

Moon of the Falling Leaves

BY GLENN SMITH

The Sioux call the November moon the Moon of the Falling Leaves. Trees are bare and unadorned, like a human skeleton devoid of its flesh and organs. Yet a tree—or even the entire woodland—still hints of life, still embodies hope for a new beginning. A naked skeleton does not.

On a day in the Moon of the Falling Leaves the world witnessed a man's life splatter and drain upon his wife, his car, his protectors, doctors and nurses, a gurney and operating room, surgical instruments, and a casket. This man seemed to have the world in his hands, answers to humanity's problems, power to stop ogres, a smile to warm a chilly room, and visions of peace balanced with the carriage of a proven warrior. I was just seventeen when an as-



sassin's ire and tangled wiring sent a bullet into the brain of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy late in the Moon of the Falling Leaves in 1963.

I saw that life can be snuffed out in just a few heartbeats. If this man could be slain in view of the world and with agents surrounding him and his wife, then who was safe, even in the United States of America? Amid worldwide confusion, the answer seemed clear: no one. While trees revive each spring, the skeletons of slaughtered humans do not.

In my youth I watched war movies, cops-and-robbers movies, and movies with cowboys shooting Indians. The killings were sanitized on the silver screen. The good guys and bad guys went home at night to their families, then returned the following morning to make a new film. It wasn't real but it appeared so. We played out those movies in our backyards, woods, and streets, good guys whooping in valor, bad guys falling and screaming in fabricated agony; then rising from the battleground to do it again and again, just like John Wayne and Audie Murphy.

Death meant nothing to us in those days, but it meant much to our fathers, who knew death yet rarely spoke of it. We kept shooting and dying, clutching our bloodless wounds, feigning mortal injuries, and exhaling the obligatory last breath. We were young with many moons to live.

Then in 1963 time seemed to stand still, maybe even reverse itself, without us realizing it, and moons whirled around us like a tornado. Life as we had known it was different, less fun, more uncertain. And in just a few more moons, the movies would come to life in a stifling, humid jungle eight thousand miles from home. There, where suns became moons in a steamy mist and moons seemed rare, the agony and mortal injuries became real. The stillness of our fathers screamed in our ears and we wept.

In the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam, many were felled by senseless, impartial bullets—not onto the ground of Bunker Hill, Gettysburg, or Shiloh but on the distant shores of Da Lat, Hue, and Pleiku.

For reasons that may never be truly understood, the youth of America—African American, Caucasian, Asian, Spanish, Native American, really just Americans in the end—fought and died in Vietnam for over ten years. To what end? My own sons did not have to go to war, and for that I am thankful. But it is regrettably inevitable that the silence of falling leaves on hillside monuments or visions of full moons rising will not stifle war. ■

Glenn Smith is a life member of VVA, formerly in Oregon, now in Ohio. He took the photograph along the banks of the Perfume River in Hue in January 2012.