



PUT A CANDLE IN THE WINDOW

CHERYL JUDGE

The match granted across the rough edge of the box, and exploded into a quivering mass of yellow and blue which illuminated the dimly lit corner of a drab, sparsely furnished living room. Barbara Pettijohn touched the flame to the charred wick of a stubby red candle and then placed it in the window as had been her practice for the past 2½ years. It was a kind of symbol that her love and hope could never be extinguished. Jake, her husband, had been a prisoner of war in North Viet Nam since August of 1967. In that time, she had received no letters from him, and hadn't the slightest idea of where he might be held captive—or even if he was still alive. Of course, she believed he was still alive—otherwise it would have been unbearable—and she prayed every night for an end to the War and his safe return.

She was an attractive and slightly built woman of 27, with shortly cropped black hair and lively, intelligent brown eyes. Her face, however, instead of the smooth, healthy glow it once possessed, had become sallow and creased with tiny wrinkles. During the day she worked as a bank teller in Bakersville, a small rural town which wasn't big enough to have its own bank, but merited only a branch of the Kansas City National.

She crossed the bare hardwood floor, her footfalls sounding somehow incoherent with the silence of the large rambling old farmhouse. Seating herself at a small desk, she gazed at its battered top. It had been Jake's while he was in college. And then she thought of the farm. He had been an agriculture major and had such great plans for their 150 acres—and had even drawn up the crop rotation for the next five years. But then the War escalated, and he was drafted, and their whole world came crashing down. She was renting the farm now to their nearest neighbor, who lived a mile and a half away. This isolation often bothered her, but she couldn't bring herself to move and thus break the one last tie with their "dream."

Her eyes fell on the stack of letters in the corner of the desk—at least 50 or more to answer. They were the result of a story about her carried in one of the local papers. People tried to be so kind, offering prayers, condolences, money—but didn't they realize that these only served to make her that much more conscious of her misfortunes?

Outside, the howling wind of a bitterly cold mid-January night whipped around the corners of the house and pounded mercilessly against its windows. A certain uneasiness haunted her, and she rose to glance out the window but was greeted only by total blackness, pierced occasionally by an oncoming pair of headlights. The road she lived on was a thoroughfare, but a little-traveled one, and provided her with little sense of connection with the outside world.

She switched on the small radio sitting on a shelf above the desk, wishing more for companionship than entertainment. "Good evening, here is the 7:30 news report. Latest casualty figures in from Viet Nam indicate that American losses were light this week with 120—" Disgusted, she flipped it off again. Wouldn't anyone let her forget, just for a moment?

She started to return to her letters when the phone rang. Startled, she debated momentarily whether or not to answer it. Phone calls were rare for her in the evening, and since her story had appeared in the paper she had been troubled once or twice by some obscene callers. But again, it might be important—

"Hello, Is Mr. Pettijohn there please?" a drawling male voice requested.

Unwilling to let the caller know she lived alone, Barbara hesitantly replied, "No, I'm sorry. He's not at the moment. May I help you?"

"Well ma'am, I'm with Stevenson's guaranteed Weatherproof Aluminium Siding and we're having a big introductory sale, and free home demonstrations, and if it's all right with you, we'd like to send a salesman out some afternoon to show you our product."

"I'm sorry, but we just painted our house last spring and wouldn't be interested." Her words rushed out in a spurt which left her breathless, and her hand trembled uncontrollably as she put the receiver back on its hook. "It was just a salesman, silly," she thought smiling weakly—trying to laugh away her fears.

She thought of returning to the letters, but decided against it. A good TV program or two would take her mind off of herself and hopefully relax her. She snuggled down into one corner of an old overstuffed sofa. The FBI was on—a show she rather enjoyed. It made her feel confident; like if she ever needed them the police would somehow be around. Later, the dullness of the repetitious commercials and a boring "talk show" lulled her into a fitful sleep.

About 10:00 she awakened, disgusted with herself for falling

asleep. Determined to stay up and get a few of her letters answered, she went to the kitchen to fix a cup of coffee. She flipped the switch which illuminated a bright, bare bulb in the ceiling. Its glow created an eerie contrast to the blackness outside, and emphasized the bleak, cold and grey appearance of the kitchen with its peeling paint, cracked linoleum, and battered second-hand stove and refrigerator.

She froze in front of the sink when she heard a loud knock at the front door. At first she was strongly tempted to ignore it, but then she realized that whoever it was had surely just seen the kitchen light come on.—Another knock, but louder this time. Retreating into the shadows of the den, she peeked out the window and saw the silhouette of a slender young man, probably 24 or 25, stamping his feet and rubbing his hands together, trying to keep warm, while his thin trench coat flapped around him in the icy wind. He knocked again. Jake had always told her never to let anybody in, no matter what the circumstances—but it was so cold tonight.

Somewhat against her better judgement, but responding to her compassionate nature, she answered the door, but left the safety chain fastened “just in case.” The young man smiled. He had an ugly scar on his left cheek and his face and ears were bright red from the cold.

“Ma’am, I’m terribly sorry to bother you at this hour, but my car ran out of gas ‘bout a mile down the road, and I was wondering if you’d be so kind as to let me use your phone to call the service station? I just got back from Nam and I’m traveling home to see my family—guess I was thinkin’ more ‘bout them than the gas guage!”

She let him in without really knowing why. Perhaps because she was afraid to say “no”; perhaps with a secret hope that somewhere else someone would do something kind for Jake. He stood warming himself for a minute over the large register in the living room.

“I’m much obligin’ to you ma’am. It’s pretty damn cold tonight! My names Johnny Walker—now don’t laugh, cause that’s for real, and I’m from Jackson, Mississippi. I must say, I think that candle you got burning in the window there’s real nice and friendly. When I saw it, I just said to myself, ‘Johnny, I’ll bet those folks there would take you in,’ and I remembered stories my mama used to tell me ‘bout women who put candles in the windows when their men were away at war, and I wondered if my woman would have one waiting in the window when I got home.”

She smiled, but was anxious for him to call the service station and

be gone. "The phone's over here, and there's only one station in Bakersville—the number's in the book."

He thumbed through the directory and then dialed. She stepped on into the kitchen to finish making her coffee. A minute later he came to the doorway. "Wouldn't you know it would be just my luck—the truck's out on an emergency call and probably won't be back for an hour. They said they'd send it out just as soon as they could. I really hate to impose, but do you suppose I could wait her 'till they come?" She consented, but the feeling of uneasiness which had plagued her earlier in the evening had returned and intensified.

"Have a seat and I'll make us some coffee." She nodded towards a chair at the kitchen table and he sat down with a sigh and said nothing. Her back was towards him as she was pouring the coffee, and she felt very uncomfortable, as if she could sense his eyes burning up and down her figure—catching her every movement. She placed his cup in front of him and took a seat at the opposite end of the table. "Won't you take off your hat and coat, Mr. Walker?"

"Thank you ma'am, but I'm still not thawed out yet!" He picked up his coffee without even taking off his gloves. This rather startled her and unconsciously she found herself staring in silence at his black gloved hands. Her guest must have sensed this, for he soon broke the silence—"You're probably wonderin' why I didn't take off my gloves aren't you?" She nodded. "Well, you see, I was in this explosion in Nam and my hands got pretty well scarred and disfigured—not too pretty. So I wear gloves 'bout all the time now. That's how I got the one on my face too, but I guess I can't go 'round wearing a mask all the time—unless I decide to become a criminal or a professional monster!" He laughed hoarsely, but Barbara could only smile weakly and grip the cup handle tightly to try to conceal her nervousness. They talked for a long time, but her uneasiness prevailed.

"Do you have any children, Mr. Walker?" she queried.

"Yeah, a little boy 5 and a girl 3. They were dolls when I left, but Lord only knows what they'll be like now without a papa to wallop 'em for two years. What 'bout your family?"

She was afraid to let him know the truth, so she replied, "Yes, we have a baby girl, 9 months old. She and my husband are upstairs asleep." He just smiled and said "Oh." She looked into his cold blue eyes which seemed to be laughing at her, and her fear increased. It had been an hour since he had phoned the service station and still

there was no sign of their truck.

Then suddenly all the subtle details began to fall into place. He might have read the story in the paper, and calculated the Viet Nam line to gain her sympathy so she would let him in. The "salesman" who called earlier had a drawling southern accent—Jackson, Mississippi. . . and the gloves—of course. There were just too many coincidences.

. . . The car leaped forward, crushing him against the concrete wall of the garage. His first piercing scream faded into a low groan, and that into silence. The car was idling rapidly and the radio was insanely blaring a hard-rock hit. With a tremendous effort, she switched off the ignition key and death-like silence encompassed the garage. She sat, stunned, unable to move. "Thank God," she thought, "that I figured out his scheme before it was too late! And to have thought of asking him to look at my carburetor—Jake, Jake—Nightmares—I know I'll have nightmares—maybe this is. . ." Then glancing into her rearview mirror, she saw a flashing red light at the end of the drive—surely the police. They must have been hunting for him; maybe he'd escaped from a mental hospital somewhere. She heard someone pounding at the front door, but she hadn't strength enough to move. Instead, she pushed the button attached to the sunvisor to raise the automatic garage door.

When around the corner walked the two service station attendants she could only stare in utter horror and disbelief. Johnny Walker hadn't called the station—she was sure of that!

"We're here with the . . . MY GOD! What's going on here? Joe, help me git this guy out from in front of the car!"

"Is he dead?"

"Lady, what in the hell did you do?"

"Yea, he's dead all right."

"Guess we'd better go call the police."

"Damn, it won't do much good now."

Barbara sat stupified, not believing, not really caring what was happening. The police arrived and ran a check on his Identification—Johnny Walker; age 25; address 3764 Franklin, Jackson, Mississippi; married to Joyce Allen; two children, ages 3 and 5, Sandy and Billy; returned from Viet Nam January 4, released from active duty January 9. His car was found $\frac{3}{4}$ mile west of her house, its gas tank on "empty."

"Mrs. Pettijohn," said one of the officers, "I'm afraid you'll have to come to the station with us to file a report so we can find out what happened here." In a state of disbelief she put on her coat and then absent-mindedly picked up the stack of letters. And an icy blast of wind extinguished the candle in the window as they left through the front door.

MORNING

EDWARD L. WILLIAMS

winter-dawn.
soft pillowskin,
cloudbreathing within my arms.

an hour ago you were but a child,
a sea bed faery
of ocean spray sighs
and young soft eyes.

dreamsmiling,
held in the blanket
like morningsun in a sparrow's nest,
deepsleeping.

i no longer love the land
or the words with which we speak.
i no longer love
the ancient oak or the statues in the park.