

The Tattered Flag

By Nancy Dale

Running was no longer easy. The uneven curvature of the ragged stones tore effortlessly through frayed jeans, every stride a drudgery of toil and pain. This infliction of the world had to stop, manifested in the bloodstain of a hopeless cause. But for now, there was no other way but to run until the cursed body surrendered.

Broken and weakened, the tall youth struggled onward, as his thoughts relentlessly raced back to the beginning when the memory of the glistening silver moon rising above the jagged mountain crests froze in his mind.

His instincts led him to a darkened jungle, a footpath twisting deep into mountain crevasses shielding his wretched body from the sight of the mangled world he once knew. Only the Ancient Ones, the ghosts of the past, knew this clandestine way into the sunken universe where now no man ever dared to pass; it was a sacred shrine of a lost people not to be trespassed upon forevermore.

But now there was no choice. Perhaps the gods would forgive this intrusive violation of the ancient Traditions. The young man would not reveal the treasure hidden beneath the known, as the threat of doom that could befall him in the jungle could be no worse than what he already knew.

Once inside the mountain's protected valley, he awakened his humble body to feel the heartbeat of the Earth and absorb its healing grandeur of Beauty.

The Ancient Ones held tightly to the secret of this hallowed ground. Billie Sergeant had only known of this place in his academic quest to find the lost people. Now at the end of his life's journey, he stumbled across the carefully enshrouded clues that led him to this place. In a blind reality, Billie Sergeant did not know at this passage of his life, that this sacred refuge would draw him deeper into the secrets. Billie Sergeant, following his dream to bare the cause of freedom in a foreign land and discover the history of a lost people, had reached his final destination; he would come to rest forever in the bone valley of the Ancient Ones that took back their own. In the end, Billie Sergeant had become more like "them" than like those in his own life.

With a tangled, strife-ridden history of civil war, the spirit of innocent indigenous people, who for generations reaped the life-giving sustenance from the rain forest, was crushed; the healing salts from the warm gurgling spring rising from the soul of Nature's rich resources was now a "dying river" diverted into the creeping urbanization of foreign oil corporations, development, construction and the downing of one-hundred-year-old trees. The canopy of forest that held the secret ways of past lives in the veins of their wooden frames lay broken and bleeding, their sap draining back into the Earth, just like Billie's life, as he crawled into the womb of their fallen wooden arms.

All that once was valued and cherished in this sacred place is a lost memory of generations past, as civilization with all its sirens of material hope bulldoze the spirit of the people fueling urbanization of the forest and the land.

In a strange reality with time now frozen, Billie Sergeant, for a while, felt the acceptance into an unfamiliar culture as he studied the history of the people, becoming one with the lives he touched and those who were drawn to him. It was a short jaunt over time that brought Billie to this passage and into the jungle of another life.

“I cannot go on,” grveled Billie, his words caving inside his chest as he pitched back and forth writhing blood from his guts, coursing him closer to his Fate. “I know they are closing in behind me, but I must rest. I have to stop, the blood, the pain... I am torn ... have to stop. Is it over? This steaming pit, I’m being eaten alive. The eyes glaring, just waiting... I must fight.”

Billie struggled to hunker down beneath the piece of flag he once carried proudly as an emblem of freedom. It was now a weight of fragility, the symbolic meaning to his life. The fight for freedom that captured his spirit was dying. He left all he had known and now there was just this simplicity: to stay alive.

Billie had all the academic credentials and scholarly labels stamped upon his university certificates, as he forged an intellectual pursuit to find man’s lost humanity in the records of the Ancient Ones. He broke free from the mindless “Establishment” ideology that “bigger and more is better.” He consciously chose to find the world he ideally envisioned as the spirit of the past and the humanitarian glory of mankind’s future, despite the degradation of causes that absorbed him in raging inscrutable home front and foreign political battles. It was these decisions that brought him halfway across the globe, following the freedom cry from another people’s land, suffering to be born independently.

The country now was of little significance; its birth on the cusp of self-destruction created from the rich natural resources flaunting its existence. What did it matter now? Corporate multi-international economic resources were far superior to all the sources the people could muster to maintain and possess their own culture and lifestyle. The land would die just like the people, but it would be “productive” in the hands of the elite global economists.

The frayed flag he wore across his wound was a bandage for his oozing gut that steadily trickled the lifeblood from his veins. Past memories merged slowly with the confusion and suffering of the present. Resurrected in his mind was the echo of the hollow man he once memorized in high school English class, T.S. Eliot’s, “The Wasteland.” “How strange,” he reflected, “at this hour of my life, I recall Eliot: ‘This is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends, not with a bang but with a whimper.’”

To him, he was no different than the curdling blood that circled around his coiled body, slipping into the Earth, unceremoniously and in silence. “I am like all that I have experienced, hoped for and now die for. What is my value? Am I more now, than who I was at home in the heartland of my America?” Billie fought to force crimson spattered air into his parched lungs, fighting to hold back the flowing blood that seeped in with each breath.

Sorting through his agony, he had to cross one more hurdle. Where was Stella? His lifelong inspiration had followed him through all of his worldly pursuits that craved an end somewhere in the hidden recesses of his mind. There was never a final end, a resolution, a completion; Billie’s life was a tributary flowing from one small stream of consciousness into the global perspective that most people do not perceive or dare to pursue. In America, labels of eccentricity, radicalism, change-maker, and a “free-spirit” was attached to him as he tirelessly followed some brilliant star lighting his dreams.

But Stella was not by his side now. She had been disposed of weeks before, shackled to a roadside lean-to, drugged, beaten and used by those who saw fit to do so. They were the people of the land, turned inside out, now wearing crosses of bullets, shields of power, recognition of their loyalty to the juntas that ravaged the Elders’ villages torching the same glorious flag that now held together his gaping wound. “What irony!” Billie mused in the vagary of his cries weaving caustically through the tall arched rainforest. He was majestically reaching again into another time and place, toward the rise of the silver moon. “I am the sentry, standing guard over my life, hanging upon the razor’s edge of death. I only crave life!” Billie screamed, entreating the strength of the jungle on his behalf; after all it was to save these entities that led him to this destiny. But what can the jungle do now; it too was befallen with no rescuer.

His thoughts unavoidably raced back to Stella, horrible flashes of memory he tried to expunge from his mind. He watched her helplessly as she fell into the dirty-faced troops harboring steel bayonets that riveted through her sodden clothes, blazoning a sheath through the heart of her tender body that he once held tightly to his bosom. Her intimacy had been ripped open starkly revealing her frail vulnerability taken in pieces over and over again with “honorable” virtuosity by nameless warriors waving their lascivious wands of victory in and out of her lifeless form. Stella’s screams echoed in his head long after her final serenity as the two tattered bodies were flung into a roadside ditch, sealing their fate forever. Stella never breathed life again, despite Billie’s desperate attempt to swaddle her oozing wound with earthen leaves. He clung to her, and him to life. They were left to die.

Stella had always worn the valiant courage of a warrior, fighting her prey whether it was ideological, emotional, or physical. This time her meager battle was to no avail. “If only I could have protected her. She died because of me,” as he let go of the tears gushing down his blood-caked face, settling into open lacerations like glue. “I could not save her with my strength, my only weapon. I am a fool. I am not invincible. How foolish... I thought I could protect my love with the shield of this tattered flag. It means nothing, it

is no more than a broken lance useless, stupid. We paid for their freedom with our own blood. May my God forgive me.”

The country had no value to Billie, and even less to Stella, as it was her love for him that led her on the romantic journey into the far corners of the world and his mind. They shared their love, their life and now their death in an insignificant place, in an insignificant time, snuffed out in a world they could not fathom. This lofty cause of liberty carried Billie to his tomb. The tattered flag that once wavered over Billie and Stella’s freedom march amongst warring rebels was meaningless to the world, as it symbolically, was draped without spirit, over the remnants of Billie’s life.

The others in their “fight for freedom clan” of the homeland, quickly slipped back into their familiar culture when the time to fight tore away their loyalty as the death march moved stealthy over living corpses. Maybe it was better to exist in hateful destruction and destitution than to fight a bitter war for hopeless dreams, against unfamiliar ideologies, that would eventually absorb the familiar past.

There was no saving Billie Sergeant from his Destiny. He sunk deeper into his jungle grave, taken back by the Earth that gently wrapped his wreaking soul in the soothing ointment of Death. He would, alas, find solace in the absence of his dreams. The warm crystal water would cleanse his pain as it carved small rivulets of his blood into the heart of the jungle, a wound that would never heal. Only the Ancient Ones would behold one more secret taken into the solace of their sacred shrine.