

HOLD ON TIGHT

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For Sennen and Tress, of course

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Draft

My days were summer-plaid and popsicle-purple until Bobby had to go.

My days were tree-climbed and skinned-knee red until my brother left.

A week into summer, I perched in the crook of the apple tree, flicking the wormy green apples from their skimpy hold on the knotted grayed-bark branches. Soft thuds when the fruit hit the ground. Drips of grape on my thigh, melted popsicle leaving sticky streams on my skin.

A slamming car door made me look up, past the brick of the house, to the driveway. My father, home in the middle of a workday.

I slid down from the tree, popsicle stick clenched between my teeth, my tongue trying to escape the cottony-wood taste. I scraped my knee against the bark, opened another scab, exposing bright red blood.

I ran across the yard, bristly dry grass scraping my heels. Then my bare feet felt the cool concrete patio. June, not hot enough yet to scorch the bottoms of feet. I yanked on the metal handle, sending the glass door sliding along its track, and slipped inside.

My parents stood in the kitchen, my mother leaning back against the sink, her sleeveless housedress wrinkled in front as if a child had just sat in her lap, wrinkling the material by fidgeting and squirming. But Bobby and I had been too old for laps for a long time. Bobby much longer than me.

My father stood next to the kitchen table, one hand gripping the back of a chair. The chair where Bobby always sat. My fa-



ther's white shirt was rumpled already, just past noon. But his short black hair, slicked into place, looked the same as when he had left that morning, the same as all day, every day.

I slipped the damp popsicle stick into the pocket of my shorts, and waited. I didn't lean back against the glass door, not wanting to leave handprints for my mother to clean. I wanted to hear what they said, everything. I wanted to know. But the Rolling Stones pounded out of Bobby's room, the beat vibrating the walls and our ears, and I didn't know if I would hear, could hear.

As Mick's voice faded out, before the next song began, my father spoke.

"He needs to go, Marna," my father said. "He's eighteen. When I was his age, I did my part. And I came back just fine. That war made me the man I am today."

"But we could go, take Bobby..." my mother paused, watching my father's frown deepen, "to Canada." My mother said the word that had been a presence in my house for months, but like a prized jewel encased in a glass museum display, none of us could quite grasp onto it. But we knew it existed, within reach. If only.

My father shook his head, and the Rolling Stones stopped, as if his shaking head had lifted the needle from the record. My parents waited, spoke no more words, because they knew that the end of the music signaled Bobby's appearance.

The three of us watched my brother as he stepped into the kitchen, his bare feet mirroring mine, but larger, darker. Bobby always tanned more quickly than me. He looked first at my father, who glanced away. My father couldn't stand Bobby's hair that summer, flat dark hair that hung to his shoulders. I didn't know if that's why my father looked away then, so he didn't have to see the hair. Maybe because of something else.

"Bobby." My mother stepped away from the sink, reached out, touched my brother's arm. It seemed that my mother and



Bobby could never be in the same room without my mother touching him. The same way she would squeeze my shoulder or rub my arm, the same way she loved us without saying it out loud. My mother touched Bobby, even though my father complained, saying, “Marna, he’s a man now, when will you stop all this lovey-dovey mama’s boy stuff with him?”

My mother never answered that question. But I knew the answer, knew it as if the word had been tattooed across my mother’s right arm, the one that touched us most often. The answer was *never*.

“We could still go, Bobby,” my mother said, lifting her free hand to her hair, patting the curled-in waves, her nervous gesture. “We could go to Canada, just say it, and I’ll take you there. Just agree to it, Bobby, and we, Suzanne and I, we’ll stay with you. Forever, if we have to.”

“Stop it with this Canada business,” my father said, not giving Bobby a chance to answer my mother. “You know that’s foolishness, Marna; stop filling his head with your foolishness. He’s a man now, and he’ll do what he needs to do.”

“I’ll be okay, Mom,” my brother said, pulling his arm away from her fingertips, her touch. “It’s only for a year. That’s nothing. I’ll be back before you know it, and then maybe I’ll quit working at the garage and find a decent job, like Dad’s always on my case about. Maybe I’ll even start those classes over at the junior college.”

My mother listened, tried to smile at Bobby’s plans, couldn’t.

“Hey, maybe this time away will be good for me,” Bobby continued. “Maybe it’ll help me grow up like Dad’s always saying I need to. Make a man out of me.” Bobby looked at my father and grinned, his joker grin.

My father shook his head, shaking off Bobby’s sarcasm. “Look, Bobby, I have to make up this time at work. Are you ready or not?”



“I have to get my shoes. I wasn’t sure you were here yet. Give me a minute.” Bobby turned and left, and I crossed the kitchen floor and followed him, trailing the back of his denim shorts and black tee shirt down the hall.

In his room, Bobby jammed his feet into the unlaced sneakers half kicked beneath his bed, and turned around.

He smiled as he saw me standing in the doorway.

“Hey, silent Suzanne, what are you staring at?” he asked.

“Mom doesn’t want you to go,” I said.

Bobby shrugged, his hated hair brushing across his shoulders.

“When your number’s up, it’s up,” my brother told me. “I don’t really see a choice. The Canada thing is just Mom’s wild imagination. Besides, if we don’t stop the communists from taking over the world, who will? We’re Americans, that’s our job,” Bobby echoed our father’s dinner table lectures. “But hey, Suze, Mom shouldn’t worry so much. I’ll be back. But probably without my hair. I hear they really do a job on it. Dad will like that, don’t you think?”

I nodded, knowing the answer to that question. The one about the communists, I had no idea. “Sure,” I agreed.

Bobby took a step toward me, saw I didn’t move, and stopped.

“I don’t want you to go either,” I said.

Bobby put both hands behind his head, gripped his hair into a ponytail, then let it fall. His nervous habit, my mother called it. Like her hair habit, though she never connected the two. She couldn’t see her own hands, her own hair. Only Bobby’s.

“Suzy-Q, right now I’m just going down to sign some papers or something. Get official, I don’t know, this is more Dad’s trip than mine. I won’t be *leaving* leaving for a few more days.” Bobby watched me with his dark brown eyes, chocolate syrup eyes, I always thought. “I’m not abandoning my little sister



yet. And I keep telling you, I'll be back in not much more than a year. You'll be what, twelve?"

I nodded. Yes, twelve and a half next spring. A lifetime away from eleven and a half, to me. A summer and a fall and a winter and a spring, all with Bobby gone.

"When I get back, we'll finish that engine on the Chevy, okay?"

I nodded again. "Okay."

"Wouldn't that be something, to get that old heap up and running?" my brother asked. "No more parts scattered across the driveway for Dad to gripe about."

"Yeah," I agreed, "that'd be something."

"And you, Suzy-Q, get first ride. But look, I really have to go now. Dad will have an attack if I'm not out there soon."

And Bobby walked past me, out of the room, but not before he gave my shoulder a squeeze, one of my mother's I-love-you squeezes, but with my brother's large, grease-stained hand. A car mechanic's hand. *Not a soldier's hand*, I thought. But then, I didn't really know. I never knew a soldier before.

I heard the front door open and close, and my father's car starting up in the driveway, and I sat down on Bobby's bed, on the unmade sheets and crumpled comforter, and I looked from one poster tacked onto the wall to the next. Hendrix, Jagger, Dylan, I could name them all. Bobby talked, all the time, talked about the music, the meaning of the lyrics. But me, I just listened to those songs because Bobby let me hang out with him, invited me into his room to listen, to share his music with him.

The floor in the hallway creaked and I looked up to see my mother taking my place in the doorway.

"He's still here for a few more days," I said.

"I know," my mother said.

"He'll be back, Mom, really he will," I told her.



“I know,” she agreed. “I know you want that as much as I do, Suzanne. So we’ll want it together, okay?”

Then my mother tried to smile at me, and I tried to smile back. It was hard. I think Bobby meant the same to us, my mother and me. Sometimes I thought she didn’t really see me; she was only seeing Bobby. At least for the last few months, ever since he turned eighteen, ever since the draft became what we talked about at dinner almost every night. But I didn’t mind. Wanting Bobby to come back would be something my mother and I could do together, just like loving him was what we did together now.

After my mother tried to smile at me, but couldn’t, she moved on down the hallway, toward her room, and I sat on Bobby’s bed knowing he’d be back. My brother always did what he said he would.

So I knew he’d come back from Vietnam. In one year. And I’d be twelve then, and he’d get the Chevy running and take me for the first ride, to the Tastee-Freeze. And treat me to a cone, a chocolate-vanilla swirl. And together we’d lick the drips from our cones before they dropped sticky, onto our summer clothes, licking along with Jimi Hendrix’s guitar licks on the radio that Bobby always had to have playing, anytime he drove or rode in a car. So I knew we’d be listening, even with the car stopped, sitting in Bobby’s Chevy parked in the gravel lot in front of the Tastee-Freeze.

I smiled, thinking about Bobby coming back and how it would be, and I could almost taste those two flavors, creamy chocolate and sweet vanilla, melting together on my tongue.





Movies

And then my brother left, and we drove back from the airport, my father dropping my mother and me off in the driveway on his way back to work. My mother went into her bedroom, shut the door, probably still wiping her eyes like she did at the airport, probably still silent like she was the whole way home. She didn't answer my father when he spoke to her, didn't respond when he told her not to act like this. My mother would act how she felt, I knew.

For days my mother spent a lot of time in her bedroom, coming out to make meals and move the clothes from the washer to the dryer. We didn't talk much. I watched TV, let the cartoons and game shows wash over me, and I read my book club books over again, and one day I sat on the nubby sofa in the living room, my fingers tracing Vietnam on the usually ignored globe on the end table. The tracing didn't take much time. Long and skinny, Vietnam didn't seem like much of a country.

Bobby in Vietnam. Was he there yet? I didn't know. I knew that he had to go somewhere else first, learn how to be a soldier. Learn about weapons and maybe marching, I didn't know what else.

"Vietnam." I tried the word out on my tongue. I don't think I had ever said it out loud before, though I had been hearing that word for months, for years. First just on the TV news. Then in my house, spoken by my family, mostly by my father, not so much my mother and brother.

I covered the country with the tip of my finger. Bobby in Vietnam. I tried to imagine how he could fit his loud wild self into that skinny land. His Mick Jagger imitations, thrusting his lips out, pillow-like, prancing around his bedroom, shouting



along with the words, *can't get no satisfaction*, into an imaginary microphone.

Would he have music there? I didn't know. A year without his music, his records spinning endlessly on the turntable, only quick breaks to lift the needle, put another record on, I couldn't imagine that for Bobby.

And then I felt Canada, traced its borders with my fingertips. A big country, close to home, big enough for Bobby, all of Bobby. And his loud music and his wild prancing. But he didn't want to go there. Or couldn't. I didn't know which.

All I knew was that he didn't go to Canada. Instead, he went to Vietnam, to do his part. That's what my father kept saying. Over and over. Bobby's part. He's doing his part. *What is his part?* I wondered. I didn't know what anybody's part in this war could be.

I didn't want to listen last year in school, when Mrs. Richards talked about Vietnam. Social Studies is boring. I didn't listen when she explained who was fighting whom and why. I thought it had nothing to do with me. Only soldiers, and I knew no soldiers.

I didn't listen to the kids in my class, the ones who claimed that our country had to go and fight there, the one or two others who said that their parents felt the war was wrong, maybe our country shouldn't be there. Well, I listened some. But not much.

The dinner conversations at my house changed from what did you do in school today and the sale on towels at Kaufman's to the war and draft notices. It was then that I started listening at home, and wished that I had listened at school.

But I guess my listening wouldn't have made any difference anyway. Or my mother and me telling Bobby that we didn't want him to go. He went anyway.



I slapped the globe with the palm of my hand, sent it spinning, the countries all melting together into a blurry colorful mass.

I stood up, walked through the kitchen and into the family room where my mother sat on the older, worn sofa, out of her room, folding towels. She stared at the TV, at the characters on *Guiding Light* as they moved from offices to houses to hospital waiting rooms, always talking, their whole lives talking. But my mother watched with the sound off, so the actors looked strange with their mouths moving and moving but nothing coming out. Silent, like me sometimes, like my brother teased me when I preferred thinking to talking. My mother used to watch TV with the volume up but didn't anymore, not since Bobby left.

My mother, halfway through a towel, looked up at me. "Suzanne, you should call Kathy back and go to that movie."

I shook my head.

"You need to see your friends; you need to have fun." My mother paused in her towel folding. "Life goes on, Suzanne. We can't spend the next year just waiting."

Who are you kidding, Mom? I wanted to say. My mother, who jumped every time the phone rang, grabbing it before the first ring even ended. Mom, who pretended not to be waiting for the mailman, but just happened to be looking out the front door each afternoon as he lugged his bag to our mailbox.

But if she could pretend, so could I. I could pretend to have fun. Pretend a normal summer day. If it would make my mother feel better. If it would make her think that at least one of her children was fine, just fine. I wanted my mother to be happy. I knew she wanted me to be happy. So I would pretend for her. "Okay, Mom," I agreed. "I'll call Kathy."

The arrangements made, I sat on the front steps, five dollars in my pocket, my mother saying I should get popcorn too as



she pulled the bill from her purse. I waited for Kathy and her mother to drive up, take me to the movie, take me to have fun.

Finally their dirt-colored Plymouth pulled into the driveway, onto my father's side, Bobby's Chevy filling the other space, and I stood up, smoothing down the front of my culottes. Wear something a little nicer, my mother had said, than those raggedy shorts. So we compromised on the culottes, shorts pretending to be a skirt, the five dollars tucked into the plaid pocket.

I climbed into the car, into the back seat next to Kathy. Kathy wore culottes too and flat white sandals like the ones my mother bought me but I refused to wear.

"Suzanne, I haven't even seen you since the last day of school," Kathy said. "What have you been doing?"

I shrugged. "Oh, stuff."

Mrs. Wilson turned around to smile at me. "I heard that your brother enlisted, Suzanne."

Drafted, I thought, but didn't correct her.

"Yes," I replied. "He left last Tuesday."

"You must be so proud of him," Mrs. Wilson said, her smile never changing as she spoke.

"I wish I had a big brother who could go fight in the war," Kathy said. "I'd be so proud of him."

I didn't look at Kathy. Instead, I pretended to study the American flag decal stuck in the corner of the car window next to me. I picked at the edge of it with my fingernail. I tried to think about being proud. *The Wilsons must be proud about the war*, I thought. *That's what this flag means. If Kathy had a brother in the war, they'd be proud of him for going, for becoming a soldier. It's easy to think that*, I thought, *when it isn't real for you.*

Like it is for my family. Is my father proud of Bobby? I wondered. He wanted Bobby to go; he thought that it was right, but I didn't remember him ever talking about pride. Not around



Bobby, at least. What I remembered most from the months before Bobby left was my father yelling about the hair, his yelling “Why do you want to look like a girl, why, Bobby, why?” As if hair were the most important issue in the time that Bobby had left at home, as if changing his hair would change anything.

Well, when Bobby comes home, he won’t have that hair, that’s what he told me. So Dad can quit yelling about that, maybe start talking about pride, instead.

Kathy’s mother let us out in front of the theater, promising to pick us up in two hours when the movie got out. As Kathy and I walked up and joined the line, we saw two boys we knew from school standing several people in front of us.

Ricky, one of the boys from our class last year, called, “Why don’t you cut?”

Kathy blushed, her freckles brightening against the pink of her skin. I knew she liked Ricky, her fifth-grade crush, but she shook her head. She wouldn’t break the rules by cutting in line; didn’t want to make the people in front of us angry.

So Ricky and his friend Kevin left their group and walked back to us, and I thought they wanted to talk to Kathy, but no, they stopped next to me. They wanted to talk to me.

But they wanted to talk about Bobby. Not about me.

“My sister said your brother just went to Vietnam, Suzanne,” Kevin told me, running his hand over his bristly crew cut hair.

I nodded, but didn’t know what to say, didn’t know what he wanted me to tell him. *Yes, Bobby left. What else could I say?*

“They get to use the coolest guns,” Ricky said, jamming his hands into the pockets of his army green shorts. “Your brother is so lucky, Suzanne. He gets to fight for us, kill those gooks.”

Gooks? I looked at Ricky, not sure what he was saying. Bobby had never said anything like that. He only talked about communists and only once in a while.

“Aren’t you proud of him?” Kevin asked me.



“Sure,” I answered. Because I did feel proud of my brother. Not because he went to the war, but because of the person he had always been. My older brother. But now it seemed that everyone, adults and kids my age, wanted me to feel proud because my brother had become a soldier, and it was hard to not let that feeling seep into me. Now I had something that none of my friends did: a brother who went to the war. Now I would be singled out, paid attention to. It was hard not to let that feel good. In a way.

As the line began to move, Ricky and Kevin backed away from us, saying “See you inside” and “Why don’t you sit near us?” and rejoined their friends. Kathy, blushing, and I, fingering my five dollar bill, were swept into the freezer-cold theater with the crowd, through the popcorn line, and into our seats. We didn’t sit with Kevin and Ricky, but two rows behind them, off to the side. That way Kathy could see Ricky, watch him during the movie, but not be too close, not have to think of things to say to him.

The plush seats felt smooth on the backs of my thighs; the air conditioning felt cool on my bare arms and face. I listened to Kathy chattering on about Ricky, “Isn’t he cute, isn’t he nice?” until the lights dimmed, went out, and the movie began in the darkened theater. Then I munched on popcorn and watched the movie, and even laughed at the funny parts, laughed at the parts where Herbie the Love Bug, who was really a car, a Volkswagen-on Beetle—but you almost thought he was human, the way he acted—won the races and made the other race car drivers mad.

At the end, back outside, blinking at the sunlight hurting my movie-theater eyes, I still laughed, Kathy and I retelling the scenes to each other. And then the Plymouth pulled up, we slid into our seats and headed home.

As we drove and Kathy relayed the plot of the movie to her barely listening mother, I realized, when I saw that flag decal again, that I had hardly thought of Bobby, or not at all, for the past two hours, not since the movie started. And that actually



felt good. I felt eleven and happy, like my friends, enjoying a Disney movie and buttered popcorn on a summer day.

Mom's right, I thought, life does go on. Bobby's in Vietnam, but he'll be okay, and we'll be here and okay, and I couldn't wait to get home to tell my mother that I understood. About life going on and needing to have fun. Not even pretending it, doing it for real.

And so after I shut the door on the Plymouth, I hurried up the front walk and into the house, calling, "Mom? Mom?"

I didn't find her in the living room or kitchen or family room or her bedroom or mine or Bobby's. She wouldn't go anywhere without leaving me a note, and besides, we didn't have a second car. I mean, besides Bobby's Chevy in the driveway, and that didn't work anyway. So I knew she had to be downstairs, in the basement. Laundry day, like every day this summer, it seemed.

I opened the door to the basement, but faced only dark, dark except for a flicker of light against one wall. I crouched down to see, to figure out what the flicker could be, and I realized that my mother wasn't doing laundry. I saw from the flicker's glow that she reclined back in one of our beanbag chairs and she stared toward the wall, at the movie screen she had set up.

My mother had been watching movies too, but not movie theater movies, home movies. Movies of me and Bobby.

I started down the stairs. We hadn't watched those movies for a long time. Now I wanted to watch them too.

