

Friendly Fire, by C.D.B. Bryan, is the story of Peg and Gene Mullen, an Iowa farm couple, whose son Michael was drafted, sent to Vietnam, and killed by artillery fired by U.S. or South Vietnamese troops -- "friendly fire."

C . D . B BR YA N) G2 ;ni,-,c_

Chapter Five

The Mullens' friends and neighbors, stunned by word of Michael's death, began arriving at the farm shortly after Father Shimon left. They were stricken, outraged, bewildered that this distant war in Vietnam, a war so wearying; so incomprehensibly foreign, so enduring, could somehow have taken Michael's life as it had claimed the life of that Jesup parish boy only two months before. The men wearing faded bib overalls, ankle-high work boots, day-glo orange earflapped vinyl caps, their mellow, weathered faces creased with sorrow, approached Gene shyly, hesitantly. Gently they touched him on the shoulder, laid their calloused hands almost tenderly across his back. Their wives, in woolen slacks and heavy hand-knit cardigans, brought baskets of food, stews and casseroles, pots of coffee which they set to simmer at the rear of the Mullens' stove. And then they moved back to take Peg's hands in their own, hugged her, kissed her lightly upon her cheek, begged her to give them something to do, wanting to help, and could barely contain the grief in their eyes.

The women gathered around the kitchen table with Peg, and the men sat in the living room with John and Gene. They talked in low voices about Michael, what a wonderful young man he had been, how they felt he had been-in many ways-like a son of their own, how hard he had worked, the many little kindnesses he had shown. They retold stories about Michael, about his 4-H activities, how much he had wanted to be good at basketball, about the time back in 1960 or was it '61?-the time Michael wouldn't let any of his family into their newly completed house until the lawn had been seeded and dragged and rolled. Michael had been fourteen then, and his family hadn't 54

finished the lawn until at least eleven at night. Or how about the time that neighbor, the one whose young wife had died of the aneurysm, had driven off the dead end, dragged himself out of his demolished car, his face smashed by the windshield, and crawled all the way to the Mullens' back door, where Michael discovered him, brought him inside, wrapped him in blankets and placed crushed ice on his shattered face until the ambulance and doctor could arrive. Over and over again the men tried to express their sorrow, tried to make some sense out of the war, to say something comforting about Michael's service to his country. And suddenly, astonishingly, one of the men, and then another, would begin to cry, would hide his face, wipe at the tears with the back of his hand and blow his nose into a great billowing pocket bandanna.

- These men were part of "the great Silent Majority" President Nixon had referred to, and they wept as much out of confusion and frustration and rage as they did out of grief for the Mullens' loss. From kindergarten through the twelfth grade in their Iowa schools they had pledged their allegiance to the flag, been taught to love their country, respect their government. To them, America's history was of Genesisic simplicity, its early Presidents Old Testament prophets whose lives were parables of selflessness and virtue. Standing there by the Mullens' big picture window, looking out across John Dobshire's road to the rolling snow-swept hills beyond, they were simple, decent people who saw their silence as a form of stoicism, not acquiescence, who interpreted silence as a strength and virtue and whose lonely lives on isolated farms were testimony to the little stock they placed in talk.

Of course, they thought themselves patriotic. Of course, they believed that a man has a duty to serve his country. Many of them, a majority, had fought in the Second World War, a war which had had front lines and battlefields and winners and losers, where success could be measured, enemy territory absorbed behind ribbons and pins and flags on the carefully kept maps back at home. These men had been young then, thinner and tougher, and they remembered how, mov55

ing up through the liberated cities and villages, they had been greeted as heroes, how the grateful citizens had gifted them with flowers and wine, how the pretty young dark-haired girls had climbed up the armorplated sides of their half-tracks and Sherman tanks to be kissed. It was a war which had confirmed the image they carried both of America and of themselves: strong and generous, invincible and humane. And of course, they had been scared. There was no shame in admitting that-but they had gone, hadn't they? In some jewelry box, or sock drawer, or half forgotten in the bottom of some desk somewhere, they still had their dog tags, their combat infantryman's badges, maybe even the medal or two awarded them because against their better judgment, on some occasion and in spite of it all, they had volunteered for something especially dangerous, something that they hadn't even needed to do. But they had done it. Why scarcely mattered; the point, to them, was that they had risked their lives and survived. They had survived and come home to Poyner and Cedar and Big Creek townships, to Eagle Center and La Porte, proud of their participation in that war. Later they joined the local American Legion chapter or the VFW and with the passing years found themselves looking back on their experiences with a strange and paradoxical longing that disturbed them.

They had returned as young lions, brave warriors, to be celebrated and praised . . . and absorbed and confused . . . and frustrated and forgotten as their war became American history, shuffled farther and farther back into chapters superseded by the new crises Americans responded to in Korea and Hungary and Berlin and Czechoslovakia and the Suez and Lebanon and Cuba and now in Vietnam. The irony was not lost on them that the two Axis powers which they as young men had warred against, which they had helped reduce to rubble and had subsequently helped to rebuild with tax money taken out of their own pockets, had re-emerged as the two most powerful nations in Europe and Asia. That is why that afternoon at the Mullens' farm these men remained mute. The death of

Michael reminded them how powerless they had become. These sudden crises, which in retrospect seemed so inevitable and abundant, unnerved them because they no longer felt they had access to the facts-whatever they might be-facts which they were no longer sure they would want to know even if there were someone around who was willing to tell them.

Gene would be explaining to the latest arrival that the family knew only that Michael had been killed by the South Vietnamese artillery, that the Vietcong had somehow made the artillery fire on Michael's platoon's position and that Michael had been killed two days ago. On Thursday.

"But, Gene," the man would say, "I didn't see nothing in the paper about it. Where'd it say anything about American boys being killed by South Vietnamese artillery?"

"You heard about the shelling at Bien Hoa?" Gene asked. "How a lot of American boys got killed and wounded at Bien Hoa? Well, see, it happened all over Vietnam that night."

"I sure am sorry, Gene. It seems the whole world is coming apart. It gets so a man just doesn't want to read or know about anything anymore."

"You got to care," Gene said. "You got to keep caring."

"Yup, well, I do, I guess," the man would say, "I do, but it doesn't seem to make sense."

What so confused these men was that no one really seemed to believe that America stood to gain anything from the Vietnam War, that all the reasons given to justify an American presence in Vietnam-to prevent outside invaders from taking over the country, to provide the people of South Vietnam with a chance to choose their own leaders-were myths dispelled nightly on the television news. Every returning GI felt that *he* had been the outside invader, that the government he had been sent to defend was incorrigibly corrupt, its elections rigged, its political opposition tortured and jailed. Most appalling of all was the fact that the South Vietnamese not only were unwilling to fight

for themselves but fired upon, booby-trapped and ambushed the American boys who had come halfway around the world to defend them.

So the men wrung their hands and wept with rage and frustration and confusion because what could any of them say to the Mullens except how terribly sorry they were?

And how were the Mullens supposed to respond? When a young man is killed in a war, his parents console themselves that he gave his life for some higher ideal, that he died in the service of his country and that his awful sacrifice is recognized and appreciated by a grateful government and citizenry. But how could Gene and Peg Mullen comfort themselves over their son's death in Vietnam? Didn't anyone understand that Michael had been their hope? Their way back up? That Michael would have returned the Mullen name to the stature it had enjoyed when his great-grandfather Patrick J. had owned that 1,000-acre farm?

What could the Mullens say to these friends, these neighbors, these well-meaning townspeople who had driven out to see them? Peg and Gene could not help thinking how none of these people's sons had had to go. How Michael was the only boy from any of the farms around who had put himself through graduate school, who showed the most potential for making a success out of farming. What's more, the Mullens sensed that the general attitude among their son's contemporaries was not that Michael had been a patriot, but rather that he had been a poor, unfortunate scapegoat who hadn't had enough sense or enough pull not to get caught. "I don't need to be here! I don't need to be here!" Michael had protested that night he telephoned from Des Moines. "I simply didn't *need* to be drafted!"

Patricia Mullen, then twenty-one years old, had been met by Peg's friend in Iowa City and reached the farm late that afternoon. Like her mother's, Patricia's reaction to Michael's death was a cold and bitter rage. Only three days before she had written their Senator, Harold Hughes, pleading with him to get her brother out of combat, that it was such a waste to let "Michael's

mind to be destroyed." Senator Hughes had replied the same day to explain the process by which Michael could request an out-of-combat assignment. Patricia had received the Senator's letter that morning.

Peg's sister, Isabel Strathman, and her husband, Gerald Strathman, arrived at the farm next. Gerald Strathman, an Army Air Corps bombardier during World War II, had taken part in the raids on the Ploesti oilfields.

Peg's brother, Bill Goodyear, arrived early that evening. He had driven to the farm directly from Omaha. Bill Goodyear had served in the Army during World War II and had taken part in the construction of the Burma Road.

Mary Mullen, then nineteen years old and a freshman at Rockhurst, had been picked up in Kansas City by Peg's other sister, Louise Petersen, and Mike Kitt, the Petersens' son-in-law. Herman Petersen, Peg's brother-in-law, had fought through the Battle of the Bulge. Mary and the Petersens would not arrive until late that night.

Howard Goodyear, Peg's older brother, was driving in from Pittsburgh and could not reach the farm before Sunday afternoon. Now an executive with Alcoa, Howard had been the radio operator-medic on the weather plane which had preceded the *Enola Gay* to Hiroshima. As part of its mission Howard Goodyear's B-29 had to fly over Hiroshima to report the effects of the first atomic bomb.

Peg does not remember her brothers and brothers-in-law ever swapping war stories or even wanting to talk about the war.

By midnight Saturday night the Mullens' friends and neighbors had left. Peg's brothers and sisters had gone to their motel rooms; Patricia was asleep. John was in his bedroom awake and staring at the ceiling. Peg and Gene were seated across the kitchen table from each other, isolated by grief, each tentatively prodding and testing the barriers that would protect them from the anguish of their loss.