Made-for-TV Abandonment: Saigon, 1975

G. Wesley Houp
University of Kentucky

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Made-for-TV Abandonment: Saigon, 1975

G. Wesley Houp

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.

Birth
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...
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, 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 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.