

*President Nixon calls
student protestors “bums”
and those fighting in
Vietnam the “greatest”...
May 1, 1970*

KIM – I – May 4

“If the wife is well informed as to what is expected of her, the probability is greater that the officer will have an easier and more successful career.”

Kim Benton places her pet white rat Squeaky in his metal cage under the sagging bed and out of Jim’s sight. It is a small motel room, and it smells of hair spray and shaving cream and liquor and sex. Tomorrow if they are lucky they’ll find an apartment.

When they crossed the state line today into Virginia, Jim leaned over and kissed her. “Welcome to being out of North Carolina for the first time,” he said.

She hadn’t felt any excitement, just anxiety. And the anxiety had less to do with the new state, she knows, than with the reason for the move.

She glances into the bathroom, where Jim stands shaving, his serious, good-looking face reflected in

the mirror. She refused his parents' offer to stay with them while Jim drove up here to Ft. Knox and found housing. His parents have the same fear of Northerners that she does. They thought it would be better if Jim made all the arrangements before subjecting Kim to such changes. It took a lot for her to say no to their offer, especially with Jim encouraging her to accept.

She waited once before, a long time ago, for the most important people in her life to return from a short trip. They hadn't. And now she can't bear to be separated from her husband, even for a few days. For a moment her mind darts to the terrifying thought of a year's separation if he is sent to Vietnam. Just as quickly she thinks of something else, anything else, to prevent the pounding headache that always accompanies her deepest fears.

"Honey, I'm ready," Jim says as he comes out of the bathroom.

He must have seen the expression on her face, because he puts his arms around her. "Everything's going to be fine."

She smiles up at him. "You're bleeding. Did you nick yourself shaving?"

She raises her hand to wipe away the blood. But before she can, he says, "Let's just go."

The blood droplet hits the floor as she follows him. No need to stop and wipe it up; it doesn't even show among all the other stains.

In the car Kim reaches for the map as Jim starts the engine. "I know where to go, honey," he says. He backs the car out of the motel lot and turns towards Ft. Knox.

The air still drips the heat of the day. Kim brushes perspiration off her forehead and searches the sky for signs of rain.

"It was sure nice of our preacher to arrange this introduction," Jim says. He hums a tune, something familiar, perhaps a church hymn, she can't quite recognize it.

Actually, this meeting worries Kim. The preacher of their Southern Baptist church contacted a captain and his wife from their hometown stationed at Ft. Knox. The couple wrote Kim and Jim inviting them for dinner this first night. Bill and Susanna Norris are a few years older than she and Jim, so she and Jim don't know them. Will Kim embarrass herself with her ignorance?

"They live in post housing for officers – but it's not really on the post," Jim explains as he turns away from the sign pointing to the entrance to Ft. Knox. "We won't be seeing the actual Ft. Knox tonight."

Kim isn't disappointed. She is in no rush to see an army post.

It's not yet dark, and she can clearly see the houses they drive past. The ranch-style semi-detached red-brick buildings look nice, with kids' bikes in the driveway and an occasional small camper parked in

front. Trees and some scraggly flowers break up the monotony of identical lawns.

Jim stops in front of one of the buildings. When they reach the front door, a sign announces “Captain William Norris.”

A little girl of about three with two brown braids and a pink gingham dress stands in the open door. Right behind her comes a woman with shoulder-length blond hair and a cotton patterned dress covering a plump body. “Welcome to Ft. Knox,” she says. “I’m Susanna Norris. Bill will be right here. He’s just chasin’ Billy Jr. ‘round the yard out back. And this is Patty.”

“Hello,” Kim says.

Patty says nothing.

“Patty, mind your manners! Say hello to Mrs. Benton,” her mother says.

Patty still says nothing as they all walk into the living room. She’s shy Kim thinks.

“Patty! Pay attention to me!” Susanna’s voice increases in volume. She grabs Patty by the arm. “Say hello.”

“ello,” Patty says, then sits down next to her mother on the couch.

Susanna smiles at Jim and Kim. “We expect our children to have good manners. I was raised without parents but I know how important manners are.”

“Sure are,” Jim says.

Relief edges up Kim’s chest. Thank heavens Jim doesn’t say anything more.

Susanna nods in appreciation of Jim seconding her opinion. “My daddy died when I was just Patty’s age and my brother was as little as Billy Jr.,” Susanna says. “My mama had what my granny called a drinkin’ condition.”

Susanna twists around to Patty. “Stop that wigglin’,” she says, slapping Patty on the arm. “Now sit still.”

Kim’s stomach wobbles. Patty hasn’t been doing anything wrong. How quiet can a little girl sit?

Susanna turns back to them. “One day my mama just didn’t come on home. My granny raised us as best she could, but she wasn’t one for talkin’ to kids or showin’ any love.”

Has slapping her own daughter shown love?

“Hello, everyone, I’m Bill Norris,” says a tall thin man coming into the room with a baby boy in his arms. The roly-poly child is as blond as his father and mother. Where does Patty get her brown hair?

Jim immediately stands. “Good evening, Captain Norris.”

The man waves Jim back to his seat. “Just call me Bill. We’re informal here at home.”

Kim smiles her hello.

“Can I get you anything to drink?”

“No, sir, we’re fine,” Jim answers for both of them.

Susanna turns to Bill. “The chicken and dumplin’s will be ready in a few minutes. We’re just gettin’ to know each other.”

“It was very nice of you to have us for dinner,” Jim says.

“Our pleasure,” Bill says.

Jim glances at Kim, his eyebrows raised. He wants her to say something.

“How did you two meet?” she asks.

Susanna beams, taking Billy Jr. from her husband’s arms and bouncing him on her knees.

“We met in senior year of high school. His folks had just moved to town. It was love at first sight...” – she glances at her husband – “... and a way to escape my granny’s house.”

“I was just as poor and ignorant as she was, but I was enlisting in the army right after high school graduation. I had a future.” Bill grins.

“We got married on a two-day leave from basic training,” Susanna says as Billy Jr. gurgles his appreciation of the horsey ride. “I got pregnant on our weddin’ night. Neither one of us knew a darn thing about sex or birth control.”

Again that flush of relief. Kim could have been as ignorant as Susanna on her own wedding night.

“What did you do?” Kim asks.

“Bought a washin’ machine and dryer. Bill got to go to OCS – Officers Candidate School. I took in

wash from the other men and it helped support me and the baby.”

Jim turns to Bill. “Weren’t you worried about your wife talking to all those single men? You never know what single men might be after.”

A stab of pain above her left eye. Please may he not start.

Bill leans forward as if he can see through Jim, then he says, “I’m talking about my buddies. In OCS – OCS is hell on wheels, 120 days of pure hell – you can’t survive if you can’t trust your buddies and they can’t trust you. There’s a motto – ‘Cooperate and graduate.’ You’d do well to remember that.” He leans back.

“And once I finished OCS it was better. We had more money on a second lieutenant’s salary and we were entitled to housing. Susanna could stop doing laundry for the men.”

Mercifully Susanna turns to her husband before Jim can say anything more. “Then you went to Vietnam and I was left alone with a baby who cried all the time.”

Bill stands up and grins. “That’s what army wives put up with. Now let’s eat before we scare these newcomers. Jim won’t have to think about a Vietnam tour for a while.”

He turns to the two of them. “You can both enjoy your time at Ft. Knox.”