

Dependent

by Rebecca McClanahan

In one of my earliest memories, my mother is standing on an unpacked crate beneath the ceiling of a Quonset hut. Barefoot, she balances like a circus performer, testing her weight gingerly as she leans toward the curved wall, trying to hang a picture of waves. This is the only image in my head that hints at any desperation my mother might have felt in her long career as a military wife. If hers was a war against rootlessness and loneliness, she fought it privately, in small physical skirmishes. She made a home from whatever was given. If the kitchen in our new quarters had a window, she'd size it up as we walked through the empty rooms. The next morning, I'd wake to find she'd stitched and hung yellow curtains, creating an illusion of sunlight that tinted the linoleum and bounced off the toaster she'd polished with her sleeve.

My father was like her in this way; he did what he could to shield us from the difficulties of military life. Since he was a marine, we could not accompany him on overseas assignments, some of which lasted fifteen months. And since he was an officer, we were able to stay in one place longer than the families of enlisted men. Except for a few months in temporary quarters--the Quonset hut, an apartment building, the officers' guest suite--we lived in sturdy houses within driving distance of the base. As we approached the gate, the uniformed guard would glance at the sticker on the windshield of our station wagon, click his heels together, and salute. We children would salute back. If our father was present, he'd reprimand us, reminding us that a military salute was not to be taken lightly.

Once out of our father's sight, we took it lightly, as we took lightly everything related to the military. Cushioned from hardships, we saw the base as one privilege after another--free swimming, dime movies, twenty-five-cent bowling and miniature golf, discount toys at the <osc>px</osc>, cheap groceries (unlike our neighbors with their civilian pints of ice cream, we never had less than a gallon in our freezer.) The only privilege we did not welcome was free medical care, which seemed to encourage our mother to splurge on tetanus shots and throat cultures.

I was vaguely aware that our sense of privilege stemmed from the fact that our father was an officer, and occasionally I caught glimpses of what my life would have been like had my father been, say, a corporal instead of a major--and later, a lieutenant colonel. On our way to the base swimming pool, I counted the stucco duplexes surrounded by dirt yards where khakis and diapers flapped on makeshift lines. Children's faces were plugged to the front window, hostages along with their carless mothers, while we whipped by in our blue station wagon, creating dust swirls that must have settled minutes later on their wet laundry.

Turn another page in the story, take the next bend in the road, and it was time to leave again--the luggage carrier packed to the gills, the U-Haul trailing. Yet no matter how many times we moved, how many friends and towns we left behind, there was always a passel of warm bodies to fill the station wagon and the empty new house. We were our own portable town; my siblings were my constant allies. Of course we fought (the veins in my brother's forehead pulsing as he lunged toward me), but when the dust settled and the blood cooled, peace was always restored. The more heated the battle, the more dramatic the truce that followed. We knew better than to turn on each other permanently, for soon we'd be moving to a new town where strangers waited at the bottom of the U-Haul ramp. In the long run, we were all we had. Because we had each other, we never felt alone.

And never homeless, for in the distance was our grandparents' farm where we returned every summer. To the same featherbeds, the haymow with the rotting floorboards, the attic crammed with outgrown clothing, the worn path to the creek. We were hybrids--half marine, half farmer--and whenever we grew tired of packing and unpacking, we knew the farm would be there. Old as dirt, the saying goes. The land would be waiting for us. I was born a marine brat and spent my childhood in service, but until my twenty-first year, my life had been lined with escape hatches. Except for one brief remembrance--Mother hanging a picture of waves--nothing prepared me for my stint as a military wife.

I'd been married less than a year, and everything that could have gone wrong, had. Pete's parents had divorced, and his father had been hospitalized with severe bleeding ulcers. When Pete quit two consecutive jobs because he refused to take orders from supervisors, I doubled up on my hours at the printing shop and continued full-time studies at the university. A brilliant linguist, Pete had been studying for a degree in German, but at the height of the Vietnam war, his

student deferment was cancelled. A few weeks later he received his draft lottery number. It was a low number, which almost guaranteed that he would be drafted. And almost all draftees were sent to the front lines. If he joined the army, rather than wait to be drafted, he might avoid an infantry assignment. Then again, he might not.

I tried to comfort him, but with each step I took toward him, he took two steps away. Being a wife, I'd come to believe, was not something I was good at. Pete's fingernails were chewed to the quick, and the tic on the side of his face had intensified, the spasms more frequent than ever. The draft was breathing outside our door, and we were holed up behind it. I felt helpless, under siege from without and within.

Then, just as the draft was about to break down the door, Pete uncovered a window. Following a tip from a fellow German student, he took a qualifying exam and won a coveted slot at the army's language institute, four hundred miles up the California coast. The timing, it seemed, could not have been better. It would take Pete two months to finish basic training and three more months to complete the introductory language course. Then he'd send for me. In the meantime, if I moved in with my parents, I could quit my job at the print shop and finish my literature degree. I told myself that this turn of events would also be good for Pete: He could escape Vietnam while being paid to study languages.

My father had never been fond of Pete, but as soon as Pete joined the army, my father's feelings seemed to soften, and for one brief moment I imagined my husband and father joining forces, their arms linked, rocking me between them as in a child's game. The day Pete left for boot camp, I stored our belongings and moved back to my parents' home--my father had recently retired from the marines. Jennifer and Tom had left for marriage and college long before, and Claudia and Rick, having claimed the empty bedrooms for their own, were not about to relinquish their privacy. I moved in with my youngest sister, Lana, who had recently turned nine. Several times over the first few weeks, I looked up from the book I was studying to see a little girl standing beside Lana in the doorway, staring at me silently. Each time it was a different little girl. Later I learned that Lana was charging her friends a quarter to see the bride who was now her roommate. She'd told them that my husband had been killed in the war, and did they want to see the veil?

Every night as I climbed into our shared double bed, I felt a great relief. Surrounded by Lana's stuffed animals and the nursery rhyme comforter, I was rocked backward into another

time. I slept longer and deeper than I'd slept since I'd left my parents' home. And waking to the clatter and bang of breakfast, my mother working in the kitchen, was a pleasure so exquisite I couldn't imagine why I'd ever left. These feelings worried me. I had a husband. Shouldn't I be missing him?

I wondered if my mother had ever felt this way. When my father was overseas, she stayed busy every daylight hour; I never saw her cry. But on nights when insomnia claimed her, I'd wake to the sounds of table legs scraping across the wooden floor, casters squeaking as the sofa was rolled to one spot then another, the electric mixer whirring, the rat-a-tat-tat of the Singer accelerating to unsafe speeds. Then the pause. The quiet. The click of the presser-foot being lifted, and in the space between seams, fragments of a top-ten song from the radio. I'd lie in the dark, wondering if they were playing American songs where my father was--in Japan or Korea or Hawaii or Vietnam. For years I counted the distances between my parents in time zones I traced in the Rand McNally Atlas. Their lives, it seemed, ran smoothly on separate, parallel tracks. The moment my father returned, the tracks converged, the double seam healed, and only the white strip on his arm, the place where his Japanese watch had lain, recorded the lost time.

Reunited, their bodies made a spoon curve on the sofa--my mother in a pink housedress with covered snaps, my father behind her with his hand cupped over her waist. I thought all married people acted that way. It did not occur to me until many years later that their union was not typical, that it lacked the quality of dailiness that dulls the shine on marriages where partners eat and work together and sleep beside each other every night. The Marine Corps built a wall of time and distance, a wall my parents were forced to scale again and again to reach each other. Perhaps that's why their marriage wore so well, and why they had so many children. My aunt tells of the day, forty-five years ago, when my mother announced she was pregnant again. The child would be her fifth. The fourth, Claudia, was nursing at my mother's breast. My aunt's reaction to the news was, "How could you let it happen again?" My mother simply shrugged her shoulders and laughed: "I'm just always so happy to see him."

Weeks grew to months. I began to miss the sputter of Pete's motorcycle in the driveway, the damp fossil his feet left on the bathroom rug. I missed his blue eyes, his rough freckled hands and his smell, an odd mixture of motorcycle oil, cigarettes, and English Leather. Surprised by the

force of my longing, I wondered if Pete was missing me too. Maybe the army was what we'd needed all along.

The day Pete called to say our apartment was ready, I rented a U-Haul van. My father and Rick loaded the furniture; in the cab I piled clothes, boxes of books, my grandmother's Wedding Ring quilt, my framed diploma in English literature, and my mother's portable Singer. Early the next morning I was on my way, driving the first leg of the four-hundred-mile journey up the California coastline. How many times through how many years had my mother made a journey like this while my father waited for her in their new quarters hundreds of miles away? On the radio Roberta Flack was singing "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face." Sun glinted off the waves. With each tick of the odometer, the difficulties of the past year receded like the images in my rearview mirror. Suspended on the road between my parents and my husband, with the ocean to my left and the sun overhead, I felt hopeful. A fresh start in a new place. Things were going to be better.

But the man who met me at the base welcome station was not the man I had married. His eyes were gray, not blue. He was thinner. He had poked an extra hole in his belt to cinch the trousers around his waist, and the fabric puckered above his buttocks and thighs. When I ran to hug him, my legs weak from the ten-hour drive, his kiss was hurried and dry. He smelled of beer and an unfamiliar brand of cigarettes. The tic was alive on his cheek. When we got to our quarters, we made love on a pallet spread on the living-room floor, but the lovemaking was as hurried as his kiss had been, and as dry.

Military dependents is what they were called, the wives and children living beside us, below us, and on top of us, in apartments identical to our own. Theirs was another world, one I'd never seen from the inside, the underground world of the enlisted. The officers' wives I'd known throughout childhood had been anything but dependent. With their husbands gone for months, sometimes years at a time, these women not only shopped, cooked, cleaned, and sewed, but balanced checkbooks, mowed lawns, made house and car repairs, and negotiated all necessary public business. If their responsibilities were doubled, so were their freedoms. They came and went as they pleased, subservient only to their own needs and the needs of their children. When my father was overseas, our household ran on a different clock. We stayed up later, slept later, played more games, ate more child-friendly foods--beanie weenies, macaroni and cheese, fish

sticks, Frito loaf, and my favorite, a dish I named Train Wreck, a Sunday night treat in which the week's leftovers collided in one large iron skillet, topped with Tabasco sauce and sopped up with white Wonder bread.

And over it all, my mother presided. I never doubted her authority or her ability to keep us safe and happy. She moved easily through the days and nights with a grace I associated with her mother. Poor farmers are another breed of independent women. Partnered by necessity, they work as equals beside their husbands in field, garden, and pasture. Both my grandmothers, trained in self-sufficiency, not only managed the indoor chores expected of farm wives (stoking kitchen fires, frying chickens, making sausage) but also chopped the wood that made those fires possible, wielded saw and hammer to build chicken coops, repaired the fences that encircled the hogs waiting to be slaughtered. This was my heritage, a legacy of independence passed from grandmother to mother to daughter.

But there were no pastures on this army base, no squads of officers' wives gathering at the pool or golf course. The young military wives who surrounded me were trapped without cars, without jobs, with two or three preschool children crammed into a two-bedroom apartment, their only escape Wednesday night bingo or a rerun at the base theater. Or morning classes in the damp windowless basement they called the Craft House, where they painted ceramic Santas, Virgin Marys, pumpkins and elves while their children scuffled on a rug at the child care center, overseen by women with bad teeth who stared at the television bolted high to the wall.

Despite what my I.D. card proclaimed, my laminated face and name stamped with the word "dependent," I was determined never to become one of those quietly nervous women I saw in the laundromat of the apartment complex. I renewed my prescription for birth control pills, hung my diploma over the kitchen sink, and set about camouflaging the apartment. I covered the khaki walls with daisy contact paper, painted a Seven Sisters constellation on the bathroom ceiling, and strung a mobile of kites and balloons over the dinette table. I draped my grandmother's quilt over the couch, and at the windows I hung colored beads that rattled when an occasional civilian breeze found its way through the maze of concrete hallways that led to our third-floor unit.

The language institute position might have been a plum, an assignment draftees would have killed for, but it was still the army. Privates like my husband still stood inspection, still pulled

K.P. And all-night guard duty, a task made all the more demeaning by the fact that they were issued shovels instead of rifles. It was a pretend war, the enlistees were constantly reminded, but to Pete it might as well have been Vietnam. Each order given, each exam, was an enemy rustling in the bushes. In sleep he thrashed at the covers, and when I reached to calm him, his chest was beaded with sweat.

Late one night I woke in an empty bed. I called Pete's name and searched the apartment, and when I looked out the window I saw him slouched inside a phone booth across the street, his boots pressed against the glass. He had left the door open to darken the booth, but the streetlight silhouetted his lean body. One hand held the phone against his cheek; the other hand caressed the cord, his fingers running up and down its uncoiled length. Suddenly what had encased him, the exoskeleton of phone booth and bone, of boots and jacket, fell away, and what had been invisible to me came into microscopic focus. It wriggled on the slide--blood and tissue, muscle, the soft inner membranes--a secret life pulsing on its own. I knew that he was talking to a woman.

I ran a bath and soaked until my fingertips were shriveled. Only four more months, I told myself. Then the Chinese course will be over and we'll leave for the next base, but this time I'll be with him from the first day on. And I'll be pregnant--that way, he can't leave. Until then I'll wait it out. You can survive anything for four months. I climbed out of the tub, powdered and creamed my body, combed the tangles from my hair and sat by the space heater until my hair was silky, spilling over my folded knees like the hair of the Oriental woman in the painting my father brought back from overseas the summer I turned twelve.

An hour later, perhaps two, Pete climbed into bed. When I asked where he'd been, he turned his face to the window. I never asked again, not when he began disappearing for hours at a time, not when he stayed out all night. I put the unpacking on hold and attended to him. I would cook more of his favorite foods, steam his khakis with a cleaner pleat. This thing I was living was my life.

Even when I missed the second period, the possibility of pregnancy still didn't occur to me. I'd been sleeping fitfully, troubled by a low-grade nausea that weakened my appetite, and as a result, I'd lost several pounds. Yet my body felt strangely heavier. My breasts had begun to swell, and there was a strange metallic taste in my mouth. One night I woke with a tightness in my belly, a wrenching, as if something were twisting me from the inside, a vise clamping down.

Pete stirred but did not wake as I left the bed. At the bathroom door, I flicked on the light. The fluorescent tube above the sink flickered, went black, buzzed, and flickered again, coloring the room in a bluish wash. The toilet seat was cold. The vise gripped me again. I concentrated on the veins in my thighs, tracing the intricate network, and when the vise came again, I closed my eyes and pushed the pain out my mouth in rapid, nearly silent animal pants.

When I finally stood and looked down, what I saw was the size of a man's outspread hand. I watched it floating, a viscous crimson island, watched the edges peel away into strands that thinned and separated, marbling the water with pink streams, leaving only a thick dark center. Then I lifted off. My bloodied nightgown billowed, and I rose toward the ceiling where my mother and grandmother were waiting. What took you so long? read the cartoon bubbles over their heads. Long fingers reached out to me, caressing the sleeves of my gown. We hung there suspended, looking down at the scene below, where a woman's hand was reaching for the chrome handle. I heard the flush and saw the water swirling in ribbons of red and pink and black, a child's pinwheel spinning dizzy circles.

A few weeks before the scheduled move, my mother arrived to help out. Boxes were stacked in the living room. The walls were bare once again. "Looks like you've got everything under control," she said brightly, but I could tell she had sensed trouble. As the hours passed she kept checking the clock; she never asked where Pete was. "You look thin," was all she said. "Are you eating enough?" She spent the evening at the Singer, altering my dresses and mending Pete's civilian clothes. I lay on the bed, comforted by the whirl of the machine, the drumming regularity of the stitches. It was a rhythm as old as my first memory of her, lulling me into a safe place. I sat up on the bed.

"He's having an affair. I know who she is. He's there right now."

My mother's lips, pressed together to secure a family of straight pins, opened, and the pins scattered to the floor. I told her everything--about the dark-haired neighbor, about walking in on her and Pete in the laundromat. I told her that the woman's husband was overseas, that I suspected it had been going on even before I'd arrived, and that now every evening when I went outside Pete was on the playground with her sons, pushing them on the swings or throwing baseballs he'd bought at the PX. I said I couldn't wait another minute, that I was going to the woman's apartment to confront him, to ask him to come home.

My mother raised her hand as if hailing an invisible cab. Her index finger was cocked. Then slowly her hand drifted down. Her eyes brimmed for an instant, cleared. "Do what you need to do," is all she said.

I knew the words she was holding back. She would not have gone. Years before I'd overheard her comforting a neighbor. Women often came to my mother for help pinning up a hem or doctoring a fevered child, and one neighbor came by often, her face tight and red, the seams in her stockings a little skewed. On this particular night, she was crying fitfully and loud, the way I thought only children cried, those sobs that lift your shoulders and deepen your voice.

"What. Would. You. Do," the woman cried, each syllable punctuated by a jerky intake of breath.

My mother's voice was even and calm. "I've never had cause to doubt him. I would swear by it."

"But. What. If. He. Did." It's the kind of question you ask when you're desperate. What you want is for the other person to tell you it's okay, to pat your hand and say everything will be all right. My mother gave the truth, and I could tell by her tone that she meant it. I could also tell that she had considered the question more than once and the decision had been reached long before this moment. Her words flowed like water:

"I'd walk out the door and never look back. The more I loved him, the faster I'd walk."

"But. What. About money? Where would you go?"

"I'd live in a shack before I'd take a penny of his money."

"But. The children."

"We'd manage."

I sat on the bed and looked across the room at my mother. Her dark eyes, lit with anger and pain, held no answers. In desperation I reached back in memory, past my mother's eyes, past her fierce pride, searching for another way to finish this, a way that would better suit me.

What I saw was Grandma Sylvie cutting off the dying dog's leg to save him. Whatever it takes, you do. Then I saw her decades before I was born, standing at the back door of the farmhouse, with two children at her side and a baby, my mother, asleep in her arms. Suitcases are stacked beside her and she is facing my grandfather. Her words are like bullets. "Look at that woman again, and we're gone."

I don't know how long she stood there before he gave his answer. Knowing my grandmother, not long. My grandfather must have played his part well, for she never took that first step through the door, into the garage and the waiting car. The scene freezes in that moment--the suitcases, my grandmother's silent stare, my mother waking in her arms as if from a bad dream, releasing a strong hoarse cry.

The marriage ended at the runway of a California airport where I boarded a plane to Columbia, South Carolina, my brother's city. After I'd confronted Pete with my knowledge of the other woman, we'd attempted a half-hearted reconciliation, but it soon became clear that he was not going to end the affair. "And even if I did," he said one night during dinner, "I can't promise that it won't happen again." I looked across the table at him, and the years stretched out before me. I knew I couldn't live that way. I packed my bags that night.

Once in South Carolina, I underwent the initiation rites common to newly separated women. I wept, lost weight, cut my hair, found a minimum-wage job, bought a used car, rented a studio apartment. Fort Jackson was a few miles away, and over the next few months I often found myself cruising its perimeter. My half of our furniture was delivered to me courtesy of the United States Army. Officially I was still a dependent and would be for another year, the grace period the army had extended to me. Desperately close to the poverty line--I now qualified for food stamps--I told myself I could use the services. I needed groceries, I was past due for a medical exam, and my first troublesome wisdom tooth was starting to push through.

When the long-distance divorce decree arrived in the mail, I contested nothing. With one signature, I swept away the previous three years, agreeing to no fault on either side. Only one remnant of the marriage remained: my military ID card, which I found, to my surprise, I did not wish to relinquish. It had taken months to mourn the marriage, the man, and the almost-child. But my tour of duty was not over. Something yet remained, a loss that ambushed me one winter afternoon as I was driving past the base. This time, my car turned, headed toward the front gate, and stopped. I pulled the ID card from my wallet and held it out to the guard. With a snappy salute, he motioned me forward. It might have been any of a dozen bases I'd known. Fort Ord, Fort Belvoir, Fort Meade, Quantico, El Toro, Corpus Christi. Bases named for generals, chiefs, bulls, the bodies of lesser and greater gods. Bases so familiar I could have driven their streets in my dreams--and I had, many times since I'd left California. I'd also been dreaming my future, in

dreams that took place outside the gates of the military and prefigured the circumstances of my new life--a new husband and a home on a civilian street, a marriage secure though childless, the death of my grandmother and of the farm.

Once inside the gates of Fort Jackson, it felt as natural as breathing, this tour past the barracks, the commissary, the PX, past the swimming pool and tennis courts with their tall fences, the officers' quarters and the Quonset huts. My gums were aching. The tip of the wisdom tooth had pushed through the surface, and my swollen jaw was pulsing with pain. I passed the clinic once, twice, then circled back to the parking lot. I stopped my car and sat for a few minutes, staring at the entrance and watching the parade of soldiers and dependents. A woman emerged holding the hand of a little girl who was rubbing her upper arm (a vaccination, I suspected) and sporting an imitation medal on her shirt, some army doctor's award for courage in battle. I'd earned the right, I told myself. Even the army thought so--that's why they called it a grace period. I got out of the car and walked toward the clinic, tonguing the swollen gum. No question about it, the tooth would have to go.

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