

A Peace from a Stone

Bryte winced again at the hissing from the tape recorder. His leg fidgeted and he took another drag of his cigarette. Dr. Martin was staring at him. Her big doe eyes were beautiful but her pondering stare made him nervous. He forced a smile at her and his eyes traveled back to the tape recorder.

“Does that thing have to be on?”

Dr. Martin uncrossed her legs and leaned forward, resting her arms on her knees. She held her pen in between her gentle fingers. She smiled and said softly, “I use it for my notes. I’m sorry if bothers you. Let’s try to focus.

Bryte nodded shifting his eyes to the carpet. He was trying to focus. But he did not want to do this. He did not like remembering things.

“Do you recall why you came to my office tonight, Bryte?”

“Yeah. It’s just you know, just stuff, you know. So much shit going on.” He tapped his temple.

“Yes, things like?” She asked.

“Some dreams. Nightmares.” Bryte cleared his throat

“Similar to the dreams you’ve had before?”

“Sort of,” he heaved a long sigh, “but some of these have gotten worse.”

“Would these nightmares have anything to do with what we’ve been discussing? Or, perhaps something to do with what happened to your friend?”

Nervously, Bryte leaned back in his chair and fixed his gaze on Dr. Martin. “Maybe,” he responded, pausing for a bit. “He killed himself, you know? Gun to his mouth.”

“Yes, you told me. The funeral’s tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah,” Bryte sighed, releasing a cloud of smoke.

“You’re going?” Dr. Martin looked at him with curiosity. She seemed genuine with her question. He closed his eyes and touched the small stone attached to the sterling silver chain around his neck.

“You touch that stone a lot,” Dr. Martin observed. “Especially when we talk about the war. What does that stone mean?”

Shaking his head, Bryte looked out the window. He could hear the rain falling. There were beads of raindrops stuck to the window. It was too black outside to see anything beyond that. He dubbed out his cigarette. He licked his lips.

“You know how I was in Vietnam.”

Dr. Martin nodded, but remained silent. He realized she was not going to press the issue. It was up to him.

He nodded, taking time to collect his thoughts. “I was eighteen. Too young for something like that. Way too young.” He lit a fresh cigarette. “I hope this smoke’s not bothering you.” He held up the cigarette but she waved it off. He looked down and studied the cigarette. The flames

quickly ate away at the paper and the smoke rose in a dancing pattern towards the ceiling. “Well, this one time, my company, we, uh, my company was moving towards Cambodia.” He gulped and puffed hard on the cigarette.

“Yes?” Dr. Martin’s voice was soft. There was no pressure.

“We, uh, we came upon this tiny village. No plans to harm anyone. We were just passing through.” He cleared his throat, closed his eyes and shook his head to force out the screams in his mind. “They came out of no where, from under the ground. Attacked us, you know?” There was nothing we could do. We just started firing. We had to defend ourselves. We killed everybody.”

His head tilted down and his voice became no louder than a whisper. “The damn soldiers came up from the ground.”

“The soldiers were hiding?” Dr. Martin asked.

He nodded. “Yes. They built these elaborate tunnels, you know? They were so sneaky. Smart. They waited. Just waited. We never meant to kill those women,” his eyes slid out of focus, “those children.” His body slumped down in the chair.

Dr. Martin touched his hands. He did not flinch when she did this. He swallowed hard.

“This one kid was shot right in front of me. He was lying there on the ground and he was so damn small. I felt sick. I didn’t know what to do. So, I checked to see if he was alive. He was holding a little rock in his hand,” he held back his choke and averted his eyes from Dr. Martin’s. Stiffening, he pulled his hands away and grasped the stone. “I kept it and made it into a necklace. Makes me think about my sins. You know? Reminds me of how innocent lives are lost every day.”

“You were not responsible.” Dr. Martin spoke with a calm, but firm voice. “It’s imperative you know that. You were never responsible.”

“Dr. Martin, it’s taken me a long time to understand what happened over there. And I still don’t understand much of it.” He continued slowly, “But one thing I do know, is this. We opened fire on those women and children. We killed them without blinking. Butchered every one of them. I’ll never forgive myself for that.” His voice quivered and his hands shook as he fought back the tears forming. He did not want to fall apart in front of her.

“Yes, I understand that.” Dr. Martin paused for a long while and studied him. She spoke in her soft, firm voice again. “I want you to do something for me, Bryte.” Their eyes met and locked.

“What is it?” He asked.

“Tomorrow, at the funeral, I want you to make peace.”

He squinted. “What do you mean?”

“I want you to make peace with yourself, with your friend and with your past.”

Raising his eyebrows, he scoffed. “How the hell do I make peace? He shot himself. Fucking committed suicide. We promised each other we’d stick together no matter what. We could never forgive that day. But we knew we could make it right later somehow.”

“I know. That’s why it’s important that you come to terms with this. We’ve worked very hard together in our sessions. You’ve held back many things for a long time. Let that healing process move forward. Talk to your friend.”

“Talk to him? He’s dead. He’ll be buried in the ground.” Bryte pulled another cigarette from his pack. He was ready to light it when Dr. Martin gently pulled his hand back down.

“Bryte.” She smiled. “Do this tomorrow, for yourself. Go to the funeral.”

He sighed and reluctantly nodded. The two sat together in silence until she looked at her watch. “I’d offer you some more coffee, but it’s late. I suggest you go home and get some sleep so you’re well rested for tomorrow. We can pick up again next week. We’ll discuss how things went for you at the funeral.”

At the door, Bryte placed his unlit cigarette behind his ear and as he turned to go, Dr. Martin touched his shoulder. “Call me if you need anything.” She looked into his green-blue eyes. Hers were visibly moist. He was touched by her care, but kept his distance. Mumbling a thank you he walked out the door into the dark, cold evening.

The sunlight felt warm and comforting despite the bitter chill that clung to that late December morning. Bryte stood motionless next to the crowd surrounding the closed casket. He tuned in and out to the words the minister spoke while hesitantly surveying the mahogany casket. The roses and flowers atop of it were brilliant, painting a surreal image against the black clothing and blank faces of the small assembly gathered there. The cemetery they were standing in was large and isolated centered between thick forests, its trees mostly bare due to the coming winter with exception to a few still speckled with colored leaves surviving the last days of autumn. A good spot, Bryte thought to himself. It was peaceful. This reminded him Dr. Martin’s advice and he pulled back his shoulders and stuck out his chest. He knew what he had to do.

After hugging the family and friends, he asked the minister for permission to stay behind alone for a few minutes. The minister solemnly nodded and joined the others heading up to the reception at the church. He watched while the crowd departed up to the small white church overlooking the cemetery and then concentrated on the casket. As he stuffed his hands in his pockets he admired again the rich mahogany now holding the body of his dear friend. He recited a silent prayer. He sniffed and fought back a growing mix of anger and sorrow dwelling in his stomach. He thought about the horrible day that changed their lives. The children screaming. The women’s cries and pleas of mercy and that gun fire piercing the air. Closing his eyes he gritted his teeth and his hands formed fists inside of his pockets. He struggled to push those images out of his mind, but he knew he had to confront these demons. He had to move on, but not forget. He needed to understand it as best as he could. He had to face that terrible experience and allow himself some sense of peace. While he stood there fighting these emotions and unraveling a million different thoughts in his mind, a heavy wind kicked up making the air very, very cold. The sky darkened as large cloud formations slowly shifted and hovered over the cemetery, shutting out the sun. Bryte pulled his coat tighter. He shivered.

Snow began to fall.

Confident he had said all he could say, Bryte debated joining the reception and settled on going for just a little while. As he walked to the church, he cautiously maneuvered among the

headstones now iced with fresh snow. It was eerie here alone, amazingly quiet with this new snow. He suddenly felt as if someone were watching him and quickened his pace. The snow fell harder blanketing the entire cemetery in a thin layer of white. Bryte stopped midway to study this strange and disturbing snowfall. He looked up at the church which now appeared so still and empty. Something felt different now. The snow was out of place. It was falling too hard, too fast. He rotated and examined the casket from where he stood. Its rich mahogany and flower display were even more striking against the snow landscape. He breathed hard marveling at this image, knowing this was the final time he would see his friend. His nose started to run, his eyes burned, his hair was wet and his ears stung. He fumbled for a cigarette.

The wind quickly died down and then stopped blowing. And just as suddenly as it started, the snow ceased falling. All was completely still. The cemetery was consumed by a swirling haunting gray mist that filtered into it.

Bryte stared at the melancholic surroundings. His hot breath formed small puffs of clouds into the bitter cold air. He realized he could no longer make out the casket. It had disappeared inside the gray air that snaked through the cemetery. He could not see much of anything anymore, not one gravestone. From afar, a dark shape slowly appeared from out of that milky gray air, slowly walking towards him. He tried to focus, but the air prohibited him from seeing clearly. Another figure appeared. And then another.

Taking a step forward, Bryte focused with one good eye. The shadowy figures looked strange and more and more appeared out of the mist. As they wandered closer towards him, he knew for certain they were not the same people who had attended the funeral earlier. These people were different. They wandered aimlessly and lifelessly. They trudged through the heavy snow but with no particular hurry. He looked at their feet and noticed many of them did not have shoes.

“Hello?” He called out to them. No one answered. There were so many, all of them approaching in an endless forward march. He squinted and tilted his head.

The world around him became a blur and he felt the blood drain from his face, the hairs of his neck shot up as he gasped at the sudden appearance of the Vietnamese soldier. From behind several of those shadowy figures, the soldier appeared and nearly blended among them if not for the unmistakable uniform. The eyes were so lifeless. Bryte’s eyes widened with terrific fear as he watched the soldier coming towards him and then saw even more soldiers appearing among the crowd. Scanning the mass of shadows now coming into greater view he realized without a doubt they all looked just like the people from the village that fateful day so many years ago. They were all Vietnamese.

“My God.” He shuddered and swallowed large gulps of cold air that stung his throat.

There they all were the soldiers, the women, the children, all of them like the people from that village. He was certain. They sauntered towards him like an army of zombies. His breathing quickened and his heart raced. Darting left and right with his eyes he took in the full view of the snow filled cemetery, spotted with this mass of...ghosts? He stood frozen in place, unable to contemplate what was happening. He knew he did not believe in ghosts. But what else could they be, he questioned. The Vietnamese wandered past him, engulfing him into the drove. The faces were expressionless, devoid of life. They looked very dead. And they did not look back at him. It

was as if he did not exist. He whimpered as they brushed past him, touching his coat. He gulped harder and shut his eyes tight. He counted. His body shook violently.

“Jesus!” he blurted through clenched teeth. He felt the ghostly bodies drifting past him. There was an odor that he could not directly place and he heard a hissing sound emanating from the motion of those bodies, the air in the claustrophobic space was colder than anything he ever felt before. He prayed repeatedly that this would end and he soon would wake up. His lungs screamed in silent agony pumping a burning sensation that coursed through his blood. And then there really was silence.

When he finally dared to look, he opened his eyes with extreme caution. He nearly fell over backwards at the sight of a very young boy standing in front of him, that same young boy he witnessed shot to death in that remote Vietnamese village years ago. The mist wrapped into convoluted shapes around the little figure. The hair on the child was extraordinarily black set against the pale face and thin olive lips. The eyes of this child were large raven circles upon which light did not penetrate. There was a noticeable wound to the left of his body, peeking through the ragged hole that flapped against the skin.

His mouth still agape Bryte noticed his jaw was sore and his head felt very heavy, bringing him to his knees. His body quivered. The young boy stood in front of him a few feet away, his little hands balled up into fists. The silence in that moment was deafening. Bryte looked out of the corner of his eyes and found that the two of them were alone. Looking at the child he saw how innocent the boy’s face seemed, how he still looked so very young, very much the same as the day he lay on the dirt ground in a spreading pool of blood that protruded out from underneath his insignificant dead body.

The boy breathed heavily in small little bursts with Bryte’s own breathing rivaling it. He dared not move his gaze from the boy uncertain of what would happen if he looked away. They both stood facing each other breathing and motionless.

The boy made the first move and approached Bryte. Creeping close towards him with measured steps, the boy came to within inches of Bryte’s face, whose teeth were chattering. The boy stared at him and those eyes terrified Bryte immensely. They were eyes of the dead. The boy looked down and leaned in peering at the small stone hanging from the chain around Bryte’s neck. The boy reached out and touched it. Bryte closed his eyes and fought to stay conscious. But the boy’s touch was gentle; the fingers carefully caressed the stone and glided across the rough texture of it. He felt the boy roll the stone away from his neck and turn it. Bryte opened his eyes once more confused and bewildered. The boy was smiling at him. He spoke in Vietnamese. Bryte shook his head not understanding. The boy pointed to the stone and Bryte cradled it in between his palm realizing that he must have been referring to it.

What was he saying? What was happening here? The boy reached out calmly and placed a hand on Bryte’s shoulder looking deeply into his eyes. Bryte looked and saw with perfect clarity his own reflection in those marble eyes that stared back at him and then for a very brief moment he swore he saw his friend. The boy, without a word, pulled away and stepped around his slumped body. With desperation, Bryte quickly stood up to see where the boy was going. He tried to call out but his voice was lost. The boy stopped and turned to face him and smiled. Bryte watched the boy, utterly mystified by this encounter. He extended his hand out, but the boy simply smiled and turned back and walked on, quietly fading into the mist.

Bryte remained there in place for a very long time. The gray mist slowly dissipated and he saw the cemetery again. His body was pulled by the gravity of earth but he managed to continue standing swaying slightly to and fro. He felt disillusioned. His vision faded in and out of blurriness. He looked down at his still shaking hands and saw the deep wrinkles and lines that covered them. And with nothing left to hold him back, he covered his face with both hands and cried.