

Kirsti Eline Torhaug, *Fragments of a Life*

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In *Fragments of a Life*, we follow Per and Helmer to Vietnam where they are officially stationed as humanitarian workers, providing food aid, but have technically joined the Vietcong and are helping to smuggle weapons. The narrative begins with Per and Helmer anxiously waiting on a boat for their contact, Tu Duong, to retrieve their shipment of Soviet AK-47s hidden under a load of rice. As time passes, uncertainty and paranoia set in, exacerbated by the eerie sounds of the jungle. Their situation becomes more precarious when Per considers the possibility of dumping the cargo to avoid being caught, an idea that Helmer firmly rejects. Per's anxiety grows as memories of past wars and traumas resurface, and he reflects on his peculiar sense of belonging in Vietnam, a country that strangely feels more real to him than any place he has ever been.

The Vietnam War feels strangely far away still. Both men play distinct roles in their covert operations. Helmer, with his linguistic skills and social charm, is entrusted with spy missions, while Per handles the more grueling logistics of arms transport. Their dynamic is reminiscent of past experiences in Mexico, with Helmer often taking the lead and Per left with time to contemplate their dangerous existence. They are both drawn to the extremities of life, living on the edge as a way to escape mundane realities. They are here for the adventure but the waiting is heavy on their nerves.. They rejoice when their mission takes them to Hong Kong, a city of contrasting modernity and tradition. Amidst the city's chaotic allure, they explore opium dens, seeking escape from the constant stress of waiting to be exposed. Per, hesitant but intrigued, succumbs to opium, experiencing an overwhelming sense of peace that momentarily frees him from his anxiety.

Upon their return to Vietnam, they anticipate Tu Duong's arrival to offload their cargo. However, Tu Duong is nowhere to be found until Per discovers that Tu Duong has been killed, his head severed and displayed as a grim warning. The brutality of his murder shakes Per to his core, reinforcing the ruthless nature of war. Per rushes back to Helmer, desperate to reassess their situation. They recognize the urgent need for a new contact and are directed to Ly Hai. After a tense exchange, Ly Hai agrees to help, arranging for their cargo to be transported in a few days. As they await the rendezvous, paranoia seeps deeper into their bones. Every sound in the jungle feels like a threat, every rustling leaf a sign of betrayal. Here, the novel delves into the psychology of individuals drawn to perilous lives. Per, haunted by past regrets and unfulfilled dreams, constantly grapples with his motivations. He questions whether he is driven by a death wish or an insatiable hunger for life. The contrast between his introspective nature and Helmer's pragmatic approach to survival highlights the different ways people cope with trauma.

The novel takes a tragic turn, when Per and Helmer leave the boat and a group of armed children steals the weapons. Unsure if these are child soldiers and part of an army, Per and Helmer are forced to follow them through the jungle for days on end until they finally arrive at their camp. The children turn out to be orphaned thieves who sell stolen goods for a living. With the help of a backpack full of chocolate that Helmer wisely bought in Hong Kong during their trip (you can find a lot of things in the jungle but chocolate is the ultimate rarity), Helmer can persuade the children to sell the weapons back to them and help them carry them back to the boat. On their way back, they accidentally cross the ever-moving front line. They have stumbled into war with these children by their side.

At this point, the novel turns into a war narrative told from the anti-US frontline as Helmer and Per are rescued and join a Vietcong camp and the book becomes reminiscent of war novels like Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*. What does it mean to see children die; to survive a napalm attack; to witness the decapitation of US POWs; and to find your best friend murdered? Helmer's death and the attack of their camp heavily retraumatizes Per who experiences the violence in a dream-like state, an expression of the intense retraumatizing he lives through on these pages.

He is found stumbling, crawling, hurt and poisoned by the jungle and is taken in by an Anglo-French couple who bring him back to life but live far-off the war and the world actually. For them Indochine still exists, the Vietnamese make perfect servants and tennis is a religion along with the daily cocktail hour. Per despises their ignorance, feels almost threatened by the eerie atmosphere on the isolated estate and as soon as he can walk again, Per leaves. He goes home, back to Norway.

In the last third of the book, Per rebuilds a life for himself. When all hope of ever falling in love again has left him, he joins his friend Even on a trip to Warsaw and meets Irena and her daughter Paulina. They fall in love, they marry, mother and daughter move to Oslo. Per does his best to provide for his family, the first he ever had, but struggles emotionally. He tries hard to control his sudden outbursts of anger and the little family manages somehow. Once things have fallen into place for the three of them, the news break out that Argentina has become a dictatorship and civilians are dragged into the shadows of secret torture camps. Will the violence never end? Will there always be a war? One day, Irena brings home an Amnesty International flyer. On it it shows Leticia who has also been abducted. Per is devastated but there is nothing he can do, or is there? For weeks, he tries to rally for Leticia, tries every single straw, bringing himself close to a melt-down and a divorce. One morning, Leticia visits him in a half-awake state and this is when Per knows that she has died in prison.

There are also moments of happiness, for example when Per's brother Matthias becomes a father for the fourth time and a little girl by the name of Elin is born. From the very first time that Per holds the baby there is a special bond between uncle and niece. She reminds him of Moa, the same light seems to shine from her. It is in the novel's epilogue – Per is in his 80s, a widower, living in a

nursing home and suffering from terminal cancer – that the very same Elin has grown into a young woman. Per has lived a full life but there is one thing he never managed: He has never seen the Amazon. The two take off to the Amazon, a 24-hour-journey what used to take weeks on a ship. Per gets to see the jungle again and he gets to see the Amazon. The novel ends with Per wandering off into the jungle while he dreams to see his friends from Sachsenhausen again – just like they said they would all these years ago: When they survive the concentration camp, the young men would go meet again. They would go together and see the Amazon.

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