

HORACIO FIDEL CARDO

# FREAKS & BABYKILLERS

BY ELIZABETH LIEBIG

It was a hot day in April of 1975. I was 13 and searching for my place in a world that made no sense to me. My mother was very ill, my father was an alcoholic and the world was coming unglued around me. I walked from the city bus, up a flight of stairs and into my dad's office. I quickly ascertained he wasn't there and sat down at his desk. He was the director of a community action program that offered every kind of service from a free medical clinic to retraining programs for veterans.

As I sat down I realized the room was abuzz with activities — much more than normal. I had never answered the phone but when it rang one of the other people signaled for me to pick it up. I said nervously, "Community Action, may I help you?"

"Yah, is Tommy there?" a ragged voice asked on the other end.

"No, but I'm his daughter. Can I help?"

"Have you been watching the news?" the voice demanded.

"I've been at school all day, but..."

The man on the other end interrupted me. "The commies are taking it honey. Saigon, Vietnam. Our boys died for nothin'."

Panic set in. I had no idea what I was dealing with here, and I was pretty sure my intro to psychology class wasn't going to help. I tried to get someone's attention, but everyone was too involved to help me.

"I don't think they died for nothing." Boy, that sounded stupid.

"Have you ever held your best friend as he died in your arms? Have you ever smelled blood in the jungle? There is this irony smell from the blood and the smell of decaying plants. And then he gasps his last breath and dies with his eyes staring up at you. It haunts you. What's your name?"

"Rebecca."

"Rebecca, do you know what I have?"

"No sir."

"I'm sitting here with a fifth of Jack and my service revolver. Do you know what I'm going to do?"

"Finish the fifth and take your own life?" I'd seen this on

TV. Boy, I sounded all grown up but I was scared to death. I had to stop this man.

"Good girl. Smart."

The line went quiet and I realized I had to do something.

"Sir, what is your name?"

"Jack. My name is Jack. Everyone is afraid of me. They say I'm a baby killer and a freak."

"I don't think you are either. Jack, tell me about your friend."

"Do you know the Barry Sadler song, *Watching the Rain Drops Fall*?"

"Of course...um... I'm watching the raindrops fall' and something about shadows on the wall."

"God, Rebecca, you must be the only woman in America who knows it. I'm like Sadler — my friends come to me at night and say, 'Don't let us die in vain.'"

"They didn't die in vain, Jack. You are here to tell their story." I was searching for words and nothing seemed to make sense.

"Well, I guess I am."

For the next hour I listened as he related stories about being in combat. That hour changed my world forever. Many things he said to me I have never repeated to anyone, and many of the things he told me are as clear today as they were on that April afternoon. When the conversation ended, so did my childhood.

As the conversation drew to a close I said, "Jack, can you do me a favor?"

"You listened. What?" he replied, his voice sounding sad and exhausted.

"Empty your service revolver where I can hear it," I requested. I don't honestly know where that came from.

"Sure. Can we talk again?"

"I'm here almost every afternoon."

I heard the chamber snap open and the bullets clank into or onto something.

"Thanks Jack." I was never so relieved to hear that noise.

"Bye Rebecca."

For the next 10 years I continued in school, worked with vets both as a listening ear and an advisor, and I was also involved in fund raising and lobbying for basic veterans programs. My daughter was born in 1984 and in 1990 I went back to school and made the biggest mistake of my life — I became a teacher.

I do not regret getting my degree in social work so I could continue to work with vets. I know today I could once again be of use but I don't have the money to return to school and there is no financial aid for people who already have a degree. My heart and soul wants to be back and working with the men and women coming home now.

Elizabeth Liebig is the high school coordinator at Tongue Point Job Corps Center. She lives in Astoria.

## PTSD

BY ANNA MYERS

PTSD stands for post traumatic syndrome disorder. It impacts the veterans of our country. The vets who live with PTSD have difficulty both at home and at work coping with every day life situations. PTSD impacts them in many ways; divorce, suicide, loss of custody of children or visitation rights.

PTSD impacts veterans of past wars, but it is now impacting the vets who are coming home from the Iraq War. Many of today's vets have served three or more tours of duty in Iraq. I think it is wrong for anyone to serve in a war that many times.

In the Vietnam War we had so many vets who came back with PTSD because of what they had to do in order to stay alive. Some of the vets who return from war have the added burden of survivor's guilt. Survivor's guilt is wondering why they survived a traumatic event but their comrades perished.

PTSD is a recognized medical condition characterized by exposure to a traumatic event. A person will experience this event through a flashback, and believe the event is happening again. Many other symptoms can include depression, anxiety, sleep disorder, and outbursts of anger (which may bring violent harm to themselves or others). Not all vets suffer from all symptoms at one time. Vets may not know or care to divulge if they are suffering from these symptoms, even to loved ones.

PTSD does not have to occur every year but can vary from year to year, depending on traumatic events that have happened to the individual. Gordon Kero, a Desert Storm veteran in our community, suffers from PTSD. Last year he had little or no flashbacks, but this year he has suffered from many flashbacks, his most traumatic in June.

Anna Myers is the daughter of Elizabeth Liebig. She is 22 years old. She was born with the effects of Agent Orange. Her father was a Vietnam veteran who died from Agent Orange exposure when she was 18 months old.

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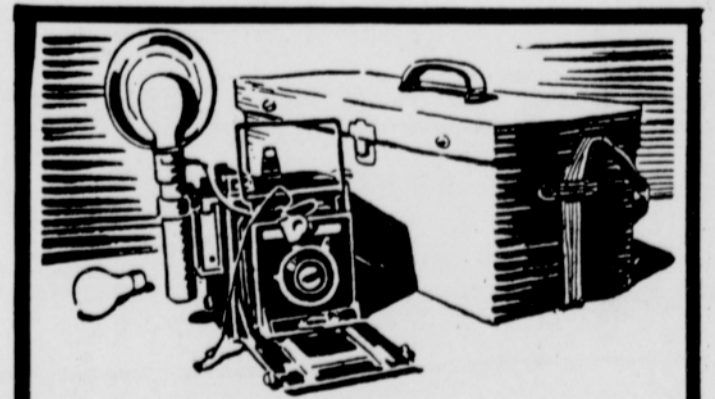
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