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Mrs. Rutan
English IV
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A Letter of Closure

Dear Sammy,

October had been my favorite month. The leaves turning from green, to various shades of yellows, reds, oranges, and browns. The cool weather moving in, bringing with it a chilly, pleasant breeze. The month of October was filled with apple cider, doughnuts, pumpkin picking, hayrides, haunted houses, bonfires, and costume parties.

Most importantly, I met you in October.

I was eighteen when I got drafted into the Vietnam War. Fresh out of high school, with my whole life ahead of me, ready to conquer the world. That is until an ivory envelope, with my name addressed on it, ended up in my rusty green mailbox. The envelope contained one page; the words, "order to report for induction," written at the top, and my name—Luke Bennett—written in smeared black ink was all I needed to see. I'd known right away I had been drafted into the Vietnam War; I was not ready to put my future on hold.

I went through basic training. It was a fast process of getting you ready for war; limiting your food, getting you in shape, and teaching you how to use the weapons. Eighteen years old, and I had not shot a gun until basic training. Nothing could have prepared me for the misery of training. It was nothing like the football conditioning, suicides, and sprints I was used to from high school sports. I remember thinking that it must have been a mistake. That I wasn't supposed to be there. Looking back now, there was no mistake. I now know that I was supposed to go to the war, and meet you, my best friend.

I arrived in Vietnam at the start of October. Nobody engaged with me, unless they had to. I had read in a paper, before coming, that the new soldiers were most likely to die in their first 19 days in Nam. Everybody avoided me like the plague. They stayed away as if I had some contagious skin disease. That is everybody, except for you.

It was my first day, and I was eating lunch alone. My first meal in Nam. I sat at the warped, bamboo table, shoveling the tasteless food into my mouth. I saw you looking at me from another table, but you didn't know it. After about 5 minutes, you marched on over and sat down across from me. You reached your strong, tan hand across the table; your dirt sleeve barely missed my plate of food. You told me your name was Sam, and that they called you Sammy. I shook your hand and told you my name was Luke, and they called me Luke. You then told me about your

parents—how abusive and drunk they were—and how Vietnam was an escape for you. You had jumped into the deep talk right away.

You told me you had no future, but I believe you would've had a great one. You told me to add hot sauce to my food to give it some sort of flavor, and then shared your bottle of it with me. After that, I was amazed. You told me how you signed up for the war, and how you were 19, and been there for 4 months and some odd days. Information, facts, and stories poured out of your mouth like a waterfall. You were an endless supply of words, energy, and humor. I think I said a total of 8 words—just enough to tell you my name—and then sat, and listened, and laughed the rest of lunch.

We instantly became the best of buds. We had each other's backs. You saved my ass from a bullet or two, and I saved your ass from stepping on a hidden bomb. You taught me things that took you months to learn and figure out. You seemed to shine happiness into a dark and dangerous place.

I remember the first death I saw to this day. It was my third day in Nam. I hadn't really known Darrell, just seen him around, maybe exchanged a few words with him. We were out on a hike, which seemed to only be going uphill. It was hot out, nothing like the cool fall weather my body was used to; I missed the chilly fall breeze and colorful leaves that I loved. We stopped to rest and hydrate. Darrell, you, and I were towards the front of the group. The sun was out, and it was extremely hot. The type of heat that itches your skin, and makes you irritable. You and I had just been joking, you know, the full out laughs. The bang of a gun stopped us in our tracks. No more laughing. I heard a second and third shot come from our end, and heard the thud of a body fall. Somebody yelled for us to move, to get out in case there were more Viet Cong. I couldn't.

Darrell was slumped over, covered in a pool of his own blood. His face hung low, and his chin rested on his collarbone. He had the starting of a new beard, the color of his dark brown hair. Move, somebody kept yelling. I felt like I was in a movie, when everything you hear is so distant, and you can't bring yourself back to your body. I couldn't move or think, or *feel*. I sat there, shocked. It was hot out. We had just been laughing. I partly blamed myself as I looked at Darrell. Blood started coating the ground around the body. The body of Darrell. Maybe if I had been paying attention, or been quieter, I thought, blaming myself. His chin was resting on his collarbone, as blood leaked from a hole in his chest. I remember this so vividly, and sometimes awake from a nightmare, reliving it all over again. Bang was all I could hear. The sound of the gun that pierced his flesh. I looked away. I looked at Darrell. His chin was resting on his collarbone as the puddle of blood got bigger. The red liquid consumed him like a monster. He was slumped over—dead.

Bang. That was all it took. A four letter word that takes your life and tears you apart. Rips away at your insides, leaving you in a pool of your own blood, as your chin rests on your collarbone. I kept staring at Darrell, all slumped over in an uncomfortable position. He sat in a puddle of his

dark red blood. You had to pull me away, Sammy, to get me to stop looking. If somebody asked me to describe death, I would describe Darrell, slumped over with his chin resting on his collarbone...or maybe I would describe you.

When we got back, after you pulled me away from the scene, you told me not to change. To keep feeling what I felt then. You had told me to keep my emotions, and never let them go. Most men lose them you had explained, and that is the truth, but I kept mine bound to my heart; all because of you and your advice, I still have them now.

It was towards the end of October when you died. I hadn't been there with you. I wasn't with my best friend in your last moments.

I was accustomed to the war by then, and I felt invincible. That was until I saw your body being carried back to camp, and heard a man radio for a copter. At first it was just disbelief. There was no way it was you. Then I got closer, and saw your face. I remember yelling at the men carrying you to stop, and they obeyed, without meeting my eyes. My cheeks became wet with my salty tears, as I looked down at you, Sammy. I looked at your face first. There was a gash on your cheek, sewn up by your dried blood. Your eyes were closed, resting with your body. Pale skin stretched over your strong cheekbones, and ash coated your wavy, auburn hair. I moved my eyes to your limp and lifeless body. Your nubby grey undershirt was red, and your left black boot was missing, revealing a dirty white sock. Could you see yourself then, from above? Could you see me as my body crumpled like a ball of paper, and I cried? I had never seen you so lifeless, so still. You'd always been a warm ball of energy, and at that moment, you were a cold and lifeless corpse. Could you feel my feelings? My sadness and grief. My anger at the Viet Cong for taking you, at the United States for putting us in the war, and mostly at myself for not being there—the anger burned inside me, but my wet salty tears fizzled the flame. You had lit up Nam, and without you, it was dark.

Two years later, I was shot in my calf, and it got an infection. When I was healthy enough to make the travel back, I was sent back home to the United States, and discharged from the army. You lost your life, and I lost my leg to a war in which we didn't belong.

Every October, since my time in the war, reminds me of Nam. The red leaves resemble the color of blood that coated so many men. The chilly breeze blows in the fear of death, and always being on guard. I don't go to haunted houses, haven't been to one since before Nam—I can't take people sneaking up on me, I don't want any more fear. The bonfire smoke rising from the flames bring back scents of explosions, gunfire, and burning flesh.

Sometimes I wake up, after dreaming of your pale lifeless body, and I can't breathe all over again. It's like I'm living the day again, and again for each nightmare I have. Sometimes I wake up after dreaming of Darrell, and his body slumped over, as his chin sits on his collarbone, resting in a pool of his own blood. Sometimes I wake up after dreaming of the other men I had

known, and watched die over in Nam. It's on these nights that I lay awake in my bed, next to my beautiful wife Cheryl, and picture how I too will die. Not by a Viet Cong bomb or bullet, then by what? To calm my thoughts on those nights, I picture our times together. Our laughs, and memories, and friendship. I picture my wife and me raising our 3 children--we named our eldest son Sam. Or I picture my 8 grandkids running around me, and laughing their innocent laughs; I hope they never have to face the hardships of war, and heartbreak of loss.

On those nights, I never picture how it would actually end. Do you know Sammy? I'll tell you in case you don't. Two months ago I was diagnosed with cancer. Chemotherapy didn't work, and it has spread through my body. It's intertwined with my body, making it impossible to cut out. The doctors say I have weeks left. I'll miss my wife and family, but I know I will see you again. I'm so tired Sammy. I can't even write this letter without my hands shaking. Later my son Sam will help me to your grave so I can read this to you. I feel like I have little Viet Cong soldiers attacking my insides, and shooting at what's left of me. I'm so incredibly tired. I have lived a blessed 71 years, and met some amazing people in my life—you being one of them. This letter has given me closure, and I can go whenever the Lord is ready. This is one battle that I will lose, among others. When I see you again, I'll be the one filling you in on the stories, information, and life I have had, life that I wish you could've been a part of. You'll be happy to know that I tracked down your folks after I got out of the war, and they had been sober since your death. I think they regret not really being with you when you were alive. You didn't think so, but I know you would've had a hell of a future man. I love you like a brother.

Until soon,
Luke