

Kim Chinquee

Service

The Air Force was strange for a woman, even for me, and I'd been in eight years. I'd just moved to England with my son Ian, to a tiny base that was supposed to do clean up during the Gulf War, only there wasn't any cleanup to do, and now they kept the place running with a skeleton staff. I was part of that. I moved to get away from my husband, Scotty, who I was trying to make my ex-husband, though he wasn't too sharp at signing the papers. My dad said maybe if I went overseas Scotty would know I was for real.

The housing was military. What that meant in England was a two-storey brick duplex, the same one the Air Force builds in Biloxi, or Saudi Arabia, or Singapore. My neighbor was a career guy named Keith and he came over to see me a lot. He had two kids of his own and his wife already signed his papers. When he came over Saturday I was getting Ian ready for bed.

"How you doing?" he said peeking around the corner into my doorway. "We going to bed? I mean—Ian?"

"That's the idea," I said. "Come on in."

Keith's hair was dusty red, greenish eyes, and freckles roamed across his face. My son, Ian, waddled up as Keith stepped in the doorway. Keith offered a high-five, and Ian looked at him as if he was from Mars, then planted his bottle back in his mouth. He was almost two, too old to have a bottle, maybe, but I thought maybe it was better to let him keep it, I didn't know, so he wouldn't wonder where his father was. Then I thought maybe it was me wondering, not him.

"He kind of threw another tantrum," I said, following Ian into the living room.

"It's a stage, believe me." Keith plopped on my sofa, picked up a *Runner's World*, sifted through the pages, then flipped the TV to the USAFE station. Ian put his hands up on the screen. He seemed amused by the crackling sound on the glass. When I pulled him back he started crying, so I picked him up and headed for the stairs. "You want to hang around?" I said. "I'll be right down." As I trailed up the stairs, Ian kicked his chubby legs, clutching his bottle for dear life, then screamed like he always did when he figured it was bedtime.

Upstairs I stopped in the hall bath and checked myself in the mirror. I looked a little bedraggled. "You know," I said to Ian, "it's time for bed." I

straightened my hair with my fingers.

I put Ian in his crib and twisted the knob of the silver music box that Scotty's mother had given us, all the time wondering whether I'd rather go down and see Keith, or just go to sleep myself. Ian stood in his crib, grabbed the rails, yelling out my name—he never called me Mommy, but Beth, because other people called me that.

I pointed to myself, saying, "Mommy. I'm Mommy. Can you say that?"

He stood quiet for a second, then picked up his bottle from the crib, sucking on it for a while, then crying again, and I kissed his sweaty forehead, then turned on the Big Bird night-light. "Goodnight sweetheart," I said, and switched off the ceiling light and headed out the door. As soon as the door closed his whimpering blew up into full scale wailing. I stood there deciding whether to go back in or leave him alone, finally deciding to check on Keith first, then wait and see how long Ian was going to keep it up.

I went downstairs, where Keith was leaning into the fridge, helping himself to spinach lasagna in the kitchen. "This is good stuff," he said with a mouthful, putting the lid back on the dish, sticking it back inside the fridge. "I didn't know you made that."

"I did it last night for your kids, remember? You had that thing to go to."

"Well, it's pretty darn good." He put the spoon in the sink along with the other dirty dishes I'd left out from supper. He reached for my hand and I gave it to him, and then he pulled me against him, leaning over and kissing my ear. "How's it going?" he whispered.

I listened to Ian crying upstairs, and felt Keith's breath on my neck, and I knew that going to sleep was the last thing on either's mind.

The first day I moved in, Keith asked me out, but I wasn't interested. After that, every time I left the place, he was outside doing something—washing the car, playing Frisbee or just sitting on the front step with his kids. Sometimes he mowed my lawn. We left for work at the same time, pulling out of the drives, waving goodbye like the stupid Brady Bunch. His girls were always knocking on my door, asking me to play. They must've missed their mother, who they hadn't seen since the divorce. Keith didn't seem to mind doing it all himself, but things were different for me—I was still getting used to living alone, no Scotty, and Ian to take care of, and in England to boot, though I guess that didn't matter so much since I never went anywhere off base, so it was like a tiny America there. I sat around a lot, staring at Ian making baby noises, thinking about calling Scotty, wondering if I'd done the right thing in leaving. At the base in the middle of Nowhere England, I worked at the clinic that was connected to a kind of bunker that had been a morgue in the Second World War and I wore com-

bat boots and BDUs. I checked in patients, took their vital signs, and did blood work when Doctor Frye ordered it. It was just the two of us and not a lot to do, so most of the time, I played an old abandoned piano in the bunker. Keith worked in supply, over at the warehouse, a big place with a lot of room, where he got good at volleyball because they played it every day since they didn't have that much to do. When stuff did come in, which wasn't very often, he and his friends stopped playing and did inventory before shipping the stuff out. While I worked, Ian stayed with an Air Force wife who had a British accent. Keith's daughters went to a pretty girl named Judy.

Scotty had been there, at that base in England, during Desert Storm. He helped set up a war hospital in a giant hangar, waiting to fix people after they got splattered, though that never really happened—none of the casualties were sent there. I was in New Jersey on the blood collection team, processing units for a stockpile no one ever needed.

After that so-called war, Scotty came home, left the Air Force, and beat me into a wall. Then the Air Force, happily, gave me orders for England, which seemed to me a convenient way to get away.

After I got set up, I cleaned up the administrative mess left over from the war, stuff everyone left behind: old papers, charts and schedules scattered everywhere. Then I went to the base bank to set up an account, and an Irish girl, teller named Geri saw my name, and asked if I'd known Scotty—she was the first person there I met who'd known him. After I told her he was my soon-to-be ex husband, she got quiet, nodding, saying she was sorry. But she was real friendly after that, anytime I stepped into the bank to cover the bad checks Scotty wrote me. Once she invited me over for tea, and although I told her I didn't want to see it, she showed me a videotape of a birthday party for Scotty that she'd had at her house, and which he had never mentioned. Ian fell asleep, so I put him in her bed, and she fast-forwarded, showing sections of the tape where Scotty slammed Guinness while playing Spades and cussing, just like he did at home. It wasn't his best performance. The people on the tape were all strangers to me. There was one guy who looked kind of like Keith, but I didn't think it was him.

When her husband, Dan, came home from work she introduced us and asked me to stay for a drink, but I was tired and I said I had to go. I went to the bedroom to get Ian, and on the dresser I saw a watch that resembled one Scotty had said he'd lost. I picked it up and saw the inscription, then pocketed it when I heard footsteps coming toward the room. Dan stepped inside. "You can stay over if you want to. Save you the trouble of waking the boy, huh? We have an extra room," he said, touching my shoulder.

“Thanks, but I gotta go,” I said, picking up Ian.

After I went home and put Ian into bed, I started thinking about all that stuff with Scotty. He was such a jerk. I put his watch around my wrist. I knocked on Keith’s door and asked what he was doing, and he said nothing much, so I asked him over.

We ate together most nights, and while we did the dishes, the kids would play or watch *Barney* or some Disney movie. After we put the kids to bed, we’d sit outside or watch TV. The British girls that I’d seen going to Keith’s weren’t visiting anymore, and his daughters started asking if I was going to be their mother. On the weekends we’d get the teenage babysitter whose parents worked on base, and Keith and I would drive around looking at all the buildings constructed using local stone. That was kind of like the only tourist attraction there was. Sometimes we’d drive to the nearest village and eat at Indian restaurants, then stop at little pubs to drink half pints of cider. It was a pleasure spending time with a guy who seemed to have some idea of a life that could be more complex than most of the men I’d known. One Saturday, we drove to the nearest station, then took the train to London, where we got lost in the Underground, although that didn’t matter much, because wherever it stopped, we got off, and there were things to do. We took pictures at Big Ben, Buckingham Palace and Piccadilly Circus. Then it rained and we’d forgotten our umbrellas, so we sat in the park, watching drops fall in the water, laughing at one another in our dripping summer clothes. When it finally stopped, we went to a souvenir shop and bought big London towels and oversized red t-shirts and found a fitting room, where we kissed and touched playfully while undressing one another. We dried each other off, then put on our new clothes, stuffing our wet ones inside the plastic bag, which we forgot, not noticing we’d left anything behind until hours had gone by.

When we got home, we reported everything to the babysitter and the kids, like newlyweds returning from a honeymoon. And for the first time in years I thought I might be in love with someone, but I wasn’t about to be the first one to say it—I was waiting for him.

Stuff was going on in the world, but I never paid attention. So when a hospital in Germany needed extra help because of the ethnic war in Bosnia, it caught me by surprise. The doctor and I suddenly got temporary orders. We’d be there for a couple months, which meant Ian couldn’t come with, something in the military I was supposed to be prepared for. There wasn’t time to send Ian to the States to stay with Scotty, so I got him ready to stay behind with Keith, then packed my bags and shined my boots, and got on the big C5.

I worked the lab. The first few days I read procedure manuals like ones I'd read before. I opened the books and stared at the pages, thinking about Ian and Keith. I already knew the drill, but they wanted me to refresh, so I made an effort. About the third day in, this Mike guy came up, rolled his chair beside me. His rank was Sergeant, same as me. "You want a break?" he said. "They're doing a procedure in the back if you want to watch."

I looked up at his cocked thin eyebrows that looked like they'd been penciled in with magic marker. He took me to the room in the far back corner of the lab, by the histology department. As we got closer, the scent got stronger, a combination of the fresh blood like I'd collected while on the blood collection team, formalin, and the dead chickens my grandmother used to butcher.

He opened the heavy silver door and we went in. A dead guy lay on the table. He was young, reminded me of Scotty, big and muscular. His arms were stiff and a tag was tied to his right toe. A big cut split his chest, and the skin was peeled back like a big life-size Fruit Roll Up. Gashes made huge dimples on his legs. The penis leaned limp to one side. Two guys in scrubs and gloves held knives, scooping out the insides. Mike introduced us, but I didn't register their names. "Guy was in Bosnia and got busted with a load of shrapnel, so they sent him here with all the others. They did surgery and he coded on the table," he said.

I stared at the corpse, inhaled the smell, watching the two men in scrubs dissect the body, throwing the man's remains into a big white plastic bucket. I started thinking too much, then the two men cut the scalp open and peeled it back as if it were some mask you'd wear for Halloween. After I saw the skull, I closed my eyes for a quick second. I wanted to see Keith. I wanted to hold Ian. I wanted to live the best life that I could. I kept staring as the two pathologists laughed and told jokes and cracked the soldier's dead white bones.

"Are you ready to go?" Mike said. "You look a little pale."

"I'm fine," I said.

"They've been coming in now and then. We're really short-handed. Glad you're here, cause when they fly in all messy, they need a lot of labs."

I stared at the manuals for the rest of the day, wondering if the dead soldier had a wife and kids, if his parents were alive, what his life was like, if he enlisted knowing he would die. I called Keith that night, and nothing there had changed—he told the kids to turn the volume down. Then I called Scotty. He told me that he missed me, and that he hoped I'd come back soon.

When I got back to England, Keith was dating a new girl, Justine, who worked for the commander. She was only 22, and had thin long hair and

big teeth like Bugs Bunny. She was sick a lot, always at the clinic. Keith and I kept seeing each other, having dinner and family nights, and sex, just like we were married, and the two of them were only dating here and there, which I wasn't happy about, but he meant too much for me to let him go. One day while she was in the clinic, she needed a white count for some infection she suspected she might have. I didn't ask her about it, just donned a pair of gloves and put the needle in her arm, but she had tiny veins so I had to dig around. I finally hit something, and watched the tube fill up with blood.

I looked up, and saw Justine fanning her face with her free hand. She looked a little pasty, and I had enough blood for what I needed, so I popped the tourniquet, withdrew the needle and covered the venipuncture site with gauze, then threw the needle in the biohazard can. I grabbed an ammonia capsule so I could wake her if she fainted.

"You don't look so hot," I said.

"Oh, I'm fine," she said, leaning her elbows on her knees, lowering her head.

"That didn't happen last time," I said, taking off my gloves.

"It only happens when the needle moves around."

"Sorry. You have little veins."

"It's OK," she said, sitting upright. "I'm better now. Maybe you could take me back to the place everyone talks about? The old morgue. Everybody says it's real creepy."

"It's nice and cool and quiet," I said. "I'll take you if you want."

I handed her a Band-Aid, then opened the biohazard fridge and put her blood in a rack that waited to be sent away. I removed my lab coat and hung it over a chair. After she got some color, we washed our hands, then passed Doctor Frye's office and found him staring out the window. I nodded to him and said I was taking Justine to the bunker, and he waved.

I opened the double doors that lead to a long descending hallway. It wound around and finally led us to two more double doors, that were always hard to open and creaked as I pulled the handles. I flipped on the lights and we went inside. Old boxes sat on dusty litters and dim lights shook and flickered. We passed stacks of old medical equipment: dental chairs and patient tables, inpatient beds piled up with crutches that were probably never used. Old-fashioned wheelchairs sat unfolded along one wall, like they were still waiting to carry casualties away. Cobwebs lurched over them and hung from one piece of equipment to the next. We walked to the far end, to the piano, the only thing in the place that was somewhat clean. I'd been playing it almost every day, so I kept it free of dust, I even polished it sometimes.

"I would never come here all alone," Justine said.

She struggled with a few short tunes on the piano, and then I took over. She walked around, looking a little nervous. "Can I ask you something?" she said.

I said, "Uh-huh" and hit the middle C.

"Does Keith get around? What I mean is, well, does he sleep around a lot?"

"Not really. Not that I know of, anyway. We're just friends," I said.

"I thought you'd know since he's your friend," she said.

"He's OK," I said, staring at the keys. "Hard to talk to sometimes."

"You think so? We just talk for hours. He's so amazing."

"He's all right," I said, thinking that he used to be amazing to me, too, though since he'd met Justine, he'd become a little distant and less attentive in bed.

At dinner, I decided to play with him a little. I leaned over, whispering in his ear. He was spreading butter on his roll with his plastic knife. "Your girlfriend asked about you," I said.

He looked up. "What'd she say?"

"She asked if you messed around a lot. I told her I was sleeping with you."

"You didn't," he said, dropping his knife on the plate. "Don't ruin things for me. I really like her, Beth."

His daughters kicked each other under the table, and Ian spilled his milk. "So do you have sex with everyone you like?" I said. I got up and used a dishcloth to soak up Ian's milk, then headed toward the sink.

He got up and followed. "Jesus, Beth, don't talk like that around the kids," Keith said.

"They don't know what's going on," I said, rinsing the cloth under running water. "You know, they think I'm their mother."

"Well, to make things clear," he said, "I haven't slept with her. Just imagine my situation. If you found someone, I'd be thrilled for you, and I'd still want to see you, but I'd leave that up to you."

Saturday we got the same sitter. Keith was taking Justine out, so I went to the nearest dance club, but I didn't see any interesting guys, so I drove thirty minutes on the winding bumpy road back to base and went to Keith's, sending the babysitter home, saying I'd look in on all the kids. When Keith rolled in at three a.m., I asked if he had fun.

"I like her," he said. "I really do."

I picked up Ian from the sofa, trying not to wake him. "That's nice," I said. "You two are good together."

"You think so?" he said.

"I paid the babysitter."

He handed me a ten, saying thanks.

I took it, stuffed it in my pocket, and brought Ian home.

Suddenly we got busy at the clinic. It seemed as though everyone needed lab work. Monday it was Geri from the bank. I hadn't seen her for months. She sat in the phlebotomy chair and asked how I was doing. "Fine," I said, looking at the slip checked HIV while she pulled up her sleeve.

"I never see you anymore," she said. "You're never at the bank."

I wiped her arm with alcohol. "I finally got things straightened out."

"You still getting a divorce?"

I uncapped the needle. "I hope so," I said. I put the needle into her arm and she jumped a little.

"Dan and I are divorcing, too. Seems like it's going around. I guess it's just the military." Her Irish accent suddenly seemed extra strong. "Military marriages don't last. It's my second one. Next time I'll know better."

I popped the tourniquet and withdrew the needle, covered the site with gauze. "I won't have a next time."

"Aren't you dating Keith?"

"We're just friends," I said. "We're neighbors. He's seeing that Justine."

She got up from her chair and held pressure on the venipuncture site.

Geri asked me to walk her to her car and told me some stories about what it was like at the base when Scotty was there, about the parties, and the drunks, and the sex, and I only half-listened, as if I didn't really want to know at all. But I thought about it, and I realized that she was talking about the stuff that Scotty had done, and it was stuff he'd continued to do, even after returning home to me. When she left she wished me good luck with my divorce, and I smiled at her, even though it took a lot of effort.

That night Keith asked Justine to marry him. I knew right away, because Justine came over after he'd given her the ring, saying she wanted me to be the first to know. It was an ugly diamond. I was holding Ian and he giggled at her cheery voice. I smiled and told her that was just the greatest thing. After she went home and Ian was in bed, Keith came over, telling me he was relieved because he didn't get rejected.

"Why isn't Justine staying with you tonight?" I said. "Seems like you two would want to celebrate."

"She wants to wait until after the wedding before having sex with me," he said.

I thought about how dumb that sounded—I'd been that way with Scotty. I stared down at Scotty's watch, which I'd started wearing, and

laughed a little bit. “That’s kind of sweet,” I said. I stood there for a minute, thinking about Keith’s ex-wife, about Scotty, about Dan and Geri, about the stuff she said had happened. I looked up and saw Keith’s glow, his cloudy eyes, his stupid face. I grabbed his hand and led him to my bedroom. I took off all our clothes, and kissed him gently on the lips.

After it was over, he got up and opened the blinds and stared down out the window. The streetlight lit the room. Then Keith got back in bed and lay next to me, staring at me the way he always did after we had sex. “I really like you, you know,” he said, brushing my bangs to one side. He kissed me lightly, just brushing his lips across my forehead, then got up again and gathered his clothes, and I watched him put them on. He patted my hand, then walked toward the doorway. When he turned to look at me, I closed my eyes, pretending not to see, then I listened to him trailing down the stairs. After I knew he was gone, I went down and locked the door, came back upstairs, put on my robe and checked on Ian, watching him sleep in the slatted light from the street. He looked just like his father. I thought about calling Scotty. I tried to think of what I’d say.

Kim Chinquee’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in several journals, including *Noon*, *Denver Quarterly Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Anthology*, *The Alembic*, *Karamu*, and *Wisconsin Academy Review*. She is the recipient of a Henfield/Transatlantic Review Award.