

*President Nixon announces  
he is sending U.S. troops  
into Cambodia ...  
April 30, 1970*

## SHARON – I – May 4, 1970

*“It has been said that when a man acquires a commission, the government has gained not one, but two – the officer and his wife.”*

They drive around the western edge of Lake Michigan, past the industrial suburbs of Chicago, down into the flat farmland of Indiana, their tiny convertible a bright yellow bug boring through the cornfields.

Sharon Gold moves her cramped right foot, and the Farberware coffeepot bangs against her shin. Then the brown paper grocery bag with its open boxes of cereal and crackers shifts across her seatbelted lap. For the 10th time in the last two hours she glances around the densely packed interior of the Fiat Spider, a car that seemed truly wonderful when Robert bought it last summer, before they had to rely on it as a moving van.

It certainly can't be said that they have all their earthly possessions with them. When you have a car

as small as a Fiat, you take only the barest necessities: Suitcases with summer clothes and bedding tied atop the luggage rack. A few pots and pans and shoes in the minuscule trunk. In the well behind the two seats are stashed a tiny black and white television, already several years old when her parents passed it on to them, and the Singer sewing machine presented in the hope that she might someday learn domestic skills. Their wedding gifts, their books and her stereo and albums, and the rest of their clothes remain at her parents' home, moved there from Robert's one-room apartment on Sheridan Drive they shared after their wedding.

The branch transfer to military intelligence from infantry has come through! Robert's orders are to report to Ft. Knox, Kentucky, for nine weeks of Armor Officers Basic to fulfill the requirement of a combat arms course before military intelligence training. "Why combat arms training?" she asked him when he received his new orders. "Surely you'll have a desk job. That's the whole point of getting the branch transfer." Robert didn't answer.

Her purse holds the official army reporting packet sent to Robert. The orders for Ft. Knox say nothing about his wife. Robert reminded her of the old army joke: "If the army had wanted him to have a wife, they would have issued him one."

Her purse also contains the journal she bought yesterday. She's a firm believer in the expression

that, when you are handed lemons, make lemonade. Since she wants to be a writer, she's going to record her experiences in the army. Maybe she can write articles or short stories about this alien environment and sell them to a newspaper or magazine.

"You think your parents are still upset?" Robert asks.

Sharon glances at him, acutely aware of his altered looks. His long sideburns shaved off; the rest of his dark hair trimmed by the barber so close to his scalp that the waves usually framing his broad face have disappeared.

Is he asking about her insistence on coming with him to Ft. Knox? Or about something more basic – Sharon marrying him right before the start of his two-year active duty commitment?

At last night's dinner Sharon's mother passed the platter of roast beef for the second time. "Wouldn't it be a better idea for you to wait until Robert has gone down to Kentucky? Checked on the housing situation? Then you could fly down to join him when he's found a place for you to live."

This plan has been proposed before. Sharon's mother first put it forward when she and Sharon lunched at Marshall Field's after a morning of shopping in the mammoth State Street department store. Her mother had actually been somewhat tactful, pointing out how much difficulty Sharon might have relating to the people she would meet

at Ft. Knox. “Remember when you decided where to go to college?” she said. “You didn’t listen to us then about going to the University of Illinois – you insisted on going to Michigan State – and look what happened!”

All around the department store dining room the lunch crowd enjoyed the food. Sharon grasped her water glass. Presumably her mother meant the two roommates at MSU that Sharon had been assigned her first term – the WASP from the upper-class Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe and the Catholic from the Hamtramck working-class section of Detroit, both prejudiced against Jews – and then, second term, the hostile roommate off a farm in central Michigan who had never met a Jew before. Or perhaps her mother meant meeting Robert. Sharon didn’t ask for clarification.

At the dinner table last night her father studied his refilled plate while her mother repeated her position. As a successful real estate attorney, he identified those occasions in which keeping quiet could enhance a negotiation.

Sharon took the platter out of her mother’s hands and passed it on to her brother Howard without taking seconds. “Relax, Mom. I keep telling you, I can always stay with Grandma and Grandpa in Louisville. At least then I’ll only be an hour away from Robert.”

Her mother had the last word: “Two days with your grandparents will be too much.”

She looks at Robert now, his eyes on the road ahead. “I think they accept my coming with you.”

“If they do, why did they get your brother to show up and try to talk you out of going?”

Sharon studies her husband’s face. His tone isn’t belligerent, but she can’t read his expression.

In fact she suspects Howard did receive an official summons from his studies at the University of Illinois to say good-bye to his only sibling. His assigned mission probably included trying to dissuade her from her “ridiculous” plan to go with her husband. If so, her parents wasted their train money and Howard’s time.

Howard, her younger brother by two years and several inches taller than her 5’5” height. There is a clear family resemblance with their light brown hair, narrow faces with strong noses, and dark eyes, not to mention their good complexions thanks to a rigorous dermatologist who burned off their blemished skin with dry ice treatments. And their opposition to the Vietnam War is equally strong.

Finally she says, “It was nice to have a chance to say good-bye. I don’t know when we’ll see him again.”

Robert snorts, flipping one hand momentarily off the wheel. “It would have been better if he had

left his ‘make love not war’ paraphernalia at school. He overdid it.”

Sharon leans toward Robert, about to say something. Instead she stares straight ahead.

Robert glances over at her, then returns his eyes to the road. “How will you feel if he’s drafted and goes to Canada? You may not be able to see him for years.”

Not see Howard for years? Robert insists that Howard has the luxury to be anti-war due to his college deferment along with his high lottery draft number based on his birth date – 239 – drawn five months ago in the December 1st draft lottery. Robert’s lottery number was 16, making his college commitment to ROTC – Reserve Officers Training Corps – appear to be a prescient choice. Even an anti-war protestor like herself realizes it’s better to be entering the army as an officer rather than at the lowest enlisted rank.

“Do you really think Howard would go to Canada?” she says.

“You’ll have to ask him yourself.”

Sharon can’t predict what her younger brother would do. Even if Howard says he’ll never flee to Canada, he still might.

Robert hums along with the song on the radio – Kenny Rogers singing “Ruby, Don’t Take Your Love to Town.” Sharon wants to ask Robert to switch the channel, not to listen to the song of a paralyzed

Vietnam vet whose woman has to go “to town” to get physical love. War is wrong, so wrong! Robert can get killed!

She wills the tears not to start and studies the farmland all around them. The top of the convertible is up to prevent their possessions from flying out, and the open windows let in the pungent odors of grass and cattle. She shrugs the smells away. She does not like the country. Too few people around and too few things to do.

Her hair blows around her head. The microscopic hairs on Robert’s head don’t move a fraction. Her mother whispered to her last night, “Why is his hair so short?” Obviously her mother doesn’t know anything about the army. And the nightly television news shots of men fighting in Vietnam are too blurry to see the men’s hair length.

Sharon yanks her mind away from the thought of men fighting. To calm herself she silently recites the opening lines of the Prologue to Chaucer’s “Canterbury Tales,” a relic from her English literature classes in college: *Whan that April with his shoures soote/The droghte of March hath perced to the roote ...*

In the midst of these Middle English words the last line of a Milton sonnet pops into her head: “*They also serve who only stand and wait.*”

Sharon fingers the bag on her lap. Is this also heroism? And will she be prepared if a sacrifice is required?

The radio signal from Chicago suddenly dies out. They must be approaching Louisville. She fiddles with the knobs to find a local channel.

She knows she's found a Louisville station when she hears: "Pete, what did you think of Dust Commander's winning time of 2 minutes and 3 2/5 seconds?"

"Chuck, I think Mike Manganello was a hell of a jockey."

"I agree with you, Pete.

"And for you listening out there today who may have been in outer space this past Saturday and not near a radio or television, we're discussing this year's Kentucky Derby, a 1 1/4 mile race for three-year-old horses run at Churchill Downs race track here in Louisville.

"So, Pete, let's talk about some of the other horses who gave Dust Commander a run for the money."

Sharon pictures spectators leaning over the railing along the race track. Their lips move but she hears nothing. Instead of horses thundering down on top of each other, their jockeys bunched close over them, Sharon sees her own life ahead on the racecourse, the obstacles past the turns still unknown. How will she ever fit into a military environment?

"This just in," a different voice erupts on the radio. "The National Guard has fired on Kent State University students protesting the Vietnam War and Nixon's incursion into Cambodia. Some shootings

have been reported. We'll have more as soon as it's available."

"The National Guard fired on students!" Perspiration dots her palms. Howard could have been there; she could have been there.

"Find another station," Robert says. "See if there's any more news."

The police siren comes out of nowhere as she jerks the knobs along a static-filled band.

"We've got company," Robert says.

Sharon flicks the radio off and peers behind them. A police car right on their tail signals them to pull over. "Were you speeding?" she asks.

Robert brings the car to a stop on the shoulder and looks at her. He turns back to the driver's side window.

A tall police officer in his early 30s comes alongside Robert. His hat, low over his forehead, covers his eyes. "May I see your license?"

Robert pulls his wallet out of his back pocket and hands over his driver's license.

"From Chicago," the officer reads.

Can he tell they are Jewish? Will he throw the book at them because he hates Jews? They are in the South now, and everyone knows about prejudiced Southerners.

The officer leans closer, cigarette smoke pulsating off his uniform. "Now why were you doing 60 in a 40-mile-per-hour zone?"

Robert squirms. “I didn’t realize the speed limit had dropped, sir.”

“Yep, you’re right outside Louisville” – he pronounces it Loullville like her grandmother – “and this here is a speed trap.” He grins, stretching his suntanned face.

“Then you caught us,” Robert says.

The officer peers into the car, stuffed with all their things. “Where you folks going?”

“To Ft. Knox, sir.”

The officer smiles again. “The Golds going to the gold.”

What does he mean? Oh, yes, the gold at Ft. Knox.

“Reporting for active duty – Armor Officers Basic,” Robert says.

“An officer, huh?”

“Yes, sir.”

The police officer straightens up and gestures down the road to Louisville.

“If you promise to follow the posted signs from now on,” he says, “I’ll let you off this time. Have to support our boys in uniform.”