

Suppose They Gave a Peace...

by Susan Schwartz

Twenty-five years after the war, and my damned sixth sense about the phone still wakes me up at 3:00 A.M. Just as well. All Margaret needs is for me to snap awake, shout, and jump out of bed, grabbing for my pants and my .45. I don't have it anymore. She made me sell it as soon as the kids were old enough to poke into the big chest of drawers. I don't interfere when she makes decisions like that. The way things are going to the dogs, though, I'd feel a whole lot better about her safety if I had the gun.

So I stuck my feet into my slippers--the trench foot still itches--and snuck downstairs. If Margaret woke up, she'd think I was raiding the icebox and go back to sleep. I like being up and alone in my house, kind of guard duty. I don't do much. I straighten towels or put books back on the shelves--though with Steff gone, that's not a problem anymore. I don't like seeing the kids' rooms so bare.

Barry's models and football are all lined up, and Margaret dusts them. No problem telling the boys from the girls in our family. Barry's room is red and navy, and Steff's is all blue and purple, soft-like, with ruffles and a dressing table she designed herself. Now that she's at school, we don't trip on clothes all over the place. And I keep reminding myself we ought to yank out the Princess phone she got when she turned thirteen. Light on the dial's burned out, anyway.

I wish she hadn't taken down the crewelwork she did her freshman year. The flower baskets were a whole lot prettier than these "Suppose They Gave A War And Nobody Came" posters. But that's better than the picture of that bearded Che-guy. I put my foot down about that thing, I can tell you. Not in *my* house, I said.

I'm proud of our house: two-floor brick Tudor with white walls and gold carpet and a big ticking grandfather's clock in the hall. Classy taste, my wife has. Who'd have thought she'd look at someone like me?

Besides, dinner was pretty good. Some of that deli rye and that leftover steak..

As the light from the icebox slid across the wall phone, it went off, almost like it had been alerted. I grabbed it before it could ring twice.

"Yeah?" I snapped the way I used to in Germany, and my gut froze. My son Barry's in Saigon. If anything goes wrong, they send a telegram. No. That was last war. Now they send a car. God forbid.

But Steff, my crazy daughter--every time the phone rings at night I'm scared. Maybe she's got herself arrested in one of her goddamn causes and I'm going to have to bail her out like I did in Chicago. Or it could be worse. Two years ago this

month, some kids were in the wrong place at the wrong time up at Kent. Damn shame about them and the National Guard; it'll take us years to live it down. Hell of a thing to happen in Ohio.

I thought my kid was going to lose her mind about it. The schools shut down all over the place, all that tuition money pissed away, and God only knows what she got into.

Not just God. Margaret. Steff would call up, say "put Mom on," and Margaret would cry and turn into the phone so I couldn't hear what she was saying. I think she sent money on the sly-like, so I wouldn't make an issue of it. You don't send kids to college so they can get shot at. Steff would say you don't send anyone anywhere so they can get shot at. She's just a kid, you know. She doesn't really believe all that stuff. The kids shouldn't have been there. Anyone could tell you that.

"Hey, that you, Joey?" The voice on the other end was thick with booze. "It's Al. Remember me?"

"You son of a bitch, what're you doing calling this hour of night?" I started to bellow, then piped down. "You wanna wake up my whole damn family?"

"Thought you'd be up, Joey. Like we were... the time when. . ."

"Yeah ... yeah ..." Sure I remembered. Too well. So did Al, my old army buddy. It happens from time to time. One of us gets to remembering, gets the booze out--Scotch for me these days now that my practice is finally paying off--and then picks up the phone. Margaret calls it "going visiting" and "telephonitis" and only gets mad at the end of the month when the bills come in.

But Al wasn't from my outfit at the Battle of the Bulge. Weren't many of them left. Not many had been real close friends to start with: when you run away from home and lie about your age so you can go fight, you're sort of out of place, soldier or not.

Damn near broke my own dad's heart; he'd wanted me to follow him into school and law school and partnership. So I did that on GI bills when I got out. Got married, and then there was Korea. I went back in, and that's where I met Al.

"Remember? We'd run out of fuel for the tank and were burning grain alcohol... rather drink torpedo juice, wouldn't you? And pushing that thing south to the 38th parallel, scared shitless the North Koreans'd get us if the engine fused..."

"Yeah ..." How far was Korea from Saigon? My son the lance corporal had wangled himself a choice slot as Marine guard. I guess all Margaret's nagging about posture and manners had paid off. Almost the only time it had with the Bear. God, you know you'd shed blood so your kids don't turn out as big damn fools as you. I'd of sent Barry through school, any school. But he wanted the service. Not Army, either, but the Marines. Well, Parris Island did what I couldn't do, and now he was "yes sir"-ing a lot of fancypants like Ambassador Bunker over in Vietnam. At least he wasn't a chicken or a runaway ...

"You there, Joey?" I was staring at the receiver. "I asked you, how's your family?"

"M'wife's fine," I said. How long had it been since Al and I spoke--three years?

Five; "So're the kids. Barry's in the Marines. My son the corporal. Stationed in Saigon. The Embassy, no less." I could feel my chest puffing out, even though I was tired and it was the middle of the night.

Car lights shone outside. I stiffened. What if... The lights passed. All's quiet on the Western Front. Thank God.

Al and the beer hooted approvingly.

"And Steffie's in college. Some damn radical Quaker place. I wanted her to stay in Ohio, be a nurse or a teacher, something practical in case, God forbid, she ever has to work, but my wife wanted her near her own people."

"She getting plenty of crazy ideas at that school?"

"Steff's a good kid, Al, looks like a real lady now." What do you expect me to say? That after a year of looking and acting like the big-shot debs my wife admires in *The New York Times*, my Steffie's decided to hate everything her dad fought for? Sometimes I think she's majoring in revolution. It wasn't enough she got arrested in 1968 campaigning for McCarthy--clean up for Gene, they called it. Clean? I never saw a scruffier bunch of kids till I saw the ones she's taken up with now. Long hair, dirty-and the language? Worse than an army barracks.

She's got another campaign now. This McGovern. I don't see what they have against President Nixon or what they see in this McGovern character. Senator from South Dakota, and I tell you, he's enough to make Mount Rushmore cry. I swear to God, the way these friends of Steff's love unearthing and spreading nasty stories--this Elisberg character Steff admires, you'd think he was a hero instead of some nutcase who spilled his guts in a shrink's office, so help me. Or this My Lai business: things like that happen in war. You just don't talk about them. Still, what do you expect of a bunch of kids? We made it too easy.

I keep hoping. She's such a good girl, such a pretty girl; one of these days, she'll come around and say "Daddy, I was wrong. I'm sorry."

Never mind that.

Al had got onto the subject of *jo-sans*. Cripes, I hadn't even thought of some of them for twenty years, being an old married man and all. What if Margaret had walked in? I'd of been dead. Sure, I laughed over old times, but I was relieved when he switched to "who's doing what" and "who's died," and then onto current events. We played armchair general, and I tell you, if the Pentagon would listen to us, we'd win this turkey and have the boys home so damned fast...

About the time we'd agreed that this Kissinger was a slippery so-and-so and that bombing Haiphong was one of the best things we could have done, only we should have done it a whole lot earlier... hell of a way to fight a war, tying General Westmoreland's hands, I heard footsteps on the stairs.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" Margaret asked me.

I gestured *he called me!* at the phone, feeling like a kid with his hand in the cookie jar. My wife laughed. "Going visiting, is he? Well, let his wife give him aspirin for the hangover I bet he's going to have. You have to go to the office tomorrow and..." she paused for emphasis like I was six years old, "you need your sleep."

She disappeared back up the stairs, sure that I'd follow. "That was the wife," I told Al, my old good buddy. "Gotta go. Hey, don't wait five years to call again. And if you're ever in town, come on over for dinner!"

God, I hope she hadn't heard that stuff about the *josans*. Or the dinner invitation. We'd eat cold shoulder and crow, that was for sure.

Fall of '72, we kept hearing stories. That Harvard guy, that Kissinger was meeting with Le Duc Tho in Paris, and he was encouraged, but then they backed down: back and forth, back and forth till you were ready to scream. "Peace is at hand," he says, and they say it in Hanoi, too. I mean, what's the good of it when the commies and your own leaders agree, and the army doesn't? No news out of Radio Hanoi can be any good. And the boys are still coming home in bags, dammit.

Meanwhile, as I hear from Margaret, Stephanie is doing well in her classes. The ones she attends in between campaigning for this McGovern. At first I thought he was just a nuisance candidate. You know, like Stassen runs each time? Then, when they unearthed that stuff about Eagleton, and they changed VP candidates, I thought he was dead in the water for sure. But Shriver's been a good choice: drawn in even more of the young, responsible folk and the people who respect what he did in the Peace Corps. But the real reason McGovern's moving way up in the polls is that more and more people get sick and tired of the war. We just don't believe we can win it, anymore. And that hurts.

I get letters from Barry, too. He's good at that. Writes each one of us. I think he's having a good time in Saigon. I hope he's careful. *You* know what I mean.

Barry says he's got a lot of respect for Ambassador Bunker. Says he was cool as any Marine during Tet, when the VC attacked the Embassy. Says the Ambassador's spoken to him a couple of times, asked him what he wants to do when he gets out of the service. Imagine: My boy, talking to a big shot like that.

And Margaret sent Stephanie a plane ticket home in time for the election. Sure, she could vote at school, but "my vote will make more of a difference in Ohio," she explained to me. She was getting a fancy accent.

"You gonna cancel out my vote, baby?" I asked her. "I sure am, Dad. D'you mind?"

"Hey, kid, what am I working for if it isn't for you and your mom? Sure, come on home and give your fascist old dad a run for his money."

That got kind of a watery laugh from her. We both remembered the time she went to Washington for that big march in '69. I hit the ceiling and Margaret talked me down. "She didn't have to tell us, Joe," she reminded me.

No, she didn't. But she had. Just in case something happened, she admitted that Thanksgiving when she came home from school.

I didn't like the idea of my girl near tear gas and cops with nightsticks when I wasn't around, so I pulled a few strings and sent her Congressman Kirwan's card. *Mike*, the Congressman says I should call him when he comes to the lawyers' table at the Ohio Hotel. And I wrote down on it the home phone number of Miss Messer,

his assistant. If anything goes wrong, I told her, she should call there. And I drew a peace sign and signed the letter, "Love and peace, your fascist father."

She says I drew it upside down. Well, what do you expect? Never drew one before.

Anyhow, she'll be home for Election Day, and Barry'll vote by absentee ballot. I'm proud that both my kids take voting seriously. Maybe that school of hers hasn't been a total waste: Steff still takes her responsibilities as a citizen very seriously.

Meanwhile, things--talking and fighting both--slowed down in Paris and Saigon. I remember after Kennedy won the election, Khrushchev wouldn't talk to President Eisenhower's people because Ike was a lame duck. As if he weren't one of the greatest generals we ever had. I tried to listen to some of the speeches by this McGovern. Stephanie was wild for. Mostly, I thought he promised pie-in-the-sky. Our boys home by June, everyone working hard and off welfare—not that I'd mind, but I just didn't see how he was going to pull any of it off. I really wanted to ask Barry what he thought, but I didn't. Might be bad for morale.

Then things started to get worse. They stepped up the bombing. Tried to burn off the jungle, too. And the pictures... Dammit, I wish I could forget the one of that little girl running down the road with no clothes on, screaming in pain. Sometimes at night, it gets messed up in my mind with that thing from Kent, with the girl kneeling and crying over that boy's body. Damn things leap out at you from the newspaper or the news, but I can't just stick my head in the sand.

Maybe the kids... maybe this McGovern... I've *been* under attack, and I tell you, there comes a time when you just want it to *stop*. Never mind what it costs you. You've already paid enough. I think the whole country's reached that point, and so McGovern's moving way up in the polls. Election Day started out really well. The day before, letters had come from Barry. One for me. One for his mother. And even one for Stephanie. I suppose she'd told him she was going to be home, and APO delivery to the Embassy in Saigon is pretty regular. We all sort of went off by ourselves to read our letters. Then Margaret and I traded. I hoped Stephanie would offer to show us hers, too, but she didn't. So we didn't push.

You don't push, not if you want your kids to trust you. Besides, my son and daughter have always had something special between them. He's a good foot taller than she is, but she always looked out for her "baby brother" in school. He never minded that she was the bright one, the leader. Not till he decided not to go to college, and he overheard one of the family saying that Stephanie should have been the boy. So our Bear joined up, not waiting for the draft or anything. I expected Stephanie to throw a fit -- Margaret certainly did, but all my girl said was, "He needs to win at something of his own."

I wouldn't have expected her to understand what that means to a boy. Maybe she's growing up.

But it's still all I can do to keep a decent tongue in my head toward my brother-in-law with the big fat mouth.

On Election Day, it's a family tradition that everyone comes over to watch the

returns on TV. There were going to be some hot words over the cold cuts, if things ran true to speed. And I couldn't see Steff sitting in the kitchen putting things on trays and talking girl talk with her aunts. Steff calls that sort of thing sexist. That's a new word she's got. Don't see why it bothers her. It's not like sometimes the women aren't talking the most interesting things.

For a while, I really thought we were going to make it through the evening without a fight. Stephanie came in, all rosy-faced and glowing from voting, then marching outside the poll all day. She'd left her protest signs in the garage, and she was wearing one of the good skirts and coats she took to school. When everyone said so, she laughed and went up to change into a workshirt and jeans.

"But you looked so pretty, just like a real college girl," her aunt told her.

"That was just window dressing," Stephanie said. "Can I help set the food out now? I'm famished."

She'd wolfed down about half a corned beef sandwich when the phone rang, and she flew up the stairs. "You're kidding. Massachusetts *already*? Oh wow! How's it look for Pennsylvania? I'm telling you, I think we're going to be lucky here, but I'm worried about the South ..."

"You want another beer, Ron?" I asked my brother-in-law, who was turning red, pretending like he had swallowed something the wrong way and would choke if he didn't drink real fast. Personally, I think he voted for Wallace in the last election, but you can't pry the truth out of him about that with a crowbar.

We settled down to watch TV. Margaret and my sister Nance turned on the portable in the kitchen. I kind of hoped Stephanie would go in there, but she helped clear the table, then came in and sat beside me.

You could have knocked me over with a feather. Maybe the kids were right and people were sick of the bombings, the deaths, the feeling that Vietnam was going to hang around our necks till we choked on it. But state after state went to McGovern ... "There goes Ohio! Straight on!" Stephanie shouted, raising a fist.

I don't know when all hell broke loose. One moment we were sitting watching John Chancellor cut to President Nixon's headquarters (and my daughter was doing this routine, like a Chatty Cathy doll, about Tricia Nixon). The next moment, she'd jumped up and was stamping one foot as she glared at her uncle.

"How *dare* you use that word?" she was saying to Ron, my brother-in-law. "They're *not* gooks. They're Asians. And it's their country, not ours, but we're destroying it for them. We've turned the kids into fugitives, the women into bar girls... and they all had fathers, too, till we killed them! What kind of a racist pig..."

"Who you calling a racist, little Miss Steff & Non-sense?" asked Ron. By then, he'd probably had at least two beers too many and way too many of my daughter's yells of "straight on."

"Why, when I was in the war, there was this Nee-grow sergeant..."

"It's 'black'!" she snapped. "You call them *black*! How can you expect me to stay in the same house as this..."

She was out of the living room, and the front door slammed behind her before I could stop her.

"That little girl of yours is out of control," Ron told me. "That's what you get, sending her off to that snob school. OSU wasn't good enough, oh no. So what happens? She meets a bunch of radicals there and picks up all sorts of crazy ideas. Tell you, Joey, you better put a leash on that kid, or she'll get into real trouble."

I got up, and he shut up. Margaret came in from the kitchen. I shook my head at her: *everything under control*. I wanted to get a jacket or something. Stephanie had run out without her coat, and the evening was chilly.

"I'd teach her a good lesson, that's what I'd do," said Ron.

Damn! Hadn't I warned her, "I know you think it's funny calling your uncle Ronnie the Racist. But one of these days, it's going to slip out, and then there'll be hell to pay." But she'd said what I should have said. And that made me ashamed.

"She shouldn't have been rude to you," I said. "I'm going to tell her that. But you know how she feels about words like that. I don't much like them either. Besides, this is her house, too."

Ron was grumbling behind my back like an approaching thunderstorm, when I went into the front hall, took out a jacket from the closet, and went outside. Steffie was standing on the stoop, her face pressed against the cold brick. I put the jacket over her and closed my hands on her shoulders. They were trembling. "Don't rub your face against the brick, baby. You could cut yourself."

She turned around and hugged me. I could feel she was crying with anger and trying hard not to. "I'm not going in there and apologizing," she told me.

"Not even for me?" I coaxed her. There'd been a time she'd do anything in the world for her old dad.

She tried to laugh and cry together, and sounded like the way she used to gurgle when she was a baby.

"I'll promise not to start any fights," she said. "But I won't promise to keep quiet if..."

"I told him you shouldn't have been rude to an elder and a guest..."

She hissed like the teenager she wasn't. Not anymore. "I also told him this was your house and you had a right to have your wishes respected, too. Now, will you come in and behave like a lady?"

"It's *woman*, daddy," she told me.

I hugged her. "You know what I mean. Lady or woman, you're still my little girl. You're supposed to be for peace. Can you try to keep it in your own home?"

She looked up, respect in her eyes. "Ooh, that was a *nice* one," she told me.

"Then remember, tantrums don't win any arguments. Now, you go in. Maybe your mother needs help with the dishes."

"*He* ought to help," she muttered. "You do. It wouldn't hurt."

"*No*, it wouldn't." To my surprise, I agreed. "But if we wait for him to get off his

butt, your mother's going to be stuck with all of them."

The gift of her obedience hit me in the face like a cold wind when you've had too much to drink. My eyes watered, and the lights up and down Outlook Avenue flickered. Everyone was watching the returns. Some of them had promised to drop in later. The Passells' younger boy had gone to school with Steff. He was the only boy on the street still in school, studying accounting. The Carlsons' middle son, who'd played varsity football, but always took time to coach our Bear, had left OSU and was in the Army. So was the oldest Bentfield, who'd been our paperboy. Fine young men, all of them. And the girls had turned out good, too, even Reenie, who'd got married too young.

Just a one-block street, but you had everything on it. Even a black family had moved in. Maybe I'd had my worries to start off with, but I was real proud we'd all greeted them like neighbors. On some streets when that happened, the kids dumped garbage on the lawn or TP'ed the house.

It was a nice street, a good block, and we'd all lived on it a long time. Nothing fancy, but solid. I wished my father could have seen my house. We'd come back since he'd lost everything in the Depression. But that's the way of it. Each generation does a little bit better than the last one and makes things a little easier for the ones next in line.

We've been five generations in Youngstown. I like to think our name counts for something. Now, this is sort of embarrassing. I don't go to church much, but I looked out over that street and *hoped*, that's a better word for it, that my kids would make that name even more respected. My daughter, the whatever-she-wanted-to-be. A lawyer, maybe, And my son. Who knew? Maybe he'd come home and go back to school, and then this Ambassador--I couldn't see my Bear as a diplomat, but...

"How many beers did *you* have?" I asked the sky, gave myself a mental shake, and went back in in time to watch President Nixon's concession speech. It wasn't, not really. You remember how close the race was against JFK. And the 1962 California election when he told the press, "You won't have Nixon to kick around any more."

I don't know. Man's a fighter, but he's not a good loser. I tell you, I don't know what a recount's going to do to this country just when we need a strong leader in place.

"Country's going to hell in a handbasket," Ron grumbled. "I'm going home. Hey, Nancy? You going to yak all night? C'mon!"

After he left, my wife and daughter came back into the living room. Margaret brought out a pot of coffee.

Stephanie sat down to watch McGovern's victory speech. She was holding her mother's hand.

"I admit I am distressed at this demand for a recount at just the time when our country needs to be united. But I am confident that the count will only reaffirm the judgment of the great American people as the bombing has gone on, pounding our

hearts as well as a captive nation: it is enough!

"Now, I have heard it said," the man went on with shining eyes, "that I do not care for honor. Say, rather, that I earn my honor where it may be found. Not in throwing lives after lives away in a war we should never have entered, but in admitting that we have gone as far as we may, and that now it is time for our friends the South Vietnamese to take their role as an independent people, not a client state. Accordingly, my first act as Commander in Chief will be ..." his voice broke, "to bring them home. Our sons and brothers. The young fathers and husbands of America. Home."

Tears were pouring down the women's faces. I walked over to Margaret. All the years we've been married, she's never been one to show affection in front of the kids. Now she leaned her head against me. "Our boy's coming home!"

Stephanie's face glowed like the pictures of kids holding candles in church or the big protest marches. She could have been at McGovern headquarters; that school of hers has enough pull to put her that high, but she'd chosen to come home instead.

I put a hand on her hair. It was almost as silky as it had been when she was in diapers. Again, my hand curved around her head. It was so warm, just like when she'd been little. "Baby, it looks like you and your friends have won. I just hope you're right."

Something woke me early that morning. Not the house. Margaret's regular breathing was as always, and I could sense the presence of Stephanie, a now-unfamiliar blessing. I went downstairs, ran some water in the sink, and washed off the serving dishes Margaret had set to soak overnight. Nice surprise for her when she got up.

Of course, I wasn't surprised when the phone rang. "Hey, Al," I greeted him. Drunk again. "What's the hurry? It's only six months, not five years between calls this time."

"How d'you like it, Joe?" he demanded. "Those little bastards pulled it off. They don't want to go, so, by God, they stop the war. Can you believe it? Not like us, was it. I tell you, or buddy, we were suckers. Go where we were told, hup two three four, following orders like goddamn fools, and these kids change the rules on us and get away with it."

Maybe it would be better. Margaret and Steff had held hands and cried for joy. I had to believe it was better, that I wasn't just bitching because other men's sons wouldn't have to go through what I had. I started to talk Al down like I had in Korea, but my heart wasn't in it.

The sky was gray. All the houses on Outlook were dark. Soon it would be dawn and the streetlights would go out, regular as an army camp.

But what were those lights going on? I levered up from my chair--damn, my bones were creaking--and peered out. Lights on at Bentfield's? And, oh *my* God, Johnny Bentfield... no. Oh no. *Not my son, thank God?* Dammit, what kind of a man was I to thank God like that? Sometimes I make myself want to puke.

"Al!" I broke into his ramblings. "I gotta hang up *now*. Something's going on on the street."

"Probably a bunch of stoned kids, celebrating the new age. Well, they're welcome to it. Let 'em come running to me when it blows up in their faces. I'll laugh."

"Yeah, Al. Sure. But I gotta go."

Moving more quietly than I had since Korea, I slipped upstairs and slid open drawers for undershorts, slacks, a sports shirt. Very cautiously, listening to see if they'd wake up, I dressed in the bathroom, then left the house, moving as cautiously as if I were scouting out my own neighborhood. I sneaked over to Bentfield's and peered in the window. At least they didn't have a dog. If what I feared was true, they'd have more on their minds than listening for prowlers. And if I were wrong, please God, if I were wrong, they were good enough friends I could always make up something.

But they were in robes in the living room. Alma Bentfield sat hunched over, hands over her face, while Stan came in, gray-faced, with coffee. The two little girls clutched each other, too sleepy to feel yet how badly they were going to hurt.

God *damn!* Just a little longer, and we'd have brought Johnny home safe. Someone must have called from Vietnam. Unauthorized. Don't ask me how.

I slipped out of their yard and back home.

"What's wrong?" Margaret's voice was sharp and came from outside Stephanie's room. She must have heard what she thought was a prowler, found me gone, and run to see if our daughter needed help.

"Better get dressed," I told her. "There's a light on at Bentfield's. I've had a crazy feeling. I went over and looked. It's about as bad as it can get."

My wife's face twisted, and she clenched her hands.

"I'll wake Steff, too," she said. "She's grown up enough to help out."

I went upstairs to change into a suit. It was almost time to get dressed for work anyhow. But long after I should have left, I sat in the kitchen drinking coffee. Margaret was cooking something. A casserole to take over, maybe. A knife fell into the metal sink. We both jumped and she spilled the milk she was pouring. "Shit!"

In twenty-five years of marriage, I don't think I'd ever heard her cuss like that.

She mopped up, and I poured myself another cup. I sat staring at the birds and butterflies on the wallpaper mural she took such care of. Different from birds in Southeast Asia, that was for sure: nice tame birds and pale colors. They call it a green hell there.

"It's time to go," she reminded me. I picked up the phone to call my office and tell my secretary I wouldn't be in just yet.

"Hope you're feeling all right," Mary-Lynn wished me, almost laughing.

"I'm fine," I almost snapped. No point taking it out on her. She'd gone to high school with my kids. I remember how old I felt the day I interviewed her-and found out that her mother had been my secretary when I'd started out in practice.

"That's good." She was almost singing. Guess she was relieved too about how the vote had gone. Her husband-the first one was no damn good, but this guy seems to be treating her okay-would be coming home. Vet or no vet, he damn well better be good to her. She's a nice kid, and besides, big as he is, I'll beat the crap out of him.

I drank my coffee and looked out at the street till the olive-drab Army car I was expecting pulled up outside Bentfield's and the long-legged uniformed men strode up the neat walk to the front door. It opened, so reluctantly. All over the street, doors opened, and the women started coming out. Each one carried a covered bowl or baking dish.

Margaret kissed me on the cheek. Her lips were cold. Then she and Stephanie went out. My daughter carried the casserole. She had on her good clothes again and lipstick the color of bubble gum. It looked fake against her pale face, and I wanted to tell her to wipe it off, but I didn't. Her legs, under the short, dark skirt, looked like a little girl's, heading into the doctor's office to get a shot. It was Johnny Bentfield who'd gotten shot.

My womenfolk went to Bentfield's and the door shut behind them.

All down the street, cars pulled out of the driveways like we were escaping.

When I got home that night, Steffie was in her jeans again, sitting in the living room.

"You shouldn't sit in the dark." I switched on some lights.

"Mom's upstairs with a headache. Took two Fiorinal." Margaret never took more than one.

I headed for the liquor cabinet and pulled out the Scotch.

"I'll do that," said my daughter. She mixed me a double the way I like them. To my surprise, she poured a stiff one for herself.

"I don't know, kitten," I began.

"I'm legal," she said flatly. "And I was there. You weren't. God!" She sat down too fast and lifted her glass. But she knows better than to belt down good Scotch.

"You did the right thing" I praised her. She'd done a good job, the sort of thing nice women like the ones on our street do without even thinking about it.

She wrapped her arms about her shoulders and hunched in. In her jeans and workshirt, she looked like a veteran of some army I'd never seen before. A vet who'd lost a buddy.

Finally, she looked up. The big brown eyes under their floppy bangs held my attention. "They brought her a flag. It was for John, they said. She didn't want to take it, but they put it in her hands. Her knees caved in, but she had to take the flag. We all sat around her. All day. Even after the soldiers left. They had other houses to visit. God *damn!*"

"Don't swear, baby. It's not nice."

"Wasn't nice to be there. Or to have to be there. What if...."

"Don't think about it!"

What kind of a father was I, leaving her alone like that?

But I couldn't help it. I got up and went outside to check on the garage door. Saw a neighbor.

"You hear about Bentfield?" he asked. Carefully, he bent and broke a dead branch off the hedge that divides our property.

I nodded. "My daughter's pretty shook up."

"It's worse than that. Stan told me, and I'm not telling the family. It wasn't VC that got his boy. 'Friendly fire,' they call it. He was stationed in front of the regular troops and, well, someone screwed up."

That's what happens when you cut and run. You get stuck facing something even worse. I had to go in and face Steffie like nothing had happened. She wasn't crying, at least, but she'd turned the lights off again.

"You want dinner? Mom said to heat stuff up." I shook my head. "Me neither."

"Let's not tell her we skipped dinner. She'd get mad."

We sat in the dark for a long time. After a while, the house got chilly, and it was time to go to bed.

Well, Nixon had his recount. It was close. Even closer than when he'd lost against Kennedy. I don't know, if I'd have thought he'd be such a bad loser, maybe I wouldn't have voted for him the first time. And the grins on the faces of those guys who look like Ho Chi Minh's grandsons at the UN made me want to wipe them out with my fist.

"It's face, y'know," Al said. After all these years, he'd finally made it to Youngstown on a business trip. Some of us got together at his Holiday Inn. These days, Al sells steel pipe. Frankly, I think he drinks through them--the gut he's got on him now! "Now that we're pulling out, they don't respect us. Not that they ever did, all that much. Talk about yellow ... I know who's yellow, those little yellow..."

"Al." Father Klein picked his beer bottle out of his hand. "You've had enough. We've all had enough."

Al lurched onto his feet, his face red. Peanuts scattered across the table. I swept them back into the bowl. Didn't think Al would take on Father Klein. He was wearing his collar, for one thing. For another, he'd always been able to punch out anyone in our outfit.

"I wanted us to win," Al said. The fight drained out of him. "You know what happens when you retreat. Remember what we'd have got if they'd caught us in Korea? Tiger cages and bamboo under our fingernails. This isn't going to be a retreat--It's a goddamned rout. Who's holding the fort while everyone's pulling out? You mark my words, it's going to be a bloodbath."

"It's okay, Al," Father Klein said. "Joey and I'll walk you back to your room and

you can stick your head in the john."

Pro-war or peacenik, we all went sort of crazy that spring. The atlas from our *Britannica* fell open at the maps of Southeast Asia as I showed Margaret just where our men were pulling back from.

"It's so green. Can't they just jump out?" Our dining room is white and gold: formal, Margaret calls it. If she likes it, fine, I'm happy. It seemed weird to be talking about weapons and jungles as we sat at a table covered by a cloth, eating off real silver.

"McGovern won't let us burn off the jungle. It's a nono. Like DDT. Damn! It's all tunnels underneath. The VC can pop out of a tunnel, strike from behind, then disappear. Or hide in a village. You can't tell VC from rice farmers. And there's no good aerial cover."

"I don't want to talk about this at dinner," she said, and closed the atlas. She didn't ever want to talk about it. Well, she wasn't a vet. God forbid we ever use our women like that, though those nurses..-you've really got to hand it to them. They've got guts. Day after day, nurses flew out with their patients. The big, silent planes flew out too, with the flags and the coffins. But the news wasn't showing them much anymore.

McGovern called it peace with honor. Withdrawal with honor, someone had tried to call it at a press conference; and all the reporters had cracked up. They'd had to fade to black real fast. Besides, you couldn't say that around the kids. McGovern still had them in the palm of his hand. They had a lot of influence, and they wanted our boys out. McGovern always had a bunch of them following him around, as interns or admirers or something. They were beginning to look a little frantic.

It was Father Klein who called it the long defeat. We were fighting to lose. It reminded me of something. Once I had to help the Bear with his history homework, and I read this thing about a Children's Crusade. They wanted to do what their elders couldn't--free the Holy land, miracles, that sort of thing. So they left home and went on Crusade. And none of 'em ever made it back.

Every time the phone rang, I dreaded it. Sometimes it was Steff. She'd turned expert, like all the kids. We talked over the withdrawal, and she said the exotic names in tones I hadn't heard for years. Sometimes it was relief operations. Everyone wanted a check. Once it was Steff's school--some lady from development assuring us that no, the school wasn't planning to close down as it had in 1970 so everyone could go do relief work. Oddly enough, I don't think I'd have minded if it had. Let the college kids do their share. But while she had me on the phone, could she possibly convince me to donate... Yeah, sure.

Al never called. After a while that sort of worried me, so I picked up the phone one evening at a decent hour and called him. Got his Mrs. and the cold shoulder, too, till I explained. Al was resting, she said. He'd been working too hard lately. No, he couldn't come to the phone.

Drying out, I thought. Not all the casualties of a war happen in combat.

Used to be, letters from the Bear were a surprise--a treat to top off a good deal or a reward to make up for a lousy one. Now, I started calling home about the time the mail usually came. "Any news?" I'd ask. Usually, there wasn't. If there was, Margaret would read Bear's letters to me. Steffie said he was still writing her, but she didn't offer.

Don't know when he had time. He said he was helping out when he was off-duty in one of the orphanages. Run by French nuns-Didn't know he'd learned some French, too. Maybe he wouldn't mind if his dad stuck his nose into his business when he came back and suggested going to college on a GI bill. There *had* to be a GI bill or something, didn't there? I mean, we owe those boys a lot.

Well, he always had been good with kids. He sent us one snapshot. There he was, all spit and polish, with these cute little round-faced kids with their bright eyes crawling all over him, scuffing up those patent shoes.

At least he got to keep clean and dry. I remembered how your feet felt like they'd rot off if you couldn't get them out of those stinking boots. In the jungle, you get mold on everything, it's so damp. I didn't like it when the Bear would complain that he had it soft, compared to most of the men. I was scared he'd try to transfer out. But I guess someone talked to him, and he thought of what he owed to his mom and sister, because after a while, he didn't talk about that anymore.

And meanwhile, those goddamn VC were getting closer to Saigon. The whole fucking--sorry, I never swear like that, must be thinking back to my army days--country was failing apart. Hated to admit it, but Al was right. As long as we came on like Curtis LeMay and threatened, at least, to bomb 'em back to the Stone Age, they'd at least respected what we could do to them if we really set our minds to it. Now, "paper tiger" was the kindest name they had for us.

President McGovern began to look haunted. He'd be a one-term president, that was for sure. And when he came down with cardiac arrhythmia, some of us wondered if he'd even manage that--the kids who surrounded his staff looked pretty grim, too. Like the kids who get caught stealing cars and suddenly realize that things are not going to be much fun anymore.

The anchormen on the evening news sounded like preachers at a funeral. I'm not making this up; it happened at Da Nang. You saw a plane ready for takeoff. Three hundred people crowded in, trampling on women and children, they were so panicky. Then the crew wanted to close the doors and get out of there, but the people wouldn't get off the runway, clear the stairs. They pulled some off the wheels and took off anyway. And you could see little black specks as people fell off where they'd hung on to the rear stairway.

Did McGovern say anything? Sure. "*We must put the past behind us. Tragic as these days are, they are the final throes of a war we never should have entered. In the hard days to come, I call upon the American people to emulate the discipline and courage of our fine servicemen who are withdrawing in good order from Vietnam.*"

I'd of spat, but Margaret was watching the news with me. We couldn't *not* watch. Funny, neither of us had ever liked horror films, but we had to watch the news.

Some people waded into the sea, the mothers holding their babies over their heads. They overloaded fishing boats, and the Navy found them floating. Or maybe the boats hadn't overloaded. Those people mostly hadn't much, but it wouldn't have been hard to take what they had, hit them on the head, and throw them overboard.

Refugees were flooding Saigon. The Bear's French orphanage was mobbed, and the grounds of all the embassies were full. Would the VC respect the embassies? How could they? Human life means nothing to them, or else they wouldn't treat their own people the way they do. And Cambodia's even worse, no matter what Steffie's polisci pros say.

In a letter I didn't show my wife, Barry told me he could hear the cluster bombs drop. The North Viets were at Xuanloc, thirty-five miles northwest of Saigon, on the way to Bien Hoa airfield, heading south, always heading south.

"If our allies had fought as well as they did at Xuanloc, maybe we wouldn't be in this fix, Dad," Barry wrote me. "It doesn't look good. Don't tell Mom. But the Navy's got ships standing offshore in the Gulf of Thailand and a fleet of choppers to fly us out to them. I hope..."

I crumpled the letter in my hand. Later, I smoothed it out and made myself read it, though. My son was out in that green hell, and I was scared to read his letter? That wasn't how I'd want to greet him when the choppers finally brought him out. He'd be one of the last to leave, I knew that. Probably pushing the ambassador ahead of him.

I wrote I was proud of him. I didn't say the half of what I meant. I don't know if he got the letter.

Then one morning Mary-Lynn met me at the door of my office, and she'd been crying-

She wouldn't let me inside. "Mrs. Black called. You have to go home, she says. Right away. Oh, Mr. Black, I'm so sorry!" She wiped at her nose. I was in shock. I pulled my handkerchief from my suit jacket and handed it to her.

She put her hands out as if I was going to pass out. "There's a ... there's a *car* out there..."

"Not..." I couldn't say the word. It would make it real. My boy. Never coming home? I couldn't make myself believe it.

"They've got a car there and Marines--oh, your wife says please, please come straight home..."

The spring sun hit my shoulders like something I'd never felt before. What right did the sun have to shine here? The trees in Crandall Park were fresh and green, and the gardens at the big corner house where they always spent a mint on flowers looked like something out of the first day of the world. How did they dare? My boy had been shot. Other men's sons had been shot in a green hell they should have burnt down to ash.

A voice broke in on the radio.

"... the American Embassy has closed its gates, and the Ambassador..."

Ambassador Bunker has refused evacuation . . ."

He'd have been there, my son. Firing into the enemy, not wanting to fire, I knew that, but there'd be a wall of Marines between the VC and the panicked crowd and the diplomats they had sworn to protect

I had people to protect too. I put my foot hard on the gas, peeled round a slowpoke station wagon with three kids and their mom in it, and roared up Fifth Avenue.

"... We interrupt this program... there is a rumor that Ambassador Bunker has been shot We repeat, this is a rumor, no one has seen his body..."

Sweet suffering Christ! Damn that red light, no one was around, so it wouldn't matter if I crashed it. Didn't want to smear myself all over the landscape before I got home; Margaret would never forgive me if I got myself killed coming home to her now, of all times.

Goddamn siren! I thought of giving the cop a run for his money, but you don't do that in Youngstown. Not ever, and especially not if you're a lawyer.

The man who got out of the car recognized me. "Hey, Counselor, what you think you're doing? You were going seventy and you crashed that light..." He sniffed at my breath, then pulled out his pad. "You know better than that. Now I wish I could let you off with a warning ..."

A fist was squeezing my throat. Finally, it let up long enough for me to breathe. "It's my boy..." I said. Then I laid my head down on the steering wheel.

A hand came in over my shoulder and took the keys. "I'm driving you home. The way you're driving, you could get yourself... Come on, Counselor."

I made him let me off up the street. No telling what Margaret would have thought if she'd seen a cop car roll up to the door. The Marine car was in the drive. The men saw me get out of the car and followed me. I made it up the front walk, feeling like I was walking off a three-day binge. Toni Carlson opened the door. She was crying, but Margaret wasn't. Sure enough, the living room and kitchen were full of women with their covered dishes.

"I called Steffie's school," Margaret said before I could even get to her. She had Barry's service photo out like they do in the newspapers. His face grinned under his hat. God, he was a good-looking boy. "Her plane gets in this afternoon."

"I'm going to pick her up," said a voice from behind

"Sir," began one of the Marines. A fine young man. I had... I have... a son like him.

He shook my hand and bravely said the things they're supposed to say. "Sir, the President of the United States and the Secretary of Defense have asked me to inform you that your son ..." The boy's voice faltered, and he went on in his own words.

Missing. Presumed dead. My son was... is... a hero. But presumed dead. After Ambassador Bunker died (that wasn't supposed to get out yet, but he supposed I had a right to know), the surviving Marines were supposed to withdraw. But Barry gave his seat to a local woman and a child.

"Probably knew them from the orphanage," I muttered. "No doubt, sir," said the Marine. It wasn't his business to comment. He'd be glad to get out, even if he had more families' hearts to break that day. Lord, I wished I could.

At least he didn't have a damn flag. As long as you don't get the flag, you can still hope.

Her school sent Steffie home, the way these schools do when there's been a death in the family. Pinkos they may be, but I've got to admit each of her professors and the college president wrote us nice letters. Take as much time as you need before coming back to class, they told Steff. Better than she got from some of her friends. Once or twice, when she thought I wasn't looking, I saw her throw out letters. And I heard her shouting on the phone at someone, then hang up with a bang. All she ever said was, "You never know who's really your friend."

I thought she'd do better to stick out the term, but she decided to take the semester off. Seeing how Margaret brightened at that news, I didn't insist she go back. And when my wife threw a major fit and screamed, "I can't bear to lose *both* the men in our family!" at the dinner table and practically *ordered* me to get an EKG, I kept the appointment with our doctor that she'd made.

Oddly enough, now that the worst had happened, I slept like a baby right through the next time the phone rang at 3:00 A.M.

Steffie came into our room. She spoke to Margaret. "It's from Frankfurt. West Germany."

Why would she be getting a call from West Germany of all places?

Margaret got up and threw on a robe. "It's in, then?" My daughter nodded. I stared at both women. Beyond family resemblance. their faces wore the same expression: guilt, fear, and a weird kind of anticipation under the sorrow that had put circles under their eyes.

Like the damn fool husbands on TV, I waited for my womenfolk to explain what was going on. It didn't much matter. After all, when your country's lost a war and you've lost a son, what else can happen?

"We have to Talk," Margaret said in *that* tone of voice. "I'll make us some coffee."

So at three in the morning, we sat down to a family conference. Margaret poured coffee. To my surprise, she looked imploringly at Steffie.

"The call from Frankfurt came through on my line,"

That stupid Princess phone!

"That's where they evacuate the refugees and process them."

My hand closed on the spoon till it hurt. How did that rate a transatlantic phone call?

Stephanie took a deep, deep breath and drew herself up. For a moment, I thought I could see her brother, making up his mind at the Embassy to give up his place to a woman and a child.

Our eyes met. She'd been thinking of Barry too.

"You know that woman and kid Barry pushed onto the helicopter in his place?"

"The ones he knew from the orphanage?"

"Where'd you get that idea?" Margaret broke in.

"Mom, he *did* meet Nguyen at the orphanage."

"Now wait a damn minute, both of you. Maybe it's too early, but no one's making sense!"

Margaret set down her coffee cup. "Joe, please listen."

"Dad, about a year ago, Barry wrote me. He'd met a girl who worked at the French Embassy. She's from Saigon, and her name is Nguyen."

I held up a hand. I wanted to be stupid. I wanted to be Ward Cleaver and have this episode end. Margaret would switch off the TV set, the show would be over, we could all go back to bed, and none of this, *none* of the whole past miserable year would have happened.

So my boy had sacrificed himself for a friend "She's his *wife*, Daddy. And the child..."

When you're on the front lines and you get hit bad, it doesn't hurt at first. You go into shock.

"You knew about this?" I asked Margaret. She looked down, ashamed.

"And didn't tell me?" Both women looked down.

"My son *married*-how do we know it's true?-he says he *married* this goddamn gook! Her people *killed* him, and you have the nerve to say..."

"If you say that word, I'll never speak to you again!" Stephanie was on her feet, her big flannel nightgown billowing in flowers and hearts about her. "Nguyen's not a bar girl. Barry said she's a lady. She worked at the French Embassy. She speaks French and Vietnamese... some English."

"They seem to have communicated just fine without it!" I snapped, hating myself.

They'd hidden this from me! Barry had written to Stephanie, and all those calls when she'd said, "I need to talk to Mom," they were talking about this unknown girl. This gook girl. Who my son had planned to bring home.

I could just see Ronnie the Racist's face. They'd hidden this from me.

"Oh Mom, I'm making such a mess of this!" Steffie cried. "I didn't really believe he'd take it like this..."

"Give him some time, darling," said my wife. "We were caught by surprise, too."

"*You* give him some time," my daughter burst into tears. "The only grandkid he may ever have, and all he can think of is to ask, 'Are they really married?'" and call the mother a gook and a bar girl! I haven't got time for this! I have to pack and go to Washington to meet Nguyen, and then I have to go..."

I reached up and grasped my daughter's wrist. "Just where do you think you're going?"

That little bit of a thing faced me down. "I'm Joining the Red Cross relief effort." She laughed, shakily. "I wish I'd listened to you and become a nurse after all. It's a hell of a lot more useful than a poli-sci major for what I need to do. We're going over there."

"That hellhole's already swallowed one of my kids!"

"That's right. So I'm going over there to look for him."

I shook my head at her. Just one small girl in the middle of a war zone. What did she think she could do:'

"Daddy, you know I've *always* looked after my brother. No matter how big he got. Except with this... this mess about the war. I did what I thought was right, and see how it worked out." She wiped at her eyes.

"Somehow, I have to make up for that. All of us do. So I'm going to look for him. And I'll... when I find him ... so help me, I am going to beat the crap out of him for scaring us this way!" She was sobbing noisily now, and when I held out my arms, she flung herself into them.

"Oh Daddy, I was wrong, it all went wrong and it got so fucked up!"

"Don't use words like that," I whispered, kissing my girl's hair. "Not in front of your mother."

"It's all right," said Margaret. "I feel the same way."

"Unless I find him, Nguyen and the little boy are all we've got of Barry. And we're all *they've* got. But all you can do is call them bad words and... and..."

I patted her back and met my wife's eyes. She nodded, and I knew we'd be having guests in the house. No, scratch that. We'd be having new family members come to live here. And if my sister's husband even *thought* of opening his big fat mouth, I'd shut it for him the way I'd wanted to for the past thirty years.

Stephanie pulled out of my arms and pushed her bangs out of her eyes. I sighed and picked my words. If I said things wrong, I was scared I'd lose her.

"We've been in this town for five generations," I began slowly. "I think our family has enough of a reputation so people will welcome ... what did you say her name was?"

"Nguyen," Margaret whispered. Her eyes were -very bright. "I'll brush up on my French" She used to teach it before we got married. "And the little boy--our grand-son-is Barry, Jr. I can't imagine how that sounds in a Vietnamese accent, can you?"

A tiny woman in those floaty things Vietnamese women wore. A little lady. My son's wife ..-or widow. And one of those cute little black-eyed kids, unless he looked like Bear. Family. Just let anyone *dare* say anything.

"We can put them in Barry's room," I stammered. "I suppose."

"Nguyen can have mine," said Steffie. "I won't need it. Oh, Daddy, I was wrong about so many things. But I was right about you after all."

She kissed me, then ran upstairs, a whirlwind in a flowered nightgown. I could hear closets and drawers protesting and paper ripping.

"I wish she'd been right about all off them," I told Margaret. She took my hand.

"I'm going with Stephanie to pick up ... Nguyen," my wife informed me.

It would get easier, I sensed, for both of us to think of her and the boy as family once we met them. My son's wife. My son's son. This wasn't how I'd thought that would be.

In a few minutes, once the shock wore off, I supposed I'd get to see the pictures. I knew there had to be pictures. But you don't live with a woman for this many years without knowing when she has more to say. And having a pretty good idea of what it is-most of the time.

This time, though, my guess was right. "Joe, I want you to come with us to Washington so we can all meet as a family. Nguyen must be terrified. She's lost everything and, and everyone."

Her voice trembled, but she forced it to calm. "I would mean a lot to her. Steff says the Vietnamese are Confucian. If the head of our family were there to greet her, she'd *know* she was welcome, she and the little one."

A smile flickered across her face. "I wonder where we can get a crib," she mused. "All our friends' children are grown and haven't started having babies yet. We'll be the first to have a grandchild."

I bent over and hugged her. "Did you make a third plane reservation?"

She smiled at me. "What do you think?"

"I'll carry your suitcase downstairs for you, baby," I told my daughter.

"*Oh*, Dad, you know I'll have to lug my own stuff once I go overseas..."

"As long as you're in *my house*, young lady--"

"It's on my bed." I went into her room to get it. She'd taken a cheap plaid fabric thing, not one of the good, big Samsonite cases she'd gotten for high school graduation. Her room wasn't just clean: it was sterile. She'd even torn down her posters and hung the crewelwork back up. I wondered what this strange new daughter-in-law of mine would make of the pretty blue and lilac room.

My foot sent something spinning and rolling. I bent to retrieve the thing, which promptly jagged my finger. One of Stephanie's protest buttons, hurled away as if in despair, poor girl. "Suppose they gave a war and nobody came?" it asked.

Suppose they did? It had never happened yet.

Suppose, instead, they gave a peace? That hadn't worked, either.

But I can always hope, can't I?

After all, I have a grandson to look out for.