

SARAH HANNAH

## THROUGH STOLEN EYES

"Happy Veterans Day, Dr. Marks."

"Thank you, Cinnamon. How are you today?"

"I'm fine and yourself?" asks the receptionist.

"Oh, I'm doing great," I reply.

*Just great.* I glance down at my calendar and among the many scribbled appointments and names, circled in bright red marker is today's date, November 11. Another year already passed. I received an e-mail the other day from my old buddy Ned. One of the few remaining guys I'd served with.

"What was it like?" asks Cinnamon. The question fills my mind with many memories from back then.

"Those were some crazy days," I reply -- an answer that seemed good enough for her. As she walks back to the front desk, I glance out the window and allow my mind to bring me back to that time.

Fort Polk, Louisiana. The air is muggy and humid. It rains all the time. It's suffocating and repressive all at the same time, but it better prepares the men for what they will face in Vietnam. They adapt to the weather here, get shipped off, and then get pulled straight out of the jungle and thrown back here.

War takes a greedy toll upon soldiers. It claims people's sanity without haste and doesn't look back.

Each week at least forty new men rolled in on stretchers. Some with all their limbs, some with missing limbs, some black and red from the burns that had been inflicted on them. As I strapped and tied those men to the stretchers, so that they could not move, I took with me that unforgettable smell. A smell that instantly makes a person wrinkle their nose and want to turn away, the smell of burnt flesh. This made the overbearing smell of bleach and formaldehyde that lurked in the hallways and in some rooms a comfort.

Silence was not a common sound there. Cries of agony and vain words echoed through the hallways of the old buildings. Some men didn't talk, they just shook with the tremors they suffered and tried to pry themselves loose from the white restrictors that ran along the beds, keeping them in place. They found it easier to sweat through the pain of the never-ending cramps, nosebleeds, and diarrhea if they kept to themselves.

Others screamed and moaned, trying to fight the payback their bodies were inflicting on them. The heroin, powdered sugar, and Nestlé Quik that once made up heaven in the form of white powder, now sat in their lungs like a tenant unwilling to be evicted. Pneumonia would overcome them and they would face withdrawal symptoms.

I saw soldiers who ranged from boys to men – both burned and not burned. The nightmares that would haunt them for the rest of their lives could be heard late at night. So many good men, fighting for a cause, as well as fighting to save their own lives. Some would talk, which is what I was there for, others had eyes that would glaze over as they stared off into the unknown, reliving the taking of life, unwilling to speak it aloud.

I could feel the grip of their hands, warning me of what was to come, forgetting they were no longer in battle. Fear burned in their eyes and regret filled their lungs as they spoke. The colonel, who refused to talk, just nodded. Day by day, my routine would remain the same and the colonel would refuse to talk. Once, he grabbed hold of my navy blue tie and pulled until I was on his level.

“Look at me” he screamed. My eyes surveyed a body that was half intact, half covered in white gauze. In the place where his left arm and right leg should have been, there was nothing. He followed my gaze, then locked with my eyes. “This is what happens when you go back for a 19-year-old in a mine field. This is what happens.”

His hand dropped to the side of the bed. His eyes suddenly could no longer fight the weight of his eyelids. With that, he fell back to sleep.

“Dr. Marks,” calls someone faintly from behind me. “Dr. Marks?”

I jump as I feel a hand on my shoulder. As I turn, I realize that it is Cinnamon.

“Your next client is here,” says the receptionist with a puzzled look on her face.

“Oh right. Thank you, Cinnamon. I’ll be out in a minute.”

I stand up, straighten my tie, and walk away from my lingering past to greet my future.