

The Sergeant's Daughter

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We were past curfew. Paused on the tiny porch, sixteen years old with a home haircut and no experience, I froze. Go for a first date good-night kiss or just a lean-in hug? In my ponder, Judith took charge and leaned in herself, kissed me. Short, sweet. As she pulled away, a whiff of what I'd learn was lilac remained. She whispered, "Come in," gently turned the unlocked knob, pushed open the kitchen door. I hesitated, cautiously stepped into the "Sarge's Barracks," as we neighborhood boys called the little ranch home. At this moment, I'd have followed her into hell.

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Like most American cities in the 1970s, ours could fill a VFW hall with WWII, Korean, and Vietnam vets. Rangers, Seabees. Gunners come home to be heads of two-car households, Rotarians, Baptist deacons. Live the dream. Judith's dad was different. Not one of the suit-up-for-work, office-body fathers common in our south Nashville suburb. The Sergeant was an El Camino man, muscled up from construction work, pissed off in disposition, we supposed from his frown.

Since no one knew him well enough to contradict that suspicion, it became fact. Local legend had it he served in the first Marine battalion ashore in Da Nang. A teenager, one of 2,000 troops poorly fitted to start a fight with guerrillas that, time would prove, a half million more Marines couldn't win.

He'd returned, just twenty-four, settled here with no ties. Learned a trade, married a lounge singer who said yes to his drunken proposal. They made it work for a few years. Even built a little ranch house in the suburbs and were rearing a daughter, Judith, when the singer disappeared. No one knew the whats or whys, just that the yelling stopped, and we never saw her again. The Sarge held his ground, reared Judith amongst the rumors milled by do-good Rotarians and Baptist deacons and neighbors. He knew us by sight, and we him, though he never sat in a pew, spoke at the mailbox, or waved to dogwalkers—just kept watch, it seemed. Amongst us, not of us.

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I followed as Judith negotiated out of the small kitchen, past the Marine in full La-Z-Boy recline, snoring off the twelve-pack, its empties lined in even columns to his right flank. She treaded on, through the den toward a bottlenecked hallway accessing the bedrooms. I gulped, considered. There couldn't be another path to her room but past this sleeping Marine and no way out, I feared, but past him again. He'd killed Charlie, I was sure. I might be next. Judith glanced back, checking on me. I soldiered on.

Down the hall, she gently shut the bedroom's door. Showed me a new album, much as my buddies and I were showing off baseball cards short years ago. We sat on the edge of her little bed, faint rumbles of the Sergeant's snores penetrating the walls. I was relieved to see a window, wondered if it would open quickly, in case. I wanted to kiss Judith again, touch a tanned knee, the small of her back. Instead, I watched her across the little room as she dropped the LP onto the turntable. Watched with a feeling I didn't fully recognize, something more than the lust the Baptists warned against. Needle met vinyl. Boz Scaggs. Cool as her. The album cover lay on the carpet beside the sandals she'd kicked off. Horns, tenor saxophone. Not Nashville twang, nor Bee Gees' disco. Blue-eyed soul. I'd never heard the like.

Judith sat back down beside me, touching distance but not touching. She gently swayed. The rhythm in her hips, the rise and fall of her shoulders absorbed

into the mattress. Fingers crossed, I sat still, both feet on the floor, one eye on the bedroom door. A slight wave of pulsations—each a second's fraction behind Judith's own, fluttered across the bedspread, vibrating my jeans. I wanted to dance with her, didn't know how.

No more action than a pulsing mattress went down that night, but I'd be back to that room, and soon learn to dance. And more. The virtues of a wine cooler buzz. How to kiss, really kiss, round the bases. To match corsage with prom dress. That Marines fake snore and burst open doors. That the bedroom window functioned, but the shrubbery below held thorns. Later, I'd learn jealousy. Eventually, heartbreak. Still later, patience and tolerance.

For ten years, I would love Judith. Love her as we graduated from high school. As the Sergeant enlisted me for grunt construction jobs. Love her beyond the puppy love, farther than the sex. Love her as I promised the justice of the peace I would. Love her when she argued against being cut off after the eighth shot. Love her when she backfilled Smirnoff bottles with tap water. Love her when I didn't want to, when she didn't care. Through missing savings and crazy mood swings and cheating. In sobriety, and in relapse. Love her through divorce. Love her in hope of being loved again. Love her when hope failed one Saturday morning. There had been an accident.

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I was sure he'd be home, that he'd received the news. I hesitated on that little porch, ducking the rain's onset, knocked to no answer. Considered trying the lock just as he pulled the door open. Looked me up and down, didn't speak. I followed the Sergeant in, around familiar corners, past the La-Z-Boy. Wanted to talk, didn't. What would I say? Past the bottleneck hallway, we entered Judith's room. Unchanged since she'd left, nearly a decade ago. Rain tapped on the window as the Marine sat himself at the foot of the little bed. His skin sagged where biceps once bulged, his frown acquiesced in defeat. Somehow, the tree-lined suburban neighborhood upbringing he provided had failed her. There was Charlie here, too. I stood, back to the open door. Beguiled in the scent of lilac, the sound of blue-eyed soul, the enduring wonder of a first kiss.

