A Man's World

No one greeted them. Dotty, her plump boss, beckoned urgently, and Arlene hurried to crouch behind a row of fuel barrels, barely ahead of a storm of grit that strafed the barrels like a minigun. When the helicopter cleared she stood warily, staring at the jungle two hundred yards away. "Just smile," Dotty said, resting a hand on her shoulder. "You'll knock 'em dead."

They grabbed their gear and followed a jagged path through the concertina wire and onto the firebase, passing culverts where the artillery crews slept. Each soldier had a bunk, a footlocker, a PX stereo, and each had taped photographs of his girlfriend or of a centerfold to his rounded steel ceiling. As they passed, Merle Haggard belted out a song, then Aretha Franklin, then Creedence Clearwater Revival.

Left a good job in the city, Arlene murmured, when suddenly a howitzer boomed. She dropped to the ground, certain she'd been wounded, and then five howitzers were firing, the grimy, shirtless boys behind them nonchalantly opening chambers when the barrels heaved back, expertly shoving in new shells, dancing forward and back as if they were part of the machinery. A dozen rounds went out while Arlene hugged the dirt, covering her ears. The boys stared but seemed not to see her. The firing ceased and Merle Haggard sang out: *Mama tried.*

Dotty motioned irritably. Ashamed of herself, mimicking the same mask of indifference the soldiers wore, Arlene followed her down a sandbagged tunnel that led into the command bunker. In the center of the room a string of naked light bulbs dangled. To their left a man was typing, while another shuffled through a pile of maps. Four enlisted men spoke into radios built into the wall, and a captain moved from one to the other. He nodded curtly. "Afternoon, Dotty. You bring us a movie?"

"Pork Chop Hill."

"You're shitting me." Grinning affably, the captain looked Arlene up and down as he spoke into the microphone. He smacked his lips and Arlene shrank to the wall, feeling like a side of beef in her thin, cotton blouse and pleated skirt. She'd made the mistake, when Dotty asked her what she could do, of saying she used to be a cheerleader.

"Roger, Bandit, gotcha lima chuck," the captain said. "Redleg on its way. ETA three-zero, that's seconds, Bandit, not minutes, how copy?"

Outside, the howitzers began booming again.

"That's all I had this week," Dotty said. *"2001* came in from the marines all chewed up. You ready for us, Don?"

"Squared away." The captain looked unhappy. "Roger, Bandit. Copy: *right* five-zero, *drop* one-zero-zero. Hang in there, pal, Big Daddy's on his way."

A tall man came down the tunnel. He smiled shyly at Arlene out of the shadows, and for an instant she thought of her faraway father. "Good afternoon, ladies," the tall man said.

"Lieutenant," Dotty said neutrally.

The lieutenant picked up Dotty's bird cage and one duffel bag and they filed outside again. The guns went crazy and Arlene couldn't hear, but the lieutenant nodded toward a sort of amphitheater cleared out between the infantry bunkers, sandbagged all around.

The captain burst out of the CQ. "Dotty, get me Clint Eastwood!" he yelled.

"I put him on order!" Dotty yelled back. "I'm not Superwoman!"

Arlene didn't fault the soldiers for being so filthy. There was no escape from the heat here and that red dust never stopped blowing. When it rained, no doubt the dust turned into a quagmire. Even so, the tall lieutenant's trousers were neatly bloused, his jungle boots polished. His silver bars flashed in the sun. A *first* lieutenant.

She thought of the story she'd read flying in from the States, *Luzon Nurse.* It was about a brave, handsome lieutenant whose wounds were cared for by a confident young nurse, Samantha Peterson.

Of course, the Red Cross strictly forbade involvements. It happened, sometimes, but you'd be on your way to Oakland before the day was out if you were discovered. The rule was for your own protection. When the ratio of men to women was one hundred to one, you couldn't be too careful.

"I'll bet you're from Iowa," the lieutenant said.

If she looked straight ahead, she could imagine her father walked beside her, since this man was just as tall and spoke in the same quick way. But no green pasture lay before them, no gleaming little pond with geese on it. "Nebraska," she said wistfully. "How can you tell?"

"You look so . . . innocent."

"Well, I'm *new."* She was a little offended. "You make innocence sound sinful."

He laughed and extended a hand. "My name's Henry Stiles. I'm from Mitchell, South Dakota."

She wanted to know everything about him. She wanted to tell him how homesick she was, how helpless she sometimes felt. "Arlene Kessler. I'm from the Sand Hills. We're practically neighbors."

"Stay innocent," he whispered. He had serious blue eyes, Arlene thought, full of sadness. She wanted to comfort him, to tell him he'd make it through this terrible time, just as, when her mother died, she'd brought her father through the miserable winter. She was here on earth to offer comfort, and when she'd finished with Vietnam, she planned to get her degree in social work, and find a job on the Rosebud Reservation.

Dotty set up her felt-covered stand and donned her cape and top hat, while the lieutenant went off to round up an audience. Arlene stood not knowing what to do, sweat running down her dusty legs. When the firing ceased, a dozen men straggled in, and sat cross-legged or hoisted themselves up on piles of sandbags.

The last man stumbled into the circle as if he'd been pushed. His skin was streaked with dirt and there was a tear in his trousers. Lieutenant Stiles, his lips tightly clinched, followed shortly behind him. "Sit down, Hays," he told the straggler. "Enjoy yourself."

Dotty made her pitch for the Red Cross Club. "Come as you are," she said, which drew a laugh. "All the Kool-Aid you can drink, and it's air-conditioned!"

She pulled a quarter from behind her ear, then palmed it into a multi-colored Japanese fan. She juggled four cans of Black Label, ending by throwing the beer to her audience.

The boy named Hays played in the dirt with his pocketknife, never once lifting his eyes. When he twisted the knife, his biceps and chest muscles flinched beneath his soiled tee shirt, but he didn't seem strong. He was pale—wrenched—as if he'd had a bout with hepatitis.

For her finale, Dotty drew a dove from a black cloth. The dove fluttered up and perched on her shoulder, and there was a chorus of "Peace!" Arlene did three flips across the tarpaulin, arching her hips each time: she was Betty Grable, Ann-Margret. On her third landing, she slipped and skidded into Hays. Her legs spread around his lean belly and she banged into his nose. "Sorry," she whispered.

"Don't *waste* it, lady," said a man with a blistered face and a bushy red mustache.

"At ease, soldier!" Henry said harshly, and drew Arlene to her feet. She stumbled against him.

"Oh, Lieutenant," the same man said. "You're *so* strong."

But the soldiers were applauding now, and Arlene threw out her hands and bowed. Hays looked up, too, but not with gratitude or amusement. What was in those eyes? Not anger, exactly.

"Something wrong with him?" Arlene asked, as Hays shuffled off.

Henry's eyes narrowed. "He just got out of the stockade."

"For?"

Henry shrugged, implying it was none of her business.

Dotty nodded a goodbye or two and strode purposefully toward the helicopter pad, leaving Arlene the heavier of the duffel bags. Lord help me, she thought, realizing that her dumb cartwheels had upstaged her boss. She'd be stuck at the club for six months, baking cookies and smiling, smiling, smiling when her heart was breaking. She carried the duffel bag for a hundred feet in the heavy air, until her neck and cheeks dripped sweat. She dropped the bag and dragged it.

She saw the lieutenant from afar, pointing angrily at one of the crews in a firing pit, striding quickly over to do the job himself. She paused on the berm, waiting for him to turn, smiling at him pointedly. Sometimes, you just had a feeling, rules or no rules. When Dotty threw her a meaningful look and pointed at the incoming helicopter, Arlene bent to tie her shoe.

Just in time, Henry saw her and trotted over. "We rotate back to Tay Ninh in ten days," he shouted.

"I can't actually—"

But then he was gone and she sat in the helicopter again. Dotty stared at her without expression and then fastened her eyes on the green horizon, where rounds streaked out and exploded in the tall trees. "I thought that went well," Arlene called out, but the rotors had powered up and her words were lost in the wind.

****

Dotty had flown to Pleiku to open a new club, leaving Arlene in charge of her fool's agenda, which, in six weeks, was how Arlene had come to think of it.

By 0800 Beulah and she had baked three hundred oatmeal, chocolate chip, and peanut butter cookies, and made two pots of coffee and a twenty-gallon canister of lime Kool-Aid. They placed their offerings neatly on white tablecloths with stacks of red paper plates and napkins with green helicopters on them, and by then there were thirty men at the door.

First, they swooped down on the cookies. Then the television went on to Armed Forces reruns: *Bonanza,* followed by *Combat!* and *Have Gun Will Travel.* Meantime, the sounds of a pool game—the clinking balls, the stream of profanity, the occasional cheer—rose up in a competition, the black soldiers trying to dominate, the whites arriving, en masse, to give challenge. A fight was always about to break out.

White or black, in Arlene's estimation, they were the scum of the earth. Short of calling in the MPs, she couldn't control them, and calling the MPs meant paperwork and a lecture from Dotty. "The greatest service is given in the face of hostility," was one of her lines, but the greatest hostility was served up to Arlene.

"Put your little twat right here, sugar!"

A week before, when three of them chanted "Bimbo! Bimbo! Where you gonna go-ee-o?" she ran back to the kitchen and gave in to tears. When she'd joined the Red Cross, she'd visualized holding the hands of dying soldiers, writing letters to their saintly mothers, but the truth was that she might as well have been ministering to convicts.

"You don't really know what they're going through," Dotty told her. "You don't know the effect you're having. You're a pretty girl, Arlene. There may be times when just looking at you pulls these soldiers back from despair."

In some other war, Arlene thought. On some other planet.

Her only friend was Beulah, a plain woman with whom no one flirted, a Jehovah's Witness whose facial expression had frozen somewhere between disapproval and pain by the age of fifteen. You got the feeling, if her eyes crossed yours, that the end was near.

Not that Beulah was truly frightening. In fact, she faded away into some deeply personal misery whenever Arlene attempted conversation. But in her shapeless blue smock, Beulah invoked the drab memories of these men, of foster mothers and welfare workers and psychiatric nurses. The very people they'd go all the way to Vietnam to avoid. "Game time!" Beulah yelled out, as if games were the daily sedative. She clapped her hands and the echo was like AK fire."Game time!"

Then Arlene—cast, for lack of a better candidate, as girl-next-door—smiled brightly and said, "This will be so much *fun!"*

Which was the knock-out punch that sent the worst of her troublemakers scurrying out the back door, less from intimidation than disgust. Those who remained were merely cannon fodder, the dunderheads, the potheads, the sleepyheads, men who judged any day they avoided being shot at as a good day.

"Do we have any volunteers?" Arlene said, pacing in the center of the day room, glaring with mock-menace at one and then another, stopping, at last, before a sleeper who'd covered his face with an old *Newsweek.*

"Shhh!" she said, as laughter rippled among her troops. She slid toward the sleeper with long, exaggerated strides, like a cartoon villain. Only a giggle or two interrupted the quietness.

She motioned to two soldiers to come in from behind. Then she pounced, knocking aside the *Newsweek,* bringing her finger down on the soldier's nose. "Sleeper!" she hissed, and laughter erupted.

The sleeper jerked up his head in panic, and brought his hands to his face as if to ward off an attack. Now the laughter was like a wall that encircled Arlene and her victim, but she knew she'd made a mistake. The sleeper was the baffled young man from the firebase, Hays.

His eyes held the same wild glint, but he recognized her, and seemed to relax a little. "It's okay," she whispered, leaning near, at the same time motioning to her volunteers. They lifted Hays in his chair and carried him to the center of the room. He shrank back and the color in his face fled. His legs went slack.

Laughter rose again as Beulah handed Arlene her scepter and fastened the red cape around her shoulders. "I am Princess Arlene!" she announced, and her subjects stomped the floor and beat on wastebaskets.

Oh, but those eyes! They were not just wild, but red, and sunken in his pale face. Stop, she told herself, and glanced up at Beulah, but Beulah stood with folded arms, her face inscrutable, a sphinx. And a regiment of faces cheered her on. "What's your name, soldier?"

"Elwood Hays," he said, with a flat drawl. Oklahoma, she thought, or Texas.

"Elwood, you're a handsome man!"

"Whoa, babe!" a big sergeant said. "She loves you!"

Arlene touched Hays' shoulder with the scepter. "But, Elwood, you've been *bad!"*

"He been wicked!"

Elwood looked miserable. Didn't he know that his reward was a kiss? She'd have begged him if she could, held his hand, listened all night if he was able to talk. And for an instant, she thought that they silently communicated, one chastened soul to another.

"You were sleeping, Elwood! You men, wasn't he sleeping?"

"Yeah! Yeah!"

"And what do we do with a sleeping soldier?"

"Take him out and shoot him."

"Naw," said one of the pool sharks. "Fuck the man *blind."*

Arlene swallowed. "No, no, please," she managed. "Let's be nice here. We make our sleepers play *games."*

She motioned to Beulah, who stepped behind Hays and deftly blindfolded him. He tensed as if he would bolt, but Arlene dropped a hand to his shoulder. "It's okay, Elwood, it's nothing," she whispered, and then, to her cheering audience, called out, "This is a taste game, Elwood. Maybe you played it back in school."

His blindfolded head rolled like a chicken's, seeking her voice. "Mrs. Dedman's class."

He was cooperating, Arlene thought. This would work out, and the worst of her day would be done, and she could go to lunch. "Good! Now, you play the game really well, Elwood, you get a prize. Okay?"

"Okay," he said. He pulled his arms back to his chest again, as if to protect himself from—from what? His stance was that of a man about to be beaten. Arlene glanced at Beulah, who shrugged and handed her the dill pickle.

"Oh, no," came a chorus.

"That's a big one!" said a short man, who leaped up to a water pipe and chinned himself three times.

Arlene thrust the pickle into Hays' mouth, plunged it forward and back once, all to a cascade of laughter. Hays swallowed and involuntarily bit down.

"Well?" Arlene said.

Hays twisted his head and spat out the pickle. He rose in the chair but Beulah pressed him back.

"What's wrong with you, young private?" said the man doing chin-ups. He jumped down and walked several yards on his hands.

"You sposed to guess," said the pool shark. "What it *is."*

"One more, Elwood, okay?" Arlene whispered. Some of the men were slipping away, but she didn't care, this was almost over. She grinned and walked about the chair bent like Groucho Marx, her royal cape swirling. Then she pushed the spoonful of chocolate pudding into Hays' mouth.

But this time he leapt up, sweeping his arms wildly, knocking the spoon and bowl from Arlene's hands. He yanked off the blindfold and crouched, his eyes jerking about. He panted like a dog.

"Elwood, please!" Arlene said.

When she reached to calm him, he swept his arm back, catching her on the neck. She skidded in the pudding and fell to the floor, and, in that instant, realized she'd seen those eyes once before, long ago, when her father shot a pig for butchering. The thing knew it was dying but kept staggering. You could see betrayal in those eyes, and the doom of the world.

"Jesus," said the little man who did chin-ups, and he and the pool shark tried to restrain Hays. But Hays threw out his arms furiously, dropping blows right and left. The men parted as if a tiger were among them, and in seconds Hays had gone.

Beulah held out a hand and Arlene heaved to her feet. She ran to the door and stared down the red road. The heat howled before her, filled with red dust, impenetrable. "Elwood Hays," she murmured. "I'm so sorry."

She lived in a tiny trailer uphill from the club, tucked into a bend in the road so that everything not bolted down vibrated when trucks went by on their way to the motor pool. But she had a shower, a hotplate, even a small refrigerator. Every night she wrote her father, had a bowl of soup and an apple. Sometimes, she tried to read. Then she closed all the windows, drew every curtain, and turned the air conditioner to high. Without the three alarms she placed by her bed she would not have known when day had come, when to go to work.

More than once, cocooned in her blankets, exhaust from the air conditioner flooding over her toes, she visualized Lieutenant Henry Stiles standing in the little hall. She drew back her legs as he yanked on the sheets. "Where have you been?" she asked. "Why didn't you call?"

And sometimes, she heard her father lumbering up the back steps, stumbling about by the narrow hall closet, dropping his chore boots. Soon he'd be upstairs, shaving for his job at the hardware, looping his one tie over his head and knotting it, muttering about his pigs. A diminished and befuddled man, now that his wife was gone. "Arlene, get up!" he'd call. If she failed to rise, he'd come in and pinch her big toe, and she'd laugh and laugh and laugh, as if she were still six and there were happy times in the old house.

Bang!

She fell to the floor, dragging her bedclothes with her. She lay in the blackness and heard something click on the tile: a roach. She came to her feet, bobbed dizzily, felt for her thongs and housecoat.

Bang!

Someone was at the door. At 0230? Rocking the trailer with blows? She edged down the hall, afraid to turn on a light. She glided to the little jalousie window, cranked it, and made out a bulky shape on her steps. She couldn't tell who it was, or even *what* it was.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

She picked up the knife lying on the counter and slipped into the living room. She stood just inside the door, trying not to breathe, and now she heard the man make animal sounds, in a muttering that resolved once or twice into almost-words.

"Hee-upp," she thought he said. And then "ma'am," she recognized "ma'am." It was a southern voice: Elwood Hays.

She tried to speak but her mouth refused to shape words. Or maybe she screamed, because, later, she could never perfectly recall. Lights crisscrossed the trailer and she dropped again to the floor. An engine roared, and there were shouts. Gears clashed. Then there were voices again, and a burst of automatic fire that hammered into the trailer, shaking it top to bottom. Hays grunted like a pig. This time, the firing sounded as though it were inside the trailer—inside her head, tearing her brains apart.

More firing, still, but sporadic. Hays screamed into her ear, and, from afar, soldiers cursed him by name, and cursed fate.

"Ah, shit," she heard.

The lights went out and a long silence followed. She lay paralyzed on the floor, shivering with cold, instructing herself to rise but unable to. She thought of the root cellar, long in disuse, hidden by sapling cottonwoods, where she used to play when she was a little girl. Her secret place.

At last the gears clashed again and the jeep whined away. She heard a voice she knew. "Arlene, are you there?"

"Yes," she said, with all her strength, but only a whisper came out. Her alarm clock buzzed. She drew herself to her knees, and stood unsteadily on her bare feet. Where had she put her thongs?

"Lieutenant Stiles?" she said. "Henry?"

"Let me in!"

She unbolted the door and fell against him. He was sweating and smelled of tobacco. He lay her on the couch, and the little room spun around one bright light. He handed her the tea he made on her hotplate.

"He's dead? He's dead?"

Henry nodded grimly. "When he fired into the trailer, there wasn't much we could do. We had to stop him somehow."

"Why?"

"He was on guard, high on something, I said I was gonna take him in. And he snapped. He started running. Down the road—we lost him for a while. Then we caught him in the spotlight."

"Why here?"

Henry hesitated. "You'd have to ask Hays. I—*we* thought he meant to kill you."

"He seemed so gentle," she murmured.

She closed her eyes. When she opened them, it seemed as if hours had passed. Henry looked like her father in the weak light. Of course, her father never talked about playing basketball in Mitchell, South Dakota, how he'd almost had a college scholarship.

She wanted to ask him why he hadn't called, to tell him about the letters she'd written him here in her cold cell, but never sent. Hays wasn't really dead, was he? Was a man dead, and on her doorstep? What had Hays done, she wondered, because in that game, you remember that silly game? It was like something terrible had happened to him, you know what I mean, Henry?

"I know," he whispered, as he carried her down the hall, her legs freezing even though, outside, she knew it was unbearably hot. She dropped to her sheets a thousand miles below, as if she were drugged. "Stay," she told him, forgiving his neglect because he had saved her, believing in him because she believed in America, in noble nurses, in brave lieutenants.

He undressed and slipped beside her, squeezing her breasts against his bare chest. *Oh love oh love oh careless love,* she sang deliriously, never opening her mouth, as waves of cold delight rushed through her. "I'm 10,000 miles from home," she cried out.

"Shhh," her father said. "Sleep now."

At 0600 there was no sign of him. Even her tea cups had been washed and put away. Nothing remained but the smell of tobacco. Kools, she remembered. Henry smoked Kools.

Her hair was tangled. She washed it and combed it carefully and drank tea, shivering in the frigid air.

Then she strapped on a mini-skirt like a sidearm, and marched down the steaming boardwalk to the club. When the officers at the CQ called out a gentlemanly good morning, she smiled. When the medics at the AID station whistled, she smiled. When the Vietnamese women looked up from their tubs of boiling blue water, and glowered, she smiled. She was a pretty girl, and

she'd been sent here to smile. Because, just like Dotty said, you never knew the effect you were having.

Yet, as the days passed and Henry didn't return, one thing began to puzzle her. Why were the bullet holes in her trailer slanted sideways, downhill toward those conex containers? If Hays had intended to kill her, surely he'd have shot directly into her door. She tried to remember all the different bursts of fire she'd heard, tried to reason out who had fired from where.

She couldn't confide in Dotty about Henry. But she did mention the game she'd played with Hays, and how, looking back, she should have realized how troubled he was.

"You couldn't have known that," Dotty said. "You're a woman, not a mind-reader."

Arlene was sure, at least, that lieutenants such as the ones in novels didn't exist. Nor was she reading minds when, fully a month later, it at last occurred to her what Elwood Hays had been trying to say. She was sitting in the mess hall after the work day, drinking tea and writing a letter to her father. She looked up at the ceiling fan and the whispering blades had something of the sound of Hays' voice in them.

She covered her face with her hands so that no man could see her tears. "Help," the fan whispered. "Help. Help. Help."