

Freedom

(Abridged)

By Eric D. Goodman

Joe watched the American landscape pass by as the train chugged along the tracks. It was comforting, this picturesque view. He needed comfort. The rolling farmland fell behind a forest of oaks and elms.

Joe thought of McMurphey, his buddy back in Afghanistan. McMurphey could have told him with certainty whether he'd made the right decision regarding Bin Laden and the war. Joe wished he could see things as clearly as his old friend had. McMurphey had a way of summing things up simply. "We're fighting for freedom," he'd once said in the dusty heat of a late Afghan afternoon.

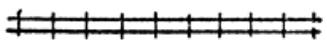
Manning, their friend and agitator, laughed as he wiped sweat from his forehead and flung it to the dry sand at their feet. "Whether we're heroes or henchmen depends on who's doing the introductions."

McMurphey flicked his cigarette butt into an ash can. "Ain't no question about it. We're willing to go into harm's way for democracy, willing to kill for justice, willing to die for freedom. Way I see it, that makes us heroes."

That's how Joe had seen it too, along with many of his brothers-in-arms. They'd come to the understanding through training and first-hand experience. When they'd been together in the blistering desert heat, Joe had stood behind McMurphey in shared convictions. But now, as Joe leaned his head against the cool window of the train and watched one Rockwell landscape pass into another, he questioned his mission. Not that it mattered what he, as an individual, thought.

Joe's time as a free man was passing by quickly, his days of roaming the country and visiting loved ones vanishing into the cool autumn air like the train's black smoke.

Outside the window, farm houses and barns speckled the pastoral landscape. A sturdy flagpole towered in front of one modest home. The stars and stripes waved confidently in the wind and it was all Joe could do to keep from saluting. There'd be time enough for such formalities when he got back.



Joe remembered the tall ship carrying him and Bi'nh out of the Baltimore harbor, into the waters of their first date.

They stood on the deck of the tall ship. The crew rushed around them, manipulating the ropes and heaving sails, sending invitation to the wind. In contrast to the sounds of a crew hard at work, the carousel's music from the harbor made its rounds in the salty air, complimented by the songs of street musicians on the boardwalk, playing steel drums and pan flutes.

The two stood together and watched the waves of activity around them. As the crew continued to lumber to and fro on the wooden deck, Joe and Bi'nh watched the Baltimore cityscape behind the harbor drift further away. When the sounds of the Inner Harbor had faded, leaving those of splashing water and surrounding conversations, Joe searched for some conversation of his own.

“This is great!” he said, realizing after he had said it that he shouldn’t compliment his own suggestion for a first date.

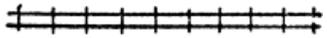
Bi'nh took in a deep breath of the sea air as she leaned her arms on the edge of the ship, overlooking the waves. “Yeah, I love the water.” She smiled. “And it sure beats one of those cheesy indoor dinner cruises.”

Joe mentally scratched what had been his idea for a second date. The sandal fit, though, that she’d prefer natural sailing to the excess of a motorized dinner cruise. Bi'nh was an environmental science major, a real tree-hugger. But she was a *hot* tree-hugger, golden skin on a thin frame, black hair that flowed like velvet beyond her shoulders. He wanted to touch that hair as the sea breeze lightly salted it. Standing beside her, he did.

Bi'nh smiled when Joe took her blowing hair in his hand and followed the lines to her face. “Isn’t it beautiful?” she asked. Her hair *was* beautiful. But as she turned from him to look at the setting sun, he realized what she’d meant.

“Oh.” He folded his arms in front of him and leaned on the edge beside her,

facing the sun. “Yeah. This is great.” The wind was cool, but the sun warmed their faces. Her skin shared the sun’s hue—and was equally as warm, he suspected. He reached out to her.



It took a tragic event to push Joe into the role of soldier.

He sat at his computer, entering figures into a database at the office where he temped. Marge, the chatty woman in the cube next to his, had a habit of reading the hot Internet headlines out loud. She was the office herald, alleviating Joe of the need to read the news himself. On this particular morning, she stood up to bellow out a big one. “My Lord! An airplane’s just hit the World Trade Center in New York!”

Joe finished the set of figures he was keying in before pausing to let the news register. “Wow, that’s pretty bad.” It was bad news in the way that a lot of news was bad: an airplane has been hijacked or has crashed; young children have been taken hostage and are being killed; several teenagers in a rural town have been murdered in another school shooting; a weather disaster has taken countless lives; an ethnic cleansing campaign has been reported in Africa or some far off country no one pays any attention to. Joe sighed and went back to his work.

Before he’d filled his screen, Marge was shuffling up and down the cubicle aisles announcing that a second plane had collided with the other tower. Then he

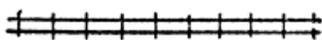
knew it was not just more bad news, not just another terrible accident. Hysteria broke out in the office when the Pentagon was struck. Eventually, everyone was sent home early because no one knew how this day would end.

On the car radio, as a fourth plane crashed in Pennsylvania, the devastation sounded even worse. At home he fixed his eyes on the screen's images and saw the unimaginable for himself: people jumping from the high, flaming windows, the towers crumbling into rubbish heaps of flesh, stone and glass. All he could think of was Bi'nh.

“It's terrible!” she cried. “What's this world coming to? Where's it going?”

Joe didn't know where the world was headed, but he knew where *he* was going. His slightly-over-minimum-wage assignment through the temp service wasn't important to him; Bi'nh was.

Joe's personal goals seemed insignificant as he held Bi'nh in the wake of September 11. So he enlisted.



When Joe arrived in Afghanistan, it was not what he had expected. The nation, in the aftermath of America's attack, was barren. The Taliban had been conquered, but the civilians of war-stricken cities and villages suffered. Joe and his brothers-in-arms kept the peace and watched over the efforts to rebuild.

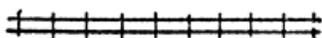
His outfit never stayed long in one place. It was just as well not to get to know these people, not to make friends. Some approached the American soldiers with smiling faces, respect, praise, and gratitude. They came with flowers, gifts, and heartfelt thanks for freeing them. But there were others too, and although the laughter and happiness of the friendly citizens were emotionally satisfying, the bullets and bombs of Afghans who were resentful of the armed guests were more than dissatisfying; they were deadly.



When Joe returned to the states, his first destination was Bi'nh. Her emails had been loving and supportive, but it wasn't enough. He needed her in the flesh, the touch of her golden skin and black hair, the scent and look of her.

She met him at Penn Station. He spotted her first—understandable, he figured, since he was one of hundreds pouring off the train. She was a gleaming bit of jade in a garden of stones.

Their reunion was wonderful ... and terrible.



There had been the good parts to the visit: holding her, loving her, her face nestled against his chest, his lips on the warm part in her silky black hair. Still, something had died between them during this visit as surely as his friends had died at his side in Afghanistan.

Back at Baltimore's Penn station, when it was time for him to leave, she invited him to stay with her and not go back to war. Joe held her at arm's length and looked her squarely in the eyes. "I have to go."

"No," Bi'nh insisted. "You don't. You can go AWOL. You'd be morally justified. You can stay with me and forget all the nonsense over there."

"Bi'nh, I'm enlisted. I don't have a choice. And even if I did, I'd go. I believe in what I'm doing."

Bi'nh's face contorted. "You mean you'd go to war instead of staying with me, even if you were free?"

"I don't mean it that way! But, I mean, somebody's got to fight this battle."

Bi'nh pulled away. "I never thought you'd turn out this way. You used to be gentle and kind. What have they done to you? To make you actually *want* to kill people and destroy nations? They brainwashed you."

Joe tried to wrap his arms back around her, but she wouldn't be captured. "I'll come back," he promised. "As soon as I get back, you'll be my first stop."

“No.” Her golden face hardened. “Stay with me now. Or don’t come back at all. If you go back over there and hang around soldiers all the time, you’ll change even more than you have. The next time I see you, I won’t recognize you. I couldn’t bear that.” The train’s whistle blew. “Stay with me.”

“I can’t,” Joe said. And he stepped onto the train. He found his window seat and looked out to her, waving. But she didn’t wave back.

Finality filled her teary eyes and it tore at his heart as the train proceeded and left her alone at Penn Station. When he left her for the war, he chose it over her, over them. Nothing in the war was quite as painful as this. As the train carried him away, he wished they’d never talked about the war. He didn’t mind fighting in it as much as talking about it. Talk could be destructive.

In the dust of Afghanistan, visualizing Binh in his arms had given him something focus on. He tried to imagine what would take her place now.

Joe clung to the idea even as it dissipated into the cool autumn air, smoke from the train’s smokestack: he fought for freedom. But the belief was leaving him just as

he'd left Bi'nh at the station. Just as he'd chosen America's war over Bi'nh's love. It was an elusive freedom for which Joe fought, a freedom he could not claim as his own.

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