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Old Memories Never Die

by Richard Rewell

“I have this memory. I think I dream about it sometimes.”

“What do you mean Dad?” said my cousin as we sat on the terrace of the Hydro Hotel, sipping Scotches, enjoying the comforting warmth and amber glow of a late summer evening.

My father gulped at his Scotch and said “Tell them Bill. I’ll get another round in,” as he stood and aimed for the bar.

My uncle Bill sat back in the garden chair loosened his tie saying “Your Dad Richard has heard this before. I used to have dreams, right up to the middle fifties. They went, but recently they’ve returned. I think that happens when you get older. And closer to death.”

My cousin, Stephen shot me a quick glance, but I mouthed “Let him speak.”

My uncle continued “We were walking, not marching, single file along this railway track five kilometres north of Rangoon. It was near a village called Kamayut on the Yangon river. Jungle both sides of the track. The most vivid green, dense, impenetrable but at the hint of a breeze it swayed. It seemed alive like a creature. Its voice, the monkeys. Hundreds of them”.

“Five paces ahead of me was my very good mate Ronnie Boyce, his uniform saturated with his sweat as was mine and everybody else’s. He took a swig of his water canteen.

“I’d prefer a cold beer” said Ronnie in a loud whisper.

“Me to.” I replied.

“Bloody jungle. I’m so pleased the top brass prepared us so well for this effing place with those highly useful six weeks of jungle training. In bloody Aberdeenshire. Bloody pine forest. How many deer or badgers have you seen since we got here in Burma?”

“Not that many mate. But I have seen a long black and yellow wriggly thing with a forked tongue the size of a tube train and I’ve just been bitten by an insect the size of sodding bat.”

Ronnie erupted into laughter as did the Sarge behind me who added “One of them Scottish badgers would see off one of those stupid pythons any day. Now shut up, stop moaning and keep going lads.”

After a further ten minutes, the jungle on my left suddenly gave way to an expansive grassy open space, separated from us by a ditch that choked with all manner of vegetation and a smelly brown stream. I was trying to see what was on the far side of the open space and was wiping the trickles of sweat away from my eyes when gunfire broke out and we all leapt into the ditch.

Japanese troops swarmed across the space screaming and shooting while we stood in the rank water and began shooting back at them.

“Who was that bird in Stagecoach?” said Ronnie releasing a couple of shots at the Japs.

“Claire Trevor” I replied.

“Not Vivian Leigh?”

“No.” I replied opening fire.

“You got one then.” Said Ronnie.

“Did I?” I answered.

“What was that western Vivian Leigh was in”

“Gone with the Wind”

“Lovely girl” said Ronnie.

“Christ, I got another Ronnie. Blimey did you just do that. You got three of them.”

“Did I? When it’s all over and we get home, how about we go and watch Arsenal. Meet up with Des and Gordon. Go up West. Have some beers.”

“Your on.”

I took aim at what looked like the last surviving Jap, he fell to his knees weeping, hands held above his head in surrender, I lowered my rifle just before the Sarge shouted “Cease fire lads. There’s only one left.” And everything went silent. Even the monkeys.

“You alright Ronnie?” I said not moving my head. And not wanting to. Couldn’t bring myself to look. I knew.

I felt the Sarge's hand on my shoulder "He's gone son."

"It's that moment, when I knew that Ronnie had been killed, that is what wakes me up and then, as clear as crystal I relive that dreadful hour," whispered my uncle tearfully.

"Drinks gentlemen," said my Dad returning from the bar.

"Thanks Des" said Bill wiping his eyes "And if the boys don't object. May I toast dear old Ronnie Boyce."

"You sure can said my cousin and we raised our glasses towards the now setting sun.

In rural Japan, a ninety- year old war veteran sat opposite his doctor and said "I have this memory. I think I dream about it sometimes. You see, in 1944 I was five kilometres north of Rangoon, near a village call Kamayut on the Yangon river."