end up like my mum, in a gutter somewhere, in a pool of my own piss and vomit.

And there’s another thing. I can’t talk, at least not about the things that matter. The other blokes get a skinful and let it all out, talk the leg off a chair some of them. But not me, I’m keeping my mouth shut. Can you imagine it? Can you just picture their faces if I let them know what I think about?

I got another letter today. Seems like the army has made up its mind. They tell me I definitely won’t be getting sent back to Vietnam. Some pen pusher in Canberra thinks I might be a liability in combat because of my injuries. They can all go fuck themselves as far as I’m concerned but I’m going to keep trying. Maybe they’ll send me over just to shut me up.

See you later,

Frank.
Dearest Minh,

We went to the pub last weekend. I had a beer but it’s no good for me any more so I let it go flat then ordered a bitter lemon. You should have heard the blokes go off when they saw that. They were yelling things like, “What are you, some kind of bloody poofter?” and “Where’s your skirt, Nancy boy?” It was all good fun of course. And I’m laughing, making up some bullshit that it’s the doctor’s orders but I’m thinking, if only they knew. If only they knew the truth.

I’ve been thinking about the dust, trying to remember how it felt to believe in that. And I’ve come to realise that on my own that’s all I am, just dust. I always was. It doesn’t matter what I think because it never has.

You know Minh, the one thing I want in life is for you to forget all this. Wait out the war and then move back to the village, marry a pretty girl and have a great big family. And one day when you’re sitting in the sun watching your grandkids play, I hope that you’ll think of me and smile.

Goodbye Minh.
Love always,
Frank.
Bindoon W.A, 1968

Dear Minh,

This is Frank’s grandfather. I’m sorry to tell you this but Frank has gone. The army says it was an accident. I didn’t ask for details. I think you knew him even better than I did, he didn’t make mistakes. They sent me his things a while back. I’ve thought a lot since then about what Frank would have wanted and I know he would have wanted you to have something so I’m sending you these letters. I hope they give you some kind of peace and help you to remember him.

I don’t really understand but I know that you were his friend. We’ll both miss him terribly.

Take care,

Bill.
Chapter Twenty One

I had been in Saigon for two years when I received the letter. It came, as Frank’s letters had, to where I worked as a translator. The postmark was Australian, the handwriting unfamiliar. I put it in my shirt pocket and sat at my desk while words formed and reformed in unsteady streams on the paper in front of me.

At five o’clock I rode through the uneven streets to Cho Lon. Past low-roofed houses, painted pagodas and cluttered shopfronts. I rode through the crush of people on the streets, through places where the sweet hint of opium hung in the air like dust. Outside a brothel prostitutes bought fish from a man with one arm. An old woman on a bicycle carried mangoes in a wire basket and a young girl sold incense in bundles tied with red string. Past stagnant canals, the hiss of bike tyres on wet ground.

The room Mai and I rented was on the ground floor of an old house. An ancient tamarind tree threw lacy shadows against the wall and damp bubbles blistered the plaster. The rain-swollen shutters let in thin, hard streams of light and the sounds of cars and ponies in the street. Mai’s bed was by the window; I slept on a blanket by the door.

I sat on the edge of the bed and read Frank’s Grandfather’s letter. I didn’t cry until I had read it twice. When Mai walked in she looked at me and took the letter from my hands. In the light from the window she read, her palm against her mouth.

“He’s gone,” I said, and the words wedged in my chest, solid and sharp.

Then she was in front of me, her hands on my face. We had not touched before and I flinched at the feel of her skin against mine. She was my brother’s wife but she leaned in and, like a mother cat, licked a tear from my cheek. Her tongue was warm, the weight of her body against my chest. Her long hair soft, and the smell of vanilla rising slowly between us.

She undid the buttons of her blue cotton blouse and covered her small breasts with my hands. I could see a pulse in the satin skin at the base of her neck. She pulled off my shirt and I bent my head to her breast. Her
skin was smooth and I could taste the warmth of her, the faint salt of her skin.

She was soft and her breath like the chiming of a bell, high and clear. Her teeth grazed my lips and her long hair was in my hands like rope.

Afterwards she slept and I watched dust motes float together in strips of shuttered light. I held her body against mine while inside me things broke apart and collapsed.
Chapter Twenty Two

My mother had more stories than a famine has empty bowls but words could not save her. She taught her children that wisdom was more important than power, that knowledge was greater than tradition. She built a family from scraps and bones, her brow furrowed with concentration and her work-worn hands never still. To me, her stories were like guardians, her knowledge a talisman. And then she was gone and in her place only silence. I learned of her death in the morning, the day after my son Han was born. It had rained all night, the wind lifting the tiles and the roads outside like muddy rivers. I met the messenger at the door with my son in my arms, his pale fists curled like flower buds. When I closed the door I searched his small face for her likeness, for a sign that her spirit was with me, in the tamarind shadows under his tightly closed eyes and the sweet, briny smell of birth. But all I could see was fire and the blackened earth of a ruined village. When I told Mai she cried, her face turned to the wall and her shoulder bones sharp on her back like flightless wings.

The months passed and we nursed our son on grief and in silence. We were hollow from crying, dry-sided and crumbling. So many were gone that some days I wasn’t sure if I should count myself amongst the living or the dead and I walked between the two worlds without the strength to choose. Grief stole the flesh from Mai’s bones and she seemed to grow smaller as each week passed. Animals should not suffer as she did. There were days when I thought that she would slip beneath the weight of her suffocating grief and fall to where the light would no longer reach her.

The Communist army spread like a stain, every day closer to Saigon. We heard rumours of terrible things happening in Hue and I was frightened, not for myself, but for the baby and for Mai. I sold the motorbike to a thin-faced French journalist who lit each of his cigarettes from the butt of the last. He was on his way to Phnom Penh and when he drummed his yellow fingernails on the fuel tank it sounded like horses galloping. I wished him luck and watched him ride away.
The sale of the bike bought our passage out of Viet Nam. We had nothing when we left, just the clothes we wore, a cooking pot and a blanket. We gathered in the dark with others and gave our lives over to two fishermen with a wooden boat and pockets full of our money. It was dark when we left and we were frightened. The pounding of our hearts in our ears and the sound of waves against the bow like gunshot. We held our breaths and lay down on the wooden floor. The smell of tar and baitfish rank against our faces. We were too frightened to look back at what we had lost and anyway, the shore was hidden by darkness.

All through that terrible voyage I held my young son in my arms. I sang to him as my mother had once sung to me. I watched the curve of his cheek against my arm as he slept. I slowed my breathing to calm him when he fretted and ate only when he had his fill. Without him I would have withered and blown to dust like last year’s weeds.

On our third night at sea the moon disappeared. The sky flung down a savage wind and the waves rose to meet it. The roar of the water filled our heads and pressed against the backs of our eyes like a fever. I prayed, not for myself but for Han and for Mai who wept silently, her thin arms around my waist. Somehow the boat held and by morning the sea was calm.

The sun rose and our hearts lifted with it. There were many amongst us who had thought they would never live to see the light again. We had survived but our boat was battered, the water drums had been swept away and the bags of rice were sodden and useless. Worse, the motor had been swamped by waves and we were adrift.

One of the women, heavy with child, began to cry as the day warmed, soft rasping notes like a broken-legged lamb. She pressed her hands against the swollen rise of her belly. By afternoon there was blood on the hem of her skirt and the veins in her neck stretched taut and blue. She squatted on the floor, stained by vomit and excrement and, while others tried to look away, she delivered a child that did not cry but lay limp and lifeless in her arms. A dark stain soaked the wood, I held our baby’s face against my cheek. The boat drifted throughout the night and the following day. The water pulsed against the hull and the mother held the still baby against her chest.
One of the other women gave her a rough, stained bag that the fishermen used for bait and she wrapped him in it as though it were a shawl. She held his small body tightly against hers for one last, long moment then silently passed him over. There was barely a ripple to mark his passage into the sea.

The next day, our third without a motor, we began to run low on water. In the tropical heat we tried to make shade and fanned our faces with our hands. An old man whose leg had broken in the storm began to run a fever, his head rolling from side to side against the hull, his lips cracked and bloated from the sun. Then, just as evening approached, we saw a boat on the horizon. We were frantic, yelling and screaming. We set fire to anything that would burn: books, papers and even money, waving them above our heads, hot ashes raining down on us and settling in our hair. Slowly, so slowly it seemed impossible, the boat turned and came towards us.

We were lifted into the ship one by one. The sailors doused the empty boat with petrol and set it alight. It burned feebly and collapsed into the sea with a hiss. I watched until it sank from view.

I finished reading Frank’s letters just after my last chemotherapy treatment. It was almost Christmas and I sat all morning under the lemon tree in the yard, listening to bees and the freeway beyond the fence. I thought about love. I thought about the difference between being alive and choosing to live. The difference between forgetting and denying. I cried a little then, the sun on my hands and the sound of crickets in the grass.

The next day I set off early, driving north to the town nearest Frank’s Grandfather’s farm. I wasn’t sure what I would find, and less sure what I was looking for amongst the dusty streets lined with jacarandas and prefab houses. The sports field was ringed with white gums and, in their shade, crows perched on treated pine picnic tables. I parked and walked out into the sun, couch grass thin beneath my feet.
Back in the car, I drove the dusty margins of the town, dry scratchy paddocks and sagging gates tied closed with baling twine. The cemetery stood on a small rise that climbed towards the hills. Rose bushes in neat beds followed the fence around and a sprinkler turned on a patch of smooth grass. I walked on crushed gravel between the rows of graves, feeling the morning sun warm on the back of my head.

I found Frank's grave at the head of a row near the rose-covered fence. A neat granite slab ringed with gravel.

Francis J Stevens.
1939 – 1967
Lest we forget.

The cemetery was empty and the sky clear all the way to the horizon. I waited to feel something, standing on the quiet path with the smell of artesian water on the slight breeze. I watched the sharp edges of my shadow on the granite and thought about the years that separated us, stretched tight like elastic. The familiar pull in my chest; the hollow emptiness like hunger.

"I tried to forget," I said. "I almost succeeded, too."

In the distance I heard a car door slam and the sound of a school bell.

"For forty years I was nothing. Hollow, without sadness. Or joy."

I kneeled and touched the sun-warmed granite, smoothing my fingers along the inscription, feeling the grit of sand collected in the indentations.

"Now I remember us, Frank. And I remember how it felt to be part of something that was real and good when nothing else was."

I spat into my palm and rubbed damp hands over the stone. It was warm and crescents of spit and dust swirled beneath my fingers.

"And I remember the man that I used to be. How I used to feel. It's like being broken open. Sometimes the pain is terrible but inside there's a small kernel of something better. Someone better."

"I lost you once and then I almost lost you again. And I realise now that the pain means I'm alive. There's a special kind of beauty in that."
“And I want you to know that one day, maybe one day soon, I’ll sit in the sun watching my grandchildren play. The sun will be warm on my shoulders, the air clear and bright. And I’ll remember us and I’ll smile. And when they ask me why I’m smiling I’ll tell them the truth. I’ll tell them that I’m thinking of someone that I love.”

I walked back to the car. At the roadhouse on the highway I bought a coffee in a styrofoam cup and I balanced it on my knee as I drove. It was hot and sweet and I wound the window down. The tyres drummed the road and the wind rushed in through the window. It was the sound of two wheels on an empty road that curved around the base of a mountain, another place – long ago but still mine. I laughed and the air was warm and somehow sweet.
Chapter Twenty Three

I used to think that mine had been a life in two halves. One half was in my mother’s mountain village and one here, wide open, by the sea. When we came to this country we never spoke of what we had left behind. I was like a machine with the moving parts missing – just steel and grease gone cold. I came to realise that some things can be halved and still survive but not men and women, they are merely divided.

Eighteen months after my diagnosis I had my last appointment with Dr Benson. His collar was undone and his shirt was a shade of late summer, the blue of the river when it runs beneath a cloudless sky. He stood up to walk me out and at the door he shook my hand.

“Good luck, Minh,” he said, “take care of yourself.”

Outside the hospital smokers flicked cigarettes into the garden and magpies plundered the overflowing rubbish bins. Mould crept along the cracks between the pavers and on the road, exhaust fumes shimmered like heat haze.

I thought about hand written letters and eyes the deep green of a river in flood. A patch of dappled shade beside a village, and the feel of my heart beating against the ground. The smell of warm skin, and the gentle sound of wind and insects. I remembered a gravel road that curved around the base of a mountain, two wheels on the gravel, the feel of laughter in my chest, the world at my back and sunlight like diamonds.

Three thousand miles away, in my mother’s village, the bones of my family bleached to hollow whiteness where once we grew yams. Embraced by the shadow of the mountains and rocked by the gentle drumming of the river over stones, they called to me and in my bones an ache that answered them.

In time, I told them. In time.
This novel was inspired by some of the experiences of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV). Although some of the events were drawn from the historical record the characters are not meant in any way to resemble real people. Dak Thay is a fictitious place and the characters’ beliefs and motivations are entirely mine – any resemblance to people, either living or dead, is purely coincidental.
Everything will always do nothing:
Learned helplessness, trauma and
the Vietnam War novel
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Prologue

After driving for five hours we stopped for lunch at the Overlander Roadhouse, half way between Geraldton and Carnarvon on the coastal highway. Out the front of the roadhouse was a late model station wagon, fishing rods strapped to the roof, the back stacked with plastic crates. As I walked past I noticed a small sticker on the bottom of the rear window – a boomerang above a crossbow and underneath the word *Persevere*. I stopped. After over a year of research, of looking at that emblem in books, photos and websites it was strange to suddenly see it there – seven hundred kilometres from home on our first family holiday.

It was then that I noticed the man sitting in the front of the car. He was eating a takeaway hamburger – fifteen bucks for the privilege that far from town. His eyes forward, greaseproof wrap folded back neatly to allow for biting. When I knocked on the window he opened the door and looked at me; his face was thin but tanned and on his lip a small piece of lettuce stuck with mayonnaise.

“I saw your bumper sticker,” I said, “I’m doing some research on the war and I’m looking at the Australian Army Training Team in Vietnam. I hope you don’t mind, it’s just, when I saw the sticker…”

He smiled and put down his hamburger. Standing up, he wiped his hands on his King Gees before we shook.

“You’re interested in the AATTV? I served with them. I did two tours, one in ’66, the other in ’69.”

We got to talking. He leaned an elbow on the door of the vehicle and I squinted into the sun, feeling the heat of the ground beneath my feet like I was standing on the back of something hot blooded. On the edge of the door his fingers were blunt with use, the dirt worked deep into the creases. The dates came easily to him and the history. The tour he did in ’69 was the worst, he said. He was married by then and the leaving was harder.
We talked for a while. About Vietnam, about Post Traumatic Stress. His was diagnosed in 1989 after he tried to blow up his boss's car – with the boss still in it. I watched my kids play on the grass and he said, “Chlorine and diesel fuel – bloody beautiful,” and laughed. “I could’ve done it too,” he nodded. “I was a heavy munitions expert in Vietnam. So I knew how, all I had to do was fine tune the fuse. But you know, things don’t always go to plan...”

He wiped his mouth with the back of a hand that was crisp with sun and years. “I ended up being committed for a stretch. There was a long time there when things weren’t great. I got to thinking that nothing mattered, you know. Like, what’s the point in struggling? It’s easier just to give up. But that was a while ago and well, I suppose I’ve moved on.”

Then he looked at his watch and smiled. “I’ve got to get goin’, love, but it’s been nice talking to you.”

But he kept talking. He was on his way back to Perth after a fishing trip – hadn’t caught much but he’d got a few tailor and a snapper or two. Late yesterday evening he said, he’d waded out into the bay and hooked into a big Spanish mackerel. It was dark out there on the edge of the national park, the outline of Dirk Hartog Island humped up against the sky and the last light silver where the line met the water. Thigh deep, the rod bent, reel whining and every muscle in his arms burning. Then suddenly nothing. When he wound in the line, there was nothing left of the biggest fish of the trip.

“I thought about that for a minute,” he said. “I thought about the sort of thing that could bite clean through a trace and a three foot mackerel. And I figured that I was done with fishing for the night.” We laughed and I pictured him packing his tackle box in the light of the car headlights, the rod on the sand and the salt water drying in white streaks on his legs.

“Anyway, this'll be me last trip,” he said. “I’ve got cancer – started in the pancreas but it’s pretty much everywhere now. They’ve done all that chemo and what-have-you, but it’s no good, this is the last furlong for me.” He
paused for a moment and brushed flies from his face. “I spent a lot of years
forgetting Vietnam. People were always on at me to open up and talk about
it – and I couldn’t. But now,” he smiled, “I’d talk the leg off a chair.” He shook
his head, “Life’s funny like that, you know. First of all you want to forget,
then you can’t bear to.”
He slid into the driver’s seat and without the door between us I could see the
wasted hollows in his chest and his bony thighs. He wound down the
window, stuck out his hand and smiled while his fingers closed about mine.

“There was a time, you know, when I would have took my chances with a big
shark. There was a time there when dying, well... it seemed alright. But
now... now it’s almost over I don’t want it to end.”
I watched him drive away and his car grew smaller and the desert stretched
out on either side of the highway – an endless inland sea.

Over the next couple of weeks there was a lot of time for thinking. I watched
our kids play on the sand, their sturdy legs and brown bodies slick with
sunscreen. We snorkelled between the pylons of the island jetty, watched
the light shiver on a school of trevally and the smell of diesel in the water. At
night we watched the news on a communal television with the clink of
snooker balls in the background and walked home in the dark, picking up
the reptilian tracks of bungarras in the torch light.

I thought a lot about learned helplessness on that trip – a psychological
theory about a state that can develop in humans and animals when they are
conditioned to believe that their situation is inescapable, or unchangeable. It
can be the result of sudden trauma or the product of sustained and
prolonged suffering. Basically, it’s about control. Individuals (humans,
horses and other animals) need to perceive they have some degree of
control over their lives – that their actions are meaningful and they can
therefore effect change. When the perception of control is lost it can lead to
psychological changes: depression, sadness, feelings of helplessness. As a
horse trainer, I have seen learned helplessness too often. Horses’ mouths have as many nerve endings as our own and you can see in their eyes the first time they feel the bit. If you’re slow and methodical (start your pressure off lightly) and never forget that there is a living being at the end of the reins, they will learn to respond to just a finger’s worth of pressure. When training is correct pressure is a problem they can solve. The horse learns to control the pressure by offering a learned response. But if pressure is painful and unrelenting they can give up. When they can find no behavioural solution to the problem of pressure they stop trying – they have learned to be helpless.

In researching novels and other literature related to the Vietnam War it seemed to me that the experiences of the veteran protagonists, as well as the real-life figures I read about – just like veterans I had met – could be interpreted through the concept of learned helplessness. For example, some of the veteran protagonists were represented as believing that there was no possibility for positive change and no way that they could improve their situation. As Vietnam veteran and American author Tim O’Brien writes: “If there’s a lesson in this, which there is not, it’s very simple … Everything will always do nothing” (O’Brien, “Writing Vietnam lecture”, 1999).

It seemed to me that the concept of learned helplessness could offer a significant contribution to the analysis of trauma in the literary texts. This is particularly important because contemporary literary trauma theory asserts that the examination of trauma is relevant to the wider study of trauma and offers insights into traumatic experience that may not be available through other means. The problem is that literary trauma theory is dominated by its Freudian and post-structuralist origins and therefore privileges the unrepresentability of trauma and the pathological effect of traumatic memory. The concept of Nachtraglichkeit, or the way in which traumatic memories manifest themselves retrospectively, is central to the way in which trauma in literary texts is viewed in literary trauma theory. This is at
odds with the wider, multi-disciplinary study of trauma which has largely abandoned Freud’s conceptualisation of memory.

In this thesis I argue that utilising learned helplessness in the study of trauma in literary texts encourages an engagement with the wider study of trauma and the incorporation of insights not necessarily privileged by contemporary literary trauma theory. Learned helplessness foregrounds losses of control and by doing so therefore encourages an examination of the cultural and social forces at work in the text and the way that these can either contribute to or negate these losses. In post-Vietnam War literature this leads to what I have called the “Vietnam paradox”. This occurs because one of the most significant ways for sufferers of learned helplessness to alleviate their symptoms is to come to view their role in the past as meaningful. Culture exerts powerful pressure on veterans to reiterate what is considered appropriate and authentic testimony (Kirmayer 191). The notion that a veteran is not a victim is at odds with this pressure. As I will discuss in greater length in this thesis, this is largely because of the contentious politics surrounding the war and the proliferation of post-war diagnoses of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The paradox occurs because the veteran needs to assert a degree of retrospective control over his past, yet is prevented from doing so by a culture that views veterans as victims.

In this thesis I argue that issues of control also inform the process of narrativisation – the protagonist can be coerced into remembering, in which case the act further exacerbates the loss of control. Alternatively, if they control the process it can be therapeutic – a way of exerting control over the world. The conceptualisation of trauma as a loss of control also gives new insights into notions of transmissibility and encourages an engagement with wider cultural issues such as gender, technology and place.

During this project I have drawn inspiration from the history of Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War and from the many veterans that I have met. I have travelled to Vietnam twice and watched dozens of hours of film. I
have examined portrayals of veterans in popular culture, the media and literature as a way of understanding the public perception of veterans, particularly how this relates to representations of masculinity. If there is one inexorable truth that I have learned throughout my research it is this: no-one returns home from a war-zone unchanged. It is my hope that by conducting research into the deleterious effects of war we may come to truly understand the implications of sending troops overseas and acknowledge the sacrifice made by those who serve.
Chapter One: Studying trauma in the novel

Introduction

The study of trauma in literary texts emerged as a discipline in the 1990s. One of the fundamental tenets of literary trauma theory is that it is not only relevant to the study of trauma as it is experienced, but also to the wider study of trauma. The foundations of literary trauma theory rely heavily on the work of Freud, in particular the notion of unrepresentability. However, the medical study and treatment of trauma no longer privileges a Freudian model of memory. This thesis examines the issues inherent in this epistemological schism and offers the conceptualisation of learned helplessness as an alternative analytical paradigm, as a way of reducing the gap between literary trauma theory and the wider study of trauma.

Since the 1970s researchers in many different disciplines have studied the phenomenon of trauma. These trauma studies and theories now constitute a framework for understanding the medical, political, social and psychological forces that inform human responses to trauma. The word ‘trauma’, derived from the Greek word for wound, was originally used to denote a physical injury (Jenson 16) and trauma was once the purview of the medical field. Now, however, the study of trauma extends to its causes and effects in disciplines as varied as law, psychiatry, history, Holocaust studies, science, art and literature. In keeping with modern medical practice, which recognises that trauma can be both physical and psychological and that the two states can exist independently of one another, the broad study of trauma has incorporated both of these academic fields as a way of exploring
the emotional impact of traumatic experience. This multidisciplinary approach enables trauma to be examined in all its guises as a way of both understanding and coming to terms with the nature of traumatic experience (Rodi-Risberg 15). As Elissa Marder observes:

Rare is the phenomenon that legitimately is an object of study not only in the three traditional branches of the university (the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities) but in medicine and law as well. Trauma, it would seem, has something of a privileged and paradoxical relationship to interdisciplinary studies (Marder 1).

Theories and studies of trauma in literary texts have been informed by the medical treatment of trauma as well as the field of literary studies. One of the key arguments in this thesis is that this approach has created a problem for the literary study of trauma as these two disciplines have opposing theoretical positions. In particular, the treatment of trauma as a medical condition moved away from a psychoanalytic model in the latter half of the twentieth century (Bornstein 3, Paloutzian and Parks 86), while literary theory – under the influence of theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan – prioritised psychoanalytic arguments, such as the unrepresentability of trauma. These opposing perspectives are the source of tension both within and beyond the field of literary trauma theory (Visser 273).

This thesis investigates ‘learned helplessness’, a psychological term used to connote an observed condition that can manifest post-trauma. Learned helplessness, psychologists claim, has its origins in losses of control. It leads to a sense of self-defeat and the belief that “no amount of effort can lead to success” (Eggen and Kauchak, 412). I argue that the concept of learned helplessness can contribute to a literary study of trauma because it enlarges the scope of what is perceived as traumatic and resolves some of the tensions within literary trauma theory, and between literary trauma theory and the broader study and treatment of trauma. Moreover, as perceptions of
control are mediated by culture, privileging the role played by losses of control and viewing every loss as potentially traumatic encourages an examination of the culture created within the world of the novel. This leads to an engagement with issues such as gender and place and the way that they either exacerbate or limit these losses of control.

Chapter One of this thesis examines various tensions within the field of literary trauma theory as well as in the wider study of trauma. The discussion addresses Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the issues that inform this diagnosis and its relevance to the examination of trauma in literature. The chapter introduces the concept of learned helplessness and outlines ways in which an understanding of this concept might contribute to the study of trauma. It concludes by examining issues that are enabled and foregrounded by reading trauma through the lens of learned helplessness.

Chapters Two, Three and Four analyse several literary texts featuring protagonists who are veterans of the Vietnam War. These include the short story collection *The Things They Carried* (1990) by Tim O’Brien, *After the Fire, A Still Small Voice* (2009) by Evie Wyld and *The Sorrow of War* (1991) by Bao Ninh. The non-fiction text *Dispatches* (1977) by Michael Herr is also used here, though to a lesser extent. The chapters also discuss the novels *The Uncle’s Story* (2000) by Witi Ihimaera and *Novel Without a Name* (1995) by Duong Thu Huong. These texts offer a comprehensive, although by no means exhaustive, cross-section of literary representations of the trauma experienced by veterans in the context of the Vietnam War.

Chapter Two examines competing definitions of trauma, offering a definition for the purposes of textual analysis. It also introduces the concept of moral injury or the act of “perpetrating, failing to prevent or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs” (Litz et al 695), as a way of broadening the definition of trauma. Using Martin Seligman’s three criteria for the acquisition of learned helplessness as a guide, this chapter demonstrates how attending to losses of control in a text encourages an
engagement with issues not already privileged by existing literary trauma theory.

In Chapter Three I demonstrate the ways in which the concept of learned helplessness widens critical perceptions of traumatic response, enabling insights into the role played by aspects of culture such as gender, technology and place in fictional representations of trauma. I argue that culture can either contribute to the sufferer’s sense of moral injury and their belief that they are powerless, or else act as an agent of control that can assist the protagonist to retain some sense of control over their world. In this chapter I introduce the concept of the ‘Vietnam paradox’ which acknowledges that cultural and political pressures can act as a form of censorship that dictates what is appropriate and authentic testimony. Overall the chapter demonstrates the potential of reading through the prism of learned helplessness to bring into focus representations of trauma in the novel.

Chapter Four argues that when the theory of learned helplessness is used to examine representations of trauma, it highlights different ways in which control is restored and therefore different representations of healing. In the novels examined, interaction with the landscape, spirituality, narrativisation and personal relationships are represented as healing because each contributes to restoring the perception of control to the protagonist. This chapter includes a discussion of the concept of transmissibility and shows that some of these novels represent trauma as transmissible to others who have not directly experienced trauma, and that this is consistent with the theory of learned helplessness.

The study of trauma

Literary trauma theory emerged as a discipline in the 1990s in order to construct a theoretical framework for examining textual representations of trauma. Literary trauma theorists were informed by both the medical treatment of trauma and the field of literary studies itself. These two fields
have arrived at opposing theoretical positions and this has created a problem for the literary study of trauma. While the treatment of trauma as a medical condition moved away from the psychoanalytic model in the latter half of the twentieth century (Bornstein 3, Paloutzian and Parks 86) literary theory, under the influence of theorists such as Derrida and Lacan, continues to prioritise psychoanalytic arguments, particularly the unrepresentability of trauma. As will be seen in this chapter, these differing perspectives are the source of much of the tension both within and beyond the field of literary trauma theory.

The development of literary trauma theory

One of the key tenets of literary trauma studies has been the claim that it is relevant to the study of trauma as it is experienced. A key theorist in the field, Geoffrey Hartman, argues that literary trauma theory offers an “exegesis in the service of insights about human functioning” (Hartman 544) and that it can provide insight into the emotional impact of trauma that a primarily medical perspective cannot. In this way, Hartman suggests, literary trauma theory can bridge the gap between the academic study of trauma and traumatised individuals:

Trauma studies provide a more natural transition to the “real” world often falsely split off from that of the university, as if the one were activist and engaged and the other self absorbed and detached. There is an opening that leads from trauma studies to public, especially mental health issues, an opening with ethical, cultural and religious implications (Hartman 543).

Other theorists have implicitly supported these views by representing literary trauma studies as a valuable form of social critique. For literary theorist Marinella Rodi-Risberg, literature is an unparalleled realm for representing traumatic experience as it gives insight into the cultural context of trauma (Rodi-Risberg 12). Similarly, James Berger argues that the
literary analysis of trauma fiction offers important cultural and historical insights as “trauma allows for an interpretation of cultural symptoms – of the growths, wounds, scars of a social body” (Berger 573). These insights are largely achieved by the study of individual protagonists because of the assumption that novels “provide a picture of the individual that suffers, but paint it in such a way as to suggest that this protagonist is an ‘every person’ figure” (Balaev 2008, 155). Drawing on literary study to focus on history, Dominick LaCapra argues that fiction offers insights into the experience of trauma “by offering a reading of a process or period or by giving at least a plausible ‘feel’ for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restrictive documentary methods” (LaCapra 13).

The novel’s capacity to evoke the experiential gives literary trauma studies the capacity to offer insights into how different, affected individuals might respond to events such as the Vietnam War. Rodi-Risberg argues, in relation to the study of trauma, that fiction may in some ways be more truthful than non-fiction texts because historical texts, despite a veneer of objectivity, are inevitably gendered and culturally-biased: “Paradoxically, then, fiction may be truthful and truth invariably contains some fiction” (Rodi-Risberg 16). Also, representations of “truth” in non-fiction narratives are subject to scrutiny whereas, in fictional narratives, authenticity is not nearly as foregrounded. In the case of the Vietnam War this may support the idea that, in the novel, war experiences can be represented free from the cultural censorship that operates upon non-fiction narratives about the war.

Some theorists also argue that literary trauma theory compliments trauma studies in other disciplines because literature provides a necessary cultural context for such studies. Hartman argues that the theory can “speak back” to the wider body of trauma studies “offering a greater understanding of trauma than can be gained by documentary or empirical methods” (Hartman, 259). Rodi-Risberg, meanwhile, sees the movement of information from literary trauma theory to the wider body of trauma studies as a two way flow: “Far from replacing historical, psychological and
scientific examinations, literature adds to the body of knowledge and understanding derived from these other sources as well as benefits them” (Rodi-Risberg15).

The development of literary trauma theory has been highly influenced by the work of Paul de Man and several key early theorists, such as Shoshana Felman, Cathy Caruth and James Berger, who either studied under or worked with him (Visser 273, Rodi-Risberg 11, Berger 573). As Rodi-Risberg points out:

Trauma emerged in literary studies in the 1990s as a possibility for the integration of, on the one hand, the concern in literary criticism at the time with poststructuralist and Lacanian abstract high theory, and on the other, “the real” in terms of the traumatic event and its socio-historical, political, cultural, and ethical meanings and functions. (Rodi-Risberg13)

As sociologist Vivienne Elizabeth writes: “Within post-structuralist theory, language is understood to operate productively rather than mimetically. Thus, language is central to the social construction of social realities” (31). Within this linguistic focus, Jacques Lacan has also been a major influence in the study of trauma, in particular his theory that the unconscious mind is structured like a language and therefore, is “inaccessible to conscious thought (Edgar and Sedgewick 262). In summary, this engagement with psychoanalytic and post-structural theory informs a conceptualisation of ‘the real’, as an event, that resists representation and cannot be made accessible through language. Combined with the Freudian model of memory this conceptualisation of language has led some literary trauma theorists to view trauma as phenomena that cannot be represented in language (Felman and Laub, Caruth). As Anke Geertsma argues:

While psychoanalytic insights into the nature of trauma influenced the work of these former students of de Man, their post-structuralist belief in the autonomous and referential
structure of language caused them to focus on the 'unrepresentability' of language. (Geertsma, 92)

The conceptualisation of unrepresentability has been a divisive issue in the development of literary trauma theory and a source of tension within literary studies. The divisive aspects of this issue can be illustrated by the definitions offered for the genre of trauma fiction by literary trauma theorists. For Michelle Balaev and Rodi-Risberg, trauma fiction is a genre that represents traumatic experience and individual responses to it (Balaev 150, Rodi-Risberg 11). For Balaev, however, the definition is less about theoretical concerns than about plot, and she argues that trauma fiction typically represents a transformation in the protagonist, the catalyst being an “external, often terrifying experience” (Balaev 150). She goes on to argue that trauma fiction is often concerned with “a profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels” (150). Taking a more nuanced view, trauma theorist Anne Whitehead argues that trauma fiction is inextricably linked to the theory through which it is read: “Both trauma theory and trauma fiction are committed to exploring new modes of referentiality, which work by means of figuration and indirection” (Whitehead 83). For Whitehead trauma texts, through the nature of their focus, are texts concerned with trauma’s resistance to representation.

The issue of representability is a focus of much discussion within literary trauma theory and the difference between Whitehead’s and Balaev’s definition of trauma fiction is indicative of the key divisions in the field. Unrepresentability is inextricably linked to the post-structuralist and psychoanalytic foundations of the theory, as can be seen in the work of Felman, Caruth and Hartman. Yet other theorists, such as Balaev, argue that literary trauma studies should move beyond its psychoanalytic origins and embrace a more comprehensive conceptualisation of trauma (Balaev 164). Because the broad problem of unrepresentability informs my own thesis on the possibilities inherent in the concept of learned helplessness I will now discuss how psychoanalysis informs the notion of unrepresentability in
contemporary literary trauma theory, and how this background is perceived by some literary theorists to contribute to its limitations.

*Psychoanalysis and the unrepresentability of trauma*

In 1895 Sigmund Freud and fellow psychoanalyst Joseph Breuer published *Studies in Hysteria*, in which they argued that neuroses, hysteria and phobias have their origin in traumatic experience. The study argues that traumatic experience is forgotten by the patient until it surfaces during psychoanalysis. Through analysis the patient recalls the traumatic memory and is able to then process it on both emotional and intellectual levels. This 'talking cure', it is argued, effectively removes the cause and the symptoms of the neurosis. Both theory and practice arose through the authors' clinical work with patients diagnosed with hysteria. The experience led Freud to believe that it was the memory of the trauma, not the trauma itself that was the cause of longer term problems. In the original text, Freud used the concept of *Nachtraglichkeit*, a German word variously translated as "deferred action" (Strachey), "afterwardsness" (Laplanche 15) or "belatedness" (Caruth 2). *Nachtraglichkeit*, Freud theorised, refers to the way in which traumatic experiences manifest themselves retrospectively in a pathogenic manner. The term was largely ignored until brought to the attention of academics working in the field of psychoanalysis by Jacques Lacan in the 1950s.

Drawing on Freudian theory, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an “unclaimed experience,” arguing that the traumatic event is not necessarily traumatic at the time of the experience, as the mind cannot comprehend the situation, and, in particular, cannot assimilate the possibility of death: “It is because the mind cannot confront the possibility of its death directly that survival becomes for the human being, paradoxically, an endless testimony to the impossibility of living” (25). In this conceptualization, it is only later that the trauma is apparent in the individual: “At the crux of trauma lies the survivors’ inability or failure to witness from within the experience itself"
(Rodi-Risberg 12). Literary theorist Shoshana Felman also argues for a causal relationship between Nachtraglichkeit (or belatedness) and the inability to articulate trauma. This is because the concept of Nachtraglichkeit implies that it is the memory, not the event, which has traumatic significance, and traumatic memories may be retrospectively repressed.

Employing similar reasoning, David Forter describes trauma as a “blow to the psyche that overwhelms its defences, and absents it from direct contact with the brutalizing event itself” (Forter 259). In this conceptualization it is because trauma is unrepresentable that it manifests itself retrospectively. Traumatic memories are therefore often described as “wounds”, “shocks”, “blows” or “concussions”; descriptors which emphasise pathologic effects (Caruth, Berger, Forter). Caruth describes a traumatic memory as a wound that “cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (Caruth Unclaimed Experience 4).

Consistent with the concept of Nachtraglichkeit, Caruth argues that “external violence is felt most, not in its direct experience, but in the missing of this experience” (Caruth “Violence and Time” 25). That is, the experience lodges in the mind without having been fully and consciously experienced at the time. This deferred action is the belief that a traumatic event is not fully experienced at the time but will manifest itself later. Indeed, Caruth, Hartman, Felman and Berger all argue that trauma constitutes a “discourse of the unrepresentable” (Berger 573). In Caruth’s words, “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (Unclaimed Experience 91). The outcome of this view is that language becomes the key vehicle for both expression and healing, via the process of Freudian abreaction or the ‘talking cure’. The belief that trauma is repressed and unrepresentable leads to the conclusion that the resolution of trauma lies in abreaction, that is, the process of purging the traumatic event of meaning by drawing it into consciousness using metaphoric and figurative language. As Forter explains it: “Traumas... thus become accessible only in the mind’s
recursive attempts to master what it has, in some sense, failed to experience in the first instance” (259). Because the trauma is understood as unspeakable and unrepresentable, as for example Shoshana Felman sees it, the trauma cannot be discussed directly by the sufferer (Felman and Laub 125). As Rodi-Risberg notes, “Trauma renders impossible a witnessing from within” (13). Drawing on the concept of Nachtraglichkeit, literary trauma theorists argue that the lack of processing or assimilation at the time of the trauma leads to the event being relived through flashbacks and dreams (Caruth “Violence and Time” 25, Rodi-Risberg 13, Berger 257). In this conceptualisation, dreams compensate for the lack of assimilation at the time of the event.

The emphasis on uncovering the experience of trauma in psychoanalytic theory (a process which informs the work of de Man and Lacan) foregrounds the role of analysis with its focus on the uncovering of meaning in dreams and in other forms of indirect manifestation. In this respect, the metaphors and figurative language of literary fiction have become an ideal vehicle for studying trauma as indirect representation (Caruth 25, Rodi-Risberg 12 and Hartman 259). As Geoffrey Hartman argues:

As a specifically literary endeavour, trauma study explores the relation of words and wounds. Its main focus is on words that wound, and presumably can be healed, if at all, by further words. But hurt, striking deeper than we realize, also comes through the radical inadequacy of what is heard or read, when the words searched for cannot address or redress other shocks, including visual images with a violent content. Literature both recognizes and offsets that inadequacy (Hartman, 259).

Hartman argues that because trauma is unrepresentable, literary fiction offers the possibility of a retrospective working through of trauma through the analysis of figurative language, a conceptualization that, I argue, owes much to Freud’s theory of Nachtraglichkeit (259).
Within the field of literary trauma theory however, some theorists diverge from this Freudian-centered perspective. Michelle Balaev, for example, argues that literary representations demonstrate that abreaction is not the only means by which trauma can be resolved (Balaev 150). Literary critics such as Michelle Satterley and Susannah Radstone show that there is a proliferation of representations of trauma in literature, both in memoir and in the novel. Satterley argues that:

Fictional texts ... provide a theory of trauma that challenge[s]
the currently popular trend in literary criticism that celebrates
the ‘unspeakable’ quality of trauma by showing, [how] through
innovative narrative strategies ... trauma is represented in
language ... exploring how traumatic events are experienced,
remembered, retold and rewritten (Satterley 138).

Susannah Radstone, describing the unrepresentability of trauma as a “theoretical impasse” (11), argues that the origins of literary trauma theory are narrow and limited. In particular, she demonstrates that Caruth’s work is informed both by Freud and by “a particular and specific type of psychological theory influenced by developments within US psychoanalytic theory” (11). For Radstone, the theory of the unrepresentability of trauma has wide-reaching repercussions, affecting not just the analysis of texts but also in how it effects the selection of texts suitable for analysis:

Trauma analysis has yet to debate how, given trauma’s unrepresentability, the initial choice of text for analysis is to be made and whether it can be assumed... that it will be texts explicitly concerned with catastrophe that are most likely to reveal trauma’s absent traces (Radstone 22).

Radstone goes on to argue that, given literary trauma theory's origins, it will privilege texts that support psychoanalytic analysis. Her suggestion is that literary trauma theory is both limited and limiting; limited because it draws on a very narrow and specific psychological theory and limiting because the kind of analysis that it engenders privileges a certain kind of text. For Balaev, a reliance on Freudian theory oversimplifies the different ways that traumatized protagonists are represented as coming to terms with their
trauma, and suggests that there are other ways that trauma can be addressed that do not rely on language alone (Balaev 164). Pertinent to my own thesis on the possibilities inherent in applying the concept of learned helplessness to the reading of trauma in the novel, Balaev argues that:

The trauma novel argues that the talking cure does not always provide a remedy for the traumatized protagonist by demonstrating that healing is achieved through various behaviours not tied to language (Balaev 164).

Visser concurs and argues that the focus on Freud in literary trauma theory, “does not acknowledge spirituality as a reference point; indeed, its deconstructivist mode denies the possibility of regeneration through ritual and belief systems” (279). Arguing against these views, Berger, supporting psychoanalysis, argues that theorists, such as Caruth and La Capra, have found psychoanalysis to be flexible in the ways it can be used to approach trauma (Berger 579).

Arguing a more radical position, Kali Tal — drawing on feminist literary criticism — describes psychoanalysis as a cultural mechanism that reinforces practices of domination (Tal 1996). She quotes Monique Wittig who in the 1980s cited psychoanalysis (in relation to lesbianism) as a cruel contract, which constrains a human being to display her/his misery to an oppressor who is directly responsible for it, who exploits her/him economically, politically, ideologically and whose interpretation reduces this misery to a few figures of speech (Wittig 52).

Based on this view, Tal resists the assumption that trauma can only be resolved through the process of abreaction not only because she sees the process as politically motivated and constrained by gender roles, but also because abreaction limits the expression of trauma to what she argues are, in Wittig’s words, merely “a few figures of speech” (Tal 1996).
The Role of Narrative

Vicki Visvis points out that within trauma theory there are currently “two parallel but contradictory narratives” relating to the narrativisation of traumatic memories. One of these suggests that narrativisation is not only possible, but therapeutic, while the other denies its therapeutic effects (Visvis par. 2). The question of narrativisation has thus become a contentious one for trauma theorists. Arguing in relation to the issue of unrepresentability, Roger Luckhurst argues that the issue of narrative has become the “flat contradiction” in literary trauma theory (Luckhurst 2008 82). He questions how an experience can be put into narrative if it cannot be represented (Luckhurst 2008 82). Likewise, Rodi-Risburg asks: “If the theory and history of trauma manifest as trauma precisely at the site of incomprehensibility, resisting narrativisation, how can trauma be represented?” (Rodi-Risberg 11).

Caruth and Felman both argue that narrativisation is of limited use in the treatment of trauma because it can only illustrate trauma’s unrepresentability. Caruth, who describes trauma as a psychic wound “that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4) suggests that literary fiction can only indirectly narrativise and represent trauma through symbolic or figurative language. This conceptualisation is resisted by critics such as historian Dominick LaCapra who argues that literary trauma theorists have over-emphasised the limitations of language and the concomitant belief that narrativisation is of little therapeutic value in recent times. This, he suggests, has led certain theorists to offer little in the way of critical insights into trauma, including addressing representations that show “possibilities of working through” traumatic events (LaCapra 151) to offer much in the way of critical insights into trauma. According to LaCapra this has contributed to a “psychoanalytically based fatalism” (151) that views all traumatic memory as embedded and pathologic.
Consistent with her arguments as to the representability of trauma, Balaev argues that narrativisation is possible, pointing out that an insistence on its unrepresentability suggests “all responses to trauma are universally pathologic and divisive” (153) and imply a fragmentation of the subject’s identity. She argues that this conceptualisation is a restrictive “binary paradigm that produces an either/or definition of trauma and memory” (162). That is, if a memory is traumatic it must therefore be unrepresentable, pathologic and resist narrativisation. Baleav goes on to argue that too much emphasis has been placed on language as therapy and writes that the “trauma novel shows a wide range of variability regarding how much significance is attached to the verbal construction and recall of the past” (164). For Balaev, while narrativisation of trauma is possible, it is not always necessary or necessarily desirable.

Irene Visser, who also resists the idea that trauma is unrepresentable, draws on the work of psychiatrist Judith Herman who argues that narrative is a powerful tool in recovery from trauma, and that narrativisation is not only possible but necessary (274). Herman argues that while narrativising trauma may be difficult for sufferers it can commute painful memories into articulate narratives, a process demonstrated to be of great use in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (Herman 183). Visser argues that Herman’s view offers a more “sustainable perspective” (274) than that of the proponents of Freudian theory (she discusses Caruth and Felman, in particular) because it offers a culturally and historically-oriented approach to trauma. In contrast, she argues, “Caruth’s model of trauma is characterized by homogenizing and dehistoricizing tendencies which … may obstruct rather than aid culturally astute readings of trauma” (274). For Visser narrativisation offers the possibility of an “historically and culturally specific” (274) analysis of trauma in the text. In contrast to Caruth’s view that narrativisation is aporetic, Visser sees narrativisation as allowing for the possibility of resolution (274) and she quotes Herman who argues that the power of a trauma narrative rests in it being an “organized, detailed verbal account, oriented in time and historical content” (Herman 177).
The role of culture

Postcolonial and feminist theorists such as Visser and Balaev argue that the literary study of trauma largely ignores the role of culture (Visser 274, Balaev 156). They argue that culture is the lens through which traumatic events are viewed and that culture mediates the experience of trauma and governs the expression of post-traumatic distress. A reading of trauma that focuses on its unrepresentability redirects attention away from the mediating effects of culture and emphasises the inaccessibility of traumatic memory. This privileges the “belated” aspect of traumatic memory, focusing on abreaction and the pathological aspects of the trauma memory, such as repetition. For Balaev and Visser readings of this nature fail to acknowledge the important role played by culture in the experience of trauma.

Psychiatrist Laurence Kirmayer has examined the role that culture plays in traumatic experience and he argues that because traumatic experiences can alter a subject’s notion of self, self-image and relationships to others and the community, the disruption is inevitably mediated by cultural values that condemn or condone certain emotional expressions:

Registration, rehearsal and recall (of traumatic events) are governed by social contexts and cultural models for memories, narratives and life stories. Such cultural models influence what is viewed as salient, how it is interpreted and encoded at the time of registration, and, most important for long term memories that serve autobiographical functions, what is socially possible to speak of and what must remain hidden and unacknowledged. (Kirmayer 191)

Because trauma is inextricably linked to culture, Kirmayer argues, culture influences not only how a traumatic event is remembered and narrativised but also what is perceived as traumatic in the first place. Interestingly for literary trauma theorists, Kirmayer argues that culture imposes a form of
censorship because it inevitably dictates how trauma is spoken about and what is left unsaid.

For Balaev, “the unspeakability of trauma claimed by so many literary critics today can be understood less as an epistemological conundrum or neurobiological fact, but more as an outcome of cultural values and identities” (Balaev 156). She argues therefore that the silence of traumatized individuals is not caused by a pathologically embedded non-memory but by censorship imposed by cultural values. In her view the trauma novel demonstrates the ways that an experience disrupts the individual conceptualizations of self and connections to family and community, but the values attributed to the traumatic experience are largely shaped by cultural forces created within the world of the novel (Balaev 156).

What trauma theorists claim to be the “unspeakability” of trauma, Balaev argues, is not a medical phenomenon, but a product of “cultural values and ideologies” (157). Tropes of silence or omission in trauma novels may not necessarily be a function of unrepresentability but, in fact have more to do with the cultural and narrative conventions embedded in the culture of the novel’s production.

In discussing the failure of the dominant paradigm in literary trauma theory to engage with “non-western, non-Eurocentric models of psychic disorder” (280), Visser also argues for the need for theory to address the role of culture. She reiterates the concerns of other theorists over the notion of unrepresentability and Freudian foundations of literary trauma theory and comments on the irony that: “Practically unknowable and unteachable, then, trauma has nevertheless become a dominant paradigm in cultural studies” (271). Joining these voices from within the field of literary theory, Susannah Radstone refers to Berger’s discussion of 9/11 trauma texts in which he points out that these have garnered more attention than trauma texts related to other events. Radstone concludes: “it is the sufferings of those
categorized in the West as ‘other’ that tend not to be addressed via trauma theory” (25). Similarly, Kristina Fagan points out that the current conceptualisation of trauma has a very definite western bias. In many indigenous cultures, Fagan points out, the talking cure is deemed to be potentially deleterious. In these cultures after a traumatic event the re-establishment of social and emotional connections within the community are prioritised (108).

Claims of Western ethnocentrism, with regard to the understanding and treatment of trauma, are not confined to the literary study of trauma. For example, in the broader study of trauma, practitioners and theorists have expressed concerns over the ethnocentrism of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or DSM, widely considered to be the primary text for diagnosing post-trauma conditions. Psychiatrist John Sadler argues that the DSM is a primary agent for ethnocentrism in psychiatry in that it “privileges the western biomedical canons” (258) over the perspectives of other cultures. Sadler’s argument is supported by a 2008 survey of 600 community psychiatrists in which, over half believed that the DSM was “difficult to apply across cultures” (Bell and Sowers et al 687).

So far my discussion has addressed issues of unrepresentability and narrativisation in relation to literary trauma theory, and established that the role of culture is an important site of analysis. In order to add significantly to the field of literary studies the addition of learned helplessness to the theoretical frame of reference for reading and understanding trauma will need to privilege the role of culture in traumatic experience.

*The problem of contagion*

A central tenet of literary trauma theory is that trauma is contagious. This view of trauma was originally articulated by Freud, who argued that
traumatic experience is an essential aspect of the historical development of culture. The conceptualization of transmissibility within trauma fiction was initially articulated by Caruth, who argues that it has its origins in Freud’s analysis of the Jewish tradition in *Moses and Monotheism* (1937). On this basis, Caruth argues that trauma “is never simply one’s own … but precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (17). In Caruth’s view we have all been affected by past traumas and all trauma is shared. Transmissibility hinges on an acceptance of unrepresentability because, as Caruth argues, “If trauma cannot be witnessed the traumatic event can only take place through its belatedness, through the witnessing of the witness” (11).

Balaev interprets Caruth’s theory of contagion as meaning that a trauma suffered in the past by a large group of people (such as the Holocaust or slavery) can re-emerge many years later in individuals who share significant attributes, such as race, religion and nationality with the sufferers of the original trauma. In this conceptualization there is a “parallel causal relationship between the individual and the group, as well as between traumatic experience and pathologic response” (Balaev 152). Through the concept of transmissability, “the traumatic experience of the individual and group become one” (Balaev 152). In their criticisms of the major tenets of literary trauma theory both Balaev and Visser argue that the theory of transmissible trauma obscures important differences between a trauma which is experienced as a personal loss and an historical trauma which is not. Balaev argues that “[p]ersonal loss can be understood as the lived experience of a traumatic event by an individual. Historical absence can be understood as a historically documented loss … experienced by a person’s ancestors” (152). LaCapra, expanding on this conceptualization, argues that while traumatic loss can be experienced by living subjects in a variety of ways, an historical experience of trauma cannot be experienced as a loss. As Susanne Vees-Gulani argues, in the conceptualization of transmissibility we can all be considered affected by trauma because we live in “post-World Wars, post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima times” (20).
Visser points out that the view that trauma can occur generationally is problematic because it conflates the traumatic experience of those directly affected with the experience of those who are indirectly affected — usually through race, religion or nationality. Balaev argues that this theory of transmissibility is too broad and all-encompassing, with the risk that broad sections of the population will be labeled as victims:

[The theory of transmissibility] suggests all African Americans in the United States are fundamentally traumatized victims due to slavery in previous decades, because these collective memories of slavery "haunt" descendants of slaves and reinscribe the trauma and shame experienced by a contemporary individual's ancestors through fiction. (Balaev 154)

Balaev points out the inherent contradiction in the view that trauma is represented as both “hermeneutically sealed” (according to its unrepresentability) and at the same time transmissible. The additional problem, she argues, is that “once trauma is spoken and passed to another, it [is considered] no longer … unspeakable, and, thus, no longer ‘traumatic’ according to the model’s own definition of the term” (154). In her view, literary trauma theorists overstate the role of the traumatized protagonist when they argue that the traumatized protagonist “functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet… also functions to represent and convey an event that was experienced by a group of people (155). While the traumatized protagonist can be a reference for a wider group of individuals who have experienced similar trauma, this does not mean, Balaev argues, that trauma is to be read as the “sole defining feature of a collective or cultural identity (155).

As we have seen, the concepts of transmissibility, unrepresentability, ethnocentrism and abreaction have been the cause of much debate among literary theorists in relation to trauma. The Freudian foundations of literary trauma theory lie at the centre of this debate, as many Freudian concepts
impact upon conceptualizations of language, narrative and culture. The next section of this thesis shows how and why the broader field of trauma studies, which includes the treatment of traumatised individuals, has mostly replaced these same Freudian and psychoanalytic foundations with alternative models for understanding traumatic experience and memory.

The wider study and treatment of trauma

As discussed one of the most significant differences between literary trauma theory and the wider study of trauma is that Freud’s model of memory is no longer the dominant paradigm in the medical treatment of trauma. According to psychologist Kendra Cherry, few contemporary psychiatrists and psychologists now employ the Freudian model of memory in their theoretical or professional practice (9). As Patricia Waugh argues, there is a disjunction between the emphasis on Freud in cultural theories and the complete absence of any psychoanalytic influence on contemporary psychiatric definitions of trauma. Whatever one thinks of the steady wane of the influence of Freud on psychiatry this situation has at least to be acknowledged – yet [it] rarely is in cultural and literary theory. (Waugh 504)

Psychologist Martin Seligman, in his book Learned Optimism (1990), acknowledges Freud’s important role in the development of modern psychology, but argues that Freud’s scientific methodology would not stand up to informed scrutiny. Similarly, scientist and researcher Keith Stanovich points out that Freud’s methods of data collection are not appropriate for a modern research environment. Stanovich points out that Freud based his theories on case studies that were unreliable, unreplicable and lacking in scientific support. He also points out that scientific philosopher Karl Popper argued that Freud’s theories explain behaviour after it occurs but do not make predictions of future outcomes and that this renders them unscientific (Stanovich 2).
Freud himself understood that his ideas would inevitably be challenged and in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922) he writes of the study of biology: “We cannot guess what answers it will return in a few dozen years. They may be of the kind that will blow away the whole of our artificial structure of hypothesis” (74).

The idea that trauma creates memories that are unprocessed at the time of the incident (and which then lie dormant in the brain beyond representation) was once influential in practice and research on trauma (Kihlstrom 1, Geraerts et al 175), as was the idea that trauma creates memories that are different from ordinary memories, and that trauma can induce short-term amnesia. All of these ideas are now being challenged. For example, in the article “Traumatic Memories of War Veterans: Not So Special After All”, psychologist Elke Geraerts and her co-authors report that, based on their research, there is no evidence to suggest that traumatic memory is qualitatively different from neutral memory (Geraerts 175). They also argue that there is very little evidence that trauma causes amnesia, stating: “our findings do not support the existence of special memory mechanisms that are unique to experiencing traumatic events” (175).

In “Trauma and Memory Revisited” (2005), John Kihlstrom also argues that not only are traumatic memories structurally the same as non-traumatic memories but they are also just as accessible as memories of other experiences. In fact he argues that “emotional involvement makes events more memorable, not less.” In his view, “there is no evidence from controlled research on either humans or animals that stress specifically impairs memory for the central details of the stressful event” (3). Kihlstrom goes on to explain that, although long term stress can impair the function of memory (the view informing its unrepresentability), this impairment would affect all memory, not just the memory of trauma: “Exposure to chronic stress releases neurotoxins that damage the hippocampus and consequently impair memory. But this memory impairment would be generic in nature, not specific to the trauma” (2).
Repressed memory is, in many ways, the foundation upon which the Freudian concepts of unrepresentability and belatedness or Nachtraglichkeit are built. If a memory is unavailable and inaccessible (except through the process of abreaction) it follows that it must be structurally different from non-traumatic memory, as it functions in a completely different way. If traumatic memory is structurally the same as other memory however, then it follows that it is accessible and able to be represented.

Psychologist Richard McNally also denies the existence of repressed memories putting the view that they are, “the most pernicious bit of folklore ever to infect psychology and psychiatry” (McNally 2). In an amicus curiae brief made to the California Supreme Court during a trial related to repressed memory, McNally stated:

How victims remember trauma is the most controversial issue confronting psychology and psychiatry today. ... Informed clinicians and scientists realize that emotional arousal enhances memory for trauma; it does not result in blocked memory for trauma. Indeed, people who develop PTSD are haunted by intrusive memories of horrors that they cannot forget.

Yet some clinicians claim that the mind protects itself by banishing memories of trauma, making it difficult for victims to recall their most terrifying experiences until safe to do so years later. These clinicians believe that a significant minority of victims, perhaps as many as 30%, are incapable of remembering their most terrifying experiences. They believe that victims repress, dissociate, or block out these memories precisely because the memories are so upsetting.

As I and others have shown, there is no convincing evidence for the claim that victims repress and recover memories of traumatic events. To be sure, some victims may not think about
disturbing events for many years, if the events were not experienced as traumatic – terrifying and life-threatening – at the time of their occurrence. But not thinking about something for a long time is not the same thing as being unable to remember it, and it is inability to remember that lies at the heart of repression theory. (McNally, 2005)

As McNally suggests, it is important to make a distinction between repressed and suppressed memories. The differences between these two have far reaching implications for the study of trauma in the literary text. The concept of repressed memory, which so often informs literary trauma theory, although contentious, supports the Freudian conceptualisation of traumatic memory as pathogenic. So too does the belief that the process of repression is beyond the control of the traumatised individual who requires some form of psychological intervention in order to heal. However, recent scientific findings have found that some trauma victims can consciously suppress memories, a process that allows them to “put their memories on hold” until they are able to cope with them. Suppression differs from repression because it is controlled by the traumatised individual and does not cause any long-term ill-effects. Indeed, as neurologist Dr Steven Novella points out, “the ability to suppress painful or negative emotional memories is actually an adaptive and healthy trait” (Internet). Roland Benoit and Michael Anderson concur and have identified the region of the brain in which memory suppression takes place. In their paper “Opposing mechanisms support the voluntary forgetting of unwanted memories” they report that conscious memory suppression takes place in the subject’s hippocampus, part of the cerebral cortex (450).
Suppression is not a destructive process therefore but a deliberate way of limiting the power of intrusive post trauma memories.¹ Thus it can be seen that suppression of traumatic memories is not destructive but may indeed be a coping mechanism that allows traumatised individuals to control the power of intrusive memories.

In the next section I discuss the relevance of the psychiatric diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and show that, though PTSD has been widely drawn upon in literary trauma studies, it is not without controversy and has some significant limitations.

**PTSD: Influence and issues**

In the years following the Vietnam War many returned servicemen and women began to develop debilitating psychological symptoms that they attributed to the traumas suffered during their war service. After the war (1975) veterans’ interest groups and their psychiatrists lobbied to have this condition recognised. In 1980 Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was included as a diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III* (*DSM3*). Published by the American Psychiatric Association, this is the fundamental reference text for mental health care professionals in the Western world.

According to the DSM an individual can develop PTSD if they:

> experienced, witnessed or were confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others.

(American Psychological Association, 1980 463)

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¹ Further to this view it is useful to consider that as suppression of memories has been shown to take place in the hippocampus it would be
The DSM states that PTSD is characterised by three groups of symptoms: out of context and unwanted re-experiences of the trauma, avoidance of trauma-related stimuli; and hyper-arousal. Before a diagnosis of PTSD can be made a patient must fulfil five diagnostic criteria:

1) The individual must have experienced, confronted or witnessed a traumatic event or events.
2) The individual’s response to the event must include fear and horror or helplessness.
3) The event must be re-experienced through flashbacks, memories or dreams.
4) The individual must make an effort to avoid trauma-related thoughts, feelings, sensations, places or people.
5) The individual must demonstrate a persistent increase in physiological arousal; hyper vigilance and an exaggerated startle response. (Richard and Lauterback, 128)

There is currently no known cure for PTSD and, although drugs may be used to control the symptoms, they have not been shown to be effective at treating the underlying cause. As Frank Lawlis notes in The PTSD Breakthrough, “there are no medications available to cure PTSD” (63). Traditional psychiatric and psychological treatments include controlling the most debilitating symptoms with medication and trying to treat the underlying cause with therapy:

The treatment of PTSD can be divided into three realms. One: Helping the individual come to terms with the original sensitising traumatic event. Two: Controlling the negative physiological reactions which endure long after the event …. Three: Helping the individual reintegrate into normal social, occupation and cultural contexts, shedding any identification of himself [sic] as a victim of trauma. (Helle 11)
In the treatment of PTSD, one of the largest obstacles is the patient’s seemingly indelible memories of the traumatic event. As one patient commented:

It's something I learned I couldn't change. These thoughts will come and they'll go and it's just the way I deal with them now that makes them different. That's why I laugh when I hear people now who say they have this new way of treating PTSD. One lady even said they were curing PTSD. I think it's a joke. Because I think to cure it you'd (have to) be able to take away those memories, those nightmares, the flashbacks ... (Larsen and Miller 77)

This view is reiterated by clinical psychologist Gregory Helle who argues it is remembering and not forgetting that is a significant obstacle in the treatment of PTSD:

I have never met anyone who was imprisoned in a concentration camp whose experience was so horrific that they could not remember it ... What I have found in my clinical practice are hundreds of people who cannot forget such experiences. (Helle 9)

PTSD as a medical condition not only recognises the suffering of soldiers but also provides avenues for their future financial compensation so, though both widespread and prolific, the diagnosis of PTSD is not without its political ramifications and effects. This aspect troubles many practitioners and theorists, for example, sociologist Jerry Lembcke argues that: “The legitimisation of the PTSD diagnosis was greatly influenced by high profile media articles ... that advertised difficulties experienced by homecoming Vietnam veterans” (38), as such, the medicalization of veterans’ anger and distress,

had the convenient function of repairing negative images of the war and focusing attention on the men who fought it rather than the politicians who promoted it ... it enabled the
authorities to pathologize the radical political behaviour of veterans opposed to the war, and thereby discredit it, while at the same time appearing concerned for veterans’ welfare. (Brewin 12)

Helle argues that the bureaucratic system of support for PTSD patients inadvertently worsens their situation. This system:

may inadvertently be prolonging the course of PTSD for many individuals. This is accomplished by providing financial incentives that may reinforce the sick role, promote too much focus on group association with similarly afflicted individuals, and give too much of a forum for the reinforcement of the self identity as a victim of war. (Helle 14)

Returning to the therapeutic value of suppressing memories (as opposed to repressing them), it can be seen that an environment that disallows suppression because of close associations with the traumatic event (such as through veteran’s associations) may limit the ability of the individual to cope with their trauma. In their paper “Suppressing unwanted memories”, Michael Anderson and Benjamin Levy give the example of individuals who manage their memories by physically removing any visual reminders of the event. Traumatised individuals, they argue, often destroy objects such as letters and photographs that may trigger memories of their trauma. In some instances the removal of memory-inducing stimuli can be quite extensive: for example, in the USA the library associated with the Columbine High School shootings was demolished as a way of promoting healing for those involved (193).

The belief that there are ways for individuals to actively suppress their traumatic memories is not new. William Rivers’s paper “The Repression of War Experience” published in 1917 recommended placing veterans in situations that did not remind them of the war. For Rivers repression is “the active or voluntary process by which it is attempted to remove some part of the mental content out of the field of attention” (514). His use of the term
repression is very similar to the way that suppression is used in this thesis, when he notes that, “repression is not in itself a pathological process, nor is it necessarily the cause of pathological states” (514). This view is at odds with the Freudian belief that repressed memories are linked to pathological changes within the brain. When viewed in the light of the theory of memory suppression it can be seen that for some veterans of the Vietnam War the politicisation of PTSD and the formation of help groups of similarly affected individuals may actually prevent the process of suppression, limiting their ability to heal and even exacerbating their trauma-related symptoms.

PTSD is also an inadequate model for literary trauma theory on the basis of its ethnocentrism. Many psychologists and therapists working in non-western countries have resisted the application of this Western model of trauma, suggesting that it excludes non-western responses to trauma (Visser 279). As Balaev argues, an individual’s response to trauma is necessarily shaped by their cultural context and by individual notions of the self arguing: “the meaning of trauma is found between the poles of the individual and society” (155). Psychiatrists and other mental health professionals do acknowledge the cultural deficit in the recognition and treatment of PTSD. As Felice Lieh Mak and Carol Nadelson write in The International Review of Psychiatry:

The sharp, recent increase in interest in culture and race as they affect the development of PTSD and the experiences of trauma would seem to signal a recognition within the field of psycho-traumatology that we have matured enough to undertake the task of understanding the boundaries of PTSD and trauma by exploring their variables across a range of cultures. (Lieh Mak and Nadelson 273)

A charge of ethnocentricity in relation to the diagnosis of trauma may come, she argues, not only from physicians but from the patients themselves: “in the face of increasing multicultural – multiracial societies, a homogenous conception of the nature of trauma will be rejected by patients who
experience ethnocentrism as the rejection of their experience” (277). The cultural context of diagnosis is particularly pertinent in the case of Vietnam veterans, the first group of individuals to attract the diagnosis of PTSD. The culture surrounding these veterans and the historical and political context of the Vietnam War have lent themselves to an homogenous view of the trauma of veterans that leaves little space for individual interpretation and variation.

Shell shock and PTSD

In that psychology seeks to identify and name emotional phenomena, it is not always an exact science with clearly delineated parameters between conditions. In conflicts prior to the Vietnam War soldiers who had adverse psychological conditions attributed to their service were often said to be suffering from shell shock. The set of possible symptoms attributed to shell shock included loss of vision and hearing, loss of speech, nightmares, extreme fear and occasionally limb paralysis. While the terms shell shock and PTSD do not cover the same set of symptoms there is a degree of overlap between the two and between these conditions and Combat Stress Reaction (CSR) – a term still used by the US military to cover acute responses to the trauma of combat. This suggests that there are a multitude of post-trauma symptoms and that classifying them into conditions such as PTSD or shell shock foregrounds certain symptoms while deeming other reactions as not valid or not authentic. Anthropologist Allan Young suggests on this basis, that diagnoses such as PTSD are inevitably culturally conditioned (Young 5). Certainly, it is difficult to find historical evidence of shell shock amongst (for example) Japanese soldiers in World War Two. This is not to suggest that they suffered less from their trauma than their western counterparts, but that the ways in which their traumatic responses are viewed is mediated by culture.

PTSD and literary analysis
The inclusion of PTSD in literary trauma discussions has not challenged the theoretical field’s Freudian and psychoanalytic foundations; the source of much current debate. As Visser argues “for the critical praxis of literary studies, PTSD is a problematic concept. In its present definition... it is characterised by a lack of coherence and specificity” (272). Allan Young, writing from an anthropological perspective, observes:

This disorder [PTSD] is not timeless, nor does it possess an intrinsic unity. Rather, it is glued together by the practices, technologies and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, treated and represented by the various interest groups, institutions and moral arguments that mobilized these efforts and resources (Young 5).

In terms of reading traumatic representations in literary texts, the concept of PTSD is limited because its causes and symptoms are constrained, culturally-specific and pathologized. Within its ambit, the effects of trauma are limited to hypervigilance, flashbacks and other symptoms (Richard and Lauterback 349). As a result, PTSD must be regarded as a description of one of many possible reactions to trauma, but it does not account for all post-trauma deleterious behaviour changes. In particular, PTSD does not address issues of unrepresentability or offer any insights into the way that culture mediates an individual’s experience of trauma. In the context of literary trauma theory, Balaev argues that, “a discursive dependence upon a single psychological theory of trauma produces a homogenous interpretation of the diverse representations in the trauma novel” (149). The risk is that a reading that fails to privilege the multiple meanings that exist in representations of the trauma novel may infer that a limited set of responses are the only “true” responses to trauma (Balaev 149).

Balaev argues for the repositioning of literary trauma studies pointing out its inherent contradictions and positing an alternative theory of trauma that
allows for greater scope. She calls for multiple approaches to trauma readings of literary fiction to maintain currency with the wider body of academic trauma studies. Visser similarly argues that the dominant theoretical position of literary trauma studies requires revision if it is to remain current:

A more precise critical positioning with regard to the divergent currents of thinking on trauma is needed to establish transparency and consistency. A more comprehensive conceptualization of trauma is needed to theorize collective, prolonged and cumulative experiences of traumatization ... A further, more comprehensive configuration of trauma would enable culturally astute and politically and historically factual contextualization. (Visser 280)

This thesis is, in part, a response to this call for multiple and diverse approaches to the study of trauma in the literary text, in order to move beyond the reliance on Freud’s model of memory and to provide a more culturally sensitive approach to the study of trauma, by integrating of cultural issues relating to gender, technology and place. In particular, therefore this thesis endorses the representation of the many possible paths that can be taken towards healing after trauma. As Visser notes, the configurations of traumatic response need more culturally and historically sensitive contextualization (280).

The Concept of Learned Helplessness: towards an alternative reading

Within the broad study of trauma, including its medical treatment, many forms of traumatic response are evident (Winfield, George, Swartz and Blazer 335). Some traumatised subjects will report no permanent effects while others will develop long-standing and debilitating conditions (such as those classified as symptoms of PTSD). This thesis argues the relevance to literary trauma studies of the concept of learned helplessness: a
psychological theory of phenomena that are observed in both humans and animals post-trauma (Seligman et al 411). The concept of learned helplessness is useful to literary trauma theory because it addresses some of the deficits of current theoretical approaches, as discussed. Emerging as it does from the school of behaviourism, it repositions the relevance of Freudian theory and offers a way to incorporate culturally-based issues into studies of trauma. What follows is a brief history of the concept of learned helplessness, its symptoms, diagnosis, treatment and potential for literary trauma studies.

Learned helplessness describes the psychological condition observed when an individual perceives that "his or her behaviour has little effect in modifying the environment of consequences" (Sheldon 108). That is, the individual comes to believe that their actions have no consequence and, as such, learned helplessness can be the precursor to conditions such as PTSD and shell shock (Sheldon 108) and can present simultaneously, or in isolation. One of the reasons learned helplessness is a useful addition to literary trauma theory is that it focuses on loss (or losses) of control, rather than a prescribed set of symptoms. Thus, it covers a wider range of behaviours and responses to trauma than the conventional diagnosis of PTSD.

In the early 1960s theories of behaviourism dominated much of the psychological research being conducted in American universities (Seligman 2006 23). One of the fundamental principles of behaviourism is stimulus/response theory that asserts that all behaviour is the result of the interplay between stimulus and response and that a behaviour cannot exist without a stimulus. In this field, a great deal of the research has focused on avoidance learning in animals, because avoidance learning appears to defy the stimulus/response principle. (Domjan, 351) In the initial studies of avoidance learning, an animal such as a rat or a dog was placed on one side of a pen divided by a low wall; a device known to psychologists as a shuttle box. The flash of a light signalled that a mild electrical current would pass
through the floor of the shuttle box in ten seconds unless the subject crossed to the other side. Almost all animals quickly learned to jump the low dividing wall to avoid the electrical shock. (Seligman and Maier 1) Avoidance learning such as this was problematic to behaviourists because in pure stimulus/response behaviour analysis, phenomena such as expectation and prediction are not measurable and cannot be seen, and are therefore deemed inappropriate explanations of behaviour by behaviourists.

At the University of Pennsylvania in the early 1960s psychologists found a way to explain avoidance learning in behaviourist terms; this approach became known as the two process theory (Domjan, 351). The theory suggested that the animal learnt to express fear when the light was turned on (the early stages of the avoidance learning process) before it had learnt to escape by jumping over the low wall. Therefore the animal jumped over the wall, not because it expected to be shocked, but because jumping over the wall turned off the fear-producing light. The researchers showed that the stimulus (light) that produced the behaviour of jumping was reinforced by the termination of the light (Domjan, 351).

In the wake of this discovery, Martin Seligman and Steven Maier began to investigate why a small percentage of animals in the experiments never learned to jump the low wall to escape the electrical shocks (Seligman 2006, 23). They hypothesised that these animals gave up trying to change their circumstances, that is, they learned to be “helpless”. This notion challenged the prevalent behaviourist approach to psychology which asserted that animals learnt only motor responses; that is, they could respond to stimuli, but could not form cognitive representations (Seligman 2006, 23). Seligman and Maier set up an experiment to determine why some animals did not try to avoid painful stimuli. Based on three groups of dogs, the results suggested that administering inescapable shocks induced a state that made the animal less likely to try to avoid shocks in the future (Maier and Seligman 1967, 4). In the preliminary training phase, dogs in the first group were exposed to shocks that they learned to terminate. The dogs in the second group were
exposed to seemingly random shocks they could not terminate, and the dogs in the third group received no shocks at all. In the next phase of the experiment all the dogs were taken to the shuttle box to escape the electrical current in the floor. The first and third groups of dogs learnt to jump over the wall to escape the shock, but six out of the eight dogs in the second group (those previously subjected to random shocks) did not attempt to escape (Maier and Seligman 1967, 6).

The results were published in the prestigious *Journal of Experimental Psychology* in 1967 to widespread controversy, as the findings challenged the core of behaviourist theory. One of the most respected professors in the field went so far as to say that the paper made him “physically sick” (Seligman 2006, 23). The controversy, which lasted for well over a decade, was the beginning of the end of behaviourism, the dominant school of thought in psychology at that time. By 1975, behaviourist-based doctoral dissertations were in the minority in American universities (Seligman 2006, 24).

Although initially used only in the study of animal behaviour, the concept of learned helplessness was soon being investigated by scientists, studying human subjects. In one of the most important of these research projects, Donald Hiroto reproduced Seligman and Maier’s experiments with human subjects (Hiroto, 187). In the initial phase of the experiment the first group of people were exposed to a very loud noise that they could turn off by pressing a series of buttons in sequence. The second group was exposed to the same noise, but randomly. The third group was subjected to no noise at all. In the second phase of the experiment the groups were placed in front of a small shuttle box. When they placed both hands on one side of the box an annoying noise started which they could terminate by moving their hands to the other side of the box. Replicating the animal study results, groups one and three quickly learned to move their hands and terminate the noise, while two out of three people in the second group did not attempt to try and turn the noise off (Deci and Ryan 37).
Learned helplessness, defined as a disruption in motivation, affect and learning following exposure to uncontrollable outcomes is now one of the most highly investigated psychological phenomena, (Seligman, 105) and is used to explain many different mood states and conditions. Research indicates that three conditions must be observed in order to meet the definition of learned helplessness:

1) Non-contingency. An unpredictable relationship between the subject’s actions and the outcome of their actions. The opposite of this is controllability — when the subject’s actions produce predictable outcomes.

2) Cognition. The way that the subject perceives and explains the non-contingency. Firstly the subject must apprehend and become aware of the lack of predictability and control. The lack may be perceived or real; their explanation of it to themselves contributes to the development of learned helplessness. The subject must come to believe they have a diminished capacity to effect change and that their own actions are meaningless. When learned helplessness occurs individuals typically expect that their behaviour will fail to influence future outcomes.

3) Behaviour. This third condition refers to visible effects of learned helplessness which may include depression, sadness and passivity. (Seligman 2006, 105)

At the heart of learned helplessness is loss of agency due to a traumatic moment when the subject loses their perceived sense of control, or as Joseph Volpicelli writes, “the degree to which a person or animal can control the traumatic event is an important factor in understanding the impact of the event” (258). The subject’s control over the event may be real or perceived but the more they perceive the loss of contingency to be significant, the more traumatic the event will be, and the greater the chance of long term psychological effects. In applying the concept to an analysis of trauma, loss of personal control becomes very significant. Learned
helplessness creates the belief in subjects that their actions are meaningless and therefore their post-traumatic life becomes meaningless to them. As John Ratey writes:

Learned Helplessness ... creates a state of inertia ... you could call it a lack of neuroplasticity, the lack of ability to change or learn new things. When you create this in rats then put them in a new environment, they will just sit there. There's nowhere for them to go. There's nothing for them. The world offers nothing for them, so they don't pursue it. (Ratey 128)

Symptoms of learned helplessness may include passivity, procrastination, decreased cognitive abilities, frustration, low self esteem, sadness and depression. In long-term sufferers learned helplessness has a negative impact on the individual's health and may lead to social problems such as drug addiction, alcoholism and suicide (Fink, 600; Volpicelli et al 258). Research shows that learned helplessness can be caused by exposure to acute trauma, but, as Seligman points out, it can also be caused by successive long-term losses of control in an individual’s environment. For example, geriatric patients in institutions can develop learned helplessness if they perceive that the institution has removed their autonomy (Seligman 2006, 177). Sufferers of learned helplessness often report feelings of helplessness, or feeling as if their lives are beyond their control. Learned helplessness can exacerbate other psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety and phobias as the subjects believe that they are unable to change their environment and this reduces the likelihood of them seeking treatment. Long term treatments for learned helplessness generally involve therapy that demonstrates to the patient that their behaviour can control their environment; that is, their belief that their actions are meaningful is restored.

Some researchers have suggested that learned helplessness is a coping mechanism, allowing subjects to function more or less normally post-trauma (Martinko and Gardner 195). Mario Mikulincer argues that learned
helplessness may be a necessary part of the healing process as the subject’s feelings of powerlessness allow them to abrogate responsibility for their actions, thus allowing a renegotiation of self to occur, if and when circumstances permit (Mikulincer 21).

The connection between learned helplessness and the diagnosis of PTSD is not fully understood but some studies suggest that learned helplessness can increase a subject’s chances of developing the symptoms associated with PTSD. Studies have demonstrated that the development of learned helplessness due to uncontrollable events early in a subject’s life may make them more prone to suffering from PTSD later in life (Christine King 36). As King notes in discussing a 2006 study that links learned helplessness to childhood and adult onset PTSD: “Learned Helplessness may play a key role in the pathways between … trauma experiences and the maintenance of PTSD” (36). Both learned helplessness and PTSD can be exacerbated by the perpetuation of a ‘victim mindset’ in the subject. That is, by the perception that the individual is powerless or a victim. In this way, some researchers argue that support groups and group therapy sessions, while appearing both productive and useful, may maintain the conditions that they are attempting to treat. As Laurence Kirmayer argues:

Contemporary social movements enable recollection because they provide a context for remembering – one with a shared belief system. The social movement can validate survivor narratives in a way that encourages remembering. However, it may also oversimplify complex issues, alienate victims’ families and friends and disempower victims by institutionalising the position of victim. (Kirmayer 192)

As discussed in relation to PTSD, involvement with other traumatised people through involvement in social movements and group therapy may prevent the voluntary suppression of traumatic memory that is therapeutic for some individuals.
Not all trauma, however, will lead to psychopathology, just as not every veteran will suffer from deleterious effects related to their military service. Joseph Volpicelli et al speculate that: “As much as 70% of the U.S population has experienced at least one trauma, such as a traffic accident, assault or an incident of physical or sexual abuse” (Volpicelli et al 257). Yet, according to 1999 figures, only 8% of the American population suffers from psychological changes due to trauma (Volpicelli et al 257). Statistics released by the Veterans’ Administration in the U.S. show that 31% of Vietnam War veterans have been diagnosed at some point with PTSD (Paré 9), a significantly higher percentage of individuals than in the general population. Bryan and McNaughton-Cassil quote David Rudd, scientific director of the National Centre for Veterans’ Studies, who reports that figures relating to the Gulf War (1991) indicate that soldiers in heavy combat are more likely to develop post-war psychopathology (Bryan and McNaughton-Cassil 2) and a recent survey of over 240 veterans suggested that rates for PTSD amongst veterans with multiple exposures to heavy combat could be as high as 93% (Bryan and McNaughton-Cassil 2).

When viewed in the context of learned helplessness and the deleterious effects of a perceived loss of control these statistics are particularly interesting because it seems likely that trauma resulting in a long term loss of (perceived) control could have more impact than trauma that does not. This could explain why 70% of the US population has experienced trauma but only 8% are diagnosed as suffering from the effects long term. The finding supports the view that the impact of trauma can be moderated by the individual’s perception of the loss of control.

Figures on the numbers of people diagnosed with learned helplessness are difficult to obtain as the condition is often both dimensional and manageable. That is, it can be present in subtle or extreme ways and may not cause the sufferer to seek medical treatment. Due to the associative link between learned helplessness and PTSD, however, it would seem logical to suggest that there are significant rates of learned helplessness amongst
veterans, particularly those who have been exposed to combat situations on more than one occasion.

As I have shown, the most telling symptom of learned helplessness is the (learned) belief, by the sufferer, that their actions are insignificant. The following excerpt comes from an autobiographical piece and it typifies the author's feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. In “The Vietnam in Me” by Tim O'Brien, published in the New York Times (1994), the author, who served in Vietnam, writes of his recent separation from his long term partner Kate, after attempting a reconciliation by giving her a tape of their favourite songs:

Almost 5am. In another hour it will be 5.01. I'm on war time, which is the time we're all on at one point or another: when fathers die, when husbands ask for divorce, when women you love are fast asleep beside men you wish were you.

The tape of songs did nothing. Everything will always do nothing.

Kate hurts too, I'm sure, and did not want it this way. I didn't want it either. Even so both of us have to live in these slow-motion droplets of now, doing what we do, choosing what we choose, and in different ways both of us are now responsible for the casualty rotting in the space between us.

If there's a lesson in this, which there is not, it's very simple.

You don't have to be in Nam to be in Nam. (O'Brien 50)

The phrase: “Everything will always do nothing”, which I have taken for the title of this thesis, encapsulates the emotional state observed in many of those suffering learned helplessness. The exploration of theories such as learned helplessness can, I argue, facilitate a rapprochement of medical/scientific research and practice, and literary trauma studies, allowing for a move away from Freud's model of memory in order to engage in a culturally sensitive way. In the following pages I examine how the concept of learned helplessness can be applied to literary representations of
trauma and show how the application of learned helplessness can assist in addressing current deficits in literary trauma theory.

**Trauma: its literary representation**

Before undergoing any literary analysis using learned helplessness it is important to define what exactly is meant by the term trauma when it pertains to the study of representations of trauma in the literary text. The current, medical definition of trauma, as outlined in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, covers pathological responses to trauma as a way of both identifying and treating them:

> The person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others and the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror (DSM IV 427-428).

This definition is very useful as a foundation for literary analysis as it covers a range of traumatic experiences and can cover feelings of helplessness and loss of control, the significant precipitant for learned helplessness.² Writers, literary theorists and physicians approach trauma from different perspectives. Writers seek to portray the experience of trauma, literary critics to analyse it, and physicians to treat it; so the focus of a definition of trauma for the purposes of literary analysis will necessarily be subtly different from a literary definition of trauma informed by a medical model. A literary definition of trauma, however, can broaden the scope of what is perceived to be traumatic as it can include non-pathologic responses. To the literary theorist and the writer, all behavioral and emotional responses are of interest as they give a sense of particularity and diversity of responses to traumatic situations. The medical model can support the literary analysis of

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² Seligman and Maier’s original study (published in 1967) has since been replicated and its claims about the significance of non-contingency substantiated by several researchers (Overmier and Wielkwicz, Foa et al).
trauma by offering differing perspectives from which to read representations of trauma in the text.

For the purpose of this thesis, the definition of the representation of trauma in the text is this: the protagonist experienced or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death, serious physical or moral injury or a threat to the physical and/or psychological integrity of themselves or others and this situation led to the perception that they had lost control. These events may have been sudden, or prolonged and sustained. The protagonist’s response involved intense helplessness, fear and/or horror. The definition, while informed by the DSM, reinforces the importance of the perceived trauma and loss of control, and expands the conceptualization of trauma to include moral injury and prolonged and sustained losses of contingency over time. This is to enable precipitants such as incarceration (for example as suffered by prisoners of war and refugees) to be viewed as sources of traumatic response.

*Trauma and moral injury*

In 2009 psychologists Brett Litz, Nathan Stein and Eileen Delaney and others published a groundbreaking paper, “Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: a preliminary model and intervention strategy” in which they posited a theory relating to the deleterious effects of a disruption to an individual’s ethics and beliefs. They defined as potentially morally injurious, “perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations” (695). In addition to this, “betrayal on either a personal or an organizational level can also act as a precipitant” (695). According to this paper, a moral injury can be traumatic, potentially deleterious and can elicit behaviours that include guilt, shame and self-hate. Although more research is needed it appears that perceived moral injury can contribute to the acquisition of learned helplessness, PTSD and other psychological conditions. The concept of moral injury, because it
suggests that trauma can have both physical and/or emotional origins, has the potential to be a very useful addition to literary trauma theory.\(^3\)

A moral injury can be a precipitant for learned helplessness because it can constitute a severe disruption to an individual’s schemas.\(^4\) This disruption can lead the individual to believe that they no longer have control over their life. When the disruption is perpetrated by the individual — the individual commits an act that they had neither planned nor believed themselves capable of — there may be a profound sense of loss with respect to the self and its values. Adding moral injury to the definition of trauma in the literary text privileges the role of cognitive frameworks (such as cultural and moral beliefs) in the perception of trauma and encourages engagement with cultural issues such as gender and place. These issues are explored in greater depth in Chapter Three.

**Learned helplessness and literary study**

My exploration of the possibilities afforded by learned helplessness in literary analysis begins with an examination of the parameters of the condition, as articulated by Seligman. To reiterate, these are: the experience of non-contingency (that is, a loss of control or loss of agency), cognition of that experience and behavioural change as a direct result of the experience. These three factors form the foundation of an analysis of representations of learned helplessness in the novel. The first focus is on the nature of the losses of contingency, which offers the opportunity to emphasise the scope of traumatic experience. That is, perceived loss or losses of control are not confined to major, catastrophic events, but also include sustained losses of

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\(^3\) The concept of moral injury is not contained in the current edition of the DSM (revised in 2000), but the principle research on this phenomenon was not published until 2009.

\(^4\) A schema is a cognitive framework for interpreting experiences. Also known as a knowledge structure, the idea was introduced by psychologist Jean Piaget (Nevid 353).
contingency over time. This view of trauma does not contradict the definition of PTSD as set out in the DSM where the losses of contingency are confined to “a threat to the physical integrity of self or others” including the subject’s response of “intense fear, helplessness or horror” (427). In a reading informed by learned helplessness, the nature of the loss of control, the period of time over which it is suffered and how it is suffered is all taken into account. For example, in a reading of the Vietnam War, conscription might be represented as a traumatic event because it represents a loss of contingency. On this basis, the process of being inducted into the army, basic training and the act of going to war can be represented as a loss of control for the protagonist.

In a learned helplessness reading of a literary text, loss of contingency is read as mediated by culture, as culture is the lens through which trauma is experienced and perceived by the protagonist. As Kirmayer writes, “cultural models influence what is viewed as salient, how it is interpreted and encoded … and … what is socially possible to speak of and what must remain hidden and unacknowledged” (Kirmayer 191). Trauma and culture are therefore inextricably linked and an analysis of representations of trauma through learned helplessness allows for a study of how culture impacts upon what is experienced and perceived as traumatic, as well as how trauma is represented. It also has a significant effect on examinations of the ways in which the trauma of individuals can affect those around them.

Representations of post-trauma behaviour are significant in readings informed by learned helplessness in terms of the way the behaviour is represented as impacting upon other characters. Such representations refer to the issue of transmissibility. This form of transmissibility arises, not because of the unrepresentable nature of the traumatic memory, but because loss of contingency can lead to behavioural change which in turn can lead to the non-contingency of others. That is, if the post-trauma behaviour of the protagonist is extreme enough then transmissibility to others is possible. This idea is supported by studies that demonstrate that
the children of Vietnam veterans have three times the rate of death from suicide and violent accident than their peers (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare “Suicide in Vietnam veterans’ children” 13, 2000). Finally, learned helplessness readings can offer insights into a range of avenues of recovery. That is, because learned helplessness has its origins in non-contingency, restoring the subject to full emotional functioning involves a renegotiation of self image to allow the subject to view their role in their past as meaningful. Psychologists Lyn Abramson, Martin Seligman and John Teasdale argue in their paper “Learned Helplessness in Humans: Critique and Reformulation” that one of the most successful therapeutic avenues for sufferers of learned helplessness is to modify the individual’s cognitive style so that they no longer harbour the belief that their behaviour will fail to influence outcomes (70). This transformation, they argue, can occur in a variety of ways, ranging from therapy to improved relationships with others, to spirituality and being close to nature (Seligman et al 70).

As the next chapters will demonstrate, reading novels that feature Vietnam veterans as protagonists through the concept of learned helplessness can produce a number of insights. In particular, the different emphasis that learned helplessness brings to literary analysis positions culture, gender and place as central to analysing representations of trauma, introducing a wider range of possible interpretations than are currently possible in literary trauma studies. The readings that follow suggest that a learned helplessness reading also focuses on a range of representations of healing and considerably broadens the ways that the restoration of agency can occur.

In the following chapters I analyse several novels featuring Vietnam veteran protagonists through the lens of learned helplessness. These readings engage with the nature of the losses of contingency, the way the cognition of the trauma is represented, and the role attributed to culture. They also examine representations of healing and the literary text’s representation of
transmissibility. I will focus on the cultural aspects of trauma by analysing representations of gender, the role of technology and of place.

At this point it should be noted that, in the long term, examining representations of learned helplessness to the exclusion of other post-trauma behaviour provides a relatively limited reading. As such, this thesis extrapolates on the contribution that the concept of learned helplessness can make to the analysis of trauma, rather than as a primary critical informant of a trauma reading. It also focuses on the change of perspective brought to literary analysis when traumatic response is viewed as a loss of control rather than a loss of memory.
Chapter Two: Reading trauma

Redefining trauma

In this chapter I examine representations of learned helplessness in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990) and in several other novels that feature protagonists who are Vietnam War veterans. The textual analysis specifically draws on Seligman’s three criteria for learned helplessness: non-contingency, cognition and behaviour. My intention overall is to show how trauma in the text can be read as centering on a loss of control. I will also demonstrate how a reading that emphasises a loss of control rather than a loss of memory encourages engagement with issues not necessarily privileged by existing trauma theory. As a way of illustrating the differences between the readings of learned helplessness and existing literary trauma theory I begin the chapter with a reading of *The Things They Carried.*

*The Things They Carried* read through Freud and PTSD

As discussed, a reading informed by Freud’s model of memory is likely to focus on trauma as a loss of memory, foregrounding the deleterious effects of the embedded memory and its ‘belatedness’ or later manifestation. Also discussed, a reading informed by PTSD will privilege the representation of symptoms ascribed to PTSD in the DSM, including flashbacks and repetitious memories.

Vietnam veteran Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990) is an interconnected series of short stories. Narrated by the character Tim, the text describes the experiences of the narrator and his friends before and during the Vietnam War and their struggles to cope with life post-Vietnam.
According to Freudian literary analysis, the narrator’s compulsive remembering in *The Things They Carried* can be read as a way of reworking the past to describe an ultimately unrepresentable trauma. For example, as literary theorist Bilyana Kostova points out, in the story “How to tell a true war story” Rat Kiley’s narrative is a *mise en abyme* that reflects on Tim’s narrative in terms of the impossibility of conveying the truth of Vietnam trauma to others who were or are not there (110). Rat spends a lot of time writing a letter to the sister of his friend who was killed in the war. The letter is “very personal and touching” (67) and when, after two months he has not had a reply he says, “The dumb cooze never writes back” (68). The character and narrator Tim suggests that Rat uses the pejorative word (“cooze” is North American slang for vagina), “because his friend is dead, and because it’s so incredibly sad and true: she never wrote back” (68). The story foregrounds the difficulty of sharing a traumatic experience with others who cannot, or don’t wish to, access a past they have not experienced. Further on in the text, Tim (who presents himself in the text as a writer) relates how people (usually women, he says), who have read his work, sometimes tell him he should put his war-time experiences behind him and find new stories to tell (80). He then writes, “I’ll think, You dumb cooze” (80). Tim’s frustration is a reflection of Rat’s because he also doubts that his readers will understand what he went through, or that his stories can convey the truth about his experiences. As Tim writes:

In the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It’s about sunlight. It’s about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It’s about love and memory. It’s about sorrow. It’s about sisters who never write back and people who never listen. (O’Brien 80)

According to a Freudian reading all that can be conveyed in prose is the narrator’s frustration at his inability to articulate the complexity of his experiences and his struggle to tell about his own past. In contrast, the theory of learned helplessness allows us to see that Tim and Rat’s
Compulsive reworking of the past is a way of asserting a degree of control over it retrospectively. That is, Tim works through voluntarily suppressed memories in order to render himself less helpless. It can also be theorised that the use of the pejorative term “cooze” to describe women is an attempt to assert a form of hegemonic masculinity that would enable both Tim and Rat to retain a perception of control over their situation. For example, when Tim writes about a woman as a “dumb cooze” it is because this view of women reinforces gendered norms which in turn assert that men (particularly soldiers) possess the qualities and therefore power of hegemonic masculinity. The role of gender and hegemonic masculinity in learned helplessness readings will be discussed more comprehensively in Chapter Three.

In her analysis of *The Things They Carried* literary critic Robin Blyn suggests O’Brien’s fictionalisation of memory is a political strategy and she argues therefore that O’Brien initially promises the reader a closure that entails, “both a loss of innocence and redemption in the form of a richer appreciation for the complexities of the human condition” (189). She also argues that the narrative undermines this by destabilizing the truth in that *The Things They Carried* “offers the ambiguous, the unfinished, and the wound that will not succumb to the narrative cure. Keeping the wound open, O’Brien’s text prevents the neat closure and false redemption of the traditional war story” (191). This reading draws on the Freudian conceptualisation of traumatic memory as embedded and damaging. That is, it is because trauma (in this conceptualisation) resists representation that there can be no resolution, rather trauma is to be subject to Nachtraglichkeit and manifested retrospectively.

The theory of learned helplessness, in a literary context, offers an alternative reading, and suggests that Tim’s manipulation of the truth allows him to exert a degree of control over his past. This representation, when read through the lens of learned helplessness, suggests that there is the possibility of healing and, if not resolution, a degree of acceptance. For
example, in the chapter ‘Field Trip’, Tim visits the place where his friend Kiowa had died twenty years previously. He writes, “Twenty years. A lot like yesterday, a lot like never. In a way, maybe, I’d gone under with Kiowa, and now after two decades I’d finally worked my way out” (187). When viewed in the context of learned helplessness this passage suggests that Tim’s strategies have, after twenty years, enabled him to view his own role in the past as meaningful and therefore provide a way for him to come to terms with his own history.

As said earlier, Tim O’Brien’s novel can be read as a fiction that relates to his experiences serving in Vietnam. In this respect in a reading informed by PTSD, the novel itself, and the behavior of Tim as writer, character and narrator, can be read in relation to avoidance behaviour. That is, Tim creates fictional analogies of his memories to avoid remembering the more painful truth. By creating a set of fictional characters and experiences Tim can work through the traumatic aspects of his war service without actually representing his own experiences. The theory of PTSD would suggest that the novel’s compulsive repetition of details, such as the physical description of the soldier that Tim kills, represent flashbacks of traumatic memory. The character and narrator Tim remembers, “His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole,” (121). Just four pages later he refers to the scene again: “He lay with one leg bent beneath him, his jaw in his throat, his face neither expressive nor inexpressive” (125). Over fifty pages later he recalls, “I remember his face, which was not a pretty face because his jaw was in his throat” (179). The vivid detail of the physical wound is repeated over and over, acting, in this conceptualisation, like the flashback of a traumatic memory.

The theory of learned helplessness, however, offers an alternative explanation for Tim’s repetitious narrative. Throughout the text the truth is represented as dynamic in that Tim, as character and narrator, foregrounds the fictionalisation of his own memories. For example, after writing about
the man that he killed the character states: “But listen. Even that story is made up” (179). The narrator and character Tim make it clear throughout the novel that this is not a factual narrative, that in it he manipulates the truth to serve his own purpose. In this instance reading the novel in terms of the theory of learned helplessness suggests that the narrative represents the narrator as using his writing to exert a degree of retrospective control, as a way of reinstating agency.

The Things They Carried read through learned helplessness

Non-contingency

The first of Seligman’s three criteria for learned helplessness is non-contingency — that is, when there is an unpredictable relationship between a subject’s actions and the subsequent outcomes of these. The loss of control may occur as the result of a physical threat or may be the result of a moral injury. For Vietnam veteran protagonists there are many possible sources of non-contingency, both physical and moral. Physical losses of control may begin when the protagonist is first drafted, or may occur when their unit or platoon is first attacked. Landmines, snipers and booby traps often feature in texts of the Vietnam War and these also represent the possibility of a significant loss of personal control. A moral injury may occur when the protagonist confronts certain previously held beliefs about themselves. For example, a protagonist who suddenly discovers that they are capable of extreme violence, who commits violent acts or who is able, in some way, to justify violence may suffer a moral injury. Also, after the war, if a much-awaited homecoming does not provide the expected emotional relief and succour this may also cause a moral injury. Deleterious post-trauma emotions such as fear, anger and the desire to do harm may also be perceived as further losses of personal control.

The first example of non-contingency that this thesis examines is in Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried (1990). Tim, the narrator, suffers a loss of
personal control when he is conscripted. He describes how he had a sense of disbelief about being drafted, as if it could not possibly happen to him. He writes, “I was too good for this war. Too smart, too compassionate, too everything” (41). Being conscripted into a war that he has protested against changes his view of the world and his role in it, and causes him acute distress and anxiety: “The only certainty that summer was moral confusion” (40). Tim’s sense of loss of control is compounded when he realises, despite his anti-war beliefs, that he is too frightened to “dodge the draft” by running away to Canada. In the quotation that follows Tim expresses this altered conception of himself:

> And what was so sad, I realized, was that Canada had become a pitiful fantasy. Silly and hopeless. It was no longer a possibility. Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would not do as I should do. I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life. I would not be brave. That old image of myself as a hero, as a man of conscience and courage, all that was just a threadbare pipe dream. (O’Brien 52)

Tim’s conscription constitutes both a loss of control (because he is forced to do something against his will) and a moral injury (because he is unable to act in the way that he has always believed he would). The subsequent disruption to his beliefs represents a significant loss of contingency.

Throughout the text Tim’s loss of control over his world is represented in various ways. Some of Tim’s most significant losses of agency occur because of the deaths of his fellow soldiers. The deaths of Ted Lavender who is shot (14), Curt Lemon who stands on a land mine (83) and Kiowa who is killed in a mortar attack (163) are sudden, violent and represent significant losses of control. The deaths are shocking and cause a fundamental shift in Tim’s perception of the world seen through the juxtaposition of incongruous elements. For example, the scene of Curt Lemon’s death is juxtaposed with references to the beauty of the sunlight and surroundings:
when he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms (O’Brien 69).

The juxtaposition of binary opposites (such as these images of life and death) pervade the stories suggesting that the boundaries Tim once assumed to be immutable have become arbitrary. That is, in the above quotation, death is not unexpected and human life is not separate from nature. Fact or fiction, sanity or insanity, significance or insignificance are separate categories that, up until the experience of war, Tim says he had always taken for granted (70). When these boundaries blur, the reader is left with an increasing sense of a world that is out of Tim’s control. The destruction of previously held beliefs and the disruption to Tim’s schemas (that is, his set of beliefs about the world) represents a significant moral injury and is an example of non-contingency.

Tim’s losses of control occur not only because of the physical aspects of his war service but also because of his altered self-perception. He is left bewildered at the changes within himself and the way in which he has been altered by the war, and he writes:

Something had gone wrong. I’d come into this war a quiet, thoughtful sort of person, a college grad, Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude, all the credentials, but after seven months in the bush I realized that those high, civilised trappings had somehow been crushed under the weight of the simple daily realities. I’d turned mean inside… I now felt a deep coldness inside me, something dark and beyond reason. (O’Brien 199)

The changes disrupt Tim’s deeply held moral beliefs and the expectations that he has about his own behavior and his perception is that he is no longer in control of his own reactions and responses.

Similarly, in David Bergen’s novel The Time In Between (2005), protagonist Charles Boatman’s life is irrevocably changed by his war service. Charles is
conscripted in 1968 and sent to Vietnam. When he returns home he has violent dreams and is obsessed by the war. His young wife Sara tries to talk to him but he will not talk about his war experience, simply saying, “I don’t know where to begin” (26). After his wife dies Charles raises his children but is plagued by dreams and by his memories of a young boy that he had mistakenly shot during the war. The novel concludes with Charles’ return to Vietnam and eventual suicide (142).

In *The Time In Between* Charles is represented as losing control when he is drafted (25) and he suffers from other losses of control throughout his war service (149). He experiences a particularly significant loss of agency when his military section enters a village in Quang Ngai province and kills innocent civilians, calling in an airstrike on the village afterwards to cover up their actions (149). Previously Charles had not believed himself capable of killing but he does so and his subsequent suffering therefore represents a moral injury and loss of personal control. The act of killing constitutes a severe loss of control both over his own behaviour and over his deeply held moral beliefs about his own nature. Charles indicates he is unable to forget it when says that the village disappeared after the airstrike: “All of that disappeared. Only it didn’t” (149). In the novel, Charles’s loss of control haunts him, and his inability to forget is represented as one of the main reasons he kills himself.

Losses of control also inform Vietnamese novelist and North Vietnamese veteran Bao Ninh’s novel, *The Sorrow of War* (1991)\(^5\), based on the author’s experiences of the war. In the novel, the main protagonist Kien (represented in third person point of view) reflects on his loss of control over his own world when he leaves for the war, leaving behind his childhood love Phuong, “It was from that moment, when Phuong was violently taken from him, that

\(^5\) Translated into English and published outside Vietnam in 1993, the novel was banned in Vietnam when it was first published but the ban was maintained only briefly (Ninh, postscript). It won The Independent Foreign Fiction Award in 1994.
the bloodshed truly began and his life entered into bloody suffering” (180). Kien survives the war, though the rest of his platoon are killed. The novel represents his experience of many losses of personal control, including sudden attacks by the Americans, the subsequent savage battles (4), floods (6) and the violent deaths of members of his platoon (24, 106, 121). Returning to Hanoi after the war, he suffers a further moral injury when he learns of Phuong’s prostitution, which repudiates all that he believed he knew about her; he had believed she was pure and that his love for her was sacred. She says to him:

“I won’t tell you everything, but some of the things I had to do in the past just to keep afloat, well at times I felt like an animal. I did a number of beastly things. I’m badly soiled, rotten through and through now” (144). The tragic anti-climax of Kien’s longed-for and eagerly awaited homecoming reiterates his loss of control as the people that he once knew and his birthplace (Hanoi) have changed irrevocably.

Australian author, Evie Wyld’s novel, After the Fire, A Still Small Voice (2009) deals with the experiences of three men from the Collard family: the key protagonist Leon, his son Frank and father Roman. While Roman fights in the Korean War Leon takes over the family bakery and attempts to console his mother. Roman is taken prisoner during the war and when he returns it is apparent that he is unable to return to a normal lifestyle. He disappears from the family home and Leon’s mother follows him not long afterwards. When Leon is conscripted for Vietnam he is still unaware of his parents’ whereabouts, so he closes the bakery and leaves without saying goodbye. When Leon returns from the Vietnam War he tries to construct a “normal” life. He marries a friend from his childhood, Amy, and they have a son, Frank. When Amy dies Leon has a succession of sexual relationships with other women, closes the bakery and eventually finds solace in a town of Evangelical Christians. After The Fire, A Still Small Voice is told in the third person point of view in alternating chapters conveying either Frank’s or Leon’s perspective. Roman’s losses of control are not as detailed in the novel as are Leon’s, but the reader learns of his service in Korea (particularly his
time as a prisoner of war) and his subsequent post-war behavior, which includes alcohol abuse, anger and long, unexplained absences.

Like other protagonists, particularly Tim and Charles, Leon suffers his first loss of control when he is conscripted; he tells a customer that he has been conscripted and the man says, “They get you to murder people out there, son. There's no reason for it. You can’t fix those people” (107). This exchange becomes prophetic as Leon kills several people during his service and the ease with which he does so shocks him. After he kills a young Vietnamese soldier he is represented as wishing that he had asked a friend to take a photo of him with the body. Then he is shocked by the thought, musing: “he wondered where that had come from” (160).

Leon’s losses of contingency are both physical and moral in origin. He suffers from moral injury, for example, when he witnesses terrible civilian casualties including seeing a creek “stuffed” with bodies: “Women and men and children and babies, adrift. They’d taken on water, become soft like rotten potatoes… A baby, swaddled still in its shawl, floated alone…” (215). He also suffers from a loss of personal control when his best friend Cray is killed in an attack (242) and again when, after the war, he goes to visit Cray’s wife and discovers that she has committed suicide (250).

In an example of transmission of trauma, Leon is also represented as suffering from losses of contingency before the Vietnam war because of the effect on the family of Roman’s post-Korean-war behavior. Because Roman abuses alcohol, he becomes incoherent and is unable to run the bakery after the war (78). He spends long periods away from home and eventually disappears altogether. When Leon’s mother leaves home to find him, Leon is left to run the bakery on his own. This disintegration of the family demonstrates a form of traumatic transmissibility as the post-trauma actions of one person can become a source of non-contingency for another. This concept will be discussed at length in Chapter Four.
Cognition

The second of Seligman's criteria for learned helplessness is cognition (Seligman 2006 105). That is, for learned helplessness to occur it is important that losses of control are perceived as such by the protagonists. In particular, the protagonist must become aware of the loss of control and, explain it to themselves in some way. The protagonist may also make extrapolations about their future based on the loss of control. The perception of non-contingency is fundamental, not only for the concept of learned helplessness to be relevant to a literary analysis, but also as a way of determining that what is represented is traumatic. For the purposes of textual analysis, non-contingency and cognition are represented as aspects of post-trauma behaviour. That is, though my thesis examines Seligman's three criteria separately, in many instances the apprehension and extrapolation of the non-contingency and cognition are represented as inextricably linked to the behaviour and motivation of the protagonist post-trauma.

In *The Things They Carried*, the narrator Tim becomes aware of his lack of personal control shortly after he is drafted. The moment when he perceives this non-contingency is very traumatic; he feels as though he is breaking open. He writes, “Down in my chest there was still that leaking sensation, something very warm and precious spilling out” (44). Tim also links being drafted to the destruction of his ambitions, as though his life ends when he receives his draft notice: “Twenty-one years old, an ordinary kid with all the ordinary dreams and ambitions, and all I wanted to do was live the life I was born to... and now I was off on the margins of exile... and it seemed so impossible and terrible and sad” (47). Trapped by the expectations of society and the law he realises that he is being forced to take part in a war that he believes to be wrong. This moment of cognition is significant as it is the first time he grasps the extent of his lack of control.
The third chapter in *The Things They Carried* is called “Spin”, referring to a way of presenting facts so that they influence opinion. Narrator Tim says, “On occasions the war was like a Ping-Pong ball. You could put a fancy spin on it, you could make it dance” (31). In the chapter this statement is ironic as each of Tim’s seemingly pleasant memories is tainted by terrible events. By attempting to present the war as sometimes having pleasant moments, he only succeeds in reiterating the awfulness of his experiences. For example, he describes how Ted Lavender adopts an orphan puppy, “feeding it from a plastic spoon and carrying it in his rucksack until the day Azar strapped it to a claymore antipersonnel mine and squeezed the firing device” (35). The underlying trauma of the war prevents the protagonist Tim, in his role as a writer, from putting a positive spin on any aspect of his experiences, despite his efforts. It is in this perception of his inability that cognition of his powerlessness occurs.

In *The Time In Between* Charles perceives the non-contingency of being drafted and resigns himself to it. Charles suffers a non-contingency by being drafted “and then, with the same resignation that would carry him through his next thirty years, Charles left for Vietnam” (25). In another example of his perception of non-contingency, when he is made to ‘walk point’ while on patrol with his unit, he muses: “Walking point was like inviting death. You were all alone and you were the first person the enemy would see and of course you would get killed walking point” (41). Having already lost control by being drafted, Charles seems to extrapolate that the same losses of control will continue to occur throughout the rest of his life.

**Behaviour**

The third of Seligman’s criteria for learned helplessness is behaviour, that is, the symptoms, beliefs and attitudes of learned helplessness (Seligman 105). Such behaviours can include passivity, depression, sadness, an inability to feel emotion, an inability to act, difficulty connecting with people, and feelings of helplessness. In literary texts, behaviours of learned helplessness
can also include acts that the protagonist performs in order to alleviate their suffering.

In *The Things They Carried* the protagonist and narrator Tim has post-trauma emotions that are analogous to the state of learned helplessness and which demonstrate Seligman’s third criterion. For example, years after the war when he takes his ten-year-old daughter Kathleen to Vietnam, and they visit the field where his friend Kiowa died, he articulates his loss of identity, sense of despair and emotional numbness:

This little field, I thought, had swallowed so much. My best friend. My pride. My belief in myself as a man of some dignity and courage. Still, it was hard to find any real emotion. It simply wasn’t there. After that long night in the rain, I’d seemed to grow cold inside, all the illusions gone, all the old ambitions and hopes for myself sucked away into the mud. Over the years that coldness had never entirely disappeared. There were times in my life when I couldn’t feel much, not sadness or pity or passion, and somehow I blamed this place for what I had become, and I blamed it for taking away the person I had once been (O’Brien 186).

In this paragraph, the conditions of learned helplessness are elucidated retrospectively. During the “long night in the rain” when his platoon is being mortared Tim suffers the threat of physical injury and death. Unable to act due to his fear he suffers a moral injury that disrupts his sense of himself as “a man of some dignity and courage” and he blames his own inadequacies for Kiowa’s death, rather than the war. The post-trauma changes described by Tim in the quotation above include emotional coldness, an inability to feel and a loss of ambition. He describes himself as having grown cold inside, with his ambitions and hopes “sucked away”. This behaviour is analogous to the behaviour and emotions of a learned helplessness sufferer.
Throughout *The Things They Carried*, the narrator Tim foregrounds the act of writing, as a way of making fiction from memory. As a post-trauma behaviour this is significant to a learned helplessness reading because fictionalising past experiences can be read as asserting control over past events retrospectively: “What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again” (180). That is, Tim identifies an inability to feel emotion and attempts to alleviate it through the act of writing. His attempt to recreate his pre-war self through fiction can be viewed as a restoration of control, and in these terms, his writing is represented as an avenue for healing. When Tim writes, “In a story miracles can happen” (229) and “We kept the dead alive with stories” (231) he is retrospectively asserting control over his past. By rewriting his own past Tim may be able to change his world view: in this way, writing is represented as an active way of engaging with the past in order to regain control after it has been lost. This concept will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Four: Healing and transmissibility.

In *The Time In Between* Charles shows very clearly the kinds of behaviours that are associated with learned helplessness. For example, he suffers from an inability to feel emotions and traces this deficit to when he was drafted: “All the inside things, the things felt when he was an eighteen-year-old, that was gone” (148). Because he is unable to feel normal emotions he pretends to have them in order to fit in with those around him, but he is always aware that it is a pretence: “He saw himself as a liar, though he didn’t know that the truth would necessarily help anyone” (88). Charles’s inability to feel emotion affects his ability to connect with those around him, even though he tries. He has love affairs and is disappointed when he discovers that they do not help alleviate his loneliness: “He was amazed once again how physical contact did not guarantee intimacy or even affection” (70). He tells one of his lovers, “I am incapable of love” (49) and to another he says, “What you want, I can’t give you” (127). Charles’s feelings of isolation, sadness and his inability to feel emotion are all symptoms of learned helplessness, as is his
inability to act. When Charles discovers his young daughter Del is having an affair with Tomas, a much older man, he is angry but cannot act (88). While out hunting he watches Tomas through the scope of his rifle and although he would like to feel angry at Tomas he doesn’t, instead he, “felt nothing, just a slight breeze on his neck and the smoothness of the stock against his cheek” (91).

Charles’s friend Jimmy gives him a novel called *In A Dark Wood.*6 This inset, fictitious novel is set during the war and focuses on Kiet, a North Vietnamese soldier who has deserted and is trying to make his way home. In the story, Kiet kills a woman and her newborn child on his way back home. He then evades capture by killing another soldier and his only friend dies from starvation. Though he has committed terrible acts, Kiet does not give up hope or falter in his attempt to get home and when home, he is able to wake from his dreams, “believing that he had crossed over and that all was well” (88). That is, because Kiet imagines himself ‘crossing over’ and therefore leaving his experiences behind him, he is able to detach himself from his past in a way that Charles cannot. A learned helplessness reading suggests that Kiet is represented as avoiding learned helplessness because he views his acts as a test and a means to an end and this was necessary for his own survival. In direct contract Charles views his actions as accidents:

The fact was he had seen a man and the man had been reaching for something and so he shot him. The sun, playing hide-and-seek with the clouds, had jumped out too late and revealed the boy for what he was, a boy (Bergen 39).

Charles does not view the death of the boy as a means to an end. Not only does he view the situation as beyond his control, he also views himself as losing control over his own actions, shooting a pig and then a dog, “an ugly little thing with a crippled back leg” (39). Although both Kiet and Charles

6 This novel shows many similarities with Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War,* something that Bergen acknowledges in his notes (239).
suffer similarly during the war the way they view their experiences irrevocably alters the long-term outcomes for each.

After reading *In A Dark Wood* Charles revisits Vietnam because he thinks that, “In some way he might conclude an event in his life that had consumed and shaped him” (93). Just as the character Kiet moves beyond his traumatic past, so Charles hopes that some kind of closure will be available to him. He visits the parts of Hanoi that Kiet mentions but only finds that they too have changed and are different from how they are described: “In the book the city was harder and dirtier” (93). After only three days he realises that the answers he seeks are not in Hanoi, or Danang, or the village where he shot the boy. The effects of the war are barely visible in these places and, like Kiet, the local people are getting on with their lives. Charles's visit does not result in a revelation about his traumatic experiences and he has no clarifying insights. When he becomes convinced of this, he takes his own life (137).

Similarly, in *The Sorrow of War* Kien's post-trauma behaviour includes an inability to feel love and an overwhelming sadness. During the war his childhood sweetheart Phuong turns to prostitution to survive. Because of this, although she still loves Kien he is unable to love her in return. He believes that they have “lost not only the capacity to live happily with others but also the capacity to be in love. The ghosts of the war haunt them and permeate their deteriorating lives” (230). This is also similar to Tim's emotional state. He writes, “There were times in my life when I couldn't feel much, not sadness or pity or passion” (185). Like Kien and Charles, Tim attributes his emotional state to the events that he experienced during the war.

Kien, like Tim, also tries writing as a way to alleviate his own sadness. However, whereas Tim’s writing allows him to assert a degree of retrospective control over his past, Kien’s novel is a chaotic memoir in which time is disjointed and the page order irrelevant. The increasing chaos
of Kien's novel is echoed by an increasing lack of structure in the novel. The narrator notes:

I worked through the mountain of pages one after the other, regardless of whether it seemed to be in sequence, or whether it was just a letter from his diary or a draft of an article. Mixed among the pages I found musical scores, curriculum vitae, award certificates, a pack of cards, torn and worn and dirty, and certificates confirming that he had been wounded several times (Ninh 231).

The manuscript is jumbled: “Any page seemed like the first, any page could have been the last” (229). It is described as both “turbulent” and “manic” (229). In the closing stages of the text the distinction between Kien the narrator of his novel and Kien the protagonist collapses and narrator and protagonist become one:

But while copying the pages and rereading them I was astounded to recognise that inside his story were ideas and feelings and even situations of mine. It seemed that by some coincidence of words and plot my own life and the author's had unexpectedly become entwined, enmeshed in each other (Ninh 231).

The novel Kien writes is so unorganised it acts as further evidence of non-contingency. Whereas Tim suggests, “We kept the dead alive with stories” (231), for Kien, the act of writing does little to rectify the non-contingencies of the war.

Seligman's three criteria of learned helplessness are also evident in a range of other novels, in which both veterans and civilians are depicted experiencing loss of contingency as a consequence of war experiences. In the non-fiction field, Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) is about the author's experiences as a journalist in the Vietnam war. Although Herr volunteers to go to Vietnam he spends most of his time in the field with the soldiers and is therefore subject to the same frightening and out of control experiences as
the enlisted men. For example, while he is out on patrol the unit he is with is mortared (33) and he is constantly attacked while at the Khe Sanh base (85). He is shocked and saddened by what he perceives as the ineptitude and dishonesty of the upper echelons of the army and distressed by the casual attitude of the army hierarchy, and some journalists, to the number of casualties. He writes about a journalist who, commenting about an action that resulted in two hundred casualties said, “Oh two-hundred isn’t anything. We lost more than that in an hour on Guadalcanal” (179). The cavalier attitude to human life can be read as a moral injury to Herr as it is at odds with his own deeply held beliefs.

Herr clearly perceives his own lack of control. Death is omnipresent during the war; the boundaries between the living and dead blurring at times. He agrees with a soldier who says, “If it ain’t the fucking incoming, it’s the fucking outgoing. Only difference is who gets the fucking grease, and that ain’t no fucking difference at all” (32). Herr begins to understand the detrimental effect that the war is having on him and he returns home, suggesting that he had come to fear, “something more complicated than death, an annihilation less final but more complete” (195).

As a result of his experiences and perceptions, when Herr returns home, he writes that he has great difficulty fitting in, he is: “Back in the World now, and a lot of us aren’t making it” (195). His description of his post-trauma emotions is analogous with the symptoms of learned helplessness:

Hemingway once described the glimpse he’d had of his soul after being wounded, it looked like a fine white handkerchief drawing out of his body, floating away and then returning. What floated out of me was more like a huge grey ‘chute, I hung there for a long time waiting for it to open. Or not. My life and death got mixed up with their lives and deaths, doing the Survivor Shuffle between the two, testing the pull of each and not wanting either very much. I was once in such a bad head about
it that I thought the dead had only been spared a great deal of pain (Herr 207).

For Herr, surviving is the difficult option and the quotation above is similar to a statement made by the protagonist Tim in *The Things They Carried*: “I survived, but it’s not a happy ending” (55). The narrator in *Dispatches* envies the dead because of his depression and emotional numbness. The metaphor of his soul, as a grey parachute, in contrast with Hemingway’s white handkerchief, portrays Herr’s soul as sullied by his experiences. The military metaphor represents the war as inextricable from his traumatised state of being.

This chapter has demonstrated how both fiction and non-fiction texts can be read in terms of the concept of learned helplessness. Identifying the three stages of learned helplessness privileges a theoretical framework for a set of behaviours that are not necessarily foregrounded in contemporary literary trauma theory readings which emphasise unrepresentability, abreaction and transmissibility. When loss of control, rather than loss of memory, is placed at the centre of the analysis it becomes possible to see what cultural forces are at work in the novel, how these impact upon trauma, and how these are perceived and expressed by the protagonist, affecting the way in which trauma is experienced. In Chapter Three I examine the role of culture in relation to representations of gender, technology and place to show how these effect the conceptualization of control and trauma in the novels under discussion.
Chapter Three: Learned helplessness and culture

This chapter focuses on aspects of culture, such as representations of place, gender and technology, which can function to either increase the loss of contingency for the protagonist, or decrease it. That is, in the novels discussed, such representations either contribute to the sufferer’s sense of moral injury and their belief that they are powerless or, alternatively, they encourage beliefs that allow the protagonist to retain some sense of control over their world. These cultural factors shape the protagonists’ perception of the traumatic event in that they effect the way the sufferer explains the trauma to himself or herself. That is, they impact upon Seligman’s second criteria for learned helplessness; cognition. This chapter will also argue that Vietnam War narratives are subject to extreme cultural pressure and, for the protagonist, this can have a significant impact on the possibility of healing. This is largely because one of the ways in which learned helplessness sufferers can alleviate their condition is to recast their role in the past so that they perceive their own input as meaningful. Yet the cultural censorship that accompanies Vietnam war narratives has perpetuated a “veteran as victim” mindset that limits the degree to which this is possible. I have called this situation the “Vietnam paradox”. Overall this chapter will demonstrate the ways in which engaging with the concept of learned helplessness can draw into focus various aspects of culture that may not be privileged by a reading using conventional trauma theory.

The role of gender

One of the cultural forces of most interest to a learned helplessness reading is the notion of gender and how this can act as a source of non-contingency. Gender is a cultural condition that modulates traumatic representation and constitutes a source of unpredictability that can intensify the experience of
trauma. Of particular interest in a learned helplessness reading of Vietnam war novels is the notion of hegemonic masculinity; the dominant form of masculinity within the gender hierarchy (Boyle 6). Notions of hegemony that inform codes of masculine behaviour and emotion, such as dominance and power, are foregrounded in scenarios of war. Gender theorist Brenda Boyle points out in her book *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives* (2009), that hegemonic masculinity (in the context of American society) informs the notion of war as a rite of passage in which boys become men. This forms part of the larger and generalised myth that “to be a man is to be masculine and to be masculine is to be a man” (Boyle 3). Boyle points out that Vietnam War narratives generally do not represent hegemonic masculinity as a singular state, but suggest multiple ways that masculinity can be manifest. This is because, even though historically war has been regarded as a “haven for developing male masculinity... [a]ccording to recent socio-political theories... Vietnam could not provide that haven” (6). On this basis, Boyle argues that the war in Vietnam did not function culturally in the same way as previous conflicts. That is, Vietnam was not seen as a crucible in which hegemonic masculinity was forged because of the contentious political circumstances surrounding the war, the controversy surrounding its aftermath and the subsequent, proliferating diagnoses of PTSD. Representations of masculinity in Vietnam narratives are often the site of non-contingency, as will be shown in the following discussion. This is of significance in a reading for learned helplessness because gender, which is so often (mis)perceived as a binary relationship and a source of hegemony, can become an unstable entity and itself an agent of non-contingency.

Gender is a complex network of social practices and beliefs that privileges certain forms of behaviour and the way that gender is expressed is mediated by culture. Boyle notes in *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives* (2009), that “gender is a performance that is socially and culturally contingent”(4). She suggests that, after Judith Butler, gender is both performative and shaped by the forces of culture and social context. The degree to which this occurs can be seen in *The Things They Carried*, in particular, in the short story
“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” (87). This story addresses the effect that perceptions of gendered behaviour have on the experience of loss of control.

Narrator Tim relates a story told to him by fellow soldier Rat Kiley. It is the story of a young medic, Mark Fossie, who flies his girlfriend Mary-Anne to Vietnam from the USA so that she might live with him on the remote medical outpost where he is stationed. Mary-Anne is described as an archetypal American “sweetheart”, a seventeen-year-old girl with “long white legs and blue eyes and a complexion like strawberry ice-cream” (90). She is fascinated by the war and initially spends her time asking innocent questions (91). As she becomes more involved with the war, she cuts off her hair, learns to use an M16 rifle and goes out on ambush with the Special Forces soldiers who live at the outpost (97). The transition marks a shift in Mary-Anne’s stereotypical WASP femininity to her adoption of traits of uber-masculinity. Fossie resists the changes in Mary-Anne and they resolve the conflict by deciding to get married. The engagement changes Mary-Anne and she becomes subdued once again. Rat comments that it is obviously a case of “setting down some new rules” (97); he jokes to Fossie: “hey, she’ll make a sweet bride … Combat ready” (98). This sarcastic comment suggests that Mary-Anne’s blurring of gender boundaries is at odds with Rat’s perception of how a bride should act. By accepting Fossie’s proposal it appears that Mary-Anne has surrendered control and succumbed to normative gender stereotypes. Even so, it is obvious that she is not happy and a “rigid correctness” governs the way she interacts with her fiancé (98).

Fossie decides to send Mary-Anne home, but before he can arrange transport she disappears, reappearing after three weeks with the Special Forces soldiers. She is totally transformed: “Her eyes seemed to shine in the dark – not blue, though, but a bright glowing jungle green” (99). Mary-Anne has undergone a metamorphosis and is indistinguishable from the other soldiers. Watching them return to base after a mission, Rat notes that, “The seven silhouettes seemed to float across the surface of the earth, like spirits, vaporous and unreal” (99). Acting outside the limits of her traditional
gender roles she is represented as an almost a supernatural being: her eyes
glow and she appears “unreal”.

When Fossie next sees her she is barefoot, dressed in a white blouse, cotton
skirt and wearing a necklace of human tongues, the tips of which “curled
upward as if caught in a final horrified syllable” (103). She tells Fossie,
“There's no sense talking” (103). She has, both literally – horrifically – and
figuratively, silenced debate about her behaviour. Mary-Anne stays with the
green berets until one day she walks out into the mountains and never
comes back. But the men believe she is still out there. “She was part of the
land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace
defensive of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill” (107).

Mary-Anne’s transformation is complete. With aspects of both femininity and
masculinity but with an unclear allegiance to either she has become a
supernatural being. She has become part of the landscape, albeit a
malevolent one that is “ready for the kill”.

Many critics and even O’Brien himself have written that “Sweetheart” is a
feminist story because it suggests that, like men, when women experience
combat they are corrupted by it: “What happened to her, Rat said, was what
happened to all of them. You come over clean and you get dirty and then
afterward it’s never the same” (105). However, examined through the lens
of learned helplessness, the story emerges as representing the
unpredictable aspects of gender and the ways in which gender roles interact
with learned helplessness. That is, Mary-Anne embraces the Vietnam War
experience and it changes her, but the changes are not the same as those
suffered by the men in the text. Vietnam corrupts Mary-Anne but it also
empowers her. She becomes a part of the landscape and, “she seemed to
flow like water through the dark, like oil, without sound or center. She went
barefoot” (106). Instead of being challenged by the unfamiliar terrain she
embraces it. She tells Fossie, “Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I
want to swallow the whole country – the dirt, the death – I just want to eat it
and have it there inside me” (103). She is absorbed by and, in turn, absorbs the landscape.

In a learned helplessness reading Mary-Anne becomes an agent of unpredictability when her actions challenge expectations about feminine forms of behaviour. In this instance, therefore, Mary-Anne’s gender “trouble” destabilises and acts as a source of non-contingency. That is, her actions challenge an hegemonic masculinity that exists as a set of expectations, a schema that asserts how men in combat must behave and feel. By reading through the lens of learned helplessness we can see that the disruption of these belief frameworks is potentially traumatic. An example of the expectations imposed by gender hegemony can be seen in The Things They Carried in the chapter titled “On the rainy river”. Narrator Tim describes the moment when he knows that he will not conform to expected notions of behaviour: “I understood that I would not do what I should do … I would not be brave. That old image of myself as a hero, as a man of conscience and courage, all that was just a threadbare pipe dream” (52). For Tim, failing to conform to notions of hegemonic masculinity, constitutes a moral injury and thus can be seen as traumatic. More importantly, Tim’s cognition of this non-contingency includes the beliefs that it is his failing, and that he is powerless to change the situation. Thus for Tim, notions of gender contribute to the traumatic aspects of his war experience because they reiterate his own powerlessness.

For Mary-Anne the disruption of gender roles is not represented as traumatic. She is shown as in control of the process in which she operates outside the social conventions imposed on her by her gender. The character of Mary-Anne is represented as adopting certain aspects of femininity and rejecting others, taking what she needs from her assigned gendered attributes. As an uber soldier, she is both at one with her environment and ruthless and dangerous. In contrast, the men’s continual struggle with the gap between their understanding of expected masculine attributes and their experienced behaviour and emotions contributes to their trauma.
Mary-Anne’s necklace of tongues is particularly significant to a reading that focuses on gender as a source of noncontingency because, although it presents her becoming a semi-mythic character, it is also analogous to stories about American soldiers collecting the ears of dead Vietnamese soldiers (Herr 35). In a learned helplessness reading, the necklace can be read as symbolising Mary-Anne taking control by combining the savagery of war with the necklace as a symbol of her femininity. Wearing the necklace silences any dissent about her behaviour; it is a grotesque visual pun that makes it clear that she has moved beyond the reach of gendered expectations. As Boyle points out, the necklace carries sexual significance and also:

symbolises multiple sexualities and ways of communicating and that, combined with the pink sweater and white culottes, defies standard gender roles which must occur outside the purview of ‘the normal’ (Boyle 96).

Wearing a necklace of tongues represents a shocking act of barbarism. Not only has Mary-Anne committed an act that is abhorrent, she has turned the evidence into a form of decoration.

While Mary-Anne operates outside the constraints of her gender to become an almost supernatural being, Rat Kiley, the character who relates the story of “Sweetheart” to Tim, is driven to despair by the war and literally shoots himself in the foot in order to escape it. In the context of a learned helplessness reading Rat Kiley’s self inflicted wound is interesting as it can be read as an attempt by Rat to seize control of his life. The idiom, “to shoot yourself in the foot” refers to a destructive act, yet Rat ironically chooses to maim himself in order to achieve some kind of control. That is, unable to express his emotions due to the constraining elements of hegemonic masculinity (foregrounded in the narrative of war) Rat undertakes an action which is permanently disabling. Elsewhere in the text the expectation that masculinity imposes on behaviour is described as a burden that the men
carry into combat: "They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze and hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down" (17). Through such references, Rat Kiley and the other male characters in the text are represented as constrained by their gender attributes. On this basis, any emotions not designated as hegemonic masculinity become a source of noncontingency and therefore contribute to the experience of trauma.

In "The Mind at War: Images of Women in Vietnam War Novels by Combat Veterans" (1990), Kali Tal argues that one of the myths of masculinity is that soldiers are completely and unequivocally male, having systematically destroyed all feminine aspects of their characters. She points out the fundamental contradiction to this in that, in war men come to suffer culturally ascribed feminine emotions:

War is the ultimate shock to male self-perception, shattering pretensions to self control and to control over environment. War breaks down the barriers between known categories, throwing the soldier into a situation where he must revise his ideas of reality in order to survive. One of the first categories to be violated is that of gender role. Though taught in basic training or boot camp to adopt a hypermasculine stance, the soldier naturally experiences "feminine" emotions in combat, including fear, confusion, a sense of being out of control, and an emotional attachment to his comrades. (Tal 88)

In accord with such critiques of masculinity, a learned helplessness reading, also highlights difficulties associated with non-dominant or marginalised forms of masculinity. This is of particular relevance in war narratives as war has traditionally been seen as a crucible in which boys turn into men and then measures their masculinity against hegemonic ideals (Boyle 5). One of these ideals, for example, in Western societies, is that to be a man is to be “white, heterosexual and able-bodied” (Boyle 3). In the context of learned
helplessness it could be theorised that groups that fall outside the hegemonic ideal could have a different experience of gender related non-contingency than groups that aspire to fulfil heteronormative ideals.

Theorists of masculinity point out that homosexuality, as a marginalized masculinity, is counter-hegemonic (Donaldson 650) and is often represented as a lesser form of masculinity: “the characteristics inherent to the practice of homosexuality mark these men with a visible form of non-masculinity” (Howson 62). In contrast to societal norms, the war novel may represent such masculinities quite differently. In Witi Ihimaera's *The Uncle's Story*, helicopter pilot and war hero Cliff Harper has a love affair with a Maori soldier, Sam Mahana. Cliff Harper embodies ideals of hegemonic masculinity in that he is successful, heroic, good-looking and a risk taker; his homosexuality is one of the only ways in which he doesn't conform to hegemonic ideals. Sam Mahana is the son of a Maori chief and heir to his father's patriarchal role. He is also represented as hyper-masculine: a natural leader, physically strong and heroic. In short, both men represent the ideals of hegemonic masculinity in every respect, except for their homosexuality.

Reading the novel through the lens of learned helplessness, it is possible to read the traits of homosexuality as offering characters the possibility of operating outside gendered ideals of behaviour, and thereby resuming some control over their situation. That is, characters that are already operating beyond the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity are less likely to be traumatised by failing to fulfil hegemonic ideals because the range of possible forms of masculinity available to them is broader.

In *The Uncle's Story*, homosexuality is represented as accommodating many of the masculine traits required of a soldier. Indeed, Cliff and Sam are represented as having hyper-masculine characteristics, such as when together they rescue another soldier in an incident that requires extreme courage and strength. Complementing this representation, the men's love
for each other is represented as an example of such risk-taking and courage. This representation is counter-hegemonic as it draws together widely varied forms of masculinity (some hegemonic, some marginalised) in a way that invites an examination of heteronormativity. For example, when Cliff convinces Sam to admit that he loves him, he says, “I’m prepared to take the risks” (185). Later in the novel he tells Sam, “We’ve got to take the risk” (227). Cliff appropriates part of the myth of hegemonic masculinity – that risk-taking is an inherently masculine pursuit – and by doing so exerts control over his own performance of masculinity.

When the war is over and Sam and Cliff meet in New Zealand, none of the characteristics of learned helplessness are represented: Cliff tells Sam, “You and me against the world, right?” (205) In this instance foregrounding the risk-taking aspects of their homosexuality appropriates some aspects of the hegemonic myth of heroic masculinity while rejecting others and the representation suggests that when the men are together they are free to operate outside the boundaries of gender hegemony. Viewed in the context of Seligman’s three criteria, the men’s sense of control over their relationship – and the risk-taking behaviour they engage in – does not lead to the cognition of helplessness, despite the presence of war-related non-contingencies.

Just like Mary-Anne in *The Things They Carried*, Cliff’s and Sam’s enactment of gender is represented as dynamic and flexible in contrast to Tim and Rat Kiley for whom dominant gendered attributes intensify the non-contingent aspects of war, because notions of hegemonic masculinity have been disrupted. When trauma is seen primarily as a loss of control, and this loss can be physical, psychological or cultural (such as in a moral injury), then gender can become a significant source of non-contingency.

Technology
Representations of the technology of war, because they are often inextricably linked to representations of gender, are of great interest in a learned helplessness reading because of the ways that they can impact upon losses of control. Representations of technology can inform a learned helplessness reading because technology is often associated with a predictable and controllable outcome, a counterpoint to the more chaotic environment of combat. Technology can also be appropriated in literary texts as part of the representation of gender. Gender theorist Susan Jeffords points out in *The Remasculinisation of America*, when technology is foregrounded, the human body ceases to have meaning but becomes an adjunct to the machinery. She writes:

> Technology as display produces not simply continuity but apparent stability out of the transience of death and its enactments, suggesting that the spectacle of warfare and its displayed spectacle of death are “pure” moments in themselves that do not need to be contextualised or interpreted, simply witnessed, in order to be controlled (Jeffords 10).

While for Jeffords the union of man and technology is associated with the traits of hegemonic masculinity, in a learned helplessness reading, the technology, or machinery of war can be read as a way of asserting control over an unpredictable and largely uncontrollable environment. The focus is still partly on the acquisition of the traits of masculinity, but also on technology as a means to an end; as a way of reasserting control.

In a learned helplessness reading, technology is such a powerful agent in the restoration of control that its representation is often anthropomorphised or beautified. In *The Things They Carried*, the narrator Tim, for example, describes the technology of war with almost loving awe:

> But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. You stare out at tracer rounds unwinding through the dark like brilliant red ribbons. You admire ... the great sheets of metal-fire streaming down
from a gunship ... any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference – a powerful, implacable beauty ... (O’Brien 77).

From the perspective of learned helplessness, part of technology’s allure is the fact that it is “powerful” and “implacable”. The awe of the narrator is less about the aesthetic aspects of the display but rather about its ability to obtain control for those who operate it.

In an article published in *Esquire* magazine in 1984, Vietnam war veteran William Broyles echoes the character Tim’s love for the powerful aspects of the technology. For Broyles also, the destructive capabilities of the technology add to its beauty. He writes:

> Many men loved napalm, loved its silent power, the way it could make tree lines or houses explode as if by spontaneous combustion ... I loved it more – not less – because of its function: to destroy, to kill. The seduction of war is in its offering intense beauty – divorced from all civilised values, but beauty still (Broyles 61).

Jeffords points out that in many Vietnam War texts the inference is that, in order to find guns and napalm attractive (or even sexually stimulating), the subject must be unequivocally masculine (15). This notion is encapsulated in the often quoted line from the film *Apocalypse Now*, (1979) in which the hyper-masculine Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore says, “I love the smell of napalm in the morning”. This appropriation conflicts with the notion that men in combat suffer from feminine emotions like fear and attachment to their peers and privileges the hegemonic ideal of the soldier (Tal 88). In *Dispatches*, Herr not only writes about the beauty of weaponry and technology and in marking the technology of war as inherently masculine, he relates it to sex:

> It was incredible, those little ships were the most beautiful things flying (you had to stop once in a while and admire the
machinery), they just hung there above those bunkers like wasps outside a nest. “That’s sex,” the captain said. “That’s pure sex” (Herr 15).

In such ways, literary representations, both fictional and non-fictional, can often represent hegemonic masculinity and technology as inextricably linked. In a learned helplessness analysis, technology allows a protagonist who has lost, or who is losing control to restore a degree of agency. Moreover, it offers the opportunity for ‘remasculinising’ the cognition of non-contingency, because an alliance with technology marks the protagonist as inherently masculine. That is, marking technology as the object of sexual desire is an assertion of hegemonic masculinity that strengthens the perceived alliance between man and machine.

In representations of the Vietnam War gender can become a site of non-contingency, because, while traditionally war has been viewed as a crucible in which to produce the traits of hegemonic masculinity, in war narratives gender is often represented as unstable and unreliable. While there are many explanations for the ways that masculinity is represented in Vietnam war narratives, including the contentious circumstances surrounding the war and the post-war proliferation of diagnoses of conditions such as PTSD, for a learned helplessness reading the most significant aspect of such representations is the impact that they have on the protagonist’s perceived control over the physical, cultural and psychological aspects of their world. Representations of technology are often inextricably linked to representations of gender in war narratives (Jeffords 10). A learned helplessness reading suggests that this is because of the restoration of the perception of control that technology offers. Marking the technology as the object of sexual desire is an assertion of hegemonic masculinity that strengthens the perceived alliance between man and machine.

*The ‘Vietnam paradox’*
As discussed earlier, one of the ways in which psychologists reduce the symptoms of learned helplessness is to assist the subject to reformulate their self image, so they no longer view their circumstances as being beyond their control (Greenberger and Strasser 165). The paradox is that reformulating the past and viewing Vietnam veterans as being “in control”, of their war-time experiences, can contradict the cultural and political pressures on them as veterans. Therefore a learned helplessness-informed examination of the cultural pressure brought to bear on Vietnam veteran protagonists, and its impact on the possibility of healing, must take into account the cultural and political pressures represented in literary texts, and its represented effects on the experience of trauma.

Learned helplessness can occur after a loss or losses of control if the subject’s understanding and perception of the experience leads to a belief that their own actions are meaningless to effect change. Therapeutic treatment of learned helplessness often requires the subject to alter their perception of the past and their role in it and, in doing so, recast their role in those experiences. Seligman has called a subject’s cognition of non-contingency (the way that the subject analyses their own experiences) their ‘explanatory style’ (2006 15). Subjects with learned helplessness view themselves as powerless to change their circumstances; Seligman writes that this denotes a pessimistic explanatory style (2006 16). In order to change from a pessimistic to an optimistic explanatory style, such subjects need to begin to view their role in the past as meaningful (Seligman 2006 16).

For veterans of the Vietnam War, viewing their role in a positive way can be difficult, not only because of the contentious politics surrounding the war but also because, in the decades since, critics argue that a process of cultural censorship and revision has occurred. In their book on the legacy and lessons of the Vietnam War, Vietnam in Iraq (2007), for example, John Dumbrell and David Ryan argue that Vietnam narratives have been censored by culture:
For a short while the message that veterans brought home to America, aka the Vietnam Syndrome, served as a prophylactic against another Vietnam. In the decades that have passed ... the hideous secrets have been forgotten, or worse, transformed into memories of virtue, sacrifice and service (Dumbrell and Ryan 43).

Dumbrell and Ryan show that, in the 1970s and early 1980s, the Vietnam War was viewed as the inevitable product of an aggressive US foreign policy but that, more recently, it has been seen as a noble act of sacrifice by the service men and women who took part. This transformation has been effected by politics, journalism and popular culture. Tal suggests that this process has been abetted by successive governments who believed it was politically expedient for the United States to change the way that its citizens thought about their involvement in the war. Historian Marvin Gettleman argues:

By the late 1970's the national consensus of ‘No more Vietnams’ was becoming a major obstacle for the US government ... It was necessary to rewrite history once again. Hence a new body of writing emerged (known by the collective term revisionism) which sought to return to the myths that had been dispelled by the knowledge we had gained at such a terrifying price (Gettleman and Franklin 13).

Ironically, part of the revisionist myth-making process has been a focus on the pathological effects of the war, particularly PTSD. That is, the widespread diagnoses of PTSD is seen by some theorists as a convenient way of diminishing criticism of the war (Brewin 12). It was not long after the end of the war that the main discourse regarding Vietnam shifted from an emphasis on the social and political implications of the conflict to the pathologisation of veteran’s post-war experiences. As James Gibson explains in "The Perfect War: Techno War in Vietnam" (1986), any discourse on the war itself was, again ironically, largely silenced by the need to study and assist veterans, with a subsequent focus on the medical, psychiatric and legal discourses that surround veterans’ affairs. Tal agrees and suggests further that: “the speech of survivors, then, is highly politicized. If ‘telling it
like it is' threatens the status quo, powerful political, economic and social forces will pressure survivors either to keep their silence or revise their stories” (7). Her argument is that, “The experience of the American combat soldier in Vietnam has been revised and codified – survivor testimony has been overwhelmed by the dominant culture” (11).

Thus Vietnam veterans who may be experiencing feelings of learned helplessness are trapped between opposing positions. There is the need for veterans to recast their role in the past as meaningful in order to escape from learned helplessness. This is made difficult however by a revised cultural perspective of the war that privileges the view of veterans as victims.

This paradox affects not only the trauma of actual veterans but also impacts upon fictional depictions of Vietnam veteran trauma. There is a sense that readers, and some writers, will anticipate a certain kind of testimony, character, scenario and thus, communicating anything different may be difficult as alternative narratives are foreclosed by pre-existing expectations. As Christian Appy states, “When you say 'Vietnam vet' the public sees a balding guy with stringy hair with his hat on and his fatigues and his little fucking medals, weeping somewhere” (327). Appy implies that because of cultural expectations veterans are defined by their veteran status and expected to openly display the deleterious effects of their war service. It can be assumed that the same kinds of pressure exerted on real-life veterans might also be brought to bear on fictional depictions of Vietnam veterans, by both readers and writers, and therefore only representations that lie inside the parameters of expected and privileged Vietnam narratives will be perceived as authentic.

In the Vietnam war novels under discussion various rhetorical techniques are deployed to negotiate a way past culturally-imposed perspectives. One of these is the creation of a fictional liminal space within the narrative, a space associated with both uncertainty and malleability. The concept of
Liminality has been employed by psychologists, philosophers and anthropologists to describe “in-between situations and conditions that are characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes” (Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra 2). Liminal space therefore provides an opportunity to offer something other than culturally-endorsed discourse. In *The Things They Carried*, author Tim O’Brien creates such a liminal space by blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction. This process begins in the introductory pages of the book when O’Brien dedicates his work of fiction to specific characters: “Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins and Kiowa” and, on the next page, writes: “This is a work of fiction. Except for a few details regarding the author’s own life, all the incidents, names and characters are imaginary” (Preface). O’Brien confirms the novel’s fictional status several times while simultaneously conforming to the genre of biography by using his own name and career (novelist) for the narrator, referred to in the third person. He writes, “I’m forty three years old, true, and I’m a writer now; and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier. Almost everything else is invented” (179). By confirming the novel’s fictional status, while maintaining the “truth” of the narrative through its dedication and other rhetorical techniques, O’Brien creates a greater flexibility in his representation of the war and its effects on the protagonists. That is, he creates a place that can operate beyond the limitations produced by cultural and political forces.

In a lecture given to writing students at Brown University O’Brien said: “That’s what fiction is for. It’s for getting at the truth when the truth isn’t sufficient for the truth” (O’Brien 1999). O’Brien’s novel doesn’t just declare that the text is fictional, but constantly blurs the boundaries between fiction and truth so that the reader is never certain which aspects of the text are based on fact. By blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, O’Brien creates a liminal space that provides the characters with an opportunity to operate outside the narrative and cultural conventions of Vietnam.
testimony. The constant pressure on the concept of truth within the novel forces the reader to look for ways of constructing meaning beyond the narration. O’Brien writes:

The war wasn’t all terror and violence. Sometimes things could almost get sweet. For instance I remember a little boy with a plastic leg. I remember how he hopped over to Azar and asked for a chocolate bar – ‘GI number one,’ the kid said – and Azar laughed and handed over the chocolate. When the boy hopped away Azar clucked his tongue and said, ‘War’s a bitch.’ He shook his head sadly. ‘One leg for Chrissake. Some poor fucker ran out of ammo’ (O’Brien 31).

Within the liminal space O’Brien creates, the character of Azar is able to be represented outside the expectations imposed by the culture surrounding Vietnam War narratives. The reader, who may expect a scene about a young soldier’s empathy for a fellow victim of war is instead given a glimpse into a psyche irredeemably altered by the war. The impact of the scene is that Azar is open about his own lack of empathy and even finds it amusing. The scene subverts expectations about culturally privileged representations because of the liminal space of fact/fiction that O’Brien creates.

Don Ringnalda, reiterating the effects of cultural censorship, also argues that most of what has been written about Vietnam is dictated by a social and political culture that discourages dissent. In his book about fictional depictions of the Vietnam War, Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War (1994) he argues:

The reason Americans fought it, the way they fought it, and the way they often write about it all stem from the very same failure of imagination, which in turn stems from this nation’s righteous, sense-making rage for order and its perennial flight from the humility engendered by self-irony (Ringnalda 76).

According to Ringnalda there are very few fiction writers that challenge the “epistemology of certainty” that led the US into the war. Referring to writers
such as Tim O’Brien and Jack Fuller (Fragments, 1984) he writes that, “The most seeing-in-the-dark novelists, poets and dramatists sift through the wreckage and offer up deconstructive, interrogative collages composed of unsettling juxtapositions” (76). In particular, Ringnalda argues that O’Brien uses incongruous imagery and metaphor to create a narrative that escapes cultural censorship and that offers an alternate view. As such, when Azar declares, “One leg for Chrissake. Some poor fucker ran out of ammo”, the juxtaposition of the disabled child and the young soldier does not conform to cultural expectations that represent returned soldiers as doing more “weeping” than laughing at the horrific injuries of children. Azar’s dialogue is shocking partly because it offers the reader a way to get at the “truth when the truth isn’t sufficient for the truth” (O’Brien 1999).

Criticising O’Brien’s narrative on an ethnographic basis, Jim Neilson argues that O’Brien’s denial of the truth is a rhetorical strategy that has more to do with aesthetics than any attempt to counter a culturally privileged narrative. In particular, he argues that O’Brien fails to,

> see beyond his individual experience to document the vastly greater suffering of the Vietnamese. In doing so, O’Brien has constructed a text that, despite its radical aesthetic, largely reaffirms the prevailing ethnocentric conception of the war (Neilson 2).

Neilson’s viewpoint ironically reaffirms the cultural status quo by imposing the censorship of political correctness on this fictional testimony. It is, I argue, precisely because post-war culture requires veterans to display a set of “appropriate” emotions (Tal 11, Appy 327) that O’Brien’s narrative moves into a liminal space to offer an alternative rendering. It is true that Azar does not empathise with the “vastly greater suffering of the Vietnamese” but the context for this is a text which is a damning exegesis of modern warfare, suggesting that the trauma of combat not only damages the way men feel but also prevents them from feeling. As an example, in The Things They Carried, narrator Tim says:
A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, or encourage virtue, nor suggest proper models of human behaviour, nor restrain men from doing things men have always done. If a story seems moral do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie ... you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil (O’Brien 68).

In other words, in the narrative, the experience of war is represented as producing unacceptable attitudes and behaviour because of the extreme conditions. It suggests that the reader gains some insight into the irremediable damage done to the men and women that served; anything less than this allows the process of revisionism, that Gettlemen describes, to continue to perpetuate the cultural pressure that censors nonconforming narratives (13).

As I have shown, in the case of novels about the Vietnam War, one way of representing aspects of the truth is to deny their truthfulness in order to operate outside the censorship of powerful cultural conventions. O’Brien’s denial of the truth frees his characters from the traditional framework of expectations imposed upon veterans and offers an insight into the war and its effect upon them that would not be possible otherwise. In the liminal space the characters are free to renegotiate their own image of themselves, which is significant for a learned helplessness reading because this path may offer the possibility of healing. Thus, any rhetorical techniques that offer the possibility of operating outside the boundaries of the cultural perspective that views veterans as victims are of interest in a reading of trauma through the lens of learned helplessness. In this instance the liminal space in *The Things They Carried* works in a similar way to the expression of marginalised gender roles in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” and *The Uncle’s Story* – they extend to the characters the possibility of operating
outside culturally prescribed norms and, by doing so, offer them a way to reassert control over an aspect of their own world.

Using the concept of learned helplessness to read texts featuring Vietnam veterans foregrounds the role played by culture in both the cognition of the trauma and the extent to which it can be spoken about. Learned helplessness also offers some insight to the role played by silence in the text. Contemporary literary trauma theory argues that trauma is unrepresentable (Caruth, Felman, Hartman). This thesis, however, argues that unrepresentability is not a product of memory dysfunction but rather the inevitable consequence of cultural censorship. When considered in the context of historical revisionism (Gettleman 13) and the cultural censorship of which both Tal and Gibson write it can be argued that, in the case of Vietnam narratives, it is possible that silence is less a product of what can’t be spoken about than the product of what won’t be spoken about. This censorship can contribute to the maintenance of learned helplessness as it prevents the protagonist from revising their understanding of traumatic events.

*Learned helplessness and the role of place*

Representations of place in the Vietnam war novel are important, particularly in a learned helplessness reading, as they refer to the site where culture and trauma are inextricably linked. Discussions about the significance of place can lead to a greater understanding of the cultural forces at work in the novel and the way they impact upon the experience of trauma for the protagonist. As Balaev writes:

> Examining the role of place as a significant formal innovation, especially the metaphoric and material value accorded to landscape imagery in the experience and remembrance of trauma, opens new avenues for a discussion of trauma’s meaning for the individual and community, and acknowledges
larger political forces at work in the fictional creation of trauma (Balaev 159).

Balaev goes on to argue that examining a protagonist’s perception of the self allows the reader to see trauma as a potential agent for change, rather than simply an agent for the destruction of self, as in a Freudian-inflected trauma reading (160). A learned helplessness analysis reads the landscape as significant for the first and second of Seligman’s criteria: that is, it can function as a source of non-contingency and also as a metaphor for the cognition of trauma. In Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1991), for example, the landscape can be read as both a metaphor for the psychic damage suffered by the protagonist, and as an element that serves to intensify the protagonist’s loss of control. In the novel, the war-time landscape is represented as ugly, malevolent, unpredictable, and beyond the control of the Vietnamese soldiers. The Jungle of Screaming Souls (where the protagonist, Kien, is stationed) is said to be “as muddy as hell” (3) and, during a battle Kien describes blood flowing “like red mud” (5). These two metaphors draw together images of mud, blood and hell as though these elements have become interchangeable. Their melding suggests a world that is destabilised and out of control and emphasise the way that the war has changed the boundaries and expectations of the protagonist.

When read through the lens of learned helplessness it can be seen that other aspects of the landscape function as sites of non-contingency in the novel and are therefore potentially traumatic. For example, forced by hunger to hunt native animals, Kien’s troops shoot an orang-utan, planning to eat it: “But oh God, when it was killed and skinned the animal looked like a fat woman with ulcerous skin, the eyes, half-white, half-grey, still rolling” (7). Kien buries the animal but believes that “none escaped her vengeful, omnipresent soul” (7). Because Kien comes to believe that the orang-utan’s spirit is partly to blame for the deaths of his companions, the orang-utan becomes part of Kien’s experience of war trauma.
The orang-utan image also appears in another Vietnamese novel about the war. In Duong Thu Huong’s *Novel Without A Name* (1996) the main protagonist, Quan, is pressured to eat orang-utan by the rest of his platoon. He is filled with horror and remorse at what he has done because, to him, the apes resemble human children. He says, “their hands are smooth and white, like the hands of a two-year-old child” (8). Both Kien and Quan liken the orang-utan to children and women, two groups outside (and supposedly protected from) the realms of conventional warfare. Metaphorically the orang-utan demonstrates the damage that has been inflicted on both the natural landscape and on the Vietnamese civilians. In this way the orang-utan functions in much the same way as the albatross in Coleridge’s poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”. The Mariner kills the albatross and, by perpetrating an act of violence against nature, dooms himself to a terrible curse. By eating the orang-utan both protagonists believe they violate an unwritten law of ‘karma’ and commit an immoral act that will have severe consequences. Karma is a fundamental aspect of Buddhist beliefs and, as ethicist Damien Keown explains, “holds that the circumstances of future rebirths are determined by the moral deeds a person performs in this life” (46). The notion of karma permeates pre-war Vietnamese culture and is reflected in the discourse of both *The Sorrow of War* and *Novel Without A Name*. When the protagonists in these novels are forced by circumstances to perpetrate an act that will attract bad karma, such as eating an orang-utan, they suffer a moral injury. The culturally-informed belief in karma can contribute to the protagonist’s acquisition of learned helplessness as they lose control, not only over their own world, but also over the moral laws that govern everyday behaviour. Committing an act that attracts bad karma constitutes a moral injury because it disrupts deeply held beliefs and schemas. Its impact is far-reaching as, not only does it affect the present, it also affects future lives. The bad karma will follow them and they are helpless to dissipate or remove it. Thus, in a reading for learned helplessness, for Buddhist protagonists, acts that produce bad karma can be seen as potentially more traumatic than acts that do not. Such culturally-specific trauma leading to moral injury supports the claims of Balaev and
Visser that literary trauma theory needs to take into account the ways in which culture limits or accentuates trauma in the novel (Balaev 155, Visser 274).

In novels of the Vietnam War it can be seen that there are many ways in which losses of control can occur. War creates an unpredictable environment for the protagonist, not only because of the possibility of sudden violence but also because of cultural factors, such as the tension war places on hegemonic masculinity. An examination of representations of gender, technology and place renders this loss of control, and the trauma it engenders, more visible. Analysis via learned helplessness also argues that healing can occur through experiences that return personal control to the protagonist. The situation that I refer to as the Vietnam paradox can make the restoration of control problematic as it exerts pressure on veterans’ narratives to conform to culturally specified norms. A learned helplessness analysis, with its emphasis on the deleterious effects of non-contingency and the need, by the protagonist, to restore control views this censorship as inherently destructive. In the next chapter I examine ways in which the protagonist can restore perceptions of control. This chapter also looks at the wider effects of learned helplessness within the Vietnam war novel and the impact of non-contingency on other characters in the text.
Chapter Four: Healing and transmissibility

When trauma in Vietnam War novels is examined through the lens of learned helplessness emphasis is placed on the definition of trauma as a loss of control. The change of focus that this brings to an analysis not only foregrounds the role of culture in the experience of trauma, it also offers the possibility of a multiplicity of opportunities for healing and recovery. Because a restoration of the perception of control is necessary for healing, any behaviour that provides an opportunity for such restoration can be viewed as being of therapeutic value. In the following chapter I examine various ways in which protagonists restore their sense of control. I also examine the issue of transmissibility through the lens of learned helplessness and argue that trauma can be transmitted to others if the effects in the original sufferer are such that they create non-contingency in others.

Contemporary literary trauma theory argues that, due to the unrepresentable nature of trauma, healing occurs through abreaction, that is, the process whereby the repressed and unrepresentable traumatic event is purged of its meaning when it is drawn into consciousness using metaphoric and figurative language (Hartman 259, Balaev 151). In this chapter I argue that, in contrast, in a learned helplessness analysis, healing may be achieved by any means that restores the protagonist’s perception of contingency. That is, healing may occur as a function of some kind of abreaction or catharsis (if this changes the cognition of trauma), but may also occur through interactions with the environment, or by voluntarily removing expectations of personal autonomy. If traumatic memories are suppressed voluntarily, remembering can be an act of control if it is dictated by the will of the trauma sufferer. If, however, voluntarily suppressed
memories are coerced unwillingly from the sufferer then the act of coercion must represent a further loss of control.

_A Healing with words_

A learned helplessness analysis does not deny the possibility of healing via abreaction but rather argues that there are other possibilities for healing. This chapter examines possible avenues for healing that are anchored to linguistic means before moving on to look at ways of healing that are not limited to the linguistic.

As noted earlier, in _The Things They Carried_, O'Brien creates a liminal space in which characters are enabled to speak of things that cultural censorship has rendered unspeakable. For Tim, the narrator, the liminal space not only allows him license to operate beyond the reach of cultural censorship, but also offers him the opportunity to rewrite his past in a way that restores his perception of agency. Thus for Tim the act of writing and remembering is of therapeutic value because he is able to manipulate his own role in the past, his remembering is voluntary. He suggests that the power of the story to save lies in its ability to provide space for alternative outcomes. He writes of all the people that he knew who have died, "They're all dead. But in a story, which is a kind of dreaming, the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world" (221). Tim controls the process of returning the dead to life and re-imagining the past.

Tim also suggests that his writing and remembering has another therapeutic function – to keep the memories of the dead alive. For example, as he explains of a friend who died when he was nine years old, that it is writing about her that keeps her alive for him:

I'm forty-three years old and a writer now, still dreaming Linda alive ... yet right here in the spell of memory and imagination, I can still see her as if through ice, as if I'm gazing into some other
world, a place where ... there are no bodies at all ... I'm young and happy. (O'Brien 236)

It is not just memories of Linda that are important, however. Also of significance is the way that memories of Linda allow Tim to remember himself in a happier time. He remembers a “young and happy” version of himself in a place “where there are no bodies at all”. By remembering, he keeps not only Linda’s memory alive but also the memory of himself pre-trauma. Understanding this scene through the concept of learned helplessness allows a reading in which Tim's remembering retrospectively allows him to exert control over his past and restore the perception of contingency that has been lost to him.

The process of writing and the remembering that it facilitates is important to Tim because of the writing’s therapeutic value. Throughout the text he reiterates the claim, “I’m forty-three years old and I’m a writer now” (179, 221, 229, 236). The repetition serves two purposes; it highlights the blurring of truth and fiction (O'Brien and Tim are both writers) and it also reiterates the importance of writing to Tim. There is the sense in The Things They Carried that Tim views himself as very much damaged by the war. He writes, “I survived, but it’s not a happy ending” (55). Tim’s writing is intrinsic to the management of his psychological pain; he writes to exert control over the past, to keep his memories of the dead alive and also to remember his younger, pre-trauma self. When he writes about his childhood self he refers to himself as Timmy. The book finishes, “I’m skimming across the surface of my own history, moving fast, riding the melt beneath the blades... and when I take a high leap into the air and come down thirty years later, I realize it is as Tim trying to save Timmy’s life with a story” (236). By keeping Timmy alive, in a sense, Tim retains his own sense of a pre-trauma world. Using learned helplessness as a lens through which to view the text we can see that for Tim, writing is less a form of abreaction than a therapeutic act that allows him to function post-trauma.

Healing without words
As discussed in the previous chapter, the war-time landscape is often the site at which culture and the experience of trauma intersect. Post-war, however, the landscape can be read as a non-linguistic means for alleviating psychological distress. The predictability and order of a rural landscape make it an ideal site for the restoration of contingency. In a learned helplessness reading these interactions can be read as being of therapeutic value when they allow the characters the opportunity to restore or maintain order.

In *The Sorrow of War*, representations of landscape serve multiple functions. As discussed, in the novel, the war-time landscape functions as a source of non-contingency and as a metaphor for Kien’s mental state. After the war, the ordered, rural landscape is represented as a potential source of healing. Kien is shown yearning to move to the country and leaving his apartment in Hanoi, where he lives an “atmosphere of loneliness, poverty and loss” (200). He longs for the orderliness of a rural landscape where he imagines his “old friends working on the land, slashing and burning in the dry season, weeding in the wet. Going to the jungle in the wet season to pick mushrooms and cut bamboo shoots. Catching fish and hunting animals, delivering crops” (196). Unlike the war-time jungle, the rural landscape of Kien’s imagination is mostly predictable, with the seasons dictating what duties the farmers will perform. In contrast to a world where one’s personal control is surrendered to the military, farming – the act of controlling one’s environment – can be read in terms of Kien restoring control of his life.

This reasoning is echoed by others in the same novel. After the war a commissar, sensing Kien’s emotional detachment, gives him some advice:

> You have suffered hardships and stained your hands with blood. From now on you’d do better to live close to nature and be closer to ordinary working people. That will ease your suffering and bring you happiness (Ninh 196).
Kien does not, however, move to the country and seek the order and peace that he craves because he believes he is not capable of healing. The rural landscape becomes for him “a symbol of paradise lost” (196). Kien eschews his chance of psychological redemption because he believes that he has “lost not only the capacity to live happily with others but also the capacity to be in love” (230). Believing the changes in himself to be permanent, he gives up trying to repair them. He has entered a psychological state analogous to learned helplessness: he believes that he has been irrevocably “crushed by the war” (232).

Aside from the landscape there are other ways in which a protagonist may effect a positive change in their mental state. In After The Fire, A Still Small Voice, veteran Leon becomes a Christian, moves to the country and marries. Before his conversion Leon is represented as sad; damaged by his war time experiences. His son Frank sees him, “grey and silent in a doorway with nothing in his face to show there was any kind of thought going on inside” (232). After his conversion he is represented as content, albeit child-like: his wife Merle says, “We are here and we are happy” (237). Frank watches his father and Merle embrace, “They came apart and, holding hands, Merle led him up the steps, a boy for his bath” (240). Implicit in the representation is the idea that becoming committed to an institution such as Christianity renders issues of personal control meaningless, as within Christian paradigms the ultimate control over life belongs not to the individual, but to God. After his conversion Leon is represented in child-like terms: when Merle hugs him she tilted “her head upwards with a smile on her lips like she was suckling a baby” (240). Leon also embroiders needlepoint bible verses. Merle says to Frank, “Takes time and dedication and love to get those looking so good” (235). Leon is described in terms that are outside a hegemonic rendering of masculinity, and although this may be because he is no longer autonomous but is guided by his religion, he is still represented as content.
In *The Time In Between*, Harry, who served with Charles during the war, similarly surrenders control of his life to Christianity: “Harry said that God was in charge. Even here, in this madness, it was a comfort to know that someone else was in control” (40). Charles does not agree, thinking Harry is a “fool” (40) but doesn’t tell him so. Like Leon, Harry’s Christianity suggests that in the face of lack of control he has surrendered ultimate control to his deity. This total surrender of control conflicts with constructions of hegemonic masculinity which may be why Harry and Leon are represented as child-like or foolish. However, representing protagonist/veterans as voluntarily surrendering an expectation of personal control to a religion is one way of representing a resolution to traumatic experience. This perspective foregrounds the culture represented in the novel and suggests that there are many ways that healing from trauma can be represented.

*Transmissability and trauma*

Transmissibility describes the process in which trauma is passed between individuals. As Roger Luckhurst notes in his book *The Trauma Question*: “Transmissibility has become a central, ethical concern about the representation and response to traumatic narratives and images” (3). Luckhurst goes on to refer to the concept of transmissibility as a “hybrid assemblage” (14) in that aspects of the literary theory of transmissibility have been drawn from many different avenues of wider trauma theory, and that there is little in the theory that is homogenous and cohesive. For example, Cathy Caruth, building on Freud’s work in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, suggests that trauma suffered by large groups of people can re-emerge in individuals who share the attributes of such groups such as race, religion and nationality (Caruth 1993, 24). Conversely, Balaev and Visser argue that the transmissibility of trauma is overly reliant on Freud’s model of memory and may trivialise the trauma of the traumatised, if it is suggested that it can be passed on to those not present at the time of the trauma (Balaev 151, Visser 275).
Incorporating the theory of learned helplessness into an examination of trauma in literature adds another dimension to the conceptualisation of transmissibility because of the emphasis learned helplessness places on perceptions of control. If trauma is viewed as a loss of control (rather than as a dysfunction of memory) and a traumatised character is able to create losses of contingency in others through their post-trauma behaviour, transmission of a certain kind can occur. In this instance, however, it is not the trauma that is contagious (such as the traumatic memory of combat), but the foundation of trauma – non-contingency. This is not transmissibility in the form that Caruth discusses. Nevertheless it is a useful way of examining the way that one person’s trauma can impact upon another’s. By using learned helplessness as a theoretical framework for an examination of transmissibility it is possible to see that while traumatic memories are not themselves transmissible, the foundation of trauma is.

Investigations conducted within the wider study of trauma do confirm that individuals who live in close proximity to a family member suffering from the effects of trauma can be negatively effected. As cited earlier, a study conducted in 2000 by the Australian Department of Veterans’ Affairs found that the children of Vietnam veterans committed suicide at a rate three times higher than their peers (Wilson, Horsley and van der Hoek 1). The study does not offer reasons, but it is possible that the unpredictability (and therefore lack of personal control) caused by growing up with an emotionally distressed parent could contribute to long-term psychological changes that could, in turn, lead to suicide. That is, just as helplessness can be learned, it can also be taught.

The study demonstrates that the deleterious emotional changes documented in service men and women post-war are significant enough to impact disastrously on the lives of those around them. This impact is represented in the novel, *The Time In Between*, when Charles’s daughter Ada is represented as suffering from similar emotional changes to her father. She feels isolated and alone, and weeps “for herself and for her loneliness”
(225). She believed that “her father’s darkness had come to settle in some small way on her own heart” (231). Ada’s brother Jon recognises the negative effect of her relationship with their father, and observes, “His love for you is like a weight that you have to carry” (60). Ada perceives the non-contingency that her father creates in her life and she says to him: “You’re unpredictable, Dad” (48).

While Ada is in Vietnam, searching for her father, she has an affair with a much older Vietnamese man: “She did not know why she was sleeping with Huong Vu. Perhaps he was the country, or her father, or simply a notion of the country, or a notion of her father” (208). It appears that Ada, seeking to heal herself of her father’s psychological wounds, conflates the people and the landscape of Vietnam, so she can assert some kind of retrospective control over her father’s past. Though Charles has caused Ada’s trauma, she does not try to exert control over him, but rather, tries to takes control over the country associated with his trauma. She seeks to heal the elements of her father’s trauma within herself and, by going to Vietnam and starting an affair with a Vietnamese man, Ada attempts to achieve a control that her father could not. That is, she reformulates her relationship with a country that, although foreign to her, has been the source of so much distress while she is growing up. Through her father-daughter-like relationship with Huong Vu she is able to reconfigure her relationship with Vietnam, and open up a path to healing which has not been available to her before.

Similarly, in After the Fire, A Still Small Voice, Leon suffers from the effects of his father Roman’s war service when Roman returns from the war a changed man. He is unable to run the bakery and spends long periods of time absent from the house. When Leon follows him (in secret) he discovers that his father walks long distances and spends time in the railway station watching the trains. He drinks heavily and sleep-walks. Leon is distressed by his father’s inexplicable behaviour and he is represented as suffering from negative emotions as a result:
In the morning with the sun bright in the kitchen, the place looked dark, but he knew it was not. It was like he’d been in the sun too long and burnt his eyes. His chest throbbed and his stomach felt tight; something sat on his ribs, peering down and breathing fouly in his face (Wyld 82).

Later, he describes his feelings about his father as an evil, almost physical entity from which he cannot escape: “He walked home alone, feeling the terrible thing rolling over and dragging itself after him in the dark” (82). Roman’s behaviour therefore creates a sense of loss of control for his son, transmitting the effects of his own trauma. As discussed, Leon eventually surrenders control through his religion.

In this chapter I have demonstrated how the concept of learned helplessness enables a reading that privileges a range of representations of the healing process through the restoration of control. In The Things They Carried, Tim remembers his pre-traumatic past and he writes stories in order to regain a sense of control. He writes, “What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can make myself feel again” (180). Kien, in The Sorrow of War, asks himself if the trappings of a rural lifestyle would generate “the joy in life which seemed to have forever forsaken him?” (196). In After The Fire, A Still Small Voice, when Leon surrenders his personal control to God, his wife tells Frank, “he’s not the man you knew. He is safe now” (238). Ada in The Time In Between has a relationship with an older Vietnamese man to restore control, because she believes that, “her father’s darkness had come to settle in some small way on her own heart” (231). Her lover Vu, who also suffered during the war, tells her that it is “important to live without hate and bitterness and fear” (232) and eventually she believes him. Through her interaction with Vu, Ada begins to understand that she has a degree of control over the ways in which she perceives her father’s role in her past, and this new sense of control allows her a measure of healing. These novels demonstrate how transmissibility can be viewed from a range of perspectives when trauma is seen as a function of a loss of control.
Conclusion

This thesis argues that the theoretical framework provided by the conceptualisation of learned helplessness can make a valuable contribution to the study of trauma in literature. Learned helplessness is a psychological phenomenon that was first observed in dogs but has since been observed in humans and many other mammals (Seligman et al); it can be understood to create the belief in sufferers that “everything will always do nothing” (O’Brien 50). The loss of control at the foundation of learned helplessness can have many origins, including physical events and “moral” injuries (Litz et al 696) and the symptoms may include passivity, emotional distance, depression and feelings of helplessness.

Based as it is on a loss of control, reading texts through the lens of learned helplessness repositions and emphasises the importance of this aspect of traumatic experience. In Chapter One the thesis examines one of the key tensions in current literary trauma theory, which revolves around the claim of theorists Balaev and Visser that contemporary literary trauma theory does not adequately address the ways in which traumatic experience is mediated by culture. When trauma is read as a loss of control, however, rather than a loss of memory, it changes the focus of textual analysis and encourages engagement with cultural issues, particularly those connected to gender and place.

The theory of learned helplessness can help resolve some of the tensions between literary trauma theory and the wider study of trauma, because it offers a way of reading trauma in the text that does not rely on Freud’s model of memory and the concept of psychoanalysis, now largely discounted by clinicians. This will help to assuage the concerns of psychiatrists such as Cherry who has pointed out that the influence of Freud in current literary trauma theory is at odds with his limited influence on the wider study of trauma outside a literary studies context. A study of learned
helplessness will also speak to the concerns of Balaev who suggests the current reliance on Freudian theory limits the scope of textual analysis. She argues that “a discursive dependence upon a single psychological theory of trauma produces a homogenous interpretation of the diverse representations in the trauma novel” (149). Learned helplessness provides a fresh lens through which to view trauma in the text and a different theoretical focus with which to analyse it. By incorporating learned helplessness into the set of theories that are used to examine trauma in the novel, we can avoid reconfirming the homogeneity of which Balev writes.

As a way of broadening the scope of traumatic representation this thesis offers a definition of trauma in the novel that is based on a medical model but not constrained by it. The thesis also introduces the concept of moral injury and argues that when trauma is viewed as a loss of control a moral injury can be considered to be potentially traumatic. Using Seligman’s three criteria for learned helplessness: non-contingency, cognition and behaviour – the thesis analyses representations of learned helplessness in several fictional texts including Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried, Bao Ninh’s The Sorrow of War, Evie Wyld’s After The Fire, A Still Small Voice and David Bergen’s The Time In Between.

In this thesis I also demonstrate the ways in which the concept of learned helplessness widens critical perceptions of traumatic response, enabling insights into the role played by gender, technology and place in fictional representations of trauma. This thesis introduces the concept of the Vietnam paradox which acknowledges that cultural and political pressures can serve to act as a form of censorship which dictates what is perceived to be appropriate and authentic testimony. This can limit the degree to which survivors can reconfigure their role in their past experiences and restore retrospectively the perception of control. Thus the degree to which healing occurs can be limited by the very mechanism that purports to offer a way out of the psychological distress caused by the war.
Learned helplessness also offers another perspective through which to view the concept of transmissibility. If trauma is viewed as a loss of control, and a character who is suffering from its effects is able to create losses of agency in others through their post-trauma behaviour, transmission of a certain kind may occur. In this instance, however, it is not the traumatic memory itself that is contagious but the loss of control which is at the heart of all trauma. Finally, this thesis examines the possibility of healing. When the theory of learned helplessness is used to inform an examination of representations of trauma, all ways in which control is restored become potentially therapeutic. In the novels examined, writing, interaction with the landscape, spirituality and personal relationships can be considered as performing healing functions because they restore the perception of control to the protagonist.

Overall, the theoretical framework of learned helplessness provides a fresh lens through which to view trauma. This perspective embraces the pursuit of objectivity by contemporary psychiatry and acknowledges the pivotal role that culture plays in the experience of trauma. More importantly, it enables trauma to be viewed as a loss of control rather than a loss of memory, with significant implications for textual analysis. Although I do not envisage that this framework will operate in isolation, the new perspective that learned helplessness brings to the study of trauma resolves some of the tensions within contemporary literary trauma study, allies the literary examination of trauma more closely to the wider study of trauma and offers many valuable insights into the analysis of traumatic experience in the text.
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