**Red Beta**

Shane Griffin

One time when my children were young, my wife and I took our three daughters to shop for school clothes at Wal-Mart. I was bored by the in-and-out trips from the dressing room to the clothes racks. They asked me if I thought something looked cute, or if something matched. I didn’t know. My youngest daughter became restless, sitting in the cart, her legs stuck out of the leg holes. She wanted out. I picked her up in my arms, and we walked through the aisles. She was one-year old then and knew the names of some things and was trying to learn her colors.

 We walked through the clearance aisle. I was amazed at what was for sale: St. Joseph statues, cell-phone cases, failed infomercial items, sandals, undersized spatulas and utensils. That day they also had a fish for sale; on clearance for thirty-three cents. I stopped and looked at the poor fish. A red beta swam in mucky water. Algae had formed on the container where the water level met the air. The fish’s fins were torn and waved like battered battle flags. Its mouth opened and closed, breathed and gasped. It swam then floated, near death I was sure.

 My daughter reached her pink hand out and pointed at the fish.

I remembered the many times I had talked my mother into buying me a pet fish. I promised every time that I would take better care and not pester or overfeed them. But my curiosity got the best of me. I got bored with the fish just swimming and looking at me through their glass bowl. I loved watching them eat and dart around the tank when I tapped on the glass. I tried to get my mother to buy me some piranha, but she said absolutely not. I wanted to feed the fish real meat. I dreamed about catching frogs at the creek from behind our house and putting them in the tank for the piranhas to feast and tear their flesh apart while I watched. It was a boy’s curiosity.

One of my mom’s live-in boyfriends, Terry, was in Vietnam. I had a fascination with warfare. All the males in my family had served in the military and had been in combat. I knew from a young age that I would join the military too and serve my country in combat as they had. I had always asked my uncles about Vietnam, but they remained quiet, their eyes glazed over.

One day, when I was alone in the house, I looked through Terry’s photo albums. It was a small photo album and looked more like a rolodex than a book of photos. Inside were Terry’s photos from Vietnam. I flashed through photos of Terry wearing his camouflage with a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth. There was another picture of him standing next to a Vietnamese family, smiling. On the next page was the photo of a dead Vietnamese boy clutching an RPG. His face was ripped apart. His tongue hung out of his mouth like giant hands had tried to separate his jaw from his head. It was the first time I had seen the insides of anything.

I stood in the Wal-Mart clearance aisle with my daughter. I let her hand touch the bowl. I remembered my first IED attack in Iraq. A suicidal cab driver had detonated explosives in the middle of a crowded street in Ramadi. I remembered the smell of sulfur, burning rubber. and plastic. Unrecognizable piles of flesh were strewn across the streets and smattered against buildings. Children’s bodies were mangled with the adults--the innocent never see evil coming until it’s too late.

The red beta gulped its dirty water and turned one eye to me, as if asking me for help. I wanted to take the fish and flush him down the toilet. But my daughter would be upset, and that could be considered theft of some sort. I felt guilty as I held my daughter in my arms. I would protect her and her innocence with my own life, but I could do nothing for the beta.

I left the fish there in its bowl, on the clearance aisle, for sale for thirty-three cents, and we walked away. My daughter screamed at first and thrashed about in my arms, but then she calmed down when I put her pacifier in her mouth, and I thought about mercy.