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Made-for-TV Abandonment: Saigon, 1975

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Everything Changes
Spring 1975.
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.

Birth
Autumn 1970.
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  
o longer plays guitar,  
staggers 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, 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.