

Evening News

There was a substitute teacher in Mr. Flynn's room when we returned to school. She didn't explain why she was there or mention Mr. Flynn. She just put an assignment on the board and told us which chapter to read in the textbook. She was there the next day too. By the end of the week, we were no longer surprised when we came in the room and saw her. She was OK as far as teachers go. She learned our names, she graded our work fairly. But she didn't ask us what we thought, and she didn't answer our questions with more questions.

The one hundred photographs of famous Americans no longer hung on the walls.

Everyone at school wanted to talk about what had happened in San Francisco, and everyone who went on the trip had their own piece of the story to tell. Where they were standing, what they'd seen, what they did when the riot started. The newspapers called it a riot. It had stopped being a protest when the crowd pushed through the doors of City Hall I guess.

Kids listened to stories, and retold them, and spread them through the halls. But they were still missing my part of the story. They asked me about the “hippie girl” or the “bloody girl.” When someone at my locker asked me about the “dead girl,” I froze halfway through my locker combination. I’d assumed she was fine after the paramedics came. I’d assumed they carried her to an ambulance and took her to a hospital and she was fine. It didn’t occur to me that she could have died. But there was a lot of blood. A lot of it.

But no one was talking about why all those people were there in the first place. No one was talking about the hippie with the megaphone and his garbled, angry words. No one was talking about why the police were called in to bust up a group of people calling for the end to a war. Mr. Flynn had taken us to the city to show us that there were crowds of people who disagreed with what was going on, people who saw things differently than the newspapers did, people who disagreed with what our government was doing, people who were willing to speak up and say that it wasn’t right. And we sure saw it, saw more than Mr. Flynn ever expected us to see. But it seemed that nothing had changed in us. We’d come home with a week’s worth of stories to tell, and that was that. It didn’t seem right.

At home each night, I began watching the six o’clock news with my mother. There was no heart-to-heart conversation, not on the car ride home the day of the riot, not in the days that followed. Again where I expected monumental change, there was none. Except that we watched the news. Together.

The really bad news didn't make it to TV: images of the protesting monk who set himself on fire in the middle of Saigon; children crying, running down a road with a wall of fiery napalm behind them; skies thick with helicopters; and bandaged soldiers with eyes that had seen things they would never forget. Maybe those pictures showed up on the front pages of newspapers in San Francisco or Sacramento, but if we saw them at all in the *Santa Rosa Star*, they were buried in the middle section or stuck next to an opinion piece that made them seem like they weren't really news, only something that someone thought. I'd figured out though, that the real news was there if you knew where to look, and I was looking.

In the years to come, there would be more photographs, and not all of them from faraway Vietnam: the screaming woman at that little university in Ohio, kneeling over the body of a protester killed by the National Guard; the soldier returning from Vietnam, exiting the plane, falling to his knees, and kissing American ground; National Guardsmen at the Pentagon, looking confused and helpless as protesters placed flowers in the barrels of their guns.

The news anchors on our screen shared careful facts about troop movements, parts of the country that our soldiers controlled, and the President's resolve to stay until we won the war. But the filtered news was really just background noise for my mom and me while we each mulled over our thoughts. We didn't talk. We didn't need to. We both knew we were missing my father, holding our breath

until he came home, and scanning the screen for a hint that would tell us he was OK.

Like having a substitute teacher in Mr. Flynn's room, sitting with my mother on the couch and watching the news eventually seemed like something that had always been, even though it had only been going on for about two weeks.

That's when my mother brought out the shoebox full of letters. It sat there on the couch between us for a while without me even wondering what it was. Just something taking up space. Until I leaned over to rest my head on my mother's shoulder and brushed my hand on it. My mother's hand was instantly on mine, and then together we were taking the lid off the box.

There, lined up in a neat row, were my father's letters. She pulled out the first envelope, slid the letter out, unfolded it, and held it out so we both could read. My father's neat handwriting described the flight over, his first days on the ground, and the adjustments of settling into a new base. And just like my father's smile shrug that said so much to me, there in all the lines I read was the message that none of the words said. "I love you. I miss you. I love you. I miss you."

I looked up at my mother, wondering if she read it that way too, or if she only saw the newsy sentences about the new base. One look and I knew she did. And if she saw it in the words on the page, she surely understood what my father was saying with his crooked smiles and half shrugs. She'd understood everything, but for some reason, she let me think that my father and I were

the only ones in on the secret, that it was just the two of us with that special connection.

We read letters into the night. At first my mother held them between us for our eyes to silently scan. Eventually we took turns reading them aloud, which was better because we could laugh together at the funny parts, and then cry together because the funny parts were just in the letter and my father wasn't in the room.

Television programs blended together, and then the news was on again at 11:00, but it was still just background. We kept reading until the test pattern came on the screen and the high pitched whining sound interrupted us. I jumped up to turn the TV off, and then we read until we reached the end of the box.



The kids at school seemed to move on from the episode in San Francisco after a week or two. The stories died down, and they found other happenings to catch their interest. But I got tired of not talking about what Mr. Flynn was trying to show us, and I had enough of the substitute. I raised my hand when she asked a question, and when she called on me I had a question of my own.

“Where’s Mr. Flynn?”

Her expression stumbled and she snapped out, “I beg your pardon?”

“Where’s Mr. Flynn?”

“Young lady...”

“Elizabeth. Mr. Flynn always called us by name,” I said and then added, “Why is he not here?” Reaction in the

classroom was mixed. Some kids simply grinned or laughed at one of their classmates interrupting the teacher and disrupting the lesson. Others looked at me with surprised faces or rolled their eyes and shook their heads. I only noticed a few nodding their heads in agreement or mumbling their own questions about Mr. Flynn's absence.

The substitute had overcome the surprise of my question and composed herself. "Mr. Flynn was removed from this classroom because his lessons and teaching were not in line with the ideals of the school or this community," she said in a voice that sounded rehearsed, like she was just repeating a line the principal had given her if the students ever asked.

"What ideals?" I snapped back. "What did he teach us that was wrong? He didn't do anything against the school or the town. He was only trying to show us..."

This time it was my turn to get interrupted. "Mr. Flynn endangered his students and exposed them to anti-American opinions." I couldn't tell if she was still reciting practiced lines fed to her by the principal, but her face made it easy to see she agreed wholeheartedly with what she was saying. Either way she sounded like a page from our history book.

"Are you talking about the war? Vietnam? Protesting the war? Is that what you mean by anti-American? Not wanting a war is anti-American?" I was peppering the substitute with questions, no longer waiting for her answers or letting her interrupt, and then my eyes darted around and I was asking questions to the room. "He was trying to show

us other opinions. Don't you see that? What's wrong with listening to other ideas? How do we know we should be fighting this war? How do we know it's right?" I had stood up without realizing it, and my hands were clenched.

The faces on my classmates were changing. The kids who had been laughing before were no longer smiling, some looking out the window or bent down over their books. The ones who had been nodding before were gesturing for me to sit down or to be quiet, the closer ones hissing whispers. "Bethy, enough already." and "Don't say that stuff, Bethy." The eye rollers' faces had turned angry and their shouts drowned out the last of my questions. I was silenced and could only look around the room at kids who I thought were just like me, unable to see how they could have a reaction so different from mine. The bell to end class saved me.

Kids grabbed their books and pushed for the door. I was bumped a few times more than what seemed normal, and some kids grumbled comments as they brushed past. "My father's over there. You saying he's doing something wrong?" and "Anti-American." As I squeezed through the door, the last comment I heard stuck with me long after I left the classroom and found myself walking alone down the hallway. "I just want to forget that day."

The kids with family fighting in the war I understood. I was still trying to figure out how my father, who always did everything right, could be a part of a war that now seemed so wrong. And I had spent enough time listening to Mr. Johnson over the top of his paper to know that it was

pretty common for people to see opinions against the war as unpatriotic and un-American. But the realization that some kids might just want to forget everything that had happened in San Francisco churned in me. Did they want to forget because what had happened was frightening? Or were the conflicting opinions of right and wrong too much to think about, so that it was easier to just not think about it at all and try to forget the whole thing? After spending weeks wrestling with my own conflicting feelings and waking up from more than a few dreams that had me back in a pushing shoving crowd or trying to wipe blood from my hands, I could see how forgetting the protest and all that followed could be the easiest thing to do. But I had two reminders that kept me thinking about it.

The hippie girl's bag with the journal hung from the back of a chair in my room, slightly off kilter like it would probably have hung if it were on her shoulder. Digging through the bag didn't feel right, but since the journal was big enough that a corner stuck out of the bag, I felt OK pulling it out. I didn't read it, but I'd pull it out most nights, look at the cover with its curly-cue lines encircling peace signs, and then I'd open the cover and look at the neat handwriting on the inside cover.

Emmie Hatcher
1461 Page Street
San Francisco

I wondered about Emmie Hatcher, wondered what her story was before getting shoved into that wall. It didn't feel right reading her journal though. Journals are private – it was hers and hers only. But at the same time, I didn't want to let it go. I couldn't let it go. I needed it, just like I needed the bag's peace symbols, smiley faces, and rainbow patches. So the bag hung there on the back of my chair holding the journal's secrets inside.

The other reminder was balled up in the back corner of my closet, my white t-shirt covered in Emmie's blood. I knew it would never come clean, but it didn't seem like something that should just get thrown out, and I knew my mother would throw it out if she saw it. I had tossed it into the closet the night we came home, and there it stayed. It was there waiting in the corner, every time I opened my closet to find something to wear.