Made-for-TV Abandonment: Saigon, 1975

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A convoy of Chinooks descends on the United States embassy, Saigon, South Vietnam. Choppers, one after the other, dip into a parking lot, pull away from a rooftop. Bodies dangle hand to foot to hand, a chain of bodies falling back to earth. When the last chopper lifts away, South Vietnamese workers who fear being left behind to face the North Vietnamese army. Some of them are trying desperately to push their children on to the overloaded helicopters.

The indelible image of abandonment. Innocent children abandoned to their fearful parents abandoned to their ravaged country abandoned to the advancing enemy.

I sit bundled on a sofa bed, still warm from my parents' bodies, eyes glued to a small black and white Zenith, where Annette and Tommy and the rest of Mickey's club should return in syndication; instead, I think about an anthill where ants are trying to pull a struggling bird into the ground. Later, I'll find out those "ants" are...

I join the citizenry of a United States of America that is changed forever.
Nothing Changes
The river rises and falls
and continues to flow.
Old men still gather
at lock and dam #7 to fish
and schools of white bass
continue to run.
Trains continue
to cross the bridge
and tobacco keeps growing
tall in the summer.
My life continues to unfold
and the simple surprises
of each new day continue
to amaze and instruct me
like any other kid growing up
in paradise.

*Everything Changes*
I won’t really understand
the significance of Vietnam
for years.
I only know that my
best friend’s dad
no longer plays guitar,
staggered everywhere he goes
and either shouts or slurs
what he means to say.
And he’s been there—an M.P.
and then a casualty.
My friend explains,

“He was hit in the head with a grenade. In combat.”

Later on, when he knows that I know
it was really friendly fire,
that a couple of young marines
didn’t take too kindly
to his dad’s gung ho demeanor
and lobbed a grenade at his feet
that blew off part of his head
and left him paralyzed in his left arm,
that he had subsequently been
a mouthy punk all his short life
before going to ‘Nam
but could never have deserved this,
and that all this is already

common knowledge, we never mention it.
Some relationships are predicated
on certain mutual silences.
I always thought that no one was
at fault for not speaking the truth.

* During those final days before collapse, someone placed a handmade sign in the
embassy courtyard in Saigon. It read, “Turn off the light at the end of the tunnel
when you leave.”

*Everything Changes*
When ancient
feuds
threatened Europe,
America was the light
at the end of the tunnel.
Later, when fascism
threatened Europe and Asia,
America, again, was the light
at the end of the tunnel.
We like to think we have
always represented a light,
a justice, when the dignity
of humankind has been threatened.
But in 1975 in Saigon
when the last Chinook lifts away
from the embassy’s roof
and the human chain breaks off
and falls back to earth,
a surge trips the breaker.

Birth
I am born into America
at the end of the tunnel
when the light goes out.
And with that final image
at the end of a decade of war,
I, an unknowing and largely
unconcerned witness
to a television premier
of royal abandonment,
am made complicit.

That’s how it seems now.
That’s why I’m writing.