

## LEAVE

### David Studdert

“Saigon Singapore Sydney Albury;

Saigon, Singapore, Sydney, Albury”.

“Jonathon. You’re mumbling darling I can’t hear you. Are you ok back there?”  
He sits. His 12 year old bones are soft, clumsy and green in the hollow back seat where the darkness drips and shimmers.

“I’m ok”. He feels his words vibrate in the dark; and it’s funny.

“Sit up here if you want. With us”.

“I’m ok”

“Alright, that’s alright then. Don’t forget, you can if you want”

The steady whisper starts again, dribbling and stretching from his mouth like thick rope rubbing his lips.

“Saigon, Singapore, Sydney, Albury; Saigon, Singapore, Sydney, Albury”.

Everything is bigger, the backseat, wide, chilled, and slippery.

Lost in this journey taking for ages.

Sometimes there’s lightning like the darkness blinks, or the razor grass by the road flaps at him or distorted white gums jab from the swamp clotted like thick fingers; everything for a second, catching, stop; sweeping back into the darkness, washing altogether into a hissing eternal trail which is the push of the car on the empty road.

The whisper rolling from his lips: "Saigon Singapore Sydney Albury".

Bright light, slides over his parents, upright and wordless, slides along the roof and away, behind.

He presses against the cold steel of the door. The cloudy moon breaks upon the back seat. His face feels small and hot and the back seat lies there empty beside him.

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He's never seen an airport; just on TV.

He dawdles behind his dad feeling the square cold of official space passing its large hand across his skin, the bright terminal lights that small him.

Over there, cross the shining floor, his father talks to some man in a green jacket.

These are his best and only pair of white moleskin trousers. He's got riding boots like his dad's, but smaller, and a new jacket, crisp and smooth and overpowering with the heavy scent of linseed. To tell the truth he doesn't like it.

He dawdles through the empty floor, liking his aloneness, kneels at the window on a row of seats, staring through the reflections out into the vast night at the cold far away stars and the grounded red lights of the flight path.

Behind him a woman calls to someone and the voice seems to pass through the cold glass out into the dark and back again, hollow and unfamiliar.

Sitting on the tarmac, there's a plane illumined in silence, and shiny with dew.

Outside in the car park, he traces his finger on the wet car bonnets. He can't look up at this stranger walking beside him. Can't look up. Watching his own shoes crunching the ashes and the gravel.

The flood lit shadow of the new man's body stretches all the way back into Albury airport terminal. With a right arm and leg, long and deformed.

And all above him and all around him, stand a cold million stars.

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A deep voice fills the car, a driver's voice big and certain. Discussing Warren the friend he'd met back there, the problems with politicians, cow trouble, no rain trouble. The car suddenly rocks and creaks like a stiff saddle. The boy's sits up straight. The soldier and the boy in the back seat.

"Yes says his mother and yes again, and "that's interesting. I didn't know that",  
All in that sometimes voice of hers.

Pressing his cheek against the slight chill of the glass. Avoiding the green leg. Holding himself away in the darkness. Staring at the gums in rags of white bark as they jerk from the night into the sweeping headlights and jerked away behind him.

The father saying "We're proud to have you Paul". Talking some more.

Saying – "I hope you're not expecting beaches and blondes Paul. I know what soldiers are like. Was one myself. Not so long ago" laughing.

And his mum saying "Robert".

The boy stares at the night feeling his skin and his body like the only body in the car.

"Well I trust you haven't brought us any bad news, from the war I mean. We get enough of that already"

"It must be nice to be out of it for a while" says mother.

Oh stop it Jan. The major says he's only got another ten months or so over there. He'll be back home, in America soon enough. Afterwards he'll wish he'd stayed there longer.

Among your friends, money in your pocket, long way from home. What more does a young man want"

"Well yes sir"

"Yes sir that would be nice I know exactly what you mean to, I do sir. Don't mind either sir. Just like you say. Not one little bit because we're alright; we're winning. And we'll go on winning too."

From the darkness, the accent makes the boy tremble.

"Yes sir, don't worry about me folks."

The dark shape leaning forward

"I've got a real good idea what I'm getting into. Yes for sure.

I'm just looking for peace and quiet sir. Some home cooking.

A week of peace and quiet.

Where people speak American and you can't hear nothing at night, that's all I want and I can't say how grateful I am to you folks for looking out for me like this".

The father talking about the food in Korea. The soldier agrees "yes sir that's right, it hasn't changed much; words of that sort.

The boy in the darkness hearing the voices back and forth.

The mother says "Watch, there's. a...". A truck flashes by, its head light running across his face. The car swaying sideways.

The father says, "go on Paul".

"It's sure nice to be here was all I was going to say, yes sir. Sure is".

The mother says "well Paul you must be awfully tired and dirty after that long flight. Did you get a chance to wash up before you landed?"

"Yes ma'am" says Paul; "I've been looking forward to washing up and a long peaceful sleep, doing just that ma'am. Yes I am. For sure".

"We're just doing our bit. It's the one thing we can do".

You know our neighbours, Warren's sister's boy, He's a neighbour of ours" she turns half around to stare at the stranger, smiling, "She's from Peakaton. He's over there right this moment, in Da Nang. Are you near Da Nang? Anyway, yesterday I was talking to her, and she said they got a letter. Last week. Wasn't that nice? I'm so pleased for Judy. How about that darling? Last week. Saying things was fine and quiet. She was relieved you could tell. Have you got brothers and sisters Paul?"

He's forgotten the whispering, the swamp and the lightning. Inside, his ears strain for each word. He sits in the car on the empty road. The ordinary car, where everything is moving.

He sits in the spare room. Smelling the dust and the nothing where no one ever goes.

The man is pulling towels from his kit-bag. Four, five, six, one after another; white towels, and then some trousers and then a shirt. Why have you got so many?". "I collect them" he says laughing and the boy laughs too without knowing why.

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The sun is up. He stares at the ceiling hot and crumbled and dry in the mouth, pressed in by a thick frustrating dream. He props himself up and stares into the garden. He feels the air, laden already with heat. He hears the cicadas. He stares at the end of the patio, at the bottom of the wall where the fish pond is. All he sees for a moment are shadows. He rubs his eyes. Across the fields through the white blaze of light amid the almost white grass he hears, voices in the kitchen. His mother's and some other, withdrawn, polite; blurred by the soft accent, the twist of the stairs, the doors in between.

It's the soldier from the plane.

Pushing into his pants he leans round the window. The garage is empty. His father has gone. He stumbles from his bedroom juggling his shoes as he rushes downstairs.

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That day him and the soldier go riding, all day. Way out over properties the boy never heard off. And the next and the one after that...till the horses are greasy with sweat.

That night the fourth night, he wakes with a jolt. The moon is shining on the lino of his room. He moves to rub his eyes but the bedding is weighted and pinned around him.

At the end of his bed beyond the reach of the moonlight, a voice is talking, mumbling and sometimes laughing abruptly in a low guttural snort of pain.....the soft monotonous voice of Paul.

"And when we catch them, when we get 'em - they're small you know real small; smaller than you. They never look you in the eye why? Why won't they look me in the eye?"

The boy doesn't know; who?

A soft insistent mechanical voice like branches creaking. Sometimes it stares at the boy, sometimes it grimaces in a twisted smile. Sometimes it stares at the wall and silently beats itself, and sometimes it cries.

The next morning the boy won't get out of bed. He tells his mother he feels sick and has a fever and he really has.

The soldier spends all next day sitting on a wooden chair outside the sick boy's window saying over and over how good the army is for a young man from the country.

And how he comes from a farm just like this one.

On Friday he flies back to Saigon. It was only ever meant to be a week. We drive him to the airport.

He doesn't know what he's meant to do or say.

Nor do I. In the end he shakes my hand. Mother claps and father says "He's a big boy now"

So.. yeah.....he went back to Vietnam; Saigon.

"And what happened to him?"

“Oh his sister wrote later – I forgot how – turns out he's lost his legs. From a grenade in a jeep – got 'em blown off. Died in hospital she said.

You didn't watch action movies in those days. Movies weren't like that. Killing someone was a serious business. Even on TV. No one ever talked about it. No, I didn't understand a biscuit of what he said; didn't mean I didn't try.

I could feel how serious he was.”

“But you remembered the exact words? In other words you're not entirely making this up?”

“Do I? I don't know.

Maybe it's just dialogue from books, war movies, all of that. Going round in my head. It was 1967. That's a long time ago. Maybe it's not exactly what he said. Maybe he said something entirely different what do I know? I was just a kid. If later on maybe I understood... that was cause I'd read things, saw things. But yeah, I'm pretty certain that's what he told me. He'd killed people; men and babies, women and children, innocent gooks, people and lots of them too. And the jungle being dark and wet and slimy and sliding off you and them swimming miles out into it. And t choosing straws for who was to kill. And slitting their throats.

Did you see Platoon? That's about that.

“But then, what was really funny? Ages and ages later, much, much later, long after I knew he was dead, I got this parcel from him covered in stamps from all these countries; with this little wooden bowl in it which he'd carved himself. That was strange. This little round bowl. Weird!”

“What was?”

“The time it took; so long afterwards; and the letter it was almost illegible, signed Paul.