

Closings · Pam Riley

IN 1971, I lived by holidays. There was Christmas and Easter and the long summer.

In between holidays didn't matter. Because in between there was no Lonnie.

Lonnie who was my friend, my boyfriend, my lover. That was the progression. And after that? Husband? Corpse? I couldn't think of after that anymore than I could think of my non-holiday time as important.

It was the Christmas of my senior year in high school and my mother and I were doing last minute errands—buying day-old bread for stuffing, buying more rum and wine. I stood self-consciously behind my mother's full cart because I was not allowed to select liquor from the shelf. At eighteen, I felt hopelessly young.

We stopped at the photographer's to pick up my senior pictures. Fifty billfolds for friends. Fifty friends? And a special photo for Lonnie. The picture showed a girl with long brown hair and a pale face. A ghost. It was a picture that would haunt me every time I looked through my yearbook.

"You're very pretty."

"Maybe so but not in this picture. What a waste of money." I stuffed the pictures in my purse. Later, I would decide that these pictures were too ugly and they would stay at the bottom of my purse along with gum wrappers and bobby pins and other tokens of high school. But that night I would give Lonnie my picture.

We had already exchanged presents. Sitting in the front seat of his Dodge, the motor running, my breath in little clouds before my face, I opened his gift, a blue nightgown, soft under my fingers. I wanted to ask when I would wear it for him. Instead I put my head against his chest. I felt his fingers stroke my hair. I kept thinking it was the sort of gift a soldier would give a girl.

"Uncontrollably," I said when Lonnie asked how I loved him.

We were standing under my parents' mistletoe. Lonnie was a head taller than I so mostly we talked when he stood face to face. We kissed in the front seat of his Dodge and on his parents' basement sofa, our bodies slanted and slouched against each other.

But under the mistletoe he kissed the top of my head and squeezed

my elbows. It was the sort of awkward embrace that I expected in my parents' safe home.

"Uncontrollably," I'd said and felt it was true. Lonnie was my lover. I loved him. Even my parents liked him, though they had their reservations. I could see by the way they looked at him that they knew I was no longer a virgin. I had let them know by the way I hurriedly showered after dates, the chill of winter love making still heavy on my skin. Still they were pleasant. If it were not him, they felt, it would be someone else. Someone they might like less. Also, he was a marked man. And his value to them leaped skyward as the lottery swept the country.

"A smart boy," my father said when Lonnie had been accepted to Creighton and I knew Lonnie could ride on that compliment for a long time. "Too smart to get killed," my father had said when Lonnie's number came up low.

I could hear my father calling us from the dining room, his voice rising above the music on the radio. "Have Jen make you a drink," he was saying. "She's a great little bartender." My parents let me drink wine from Advent to Epiphany. That year I backslid into rum and cokes, no body of Christ there, just a delightful fieriness that I needed to get through Christmas.

"How come you're drunk," Lonnie said.

"I'm not really."

"I should know when you're drunk or not. I know these things."

My father was standing behind the bar. He extended his hand over bottles of Jack Daniels, Cutty Sark, tonic water.

"What's your poison?"

Lonnie asked for whiskey.

"Bourbon. Good choice."

My mother was sitting on a bar stool. She was dressed in a long quilted dress, like a bathrobe. Looking at her, I wanted to tell her that I was so much in love and yet so terrified that I wanted to bury myself in her warm quilting and cry.

Bing Crosby was singing "White Christmas" on the radio.

"I like him so much better than his friend," my mother said.

"Hope? You mean Hope?" I said. "I think that's a funny name for any friend of Nixon's."

"I think so too." She looked at Lonnie and then at her drink.

I'm so afraid, so afraid, I thought as Lonnie sat next to me, our knees touching, my heart bending and collapsing. My stomach as tight as sheets on a new-made bed.

“The worst thing to happen was when they stopped giving out student deferments,” my father said.

We all nodded at the obvious.

“There’s Canada,” I said. I had been saying that for weeks. Every time Lonnie called long distance I had pleaded with him to run away with me to Montreal or Toronto. “Too cold,” Lonnie had replied and his joking had made me sick. I thought of searing bullets, of humid jungles. Cold was nothing.

“Better to be a C.O. It’s a harder road but worth it.”

“What did my mother mean?” I wondered. I wanted to scream at her and at Lonnie. His calmness amazed me.

“This is my country and I don’t want to leave it and not be able to return.”

“Jesus,” I muttered.

“I don’t know what I want to do with my life.”

My knee pressed harder against my leg. Yes, he knew, he wanted to marry me.

Lonnie shifted in his seat. “To be honest, I was scared when my number turned out to be forty and Jenny, I did think you were right. I thought about Canada a lot. But,” he smiled broadly, “it’s really irrelevant. I’m going for a medical deferment.”

“You asshole, why didn’t you tell me? Why did you let me worry for weeks?”

“Don’t use that kind of talk.”

I wanted to say that I was in love with this person. I could call him anything that I wanted.

“What exactly is wrong with you?” my father asked.

I imagined him conjuring up epilepsy or cancer. Something dark and doomed to saddle his daughter with.

“An essential tremor,” Lonnie said. He held out his hand. We all watched for some movement and believed it was shaking even as it hung stiffly in the air. “It really does shake some time,” he said. I believed him. I knew. I’d seen both hands shake the first time he took my clothes off in the back seat of his car.

“It gets aggravated under tension. I’ve had a neurologist confirm it. It’s my ace in the hole.”

“Oh, I love you. I love those hands,” I said and it was the first time that I’d said those words to Lonnie in front of my parents.

“To Lonnie’s hands,” my father said lifting his glass in a toast.

And I smiled, basking in the secret knowledge of those wonderful, erotic hands. His ace in the hole.

Lonnie had written that everything would be over by Easter but in March he had passed his pre-induction physical.

On the day that he was to arrive back at school, I had stayed home to wait for his collect call. My mother and I sat drinking coffee and playing gin, the cards nervously slapping the table.

“It will be all right,” my mother said whenever I looked at the phone.

But it wasn’t all right and I sensed it the minute the phone rang or maybe I was so upset when I heard the news that I couldn’t remember not ever knowing that things would turn out badly.

“So how’s it feel to be physically unfit?”

“I’m not. I’m in perfect shape for getting killed. Jenny, I passed with flying colors.”

“No, no, no. Please don’t joke with me.”

“They didn’t even read the letters. Some jerk just stamped them ‘read and reviewed.’ ”

“How can they do that?”

“They can do anything they want. They’re the army. God, I’ll be in the army soon enough. I can’t believe it.”

No one could believe any of it. Not my parents. Not his parents. Especially not me. Especially not what happened during the physical. His letters were full of details about checking for hemorrhoids, about the corporal who had given him a pulp magazine to read while waiting, about the place where they ate off metal plates and how the scraping sound of metal forks against metal plates had made him think of prison.

“There was a sheet of plastic on the beds in case there were any bed wetters and you could hear everyone move. It was like the sound of a leaf being crumpled. I couldn’t sleep at all listening to that crinkling.”

“You could sleep now,” I said. It was the Saturday before Easter and we had checked into a motel. We had the room for the entire night but I could only stay until midnight.

“I want to stay here with you. I could call my folks and lie or even tell the truth. They must have figured all this out already.”

Lonnie shook his head. His hair was shorter now and his curls did not dance about his head. It made me sad that soon his hair would be very short. I knew that if he ever sent me a picture of himself in uniform that I would not believe it was him. That made it a little easier. If Lonnie

was killed or maimed it would be someone else, someone in khaki and a helmet. Lonnie would die for me when he got on the greyhound bus.

“The worst part of it was . . . Did I write you about the worst part?”

I shook my head.

“The worst part was time. I had nothing to do from when I arrived that afternoon until the next morning. I remember standing around in this cold yard and there was this volleyball net but no volleyball. I remember that struck me as awfully funny.” Lonnie started to laugh and then he was crying. “For two years my time won’t mean a thing.”

“Please don’t talk. Just let me hold you.”

I held him until he felt hard against me.

Afterwards, I went into the bathroom and waited for the hot sting of urine. Our room was the bridal suite. The bedspread was crushed velvet. The bathroom wallpaper was of jungle animals.

“Are you all right?”

I was still sitting.

“Come here.”

We stood in front of the mirror. Lonnie was behind me, his hands cupped over my breasts.

“Me Tarzan, You Jane.”

“You’re hurting my breasts. You’re hurting me.”

“I’m sorry.” Lonnie dropped his hands. “You can stay in here all night if you want. I’m supposed to be the one who needs cheering up.”

I didn’t close the door behind him; instead I listened to the hiss of a beer can being opened, to the noise of the television being turned on. All right, I thought, let him hurt me. This was a motel and motels were for sex and not love. I was beginning to think that I didn’t love Lonnie at all. There was a fear I had to fight off when we touched. At first I thought it was fear for Lonnie, but then I realized I was afraid for myself, only myself. I wondered if anyone could be so loveless.

We drank beers and watched the ten o’clock news. We watched the war. “We must be sick to do this,” Lonnie said. Still we watched helicopters and the blondish reporter standing on an exotic and ruined street. Our naked bodies, on the edge of the bed, turned blue in the glow of the color TV.

We had watched a lot of TV together because it had let us be alone in his parents’ basement, and there we had kissed and petted and finally made love. And always with the television on.

There was blood on the sofa the first time we had made love. I

couldn't remember if hot or cold water took out blood and Lonnie had turned to the blaring TV and said, "Where's Mr. Clean when you need him?" I had laughed so hard that I was afraid his parents would come down to see what was going on.

But in the motel room, all I could think of was how much time we had spent making love to the sound of war news and how unreal and distant it had seemed.

I still wanted it to be distant. That was why I left at eleven and not at midnight. The motel room smelled of our sex and our death and I could not stand it.

Lonnie was back in June and would be with me until August when the army took him and changed him.

At night we drove up and down the strip, the wind tore at my hair we drove so fast. And then we drove out into the country past new corn and dilapidated barns while I thought up lies: "We went to the movies and then out for tacos." In the country we undressed and put a blanket on the ground. "A night time picnic," I could tell my parents. "What movie did you see, dear?" "*Carnal Knowledge*." I giggled. The laughter made me relax for sex. I hated rubbers. I hated their smell and the sound of their going on. A shield. That was a good name. They just made Lonnie more distant from me. Inside me and he was more distant. Already he was going away.

"I could go on the pill."

"Why? I'll be gone in August. Are you going to need the pill after August?"

"Of course not. But, please, for now. I hate this. It makes me tense."

I felt his hands dig into my shoulders. "No pill," he said.

I opened my legs. I let him get close.

That month Lonnie and I ran at dawn and drove at night. In between—in the worst hours the hot summer could offer—I worked at a hamburger stand. Because I didn't work for tips I didn't have to be polite. I mixed up orders. I miscalculated change. I waited for the pain of being fired. But the pain never came.

At first I thought it was the running that was making my period late.

At night after dates, after long baths where I sat waiting for the water to turn red, I watched the late show with my mother. She was an

insomniac. And while I watched Doris Day and Rock Hudson, she watched me.

“What a joke that Doris Day is,” I said.

“She doesn’t show her age.”

“Maybe that’s where she gets off playing that dated morality. She looks and acts like it’s still 1950.” I didn’t care at all about Doris Day. I wanted to talk to my mother about the early Fifties when she was a child war bride. I wanted to ask her about babies and absent husbands and dead love. Would I, too, be an insomniac after twenty years of marriage?

I was an insomniac already. Alone in my dark room I put in a tampon, hoping its very presence would draw blood.

In the morning I was not surprised when there was nothing. Putting on my running shorts and a tee-shirt I decided I would go to New York. I tried to imagine the abortion because I couldn’t imagine having a baby. I was certain that having Lonnie’s baby would jinx him, that a baby would ensure his death. I thought a lot about the abortion. To go under the knife in New York certainly didn’t compare to going under fire in Viet Nam but it had to count for something.

Two summers before, our first summer together, Lonnie’s grandmother died, leaving him a 1966 Dodge Polara. It was, until we conjured up the basement sofa and TV trick, our arena for passion. But more than that, it was in that car that we discovered the freedom of being able to leave the city, the freedom of having our solitude. We packed the car with our combs, hairbrushes, Kleenex, breath mints and cigarettes. Later, we added beer and Lonnie’s rubbers. The car was roomy and inhabitable. We called it Dodge City. And Lonnie sang about the car: “Come roll in the cloverleaf with me.”

The summer he was going to war the song took on an ominous meaning. I imagined the Dodge falling off an exit ramp, the car crumpling, squeezing all the life out of the two passengers trapped inside. The doctors examining the bodies. “The girl was pregnant. The boy was 1-A.”

We were in Lonnie’s car for the last time for at least two years. His parents were driving him to the bus depot. His father was driving, his mother was crying. In the back seat, I held Lonnie, my hand cupped over his crotch; his gym bag was on his lap hiding my hand. He had one change of clothing in his bag and nothing else. He was told not to

bring his wallet or a razor. They—the army—had specified those two things. I wondered if that was because the army wanted him to be without an identity and a means of killing himself.

Everything personal, the army said, would be sent home. “First the belongings, then the body,” Lonnie had said. His words made me grow cold inside. I felt I would never again get warm, not in my heart, not anywhere. No matter who touched me, I would always stay cold.

In the car, Lonnie said that he would have preferred to walk. He would have liked the fresh air and to see the sun come up. “I’m a condemned man, I demand to see my last dawn.” No one laughed.

At the depot, we held hands, more innocent, more public. His mother pressed Lonnie against her breast like a wilted corsage. I let her hold him for a long time. She gave him life. What, I wondered, had I given him? The life I had in me wouldn’t be there for long. Any love I’d felt had already been flushed out, extracted.

We stood there as the bus rolled in. I imagined letters I would write: “I am pregnant, I am going to New York to meet the man of my dreams. I am pregnant. You and your rubbers can go to hell.” I realized that I would not write any of this. I would probably write nothing. I would let his letters remain unopened in the mail box. I would be as cruel and as heartless as the rest of life.

We kissed, our tongues salty. I thought of saline solutions. I’m saline away, said the fetus. Good, I thought I wanted to be empty and dry and cold.

“I love you,” I said, lying.

“I love you, too.” Lonnie said and I recognized his lie.

I stood there feeling his lie all over me. I stood there watching the bus, choking on the fumes, letting them poison me.