

*Thomas Bonner, Jr.*

Nurse

“**N**o, Adrien is not home, not at the hospital either. She’s in Vietnam.” If I say that one more time, I’ll scream. She has

been gone five months, and my friends in school shake their heads. Why would anyone willingly go there? For God’s sake, she’s a woman and married. None of my explanations wash, and hers don’t get a full sentence before the questioner shakes his head and walks away. I know why she went and I still wonder.

I’m in my second year of Ph.D. coursework in English. Unlike many of my friends, I actually like what I’m doing, but down deep I know it keeps me out of the draft. The major task this semester is working through *Beowulf* in Old English—this week the fight with Brecca. Our study group divides the work into sections of twenty-five lines a week for which each is personally responsible—context, translation, parsing, in other words, the works. Concentration comes hard when her letters arrive only every ten days or so.

Adrien is a surgical nurse in a field hospital near Cam Ranh Bay. Her health is good, but she sounds tired and distracted. Her letters describe the wounded and dying in vivid detail, almost as if she is writing to herself. More and more, I feel that I’m only the keeper of the records of her experience. She begins them in a personal, often intimate way but soon she enters another world, one in which I know I have no part.

Her account of Bryan Joseph is a good example. She had told me how much she missed me and our old studio apartment and her friends on the second floor at Ochsner Hospital. Bryan had an abdominal wound and was barely conscious as he was prepped for surgery to remove shrapnel and tie everything together in an orderly knot of organs and tissue.

The previous surgery was taking longer than expected and she would come by to encourage him and check on bleeding and shock. He began to tell her about his life in Memphis and got as far as his high school prom before he was taken in and put under. He didn't make it, so she wrote his aunt about what a nice fellow he was and that his suffering had been minimal and that he had had great hopes for life at home when all this was done. He had been a jeep driver mostly, and had been simultaneously relieved by rarely being near combat and yet vexed by its distance from his everyday experience. She wrote about the correspondence between him and his aunt, and soon I was nowhere in the letter.

Adrien is hard to explain, but I will try. Her dad had told her about a friend that he had made years ago and that this person had fought in World War II in the Pacific island campaign. Wounded on Iwo Jima, he had been evacuated to a ship and tended by beautiful nurses. When her father told the story as he did many times, even to me, the nurses grew more beautiful, more plentiful, and more nurturing. His friend survived, according to her father, only because of these wonderful women. The year after we were married her father died in a car accident, a head on collision, as he was taking his students to a basketball game. Adrien was devastated. She was a year from finishing her degree in nursing—she would study and work while I was in graduate school and then she would go for a master's degree.

She did finish the program, but her demeanor had been quiet. One day she told me that she thought that she could join the army as a nurse. It would not only be substantial experience but that the pay and allowances would cover our living expenses while I was in school. She knew that the separation would be hard, but that I could really concentrate on school and finish more quickly—after all, there were some weekends and many holidays. She made a strong case and I could not persuade her otherwise.

We did somewhat well through her training, the ardor for each other still being strong. Her initial assignment was at Fort Polk, an afternoon's drive away, and I got used to carrying a dependent's card for services at the nearby Navy base. Then she received orders to Vietnam, a shock to her and me. I railed against the move, but she said that unless she was pregnant there was no impediment to her assignment. She wasn't pregnant; she'd been on the pill even before we were married and impregnation comes slowly when one gets off it. I flew with her to San Francisco,

where we had four days together, and then she left for Southeast Asia and I came back to Tulane.

I have to admit the material aspects of my life were good, certainly in comparison with that of my classmates. A two bedroom unit replaced the studio with one room's being a study. I shopped at the commissary and exchange at the nearby Navy base and received medical attention there for the usual assortment of viruses and flues. The checking account actually had a small balance at the end of the month and a passbook showed a modest savings account. The VW bug with its well warmed back seat was still a used one, but it was only five years old.

It was not unusual for graduate students to be supported by their wives, but it was unusual for one's wife to be in the military service and even more so for her to be in a combat zone. Even though Adrien was a nurse, my classmates made comments about "baby killers" and napalm. Even among liberal students observations about her sexuality emerged in conversations. I was never in favor of the war, but I understood how we got there and how the loyalties and goals rooted in the Second World War were soon out of place and time in this one. What Adrien wrote and what I experienced grew far apart.

Yes, I love her, loved her for years, knew her when she played at tea parties with her sister and friends. She served me a cup of tepid tea one afternoon when I passed by her circle sitting on the grass. She sat surrounded by a swath of pink skirt and a white blouse with grass stains.

Two months ago she wrote me about storing her clothes to protect them from the moths and the roaches. Even in nicer apartments the roaches in New Orleans are omnipresent. The dresses and blouses hanging in the closet always assuaged the loneliness, but removing them made it seem as if she were dead. So I replaced her things with my athletic gear. She was right: her yellow frock had a tell-tale brown stain already.

So I had it cleaned, but a slight tan smudge persisted. In that letter, she recounted flying with a wounded Marine to the rear hospital because he couldn't be put out and his twisting and reaching dismantled all the life saving work that had gone into him. When she landed, her blood-soaked clothes were discarded, but her new jacket and pants were too large, causing the men in the nearby reception station to laugh. Her dark hair must still have been attractive because one of the soldiers waiting for transportation to a forward area asked her to join him for a beer. She went. He wrote her twice after that, according to her, but the letters

stopped. When she inquired about him, she discovered that he had stepped on a mine. The army had recovered his body and sent it home. She said that because she didn't know his family, she would write me about him. Other than a mild "how are the courses," there was little about me, even us.

When Beowulf was battling underwater, in such a foreign environment, there was the sense that it was the equivalent of Hades in the Greek epics and dramas. Our professor seemed less interested in the mythic parallels than in our ability to explain the linguistic constructions, especially the endings of the verbs. In the evenings I would walk home along St. Charles Avenue beneath the live oaks, whose leaves rarely dropped but only changed shades of green. The constant humidity suggested a mustiness, almost the smell of death, even in an environment in which everything from mold to weeds grew at paces beyond those of a field of runners. At Fern Street, I stopped for beer at Serio's. The odor of old beer and old wood permeated the darkness. Smells of tomato gravy drifted into the *mélange*. Dee Roberts from the Victorian poetry seminar walked in from the side entrance. So I had another beer. Around the conference table, I always stared at her long, often tangled and dirty red hair. That night she came home for supper under the pretext of going over some Browning. I tried not to think about sex then, even in the morning when I saw a thin red hair on a towel where once was a nearly coarse black one.

I had wondered whether I could have sex with another woman, and I had found out. I felt dirty, so I washed the sheets and towels. While waiting for them to dry, I wrote Adrien. I had much to say, but what I said camouflaged the real impulse for my writing. I said nothing about Dee, but I did write that I had stored the clothes and that there was a new emptiness. In order to get her to write about us, I interweaved various questions about her and the plans we had discussed long before we married. It felt different today, and I wondered whether she would be able to tell.

At the commissary on Saturday, I heard a group of Navy wives talking about their husbands, one of whom was patrolling rivers in the Mekong Delta. He had come down with a sexually transmitted disease. Her friends were consoling her and invoking the exigencies of war—not their word. I wondered. Adrien had come from a parochial school and believed in sexual abstinence before marriage. When we made love, she suffered and wrestled with her conscience, and when we were married,

she tried not to wear white, but her mother had insisted. When I was checking out, the clerk glanced at my card and asked if my father was overseas. I replied that my wife was. She looked at me in a lesser way and simply said, "Oh."

That week we read and talked about Browning's "Porphyria's Lover," in which a young man of lesser social standing meets his long haired lover and wraps her hair about her neck, strangling her, during an embrace to keep her all his own. I thought about Adrien's dark hair wrapped after a shower in a white towel that fell to her waist, but I saw Dee's long, nearly clotted strands of red falling into my face. It had been years since I had been to confession, but I thought it was time.

Before the evening Mass that day, I gathered myself up and drove myself into this dark booth at Holy Name of Jesus Church. When the screen opened, I spoke the ritual words memorized and exercised all through my youth. The priest cautioned me to think about faithfulness, asked that I say an "Our Father," and closed the screen. When I was a child, I'd always felt cleansed. Not this time. I wasn't really sorry. I wanted to see Dee again. And I did.

When Adrien's letter came, she chatted about the hot and humid weather—how similar it was to July and August in New Orleans and described a new friend in the ward, Henry, who had been wounded in the groin and who was concerned about the future of his sex life. She then moved through my queries. She worked Sundays, but had Tuesday off. She said it was quiet with nearly everyone in the quarters working and she slept soundly, in a manner that was not allowed most nights. She said the occasional shelling and the aircraft noise was not the problem; it was the sounds of radios and tapes trying to sweep out the day's debris. She remembered our plans to move into the Appalachians to live and work in a small town, where there might be a hospital and a college. She wondered whether this was still possible, whether anything was possible. It was a change from the growing distance between us into a fragmentation of her self. She wrote "As ever" and signed the initial A.

Dee moved in to the apartment on weekends and I moved my athletic gear back into the trunk from the closet, so she could hang her clothes. We talked about our courses and the small cafes that dotted the neighborhood. She asked about Adrien once and said that she must be strange: "After all, why join the Army at a time like this?" Dee was from New Jersey and had lived within sight of Manhattan for most of her life, even going to college at NYU. Tulane was part of needing a change in her

life, and she had heard that she could buy some time down here while thinking about what she really wanted to do.

At first we hardly left the apartment on weekends. In fact we lay in each other's arms on every available surface. After a month and two letters from Adrien, she came with me to the commissary. The clerk who had checked me out before asked if she were my sister. I said, "Yes." That night we had dinner at Serio's as the checking account was flush. Afterwards, we walked down St. Charles Avenue listening to the birds and the singing of the streetcar rails as the cars passed. Suddenly, when we were near riverbend, an ambulance with its siren shattering the evening harmonies crossed the median only to be rammed by a streetcar. A crowd quickly gathered from the college bars on the corners and official vehicles arrived to the continuing siren of the damaged ambulance. Uniformed aides transferred an inert body from one stretcher to another and then sped it away. The ambulance driver walked about throwing up his hands while the streetcar driver complained to a police officer. Finally, the siren quieted and trucks towed the vehicles away. We left the no longer crowded intersection and went to the apartment. I was tired that night. Two weeks later Dee moved back to her place with her three roommates.

Adrien's letter arrived before I left for class on Friday. A small dead bug fell from the folded paper. She was being discharged and would be returning to New Orleans in ten days. The prose was terse and economical: she was pregnant.

I met her at the airport on Monday, where we hugged each other. I carried her bag to the car and placed it lengthwise on the back seat. We talked quietly about inconsequential things like her complexion on the way to the apartment, where she replaced her uniform with jeans and a T-shirt. I then left for the Hemingway seminar.

Before she and I had to turn in our ID cards, we made a big run to the commissary. In the familiar local fashion, the clerk asked, "Well now, and who is this?"

"My wife," I said.

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