

Lost and Found

by John Yi

“How many people have you killed?” Matthew flung the question at Ethan Severin Harding like a hastily folded paper airplane.

“Mattie!” his mother interjected, “That’s not a nice question.”

April faced Ethan with eyes that said, “You don’t have to answer that. He’s blunt like his father. I loved and hated him for it. I’m sorry Ethan, but you remember how he was.”

“Can I get you something to drink?” she asked.

“No thank you, I’m fine. We should get going soon, the matinee starts in 20 minutes.”

“Oh that’s plenty of time Esh,” said April, “It’s less than a mile away.”

Ethan couldn’t recall her ever using that nickname, one that his high school friends had started but which hadn’t followed him to the Academy or to the 9 countries the Army had sent him to in the past 13 years.

“I’m sorry, that’s what Riley called you. I kinda got used to it.”

“Of course,” Ethan offered, “It’s fine. I forget that there’s no traffic here. Not like the City.”

“Coffee then?”

“Sure, thank you.”

“Cream and sugar?”

“No, just black, thanks.”

“Of course. I shoulda known, right? Army guy.”

Ethan tried to smile but stopped short, fearing transparent insincerity. And in so failing, tried to compensate with a manufactured chuckle. Two staccato bursts shot from his esophagus and catapulted end over end, landing flatly on the carpet behind her as she slipped through the kitchen doorway.

He held out his weatherbeaten hand toward Mattie, simultaneously sinking into the corner seat of the overstuffed couch.

“Hey Mattie. How was Christmas?”

Mattie held out his thin adolescent palm and shook with vigor, like he’d been taught.

“Pretty good,” he answered, “I think last year I actually got more presents, but the quality was higher this year, on average. My friend James said his dad told him it reflects the economy.”

Ethan was taken-aback. It’d been two years, and he’d forgotten how loquacious and eloquent Mattie had already become. Riley used to say that the milkman must’ve been a genius, for Mattie had always sounded more like a miniature academian than the son of a longshoreman.

Early that evening, after a series of selected animations, the festival ended with Albert Lamorisse’s classic, ***Le Ballon rouge***. The short film stirred for Ethan sweet memories from a long hibernation. He’d first learned of the story of the young boy and his kinship with a red balloon via the photos in a hardbound book, discovered on the shelf in his first grade classroom. His classmates were playing nationball on the blacktop, but Sister Rose Marie trusted him to stay inside by himself, reading quietly.

Ethan wonders if Mattie will someday look back upon the movie's last scene, after a cruel young gang of peers has popped his red balloon, and a multi-colored cluster of new balloons appears, lifting the boy across the sky as the credits roll. He wonders if Mattie will remember a Sunday afternoon spent with his father's former best friend.

He wonders if Mattie will grow into a gregarious, risk-taking young man or if he will eschew his individualism in an effort to ease his acceptance into the grand social machine. He wonders if he will be haunted by and be compelled to investigate his father's last days and if anyone will tell him how he locked himself in his house and drank himself to death, that the coroner told his mother that his father's pancreas was the size of a watermelon and that the official cause of death was asphyxiation by his own vomit and bile, like Jimi Hendrix and Elvis before him, having lost the will to wake, having long since replaced his best friend, lost to tough love, with a clear spirit delivered by Yellow Cab; a bottle every hour on the hour until his last.

"So what did you think?" Ethan inquired, unsure if he'd said the words loud enough to hear.

Mattie looked up at him.

"I don't understand where he went." he said.

Ethan didn't answer.

"Where did he go?" He asked again.

The rhythmic Plunk! Plunk! of 81mm mortars converses back and forth across the valley with the melodic rat-a-tat! of small arms fire. At the base of the dusty foothills another man lies hunched against an adobe wall, gurgling his last breath.