

## *Marian Faye Novak*

### A Real Story

Before they left the party, they argued about him bringing the car to her. Joe stood before the open door of the Robertsons' coat closet and lifted and jerked his arms to settle his raincoat across his shoulders and finally, exasperated, but kind, he said to Charlotte, "Wait, just wait. I'll get the car." She shook her head firmly and pushed in front of him to get to her own coat — and her umbrella, too, hooked over the bar — and she went with him as far as the door. But in the end her sense of doing things right — she had not thanked the hosts — stopped her and she let Joe go out the front door alone while she turned back down the hallway to say "Goodbye, and thank you so much."

It irritated her that Joe always went for the car. She could not say why except that it seemed to imply something about her, a fragility or helplessness, maybe, but something she did not like. But she usually let him, so she found herself waiting in the fern and brick foyers of restaurants, in the popcorn-smelling, carpeted lobbies of movie houses, and by the thick glass front doors of shopping malls. She waited while he retrieved the car from wherever he had parked it. Often she did not know where this was, because he also liked to leave her off at the doors of the places they went to. Only at the hospital, when she had had the two miscarriages, did she feel that all his trouble was appropriate or necessary.

Now she waited under her brown plaid umbrella on the small cement steps of the Boston townhouse of friends, a townhouse on a wide street divided by a grassy mall in the Back Bay. It had rained all evening and the tiny yard in front of the building was soaked. The dark, wide leaves of a magnolia near the wrought-iron fence by the sidewalk glistened from the light coming through a front window. The rain hit the tree and then fell to the ground in streams, and the magnolia and the grass underneath shuddered.

On the other side of the walk, dark water ran in the gutter and swirled around empty cans and bottles and torn food wrappers in the catch basins. Cars splashed mud up and down the streets on both

sides of the mall. Their white-grey exhaust looked like dirty steam, and its odor mixed with the smells of gasoline and the tarry mud of the pavement. The rain was miserable and cold, and the party, Charlotte thought, had been that way, too.

She leaned out over the steps so she could see the corner by the White Hen Pantry — she had seen Joe disappear around that corner just as she left the party — and she saw their car turn and come toward her. And then it was in the only empty space near her, a spot in front of a yellow hydrant, and Joe bent his head to see her through the rain-spattered window. She closed her umbrella and tucked it under her right arm, and with her left hand she held the hood of her raincoat over her head and ran down the steps, across the puddled sidewalk, to the car. Joe reached over and opened the door for her just as she touched the chrome handle. She threw the wet umbrella and her purse into the back seat and slid in next to him. The rain thudded on the roof of the car, and inside the heater pumped warm drafts of air up to the front window and below onto their feet. Joe pulled away from the curb, switched lanes, shifted gears, and the engine adjusted and they were going toward Tobin Bridge, toward I-95, north, to where they lived.

Joe smiled. "It was a nice party, wasn't it, Char?"

She did not answer, but sat back heavily in the bucket seat and unbuttoned her raincoat and unbuckled its wide poplin belt. Joe looked at her, a quick look, but she saw him frown. He spoke again, and this time the frown was in his voice, too. "I thought it was a nice party. Didn't you have a good time?"

Charlotte jerked impatiently at her seat belt. They were on the bridge, crossing the large steel girders that spanned the Mystic River. Thirty-five minutes to home. She leaned over and clicked on the radio and turned the dial along the panel until she heard a twangy guitar and a nasal voice that told her before she looked that it was 97.5. The music on the radio mixed with static, but it filled the silence and besides, Charlotte thought, it would come in better as soon as they got past Revere. Joe reached for the volume control and twisted it. She could still hear the song, but the words were in the distance and behind the static.

"Is something wrong, Charlotte?"

She breathed audibly, almost a sigh. "You tell stupid stories, Joe."

He turned for a moment to look at her. His eyes were hidden in the shadows inside the car, but she could see his mouth, and he was

still frowning. "I don't get it, Char."

"I meant, you were telling a stupid story tonight. And I'm tired of hearing you tell stupid stories about the war."

He did not say anything, but she saw his hands tighten on the wheel and she wished she had told him another way what she wanted him to know. She had not meant to hurt him.

Tonight she had hurt for him. She had raged silently at the edge of the party when he leaned against the black baby grand piano in the pretty living room of their friends and talked to a blonde girl in a green dress. He held a beer in his hand, but he did not drink it. He gestured with the bottle, and he laughed, and Charlotte saw that his eyes were smiling, too. The girl listened, her eyes on Joe's face, and her own responsive laugh rang above the party noises. And while she watched, Charlotte's cheeks had burned with a kind of shame for Joe. She had heard the story before.

"I heard Karen Gladstone ask you what it was like, Joe, and you told her the same story you tell everybody who asks."

"For chrissakes, Char."

"No, Joe, I mean it. Everybody wants a piece of it now — 'What did you do in the war, Buddy?' And instead of telling them to get lost, it's too late now, why don't they go stick flowers in gun barrels or something, or even better, some of the awful truth, you tell them that dumb story about the old Vietnamese woman and the chicken."

"Most people don't mind hearing it, Charlotte. Karen didn't. It's a funny story — I tell about the war, and no harm done."

She hated it when he was like this, and she knew that it was not good for him. She knew, because at night, not every night but so often she had come to expect it every night, he cried out in his sleep, the sounds of nightmares. At first — when he had just come home — she would wake him and say "What is it, Joe? What's wrong?" And he would say "Nothing, it's nothing," and lie back flat against the mattress, his dark head pressed into his pillow, his hands knotted over the satin edge of their blanket, the blanket pulled rigid over his bare chest. In the dark his eyes stared at the ceiling and glinted like the silver chain and crucifix he wore on his neck. And she knew it was not nothing.

Later she learned to hold him without waking him, to simply put her hand on his body and her head where she could hear his heart and say "It's all right, Joe. You're safe." And he would fall silent without waking. They both knew about these nights — somehow Joe knew, too. But they hid the knowledge from each other. When she dared she

would say to him: "Just tell me something that matters, Joe, if you would just once tell me something real, I know it would help. All the experts say so, all the psychologists, the doctors. Just how long do you intend to keep it all to yourself?"

Twenty years ago she had been a young bride of twenty-one and he had been a very old Marine of twenty-three. He had been the oldest in his platoon, when he was a first lieutenant and had a platoon. Most of the men had been boys, eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds. Now he was forty-four years old and his black hair was almost all grey. And he complained to her of pain all the time. Every morning he woke with a new ache somewhere, his knee, his shoulder, his back. But Charlotte knew the worst pain, the real pain, was from the things he did not tell. She saw how they haunted him, came to him in the night and in the day too, and made him live through everything again and again. And she felt he kept her with him in his past because he would not face these things and move on. If he would just tell her, she thought, if he would just say them out loud, he could make them harmless, for him and for her.

Now in the car on the way home she said: "Do you remember graduate school, Joe? You had no clothes — nothing fit anymore except your uniforms, and your mother and I bought you a new suit for your birthday. And you wore it to a reception at the chairman's house." She was looking at the wet, black road, but she was seeing Joe years ago. "Everyone else seemed to be dressed in sweaters and some sort of India cloth, but you were handsome in your suit. The chairman guided us around the room, introducing us. It was nice to be with you again, having fun. Then a woman in a tan skirt with red and black elephants on it saw your tie tack. The gold globe with the anchor and the eagle. And she said, 'Were you over there?' You were stretching your hand toward her and you looked up at her quickly and said, 'Yes I was.' She just looked at your hand and she turned away and started talking to someone else. And now that woman, or someone like her, is somewhere asking someone what it was like. And I hope to God whoever it is has the courage to tell her, really tell her." Charlotte was surprised by her own voice, by the fierceness she heard in it. "Talk to me, Joe," she said softly. "I can't stand it anymore that you won't talk to me. Stories like you told tonight might satisfy other people, but I want to know what you dream about at night and what you're thinking about during the day when you're so quiet and don't even remember I'm in the room."

She looked at him, her voice and her eyes insistent. Outside, the



rain was letting up. Large circles of heavy mist hung in the glow of the overhead freeway lights. Joe took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and said, "You remember Hue City, Char?" She nodded and smiled, shy but triumphant.

"You wrote me from Hue. But you never said much in your letters."

"Hue City is divided by the Perfume River. It's a wide, pretty river, or it was when I saw it, and that was during the battle for Hue, when it couldn't have looked worse. There were firefights all along the banks — the trees and bushes had all been burned or flattened into the mud by troops and equipment. There was an Old City there, too, which was also very beautiful, or at least you could see that it had been. It was a beautiful old place, Hue, with this wide, pleasant river — the Perfume, a pretty name."

He paused. The windshield wipers swished clear arcs across the glass and Charlotte could not take her eyes from them. Joe was going to tell her something, and she was happy. The woman on the radio sang on. Her anguished song floated out into the car where it was lost among Joe's calm words.

"It was Tet," he said. "Tet, 1968, and the North Vietnamese attacked all the provincial capitals. And Hue was a provincial capital. Four armies fought the battle for Hue. There was us and the ARVN and the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. We fought at least a month for the city. We won, if you can call it that. Anyway, they didn't get Hue. When the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong had to cut and run — we pushed them out of the city — they left their dead behind, in the ditches alongside the road, or in the small courtyards of the houses.

"I was a captain by that time. The fighting was bad, Char. There's no way I can tell you how bad. It was house to house, even in the Old City. We wrapped our dead in ponchos the first few days because we didn't have enough body bags. We were caught by surprise at Tet, but we did our best and at Hue it was enough. We didn't sleep. We were attacking, or waiting to be attacked. We ate when we had a break. We couldn't do any of the ordinary things, like bathe. We didn't bathe for a month, but you got used to all of that. Or you learned not to notice, though you always felt like an animal. What you didn't get used to were the Marines all around you bleeding, screaming, and dying, and some of them were your friends, but you felt bad about them all."

"Oh, Joe," Charlotte said. She reached over and put her hand on

his arm. Joe shook his head at her.

"That's not it, Charlotte. That's not the story." The wide road ran before them. The rain had stopped, but the night was still partly shrouded. Above them, clouds like clotted smoke stood still in the sky while the moon followed the car down the highway.

"They left their dead behind," Joe said. "They had been lying where they died four or five days when the regimental commander sent for me. All of us at headquarters were living in a compound on Le Loi Street then. Bunkers, wooden towers, sandbags, and barbed wire made up the outside perimeter. Inside was a large cement - block building, pitted all over from the fighting. It had two stories — there was even an outside balcony. The men called it the Alamo, but it looked like a cheap motel. And this was where the colonel was when he asked for me. He was a big man, tall and wide both, but he always spoke softly. I never heard him raise his voice at anyone the whole time we were together at headquarters in Hue. He called me to his office, a room in the cement building with maps all over the walls, and he said to me in his quiet, slow way, 'Captain, there are the bodies of our enemy lying unburied in those streets,' and he spread his right arm toward the streets beyond the compound. 'I want you to see that those bodies are buried.'

"This was February, a misty, cool February, but not cold enough to keep bodies, and you could see some of the dead from the compound. There were six of us in the burial detail — a sergeant and I and four South Vietnamese civilians, some old men who had taken refuge in the compound. We were supposed to find all the bodies we could and bury them. A lot of the dead had been killed outright and were easy to find. They were lying pretty much in the open, in a gutter or in front of a house or a wall, and they'd usually have horrible wounds you could see right away and these surprised looks on their faces.

"But some of them had managed to live long enough to crawl under a bush or behind a wall, or into a doorway. They'd died slowly, in agony maybe, or sometimes more peacefully from loss of blood. Their faces also told their stories. I'd seen it all before and the sergeant, Jakes, had too, but still, their wounds seemed horrible — an open stomach with intestines on the ground, a man missing his foot and his boot with the foot still in it lying near the body, an open chest full of black blood, always the blood, and even in February, everything full of flies, their ears, their eyes, their mouths, and those wounds, black and moving with flies."

Joe paused, and Charlotte turned and looked at him, a question

in her look, and he asked, "Do you want me to go on?"

She swallowed, a slight tightening of her jaw and her neck, and said softly, "Yes."

When he began to speak again, his voice was a quiet, odd monotone: "As far as we could tell, there were at least six dozen bodies in the streets, and they smelled. But the first day wasn't too bad. The old men dug graves, and Jakes and I went through their pockets and gear for anything that might help our intelligence. We managed to bury about two dozen. When we found family pictures we took them and put them under their shirt, if they were wearing a shirt, over their heart. I used hand signs and a little French and even less Vietnamese, and I asked the old men to show Jakes and me how to put up little piles of stone. Like the ones I'd seen in their graveyards. And we got one of them to bring incense to burn.

"They weren't happy about doing any of this — these bodies had been their enemy. It was all very sad. I know that sounds strange — there was so much death. We had all those dead piled by the landing zone. But they were zippered into body bags and medevaced out, on starflights. But when you saw these enemy, these boys, and the pictures of their parents, wives, children would fall out of their little pouches, all you could think to do was to bury them. It's all you can do for anyone in the end.

"Things didn't go as well the second day. Jakes was a good man, a lifer who knew how to humor a college kid like me. He tactfully suggested that we should probably call in a dozer — he'd seen that done before. But I didn't want to do that. I told him I wouldn't bury a dog that way. So we just kept going. But it was slow. The smell was so strong we could hardly breathe, even though we had all tied pieces of cloth over our mouths and noses. There was just no way to escape that sweet, rotten smell. It slowed us down. Jakes and I quit going through the possessions and just threw all that stuff, the pouches, wallets, knapsacks — everything — in a pile to go through later. And we stopped putting up the stones and burning the incense.

"When we left the streets that evening, we had only buried about forty men in all. I figured we had almost that many to go. Jakes and I didn't speak at all on the way back to the compound.

"We drove out early the next morning. The sun was shining — it was a low, winter sun, but it was strong. We hadn't seen the sun much, and it was good to see it, but the whole city smelled like dead flesh and I didn't know how I was going to stand another day of handling those swollen bodies. But, like I told you, Jakes had never

been much in favor of the individual burying, and the South Vietnamese were downright against it — it had all been my idea — so I didn't feel I could just change my mind and not do it. Then we went to put the first body into the little grave the old men had just finished digging.

"It was the body of a soldier who looked like he was about fifteen years old. You couldn't be sure. By this time he'd been dead over a week already. He'd taken a round in the stomach, and he was shirtless, and swollen and covered with flies. But still, I can't tell you why, he looked young.

"Jakes grabbed the boy by the legs, and I crooked my elbows under his arms and we went to lift him up. And, Char, his arms pulled loose from his shoulders. They fell off, just like that. They'd rotted through, and then Jakes said to me, 'That's not a stomach wound, sir, his belly's burst.' We both stood there for a moment or two, not moving, just looking at one another over the tops of our masks, and then I had to grab mine off and turn away.

"Jakes called in a bulldozer to a soccer field near where we were. Pieces of the nets were still hanging from some rusted, pitted steel bars there. We had a hole dug and then we carted the rest of the bodies to this place and we watched the dozer push them in and cover them over. That night I drank most of a bottle of scotch. When I woke up, it was past noon of the next day. Someone had covered me with a poncho. Somewhere outside and off in the distance, I guess it must have been across the river, I heard gunfire."

He stopped then, and she knew he was waiting for her to say something. But she did not know what to say. She sat motionless and silent, her face turned toward the blackness outside the car window. There was only the whirl of the tires on the wet pavement and the sound of cars passing in the other lanes. And on the radio, the low, earnest voice of a man singing.

"Char?"

But still she did not answer. They pulled in front of their house a few minutes later, and she waited for Joe to open the door of the car. And when he leaned toward her offering his arm, she took his hand instead and, still silent, she held it tight in her own, all the way up the dark walk to their front door.