**Pirate’s Plunder**

In the late 1970’s, the media flashed images of defoliated jungles, villages of people dead in holes, and small mountains of skulls in the wars of Indochina. Those who sought to flee, struggled to escape, hitting the surrounding waters as a last chance for hope. They were called the Boat People, South Asians from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Do not picture a canoe drifting on a moving stair of current. Imagine make-shift crafts and patched vessels, bursting at the seams, as the screams of children rose. Pirates plundered, their pricks aroused by the small boned, most innocent refugees of war, as the parents crouched helplessly. This, the final indignity before a few shores opened at last. Sympathetic to their plight, lands welcomed them, America one, and San Francisco a city. Do not picture them moving into the abodes of Nob Hill or Palisades. They settled into the dirty sometimes depraved Tenderloin district, where hooker met drug dealer, drunks and artists met the poor, the lost and yes, the refuges of war. There the Boat People crowded into tiny roach infested flats to begin their lives again.

I worked in an elementary school tucked in the mouth of the Tenderloins, as a secretary for their ESL program. Stuffed in an office shuffling paper, I spied, from the corner of my eye the waves of children moving through the hall. There the children of the poor, the lost, the indigent roamed. Black, brown and white, and now, the yellow children, the refugees. I heard their laughter, the giggles and the shrieks, as a myriad of spices, the garlic, lemon grass, and peppers lifted and drifted off their skin. Strange accents and sounds chained into unknown tongues broke and punctuated their joyful expressions. I knew about their plight. I had seen the orange dust dropped, the bodies flung like discarded dolls, and the rows of skulls that marked the toll, but all that faded now in the pursuit of fame and cool.

At night, my friends and I prowled the streets of San Francisco. We stopped in the gay bars to dance wildly, in the punk and new wave clubs to listen to Jim Carroll recite prose, watch Lene Lovich whirl, and the Dead Kennedy’s provoke. We attended loft parties and art openings, raided Goodwill boxes to find our costumes, and sit around cheesy diners to drink coffee through the night. We were cool, at least we thought we were cool, artists and writers dreaming of fame and fortune. Our faces would dress the covers of magazines; we would ride around in limousines. I too would leave my mark, as I buried my hayseed roots in a scrap box that I never opened or told anyone about. As if anyone looking closely couldn’t see the real me.

Then came the day of the elementary school carnival. My friend Leah, an ESL teacher, had asked if I would help her paint the faces of the children. Painting faces wasn’t cool, but reluctantly I agreed. The hours passed that day, the rainbow of children passing through our hands, their delight bouncing. At the end of the day, as we were putting our paints and brushes away, just one more, one more child suddenly slipped onto my lap. She settled with her back against me, as if in search of safety within my frame. I felt like a tipi or a tent. The lights in the hall shown down upon her small head of long black hair, reflecting blue and purple hues like that of a raven’s wing. Her flowered dress freshly laundered though a bit ragged, and her black shoes scuffed and the soles worn. She shifted and squirmed then turned her face up to me. I saw for the first time, up close and personal, a startling and wicked remnant of war. Her dark almond shaped eyes shined in a face two fifths ravaged, a scar that waffled, ragged and uneven, down one whole side and wound down around her chin. Yet, she smiled, however hesitantly, two perfect rows of small white pearls, excited so excited to have her face painted, too.

Did I gasp? Did I recoil? I remember picking up a brush. I painted so gingerly, so gently, across this pink, red and white cruel souvenir of war.

As her family fled the fires and the bombs, I teetered on heels. As the memories of all that this child saw ran into the dark recesses of her heart, I watched Jello Biafra piss on his fans from the base of the stage.

I painted little flowers, and little swirls, her almond eyes searching mine. They screamed, “I have seen too much! I have seen too much!” I painted, moving the small brush across the waffle, soothing, healing, my darling little one, I will erase, I swear I will erase this offense against the innocent. She neither winced nor moaned, and I saw that she was wide awake. Her eyes wise, not five. Carrying the weight of all that she has seen and felt in this sparrow boned frame, but fearless enough to crawl into the lap of a stranger, my lap, suddenly a safe haven for a small survivor.

As I raked through a pile of clothes for the perfect outfit for the night to look just right, she looked into the mirror. I pulled the veil down on a vintage hat to hide my eyes, as my red lips glared. She leaned in closer to the looking glass and asked herself, will I ever be pretty, as she fought to hold the memories at bay. In this way, I began to learn what matters.