

Out of Darkness.

A short story *by* Russell Perry

Captain Peter Graves clung desperately to consciousness as his crippled F/A-18E fighter plunged from the skies above Iraq. A ground to air missile had slammed into his aircraft, as he returned from a bombing mission to an ISLE-held village in the north of the country, and he feared, in that moment, that he was very likely to go down in enemy territory.

The fighter's twin engines howled in protest as he wrestled with the controls, fighting to climb to a safe altitude, in the hope that he might limp back to his carrier in the Persian Gulf.

After what seemed an eternity, by some miracle he finally found himself over water, searching the ocean through damaged eyes for any sign of his home ship. The threat of unconsciousness closed in on him as he desperately shifted his failing vision left and right, wanting to ditch as close to his carrier as he could, but his efforts were to no avail. He ran out of time, as the engines of the fighter stalled, and the F/A 18 fell from the sky like a wounded bird.

He hit his ejector button at the last possible moment and was propelled away from the stricken fighter, the resulting g-forces causing him to lose consciousness and drift into darkness as his chute popped automatically.

Muffled voices brought Peter from the nothingness, scrambled thoughts trying to make sense of his desperate situation. *What were they saying?* Their muted conversation seemed just beyond the range of his comprehension. *Were they speaking in another language? Where was he?* Tremendous pain came as he tried to look around him. He could see nothing; there was only darkness, a deep impenetrable void. Panic seized him, and he tried to move again, as the terrible pain racked his body, overwhelming him, as he drifted into oblivion once again.

Peter slowly emerged from his dark hell. He was in warm sunlight, on a wide beach, with small waves lapping on glistening sand. He recognized this beach; he'd been here before. The surrounding scenery of tropical rain forest cascading down mountain sides to meet the white sandy beach, told him that he was home in North Queensland, but the memory of the exact location wouldn't come to him.

He heard his name being called in a voice that forever gave him joy. He had heard it for the first time in a bar in Cairns, and it continued to bring him happiness from that day to this. Her voice creating a thrill in him, which became a warmth and a comfort.

"Pete! There you are my love. I've been waiting for you; I knew you would come."

He turned to see Jennifer, his beautiful wife walking along the beach toward him. Splashing through the small waves as she ran to him now, her arms outstretched, and as they came together and embraced, he rejoiced at her touch, her smell, her nearness.

Then suddenly, he paused as questions rushed at him; he held her from him and looked into her eyes.

"This is impossible Jen, where are we? What's going on?"

She smiled a dreamy smile and spoke softly. "You must remember this place Pete. This is where we had our honeymoon. Don't tell me you've forgotten." She put on a mock look of hurt feelings, but then smiled again. "We are in Australia, at Port Douglas silly, on Four Mile Beach, our beach, you remember."

Peter looked around him. "Yes, but how is that possible? I was away in the war. How did I get here?" He shook his head in confusion. "This can't be real. Have they drugged me?"

He took his hands from Jen's shoulders and put them up to his head, turning to look back along the beach. "This can't be real," He repeated. His head swam, and the skies darkened.

Suddenly he was in complete darkness again. The strange voices were back, susurrations from just the other side of the impenetrable veil, coming to him in low, incoherent whispers.

He thought about his last reality, he remembered blacking out as he ejected.

Had he been captured by ISLE? Please god no. It was every pilot's nightmare, being captured by those butchers. Death would be the preferred option.

The pain was back now. He couldn't move or see. *Please let me die ... better than being beheaded by these butchers, or worse ... tortured.*

He thought about the illusion of being on the beach with Jennifer, and how real it seemed. *I saw Jen, I touched her. How could that be possible? Could it be drugs? Do they know about her?* How he wished he was back with her now, on that golden beach, with the cool sea breeze on his face. He knew it must be an illusion, but it seemed so real, and he felt no pain when he was with her.

Again, he could hear the jumbled voices. Urgent, abrupt, but he couldn't make out their words. *What were they saying? What language were they speaking?* A flash of light seemed to cross his vision and was gone.

He heard sounds of metal implements being dropped on a tray. *Torture implements? Surely it was impossible to inflict more pain.* The voices came to him faintly, there seemed to be a wall, muffling sound, blocking light; there was only blackness, pain. He drifted away again into his nothingness.

He was on the beach again. He looked around for her and there she was, sitting at the top of the sand in the shade of palm trees, a zephyr of breeze teasing her soft blond hair. She was smiling at him as she held out her arms and calmly beckoned him to her. "There you are my darling. Where did you go? You must stay here with me; this is where you belong now."

He went to her and dropped down beside her in the shade. "Could this be real Jen? Am I

really with you? Or is this a drug induced illusion?"

He looked around him, searching for some reality. He felt the warm sand run through his fingers, the breeze on his face. He looked back to her in surprise. "This is real? But I'm in a dark cell somewhere in the Middle East. I can't be here."

Jennifer smiled at him again and put her soft hand to the side of his face. "But you can stay here Pete. You can stay with me. There is no need to go back there."

He looked back at his wife, he had never seen her so serene and perfect. "But honey, how are we here, if I'm in that awful place and you were home when we spoke on Skype yesterday? It doesn't make sense."

She put her arms around him and put her head against his chest. "This is where we belong now Pete, together again. No more loneliness, no more war, no more pain."

He stroked her hair, "Is it true Jen? I can stay with you?"

She held him more tightly. "Yes Pete, just let go of your pain and fears. You're with me now, in this beautiful place, our happy place. Just close your eyes and be with me."

Peter did as she asked. He wanted so badly to stay with her, in the warmth of her embrace and in the glow of her love, away from the pain.

He drifted off again, he didn't know for how long, but this time when he woke, he was still on the beach with Jennifer. They rose from the sand and walked hand in hand along the water's edge, and he knew that this was where he belonged, and this is where he would stay.

Outside the darkness Peter had left behind, there was also light, a surgery light shining on the body of Captain Peter Graves.

Dr. Allen Spicer removed his gloves and turned to his assistant.

"He's gone. Death came at 14.17 hours."

Dr. Spicer walked out of the medical theatre on US Aircraft carrier Orion and addressed the

waiting General Peterson.

"I'm sorry General; we were unable to save Captain Graves. His head injuries were too severe. By the time they pulled him from the water he had lost a lot of blood."

General Peterson dropped his head for a moment and then replied. "Thank you, Doctor. Captain Graves was a fine officer, he will be sadly missed. The added tragedy is that, shortly after he left on this mission, we received word that his wife had been killed in a car accident. Well at least he doesn't have to face that loss, he's at peace now."

The End.