

# The First Day of School

by Sharon Grant

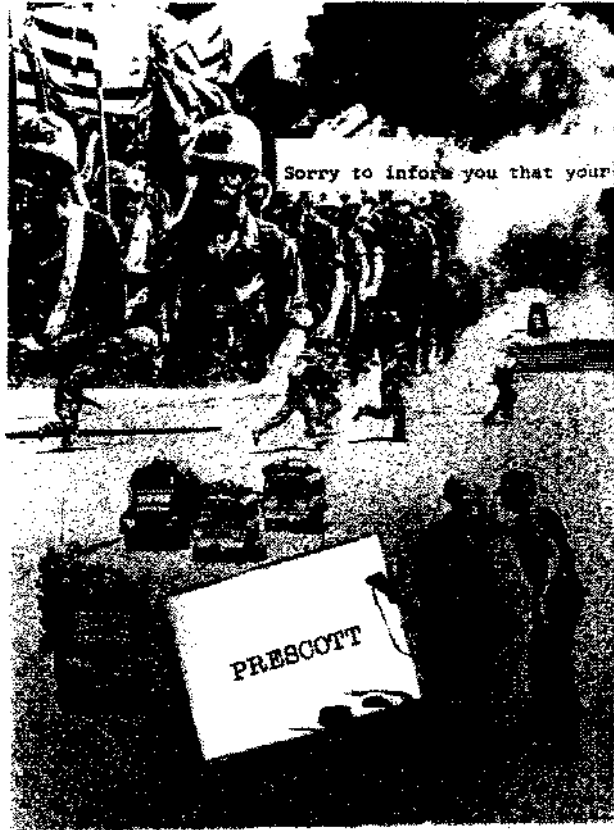
Joanna Prescott wondered if she would be alive on her twenty-fourth birthday. She adjusted her seat for a better view of the movie screen at the front of the cabin and pushed the foam earpieces tighter into her ears. On the screen a jugular vein shot blood like a geyser. Donald Sutherland cursed and slapped his hand over the open neck wound.

"Let's get this guy into O.R."

J. P. wondered if someone was perverse or it was just an incredible coincidence that *M\*A\*S\*H* was scheduled on her flight. She decided to be as perverse and watch the movie, losing interest when the football sequence started. She took the earphones out and watched the water,

gray and smooth, pass beneath the plane; she napped. The stewardess, a thin, attractive woman in a striped apron, the only other woman J. P. had seen for hours, served a meal. J. P. had lost track of what meal she was eating. The stewardess cleared away remains of sliced beef, cottage fries, and glazed carrots. J. P. pulled her black leather purse from under the seat and walked the gauntlet of male eyes from her seat to the front of the plane. A tall man with a wide, country face came out of the bathroom marked "Women". J. P. wondered if latrines were sexed.

Her haircut and set by Mr. Andemo of San Francisco had barely lasted through her three-day wait at Travis Air Force Base. She brushed out the short blond curls and wondered if she would be gray by thirty, like her mother. Her face was broad and flat, like the prairie around her Kansas home, and her teeth were almost straight, never crooked enough for Dr. Wiltmier to put



her in braces. She pulled down her panty hose and massaged her stomach and thighs, envying the men who travelled in trousers. She pulled up her pantyhose and noticed in the small mirror over the sink that one of her silver bars was smudged. J. P. polished it with a piece of toilet paper, then for good measure, polished the other bar, her caduceus, her U. S. pin, and the black plastic name-tag with white letters saying "Prescott" over her right breast. Then she stood with her hand on the door, took a deep breath, and prepared to run the gauntlet of male stares back to her seat.

The plane descended for landing into Bien Hoa Air Base. In the monotone usually reserved to wish visitors a pleasant stay, the stewardess

read instructions for the passengers to leave the plane quickly, keep low, and run for the terminal. As soon as the plane came to a halt, a sergeant with a clipboard came on board.

"Couriers, women, and senior officers disembark first," he announced over the plane's PA system.

J. P. ran down the steps between two bird colonels, stopping only when she was inside the building. The terminal was hot and dust blew across the concrete floor from the backwash of the planes. Behind her J. P. heard a coarse whistle. A skinny black man in fatigues with a Sanyo tape player glued to his left ear jive-walked past her.

"Hi, mama."

She put her purse strap over her shoulder and walked with her eyes straight ahead as she had been taught at Fort Sara Houston. She was an officer and a gentleman

by an Act of Congress, and she meant to act like one. Two small men in camouflage fatigues, iron helmets, and field packs passed her, speaking in a fast, musical language, gesturing with their hands. J. P. thought these ARVN soldiers looked like obscene Barbie dolls.

The airman at the desk directed her to a gray bus waiting in the hot afternoon sun to take people to the Replacement Depot. She was the only woman on the bus. J. P. took in the coils of barbed wire around each compound, the hot smell of diesel fuel, the green vehicles on the streets, but the rest of the details blurred in her consciousness. She and twenty men were taken to a briefing room. Gray benches filled the cool, blue room. In front of the benches a map of Viet Nam, an orange, green, and yellow curve, reached like an arthritic finger along the side of Indochina. A staff sergeant in pressed khakis and polished boots stood in front of the group,

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. I am Sergeant Gonzolos, and for the next hour, I will be your principal instructor for your Incountry Briefing."

He handed out little booklets with coloured maps like the one behind him on the covers. He reminded them they were guests of the Vietnamese and must not criticize any unusual customs. They were not to give the Vietnamese American money or Military Payment Certificates, not to eat off the economy or drink the water, not to smoke at night because of snipers. He reminded everyone to take their malaria pills. J. P. could tell which of the men were on their second tour of Nam—they slept through the lecture. Then the sergeant asked her to leave and several of the men tittered. Red-faced, she walked out of the room, knowing the sergeant was going to discuss B-girls and the clap.

After supper a Spec-4, who said he was from Jersey and had sixty-five days left incountry, drove her to the nurses' quarters. An armed sentry *sit* the barbed wire gate saluted her, and she returned the salute, wondering if the wire was there to keep her in or the men out. The quarters were a single story, unpainted, wooden building, dirty, smelling of hot, unwashed bodies. She was the only person there. By dark, J. P. would have given anything for another woman to talk to.

The latrine was connected to the hootch by a plank sidewalk, listing into sticky, black mud at a crazy angle, J. P. started to wash her face and one of the faucets moved as she touched it. She bit off a scream and stared at the lime green frog she had mistaken for a faucet in the dim light. She quickly ran her hand under the cold water, hoping the frog wasn't poisonous. The shower floor was slick. One of the nurses at Fort Gordon had warned her to bring flip-flops, so at least her feet were

out of the slime. She showered, washed her hair, and brushed her teeth. Her mouth kept the first aftertaste of metallic, treated water.

Her room was eight feet by six feet, furnished only with a cot and straightback wooden chair. She hung her uniform jacket carefully on the chair, already knowing that a night's airing wouldn't remove the body odour under the arms. The sagging mattress and heavy pillow smelled like hundreds of people had slept there before her. The night was hot, but J. P. didn't dare open the screens because of the mosquitoes. Flares went off outside—a red dot, then a white light as they fell to the ground. The last thing she heard before she slept was an automatic rifle, far away.

A man knocked at her open doorframe. His voice in the darkness said the bus for the airport left in ten minutes. Her watch dial, green in the dark, said four a.m. She dressed in her green summer uniform, which stuck to her body. Her skin and hair were sticky with sweat. So much for Mr. Andemo of San Francisco.

J. P. boarded the bus with half a dozen men, drugged to silence by fatigue and heat. The glass in the gray school bus windows had been replaced by wire to keep out flying objects if there was an explosion. An armed guard, naked from the waist up except for a flack jacket, boarded the bus. Her life might depend on this stranger. She wondered how long he had been incountry. As the bus moved through a crowded section of Long Bien, a barricade of boxes and tin blocked the street. The guard yelled for them to lie down on the floor.

J. P. lay with her cheek against the gray, metal floor, her eyes focused on a line of rivets. The paint on the third rivet was peeling, revealing the rusted screw below. Maybe this was just harrassment from the locals. Maybe the barricade was boobytrapped to explode when moved. Maybe a child waited in the shadows to roll a grenade under the bus. She waited for the sound of the grenade, like a stone rolling on concrete, but she heard only her own heartbeat loud in her ears. She wanted to vomit.

The bus door creaked open and the guard's footsteps went down the stairs. If there was gunfire, the driver would try to run the barricade. She was lying on top of the gas tank. Her mind was forming the telegram to her mother, "Sorry to inform you..." She wondered if it would be delivered in person. The street was dead as the guard removed the last of the barricade. He climbed back into the bus, muttering, "Fucking gook kids." The driver gunned the motor. In ten minures they were at the terminal. Numbly, J. P. waited in line to board a plane for DaNang. She felt a hundred years old.