

Mẹ's War

Esther tries selling off her late father's military collection, not realizing the importance his diary holds for certain people in his and his wife's past.

written by

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INT. BASEMENT STORE, AFTERNOON. A ROW OF HIGH WINDOWS ALONG ONE WALL. A STAIRCASE TO THE STREET ABOVE. MILITARY PARAPHERNALIA IN THE PROCESS OF BEING PUT ON DISPLAY.

ESTHER (25, Vietnamese American, casually dressed, cheerful) is up a ladder hammering nails into the wall and balancing guns on them. She hears footsteps on the stairs.

ESTHER

Hi, sorry, we're not open till tomorrow!

NARI (a Korean woman, late 70s, quiet but direct) enters.

NARI

This is the military pop-up store?

Esther laughs as she comes down the ladder and points at a sandwich board, which has "Pop Down Store" chalked on it.

ESTHER

It's a pop down store actually. Because it's a basement building.

NARI

That's good. Clever!

ESTHER

Thanks. Anyway, I haven't even priced everything yet.  
(NARI raises her eyebrows)  
I know right! I'm going to be here all night getting ready!

NARI

I am looking for war diaries.

ESTHER

Oh, you won't find any of those here. The only diary I have is my Dad's and I'm keeping that.

NARI

All this is his?

ESTHER

Yep. A mad collector. He died last year and Mẹ has agreed to sell it.

NARI

Mẹ is 'mother'?

ESTHER

In Vietnamese. She and Dad met in the war. I'm turning their story into a film.

NARI

A film? I think I read about that.

ESTHER

Yep, a documentary. I've already got a producer. The money we get from this will help pay for it.

NARI

May I look at the diary?

ESTHER

Sure.

Nari finds a black and white photo: two grinning soldiers, one White in his mid 20s the other a Korean man of 18 or 19.

NARI

So, the American is your father?

ESTHER

Yep, and the Korean guy... well, I won't go into that.

NARI

Is the Korean guy going to be in your film?

There is something in Nari's voice that makes Esther pause.

ESTHER

I suppose you'll find out when it comes out.

Nari slips the diary into her handbag; heads for the stairs.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

(runs and blocks her way)

Hey!

NARI

I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. Here.

Esther takes the diary and watches as Nari makes her way up the stairs. A little shaken, she sits on the floor with her back to the counter. She finds the page with the photo. Below it is written "1968, Saigon. Jung-Seo and me. I thought he was a good man." Esther turns the page and reads on.

INT. BASEMENT, NIGHT.

ESTHER is asleep. The door upstairs bangs in the wind waking her. She pulls out her phone to check the time. It is 04:12.

ESTHER

Shit.

She exits upstairs, locks the door and flicks on a light, illuminating, among other things, the diary on the floor in front of the counter. She then starts pulling gas masks out of a box and suddenly has a funny idea. Giggling a little, she puts one on; then after setting her cellphone up on the counter to take a video, poses for the camera.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

(places hands over visor)

See no evil.

(hands over ears.)

Hear no evil.

(hands over mouthpiece)

Speak no...

A loud crash: breaking glass. Esther freezes; then madly tries to remove the mask but, in her panic, can't work out how. So, she dives behind the counter. Through the mask's visor, she sees the upstairs door with a fist-sized hole in the glass and a gloved hand fumbling with the lock. She scrambles into the narrow space under the counter. As footsteps descend the stairs, she notices the diary on the floor in plain view. She stretches out her arm but can't reach it. JUNG-SEO (60, Korean, clumsy, anxious) enters.

JUNG-SEO

Anybody here?

He searches quickly but not thoroughly, starting with the drawers behind the counter. Esther uses her foot to drag the diary close enough to grab with her hand. She disappears just as Jung-Seo comes out from behind the counter. He checks the pockets of some army uniforms and searches the countertop, not noticing the cellphone which has gone dark. He looks under the counter and sees the gas mask Esther is wearing but not Esther. He reaches for it and pulls. Esther struggles not to make a sound as her head is pulled this way and that. He gives up and makes a call on his cell.

JUNG-SEO (CONT'D)

It's not here. Yes, mother, all locked up, but the light was on.

NARI  
 (voice on phone)  
 Are you sure she's gone? She said  
 she would be there all night.

Esther, terribly squashed, adjusts her position.

NARI (CONT'D)  
 I have her home address. I'll pick  
 you up.

Jung-Seo hangs up and heads for the stairs but is stopped by the sound of Esther's cell receiving a text message. He goes to the counter and reads the text. It's from Mē and says, "Where are you? I thought you would be home hours ago."

JUNG-SEO  
 All I want is the diary.

He looks under the counter then straightens up. He notices some bayonets next to a bin full of rifles. Slowly and expertly, he attaches one to a rifle; then, squatting, starts repeatedly poking the bayonet at Esther till she comes out. Bayonet in hand, he backs her up against a wall.

JUNG-SEO (CONT'D)  
 Take off the gas mask.

She does. When JUNG-SEO sees her terrified face, he drops the bayonet and covers his face with his hands. We hear gunfire.

EXT. JUNGLE, VIETNAM.

Gunfire continues. A terrified young Vietnamese woman (Mē) is backed up against a tree, she resembles Esther somewhat. Three Korean soldiers prevent her escape. One of them, a young JUNG-SEO, forces himself on her.

Mē  
 (screaming)  
 No! Stop. Don't!

JUNG-SEO grunts with each thrust. The other soldiers encourage him. He comes and Mē falls to the ground sobbing.

INT. BASEMENT, NIGHT.

Jung-Seo still has his hands over his face. Mē's sobbing rings in his ears and he collapses to the ground. Esther runs to the stairs just as Nari, steely-eyed, enters. Esther backs away. Nari rushes to Jung-Seo and cradles him in her arms.

NARI

Jung-Seo. Jung. I'm here. I'm here.

Esther looks at the photo in the diary, then back at him.  
Jung-Seo speaks inaudibly.

NARI (CONT'D)

I know. But this girl and her  
documentary won't let you forget.

ESTHER

(murmurs)  
It's a part of history.

NARI

(viciously)  
What do you know? You have no idea  
what our soldiers went through.

ESTHER

He raped my mother.

NARI

Raped? He slept with her. No crime  
in that. She was single. She...

Nari Breaks off and turns her attention to Jung. Esther  
hoists herself up on to the counter and sits there. Silence.  
Then,

JUNG\_SEO

It was rape.

NARI

Jung-Seo! Don't ever say that.

JUNG-SEO

I raped her. I am so... ashamed.

NARI

You were a boy.

JUNG-SEO

(looking at Esther)  
I can still be ashamed.

She holds his eye for a moment, then turns away to look at  
the morning sun as it starts to come in through the windows.

Nari is silent. Jung-Seo weeps softly.