

CHAPTER ONE

HE & SHE

Our high school years were a very long time ago. We were so young, so in love and so full of hope.

Then along came Uncle Sam and Vietnam. High school sweethearts often grow up quickly when their seemingly bright future turns dark.

HIGH SCHOOL SWEETHEARTS

We met in Study Hall
my first day of high school.
He was a year older than me
and I thought he was pretty cool.

He was on the basketball team,
so I went to watch him play.
He was the starting guard,
but I'd have watched him anyway.

He was a real jock,
but I was into my studies.
He already had a girlfriend,
but I wanted to be more than buddies.

Then along came my birthday
and a girls' slumber party.
All my best girlfriends came,
not a single one was tardy.

In our PJ's and wearing curlers
we giggled about the boy we'd catch,
when came a knock on the door,
and there he stood in the flesh.

I stood there with my mouth agape
as his friend presented an empty cup.
They claimed a need to borrow sugar,
we laughed and couldn't let up.

This was our beginning,
that old girlfriend was history.
Suddenly we were a couple,
what lay ahead, still a mystery.

No one had much money,
neither of us had a car.
So, he'd walk over to my house,
saying two miles wasn't so far.

With my family gathered around,
we'd watch black & white TV.
And for us, of course,
there was never any privacy.

We were high school sweethearts,
so very much in love.
We were walking in the clouds,
feeling blessings from above.

We were always together
right up through graduation.
We were happy and carefree,
but dark clouds were on the horizon.

It was during the days of the draft,
war was a fact of life.
A future together was unsure,
still I became his adoring wife.

Uncle Sam called his number.
Vietnam was a scary place.
As we were saying our goodbyes
tears streamed down my face

I swore I'd wait as long as it took.
He swore to come back to me.
Each night my only request,
"Please keep him safe and free."

This story took place in the days before the ever-so-popular automated phone systems. My wedding would most likely have never taken place if phones had not been answered by a real live breathing person.

CALLING FORT KNOX

I wonder how many people there are out there in the world who actually remembers making phone calls to a business and talking to a real live person. I'm not kidding. It truly was that way once upon a time. There was nothing unusual about it at all. That's probably why I felt no hesitation in December of 1966, when I picked up my home phone, dialed 0 and asked the operator to connect me to Fort Knox, Kentucky.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. You need to know what prompted me to try to call a U.S. Army Base in the first place.

We grew up in a small town in northeastern Kentucky. We dated all through high school and just assumed that one day we would marry and be

together forever. Uncle Sam, however, didn't know of our plans and just a few days after my high school sweetheart, graduated, the dreaded draft notice came in the mail. Almost before we realized what was happening he was whisked off to basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky. We may have been young and naïve but we knew that the next step would be Vietnam. That's the way it was during that time.

We started making plans to marry as soon as his basic training was completed. Very often, soldiers were given a 30 day leave after basic and before being re-assigned. We counted forward six weeks and plowed forward with our plans. AGAIN Uncle Sam didn't realize our Grand Plan and for some reason all after-basic-training leaves were canceled. Don was immediately and 'temporarily' assigned to remain at Fort Knox.

Plans were canceled. Nerves were rattled. Still we were determined to marry. We sent letters back and forth and tried to decide what to do. Finally we agreed upon a December wedding. Surely there would be some sort of leave for the Christmas holiday. Again plans were put in motion. Again Uncle Sam canceled all leaves. Only week-end passes would be given.

Ok, we thought to ourselves, we'll get married during Don's week-end pass. Everything will be fine. It will all work out. Think positively and just keep plugging along.

The next snag came with the marriage license and blood tests. We were both underage. I was only 17. Don was 19, which today seems so young, but he was evidently old enough to fight a war. We each needed our parent's signatures and we each needed blood tests. The court clerk helped make arrangements for Don to have his blood test on base and the results would be mailed. Faxing was not an

option at that time. Both of our fathers agreed to sign giving their permission, but of course, they both worked and getting them together at the same time appeared to be impossible. Again the court clerk came to my aid and told me to come in myself with one of the fathers. Then Don would need to come in on Saturday before noon, with the other father. Everything would be signed, sealed, and ready for the Saturday afternoon wedding.

It worked out that Don's father went with me and my dad was going to go with Don for all of this 'signing' business. When I walked my 17 year-old self in to the Court Clerk's office with a man in his early 60s and told the young lady at the counter that we were there to apply for a marriage license, I thought she would surely swallow her teeth. Then I told her that I had been working with Judy and she gave a big sigh, indicating that all was well with her again.

We left the office and so far so good. Nothing had gone wrong. When I got back home, my grandmother had arrived for the wedding and had even answered the phone and taken a message for me. She was very careful to write it down exactly as it was told to her. The call was from Don telling me that he would be arriving Saturday afternoon on the 12:25 bus.

I looked at Granny and said "But Granny, that's too late! He has to be at the court clerk's office with Dad BEFORE they close at noon. 12:25 IS TOO LATE! What am I going to do?" and I started to cry.

My granny seemed quite calm about the whole situation, patted my hand and said, "Well, Honey, just call him back. He probably forgot that the office closed at noon. I'm sure he can get an earlier bus. Just call him. It'll be ok."

Well, all right then! That's exactly what I will do. I picked up the phone (rotary, of course) dialed 0 and

told the operator to connect me to Fort Knox. And in just a few minutes there was a human voice on the other end of the line. I was still sniffing and crying as I asked to speak to Donald R. Chandler. I gave his rank and serial number. I had no idea where he was or the name of his barracks. I only knew name, rank and serial number. The voice on the phone didn't even ask why I needed him, just told me that it might take a few minutes and for me to hang on. I remember vaguely wondering how many sobbing females called Fort Knox during any given day. The voice seemed not in the least alarmed and treated my request as if he received them every day.

By the time a male voice spoke to me again, I had worked myself into near hysteria. I asked, "Is this Don Chandler."

The answer was, "Yes, Mam." With that I launched into a crying rant that I'm sure was barely coherent. I ended up by saying, "If you can't get her before noon, then just forget it! Don't come home at all!!"

As I was trying to get my breath and blow my nose, the young man on the other end of the line, said, "Mam, I think you have the wrong person."

"Are you kidding me? Are you Don Chandler"

"Yes Mam, I am but I heard that there's another Don Chandler on base. Maybe you want to talk to him. Want me to try to find him for you?"

"YES, PLEASE!"

During all this time, my mom, dad, little sister, and of course, granny, were all tip toeing around trying to pretend that they weren't listening and trying NOT to get my attention for fear that I would fly in to a rage in their direction.

Minutes passed slowly, it seemed like nearly half an hour had passed when I finally heard, "Hello?"

"Don?"

"Yes,"

"Don Chandler?"

"Yes"

"The Don Chandler that is supposed to get married this week-end?"

"Yes,"

"WELL, YOU'VE GOT TO GET HERE BEFORE NOON!!!! I THINK I TOLD YOU THAT BEFORE. WE CAN'T GET MARRIED IF YOU SHOW UP ON 12:25 BUS! On and on and on I went.

When I had finally exhausted myself, he said, "Ok, no problem. I just got an extra day added to my pass. I'll be in on the Friday bus.

When I hung up, my granny was back, patting my hand and saying, "Now, was that so hard? Everything is just fine." I was a blubbering mess but yes, everything truly was fine.

So, the wedding actually took place. He DID end up going to Vietnam. When he returned to me, we had a happy life, raised 2 children and often talked about the day I called Fort Knox and yelled at some OTHER Don before I found the right one.

It was almost 40 years before he left me again. This time it was cancer, instead of Uncle Sam, that called him away and from that, he'll not be returning.

For newlyweds, the first year of marriage should be a time of joy, happiness and learning more about each other. Instead, my new husband and I were learning more about war and the devastation that goes along with it. Within weeks of our wedding, he was off to spend a couple years doing Uncle Sam's bidding.

Don in Nam

UNCLE SAM & VIETNAM

That first year apart
brought many cards and letters.
I knew that once he was home again,
everything would be better.

In the beginning he was a mechanic
for the helicopter squadron,
but the loss of men was so great
soon a gunner he'd become.

Flying in to get the wounded
was dangerous duty indeed.
While our young men were fighting,
many were injured and in need.

At home in warm houses,
as neighbors learned of their son's fate,
it seemed like all that we could do
was sit,,, and worry,,, and wait.

Then, there came a letter,
along with a call from the Red Cross.
His injury wasn't life threatening,
so it wasn't a total loss.

He would soon recover.
He was lucky, so they said.
But, he'd not be coming home.
It was back to his squad instead.

He'd ask for his R & R in Hawaii,
and I'd fly there that very same week.
Through the bitter disappointment,
we were making plans to meet.

Arrangements were hastily made
for me to join him there.
I'd never been on an airplane,
the anticipation impossible to bare.

Hawaii is a beautiful place
to spend a week on R & R,
But when you're so much in love,
does it matter where you are?

We had a wonderful week together
in this breath-taking place.
But, time flew by so quickly,
as if we were in a race.

Suddenly, back to the war for him,
to the mainland it was for me.
His tour of duty was half over,
patience seemed to be the key.

When he returns safe and sound,
we want to start our new life.
At long last we'll be together,
finally as man and wife.

My husband and I had barely gotten married when he was sent to Vietnam. I was so excited when he called to say he was again in the States, I hung up, jumped into my car to go get him with only an itty bitty idea of exactly where I was going.

GOD LOOKS AFTER FOOLS (AND LOVERS)

The year was 1968. The month was August. I was living in Kentucky in my parent's home. My husband was in the Army, serving in Vietnam and it was time for him to come home again. As a matter of fact, we all felt it was long PAST time for him to come home. The last I'd heard he was 'waiting for orders'. and I had learned that servicemen 'wait for orders' OFTEN. That old "hurry-up-and-wait" comment was right on the money.

My parents were preparing to leave on a week-long vacation to Daytona Beach, Florida. I was SO hoping that my husband would arrive home during that week. He'd been gone a year and to have a house all to ourselves for a whole week would have been like the honeymoon we weren't able to have. Our first attempt at getting married was postponed when all leaves were canceled because of some perceived emergency. We were finally married during a week-end pass several weeks later. The wedding took place on a Saturday and he had to be back at Fort Knox on Sunday evening. He was required to be ready to report for duty at some amazingly early hour on Monday morning. The point being, having missed out on a honeymoon, we were planning to make up for lost time.

Those who remember the Race Riots of the late 60s, will likely understand the reasoning behind my father giving me his hand-gun. He instructed me that if I had to drive any distance after dark to make sure this gun was lying, loaded, on the seat right next to me. I listened with half an ear. Nothing was going to happen to me. I wasn't going to be driving any distance after dark so I just let Dad be dad and promised him I'd be very, very careful.

The day I saw my parents off on their trip, I suddenly felt lonely. I'd been waiting and waiting for them to leave and now that they were gone, the house was awfully quiet with no one around to talk with. I paced the floor, willed the phone to ring, tried to telepathically tell Don to call me and let me know that he was at least on his way. Not knowing is not fun and I was starting to get annoyed with him for keeping me in the dark.

Finally I gained control of my roller coaster emotions, reminded myself that he would call as soon as he possibly could, and took myself off to bed for the night. About midnight the phone rang. If I hadn't been so young and agile I surely would have broken my neck trying to get to the phone. Nobody calls in the middle of the night. I knew it must be him. He's going to tell me when he'll be home.

And yes, it was Don calling. He was not only back in the States. He was in MY state. He had just landed in Lexington, Kentucky, which was as far as he could get by plane. He would have to wait till morning to get a bus the rest of the way. I told him to stay put, not to move a muscle or go anywhere, I would come for him. After I jabbered and cried and told him I was coming, I slammed down the phone, threw my clothes on and ran out the door, only to have to run back inside because I forgot my car key.

As I backed out of the driveway I remembered my dad telling me to be sure to take the gun, "lay it on the car seat if you go ANYWHERE after dark." Being the obedient daughter, I pulled back into the driveway, flew back into the house, grabbed the gun, laid it on the car seat and off I went again.

I had been to Fort Knox when my husband was stationed there so I knew how to get that far. However I'd never been to Lexington. I knew the general area and figured that if I got on the highway, sooner or later I'd see an exit sign that said Lexington Airport. I think Lexington is about 120 - 150 miles from Ashland, where I lived but it seemed as far away as the moon. It was the middle of the night. The roads were empty and I had that crazy gun laying there on the seat.

As I drove along, alone with my thoughts, I pictured the gun getting accidentally knocked off onto the floor and going off, shooting either Don or me. The more I thought about it, the more I knew that was exactly what was going to happen. How horrible to survive Vietnam only to come home and be accidentally shot by your own wife's gun. No, I just couldn't let that happen. So I pulled off at the very next exit, even though I was losing precious travel time, unloaded the gun, and put it safely out of sight. As long as I couldn't see it, as long as it wasn't loaded, it couldn't possibly hurt either of us.

Around 2:00 in the morning I started seeing Lexington signs so I knew I was getting close. Unfortunately none of the signs said anything about an airport. Rather than take a chance on driving too many miles in the wrong direction, I decided to stop and ask directions. Not much was open at 2:00 in the morning, probably because of the unrest between the races but I stumbled upon a coffee shop. Pulling into the parking lot, I could see two men inside eating doughnuts and drinking coffee.

I went in, trying to look mature and worldly, and asked if either of them could tell me how to get to the Lexington Airport. Several seconds of silence went by before one of them finally spoke and said, ""Which one do you want to go to?"

WHAT? THERE'S MORE THAN ONE? I felt my heart fall to my stomach and tears sting my eyes. I didn't feel very mature or worldly any more. I felt scared and silly.

Why hadn't I gotten more information from him? For goodness sakes, if I ever did find this airport, I didn't have a clue as to which airlines he flew in on. I'd just jumped into my car and headed out. What a stupid thing to do! Now its 2:00 a.m., I have no idea how to find him or get in touch with him. I struggled to keep from crying.

In a small defeated voice, I answered the man and said "I don't know which airport." His friend spoke up and said, "George, don't give the young woman a hard time, I'll bet she's looking for the big airport. Don'tcha think?"

"So," George asked, "What do you want at the airport? Why do you need to go there in the middle of the night?"

It didn't occur to me to tell him it was none of his business. I needed some help and there didn't appear to be anyone else around. I told him that I was going to pick up my husband, who was just getting home from Vietnam.

"Well Missy, why didn't you say so?" says George, looking at least a little bit friendlier than he had when I first walked in. He then wrote down the directions on a napkin, wished me luck and I was quickly out the door and on my way again.

In a very short time I found the airport and what an airport it was. It was HUGE! To a "Bible Belt Kentucky girl" it seemed as big as a city.

I was NOT going to let myself get discouraged again. I followed the signs to 'Parking'. Of course at this time in the morning it wasn't hard to find a parking place and I marched into the airport prepared to walk from one end to the other, if that's what it took. I knew my husband was there somewhere and I WOULD find him before the sun came up on another new day.

As I walked through the automatic doors, I saw him, not 10 feet away, walking in my direction. I couldn't move. I couldn't even walk to meet him. I just stood there and cried and cried, thinking, he's home. He's really home.

It has been said that "God looks after fools and lovers." This little 120 mile trip in the dark is proof... even though I didn't know the way, He got me there.

Finally, his tour of duty complete, the husband returns home. However, leaving the war behind isn't easy. Still, with a great deal of determination, the young couple work together, to achieve the American dream, a home of their own, children, and a white picket fence.

THE RETURN

The husband returned from the war,
having left a young man full of dreams,
he returns older and wiser,
surviving the nightmare of war, it seems

Working hard to start a new life,
everyday he punches that clock.
Standing on that assembly line,
he wonders if it's all just a crock.

Gradually the war leaves him,
and he learns to smile again.
His young wife stands by him,
thankful for the return of his grin.

Things are difficult at times,
but they lean on each other.
Then one day, she gives him the news.
He's to be a father, she, a mother.

He could hardly contain his joy
and finally breaks down in tears.
The happiness they've been seeking
would be theirs in the coming years.

After months of morning sickness
and trying to control her weight,
a baby with fire-engine red hair
makes his appearance, two weeks late.

A beautiful perfect baby boy
swelled the man's chest with pride.
Days were filled with diapers and bottles
but the joy of parenthood was hard to hide.

They moved to a bigger house,
one just down the street.
Now the baby had a room of his own.
Life was becoming ever so sweet.

The young father continued at the factory.
The work was boring and hot.
But his family made it all worthwhile.
He was providing for his little tot.

Soon there came a day,
they decided to expand their world.
They wanted another baby,
hopefully this time a little girl.

Days and weeks became months.
It seemed conception was not to be.
They decided they'd been blessed once
and to want more might be greed.

Then one day the wife had a surprise
delivered directly from heaven.
There would be another baby
shortly after their son turned seven.

No morning sickness for a change,
everything was fine.
On Valentine's Day a baby was born,
it was a little girl this time.

Living the American Dream,
through the occasional set back,
they faced them all together,
working hard to stay on track.

The children are now adults,
both of them fully grown.
With guidance from their dad,
soon they moved out on their own.

Where had the years gone so quickly?
There were those who didn't believe
that high school sweethearts could last,
but neither had felt a need to leave.

It was almost time to retire
for both the man and his wife.
For years they'd been together,
sharing an extraordinary life.

They moved to sunny Florida
anxious for a new chapter to begin.
Leaving their home and children
and all the cold of Michigan.

The man wanted to play lots of golf.
The wife wanted a year-round tan.
They agreed the struggles were worth it
retirement just gained two new fans.

On October 30, 2006, cancer took my husband just days before our 40th anniversary. He was a good, kind, honest, and loving man who did a lot of 'living' in his 59 years. When he left us, he had no regrets. I hope I can say the same when my time comes.

RETIREMENT

He loved his high school sweetheart,
then served his time in Vietnam.
He raised his son and daughter
and was loyal to Uncle Sam.

Thirty-five years on the assembly line
and now the time had come.
They'd finally enjoy retirement
by moving south to a new home.

They were happy in their little condo,
They had owned it for several years,
but moving away from their two children
brought more than happy tears.

The first year was all they'd dreamed of,
sunshine swimming, cruises and golf.
Then one day he didn't feel so well,
something was most definitely off.

The doctor listened to every word
and ordered a battery of tests.
All they could do was sit, wait
and hope for the very best.

The best wasn't what they got,
the scary word was 'cancer'.
They both had lots of questions,
to which they got too few answers.

The journey began with surgery.
Weight loss and sickness followed.
But, they were both determined
and sad words just weren't allowed.

The second year passed,
but they knew there'd not be another.
They knew he'd soon be in Heaven
with his father and his mother.

During their hours alone,
they talked about their life.
He said he was ready to go
and couldn't have had a better wife.

During that last week-end
of his far too-short life,
his sisters and brothers came,
offering comfort to him and his wife.

He asked to see his children,
his daughter and his son.
He wanted one last fatherly chat
before his days were done.

The son arrived first, with a lump in his throat.
He said, "Son, I know you're a good man.
Take care of your mom.
In everything, do the best you can."

The daughter arriving with tears in her eyes,
said, "I'm here for you Dad."
She gave his cold limp hand a squeeze
all he managed was a whisper, "I'm glad."

The home was deathly quiet,
The hospice nurse standing by.
The man's breath grew shallow,
then he gave one last long sigh.

In the blink of an eye he was gone,
but in his 59 years he'd seen much.
He was loved by many people.
Many lives had he touched.

The end is never easy,
when the man you love is leaving.
For all those left behind,
there seems no end to the grieving.

Rest in peace, good man.
You'll suffer pain no more.
We'll see you again some day,
when you greet us at Heaven's door.

The death of a spouse is a heart wrenching time. Whether they are taken suddenly or after a long illness, loved ones left behind are never prepared. There are many hours, days, weeks, and months of warring emotions.

ALONE

The children were both gone.
The house was still and quiet.
Wondering how to go on,
knowing she'd have to try it.

Everyone said the service was nice,
during the sharing of hugs and tears.
Cards and flowers aplenty
and many "We'll pray for you, Dears"

A widow, what does that mean?
It means she's alone and lonely.
It means she lost the man
who was her one and only.

They all said it's better,
that he suffers pain no more.

They said that time heals
and there's more life in store.

Comforting words were these,
each one well intentioned.
But, how to go on with life,
never was that mentioned.

He was her high school sweetheart.
She married at seventeen.
For almost 40 years
the two of them had been a team.

What will she do now?
Who will hold her when she's sad?
Who will laugh at her stories?
What will her children do without a dad?

They had started a new chapter.
Their future seemed so bright.
Suddenly he's gone forever,
somehow that just didn't seem right.

She knows she must go on.
She'll learn to face each new day.
Perhaps she'll find some comfort
each time she kneels to pray.