

*She carries his heart in her heart...*

Each of us carries things with us every day. Sometimes it is ordinary things: a handbag or wallet, countless papers, a pen or pencil, a book, maybe a little money or credit cards, a pair of sunglasses, but we carry other things too; the things that no one else can see.

Where does a life truly begin? When we are born? When we speak our first word? When we take our first steps? When we have a first kiss? When we experience love for the first time? When does our heart truly awaken? Her life began with him some forty years ago and ended thousands of miles away on a foreign battle field. That is where he left her heart, in a field of dust and smoke and blood but that was later... the love came first...

Her face was turning from me now as I listened to the story of how she had met him, what he looked like on that warm Friday evening in May 1969. It wasn't until then that I realized she had truly loved him, that she would always love him. I had heard this story of her soldier before, the number too many to count, but somehow this time was different; I was different. I never noticed before how she carries him with her.

He was twenty-four years old, long and slender; dark hair, dark burnt amber eyes and beautiful with pale creamy skin. A Staff Sergeant in the Army and a University of South Carolina graduate, he spoke in an intelligent, gentle, and intoxicating southern manner. His expression was a mysterious one, a carefree face trying to mask lonesome eyes. He came from old southern money, although this did not define him, he didn't take shame or boast in it either. He was a gentleman; a gentleman in every sense of the word.

They met at the officer's club dance. She was with her friend, Sue. As they stood, she noticed a handsome young man crossing the room. She assumed it was to meet Sue. Men

were always crossing rooms to meet Sue, but when he finally reached them his gaze was directed right at her. He spoke to her for the first time, “Would you care to dance?” She could only manage to nod her head slightly. His hand embraced hers; he tenderly reached for the small of her back as he led her out on to the dance floor.

As she told me of this first night with him, her eyes were brighter and younger as if she were still that eighteen-year-old girl. They spent the rest of the evening together; talking, laughing, and he told her just before the night was through, “You are a true lady.” He asked for her phone number and then she left with her friend. She told me, “I never expected to see him again.” Monday came around and she had received no call, Tuesday came and went no call. Wednesday came, but it was different, that evening the phone rang. It was him. During that evening she came to know him more deeply than anyone she had known previously in her short life. They discussed it all, the books, the music, the things that make them laugh, and the things that made them cry. Hours later, as the first light came through the trees, he asked to come see her and meet her family that coming Friday. Before she even had the chance to think about it she had answered him eagerly, “YES!”

It was at this moment, as her eyes closed that she was no longer with me in the present, but with him, in 1969 living in her memory. She said that night he came to meet her family was the most wonderful night of her young life. As she said goodnight to him on her front porch, he pulled her close and gently pressed his lips to hers. It was “a kiss of innocence” she said as she sighed. It was getting late and he finally had to tell her the truth. He was being shipped out the very next day to California and then within seventy-two hours to Vietnam. In spite of all this, he wanted her to write and write and write to him. No matter

how bad things might become in that foreign land, he wanted to be able to carry her with him, even if it was just the words she had written. He told her, “It isn’t over, not yet.”

Over the next six months she wrote him more than one hundred letters. She did not receive a single reply. Finally, after it had been seven months since she last saw him on her front porch, she received a phone call from her friend, Sue. Sue asked to meet up with her the following evening; there was a message that she needed to deliver. The next evening a young service man from the army told her of what had happened all those months ago and why she had never heard from him. She felt frozen as he explained how the parachute drop had gone wrong and how instead he was released behind enemy lines. Her tears flowed, but she never made a sound, as he finally said what she knew was the inevitable conclusion; he had been killed. His life had ended less than a week after he left her on that porch.

A few weeks passed and she received a package labeled “*war department.*” Enclosed were all the letters she had written, every word that she gave to him, all unopened, unread, and unspoken. She said, “It is how funny how long it took them to send my letters back to me.” I knew she didn’t mean it humorously, but she managed to give me a half smile anyway.

I guess you could say that she barely knew him. That if you added it all up, they only spent all of a few precious hours together. Now, it had been more than forty years since she last saw him or felt his touch, why should it matter now? Why do these thoughts and memories stay embedded within us? Why do our hearts take hold and keep possession, even decades later? In truth, I do not think anyone truly knows. Just before I turned to leave her

bedroom, I asked her, “Do you a photograph of him?” Her eyes filled with gentle tears and softly she replied, “Only in my mind.”

Each of us carries things with us every day. Sometimes it is only the ordinary things, but sometimes it’s not. As for me, I carry her with me each day. I carry her in my heart, she is my mother.