The Hope of Miracles

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Kathleen Shumon was drafted in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War. There were no more exemptions by that time. School was out; wife and children were out. By 1968, when they called you, you had to go. We were married; we had both just graduated from college, and we had a baby. He had applied to Navy Officer Training School, which, according to the current campus rumor, was the thing to do. Several weeks after sending in his application, he received word from the Navy that they had so many applications they were no longer even accepting them. His name went back in the draft pool. The next best thing, everyone said, was to sign up for the four-year Army program. The benefit in doing this was that you were able to name the field in which you wanted to be trained and to say where you wanted to go after you finished training. This was before men discovered that, while technically true, nothing prevented the Army from fulfilling the letter of the commitment, then retraining and rerouting them to Vietnam within a matter of weeks. What it amounted to was that the Army needed men in Vietnam and hardly anywhere else, and what the Army needed, it generally found a way to get, in spite of all the efforts of inventive young Americans to avoid such a precarious fate.
After the Navy rejected his application, Lee decided not to do anything, but rather to take his chances with the draft. We tried to live our lives as though that dreadful fate did not hang over us. Lee took a job with Sears, and I settled into the downstairs of a little duplex with our new baby. We waited for the summons, and each day that it didn't come, I became a little more sure that we had been overlooked. But that nice, safe atmosphere evaporated at mail time one November afternoon. His draft board had not forgotten him; it had merely been tantalizing us with that thought for several weeks.

Lee was sent to Fort Polk in Louisiana for basic training, and I moved in with my parents in Dallas to be near him. That was really a rather futile gesture since, as I look back upon that time, I think he only had one weekend pass during all of basic training.

With endless hours and little to do in my parents' home, it was easy to drift into imagining our future for the next two years. It was not as though I had led a sheltered life up to that time. I was a recent college graduate who had read the paper every day and knew what was going on in Vietnam and knew that it truly was a war where men fought and died. I knew as well as any human being who had even half a marble left in his head that the reason the Army wanted all these men was to send them off to fight. Nevertheless, in my daydreams, our life with the Army was rather rosy. The worst scenario was that Lee would be sent to Europe or Alaska as a company clerk. Usually, I had him at some recruiting office somewhere in the States where he would have weekends off and we could see each other at least occasionally. Not even I could concoct a future where the Army would allow a private and his wife to be together.

My fantasies even survived his assignment to Infantry School. Lee, of course, was totally, chillingly aware of what that assignment meant and tried his best to make light of it to me.

"Kathy, the assignments came through today," he called one evening from Fort Polk.

"Great! What'd you get?" I knew he had put down what everyone must put down on those choice forms — company clerk.

"I've been assigned to Infantry School."

"Oh . . . . Well where's that going to be?"

"It's here at Fort Polk. All they did was load us into a cattle truck and ship us down the road."

"Well, at least you're not going too far," I chirped cheerily, and really meant it. Lee must have thought he had married an uncommonly dense woman.

"Yeah, well, let's don't worry about it. It's really what I expected."
It never even occurred to me to worry about it, lost as I was in my dream of the recruiting office. After all, they would need some infantrymen to show incoming recruits what they too would look like after three months at Fort Polk.

It all crashed down about my ears six weeks later in another phone conversation.

"Kath, you’ll never guess what!" The excitement in his voice was electric. I could feel it right through the phone wires. Something great, magnificent had happened. The recruiting office must be in Dallas.

"I’m being sent to Korea! My whole company is going to Korea! They just took one whole class out of Polk and said, ‘You guys are going to Korea.’ Isn’t that great!"

The silence on my end must have been deafening. Korea had never even occurred to me. Just like Vietnam had never even occurred to me.

"Well, what do you say?" His voice was a little puzzled now.

"You mean you’re going to have to go to Korea?" I was shocked.

"Have to go? I’m tickled pink to go. Don’t you realize that means no Vietnam?"

"But you’ll be so far away." I was almost in tears.

"But I’ll be so safe. What’s wrong with you? I thought you’d be so happy to hear it. God, I can’t believe how lucky I am."

"I was hoping you’d be assigned somewhere in the States." I decided I’d better not tell him about the recruiting office.

"Kathy, don’t you realize there’s only one place for infantrymen? Everyone from here goes to Vietnam. Once in a blue moon they send some to Korea. I hit the jackpot."

I realized he expected some excitement on my part. But when I had never even admitted the possibility of Vietnam, and completely ignored the existence of Korea, it was hard to adjust on a minute’s notice.

Afterwards, when I sat down to think about it, I knew what I had done. Faced with the horrifying, we all do our best to deny it. "Hope springs eternal . . ." is not an inaccurate line. I’d be willing to bet that even the agnostic dreams of miracles when confronted with the possibility of great suffering. The hope of miracles never dies.