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Hog Creek Review

The Crying Man

I was waiting for my flight at the Atlanta airport when the man a few seats down from me began to cry in loud, harsh sobs. I turned to look at him. Everyone in the boarding area, perhaps 30 people, did. He was young, mid 20's, wearing jeans and a Steelers t-shirt. A battered carry-on rested by his feet, an open paperback on his lap.

Terrible news was my first thought. Maybe a death in the family. But there was no phone in sight and he'd seemed all right when he first sat down. Was something wrong with him? I looked at the other boarders. Some were looking away from him now. Some staring. Perhaps he would stop. But he seemed oblivious to everything. Lost in his own world. It was becoming uncomfortable. I didn't know what to do. It was none of my business. Should I go to the man, find out what was wrong? But what if he was deranged? What if he attacked me? He sobbed louder. Where was my compassion? If it was me, wouldn't I want someone to help?

The airport was busy. People hustled by down the aisle on their way to catch their flights. The others waiting at the ticket gate were shifting in their seats. Some stood up and moved away. He was a leper. Unclean. The loudspeakers announced our flight was boarding in 20 minutes. He buried his face and started to wail. The sound brought a quick flash of memory from Vietnam to me.

It'd been a bad time in the war. Our platoon had been doing Search and Destroy Ops. in Tay Ninh Province near the Black Virgin Mountain and had lost some men. The day before Johnnie had tripped a Bouncing Betty, a nasty little mine filled with ball bearings. He didn't make it. When we approached the village, we caught some sniper fire. No one got hit, but we were pissed, hot, tired, scared. We found a cache of extra rice hidden in the village.

For the VC. We were happy when the LT. told us to blow the wells and torch the place. The old Mama-san had wailed like him when I burned her home. And I'd smiled and walked away. Should I walk away now?

Some of us looked at each other. Some looked at the floor. I started to get up to go to him, but stopped. I don't know why. The woman sitting across from me stood. She was middle-aged, her black hair streaked with gray. She could have been a mother, a teacher, a lawyer. But she was someone who cared.

She went over and sat by the crying man and began to talk to him, put her hand on his shoulder. He raised his head and looked at her. "I'm sorry," he sobbed. "Everything's so black. And I forgot my fucking meds. I thought they were in my fucking bag." He kicked his carry-on viscously. It jumped like a beaten dog. We all flinched, ready to run. Except her. She took his hand. "I'm just so lost," he said. His tears were falling on her hand. "Why am I so lost?"

She smiled at him and took his other hand. "It's all right. We all get lost. But we find our way home." She sat with him until some airport medical personnel came and led him away. He'd stopped sobbing and seemed rational. The woman went back to her seat without speaking. Whatever she felt for the rest of us--disdain, contempt, pity, nothing-- was hidden. She simply sat down.

We boarded shortly after. People found their seats and pretended to read, to sleep, to listen to headphones. Everyone was in their closed world. No one spoke of the crying man. The plane taxied into position. Its jets revved, built to a roaring crescendo. The 737 raced down the runway into the sky.

I sat back and watched the clouds. In three more hours, I'd be home with my wife. I'd never told her about that day or other days in Nam. I didn't think I'd tell her about today either. Some things we keep to ourselves. I closed my eyes, floating in the clouds.