



# Requiem for an Army Wife

by Benjamin J. Stein

Friday

**R**ing, ring, ring. At about ten to eight, as I was sleeping, listening to the wonderful sound of my boy laughing in my dreams, I was awakened by the telephone. I couldn't get up before the machine answered it, so I went back to sleep. I figured it was probably Citicorp calling about my car lease bill, so why bother racing upstairs for the call?

I was wrong. When I checked my messages, the first one was from my father-in-law, calling to say that my mother-in-law, Norma Jean Denman Warmack, originally of Idabel, Oklahoma, and more recently of Heber Springs, Arkansas, had died that morning in her sleep. I called Col. Denman back. He said that he did not know exactly what she had died of. She had suffered excruciating pain for years from osteoarthritis, and now she was gone. "Maybe she was just worn out," Col. Denman said.

It fell to me to call my erstwhile wife's housekeeper, have her awaken Alex, and then tell her the news. When I told her, she cried. "But I didn't even get to say good-bye," she said. "I was going to see her next week, and now I can't ever say good-bye."

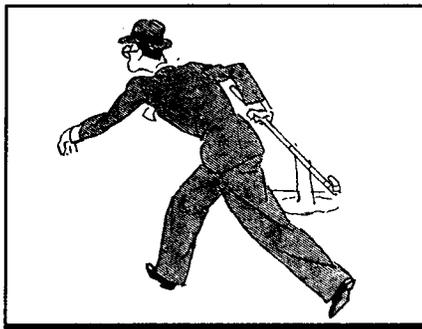
Frantic calls to Zuma Travel, frantic packing, frantic instructions to my assistant, and then we were off on American Airlines to Little Rock via Dallas. We didn't have time to use our fabulous AAdvantage Miles to get into First Class, so we were all three in coach. Every seat was filled, mostly with people in bad moods. Alex sat next to me, occasionally crying, mostly struggling with Tommy, whom we had brought along

*Benjamin J. Stein is a writer, lawyer, economist, and actor living in Malibu, California.*

just to show us that there is continuity in life. He read a book about sharks and then fell asleep.

If you don't think that this is a class system, try flying coach some sweet day. Then try flying First Class. Then coach again. Try asking a flight attendant in coach for something like a glass of orange juice. Try to survive her basilisk stare. In coach. Then ask for vintage champagne in First. Try to survive her overwhelming smile.

**I**n Little Rock, it was dark. The airport was packed. The air was damp with the kind of humidity we do not know in glorious Los Angeles. A driver of a van hired in Heber Springs drove us through the Arkansas night to Heber, through empty streets. By the time we got to Eden Isle, a glamorous residential



community on a large lake forty miles north of Little Rock, it was midnight. Col. Denman was asleep in bed at the house of his friends.

Alex and I let him sleep. We went to his condo and looked at the room where Mrs. Denman had died that morning. Alex started to read prayers that her mother had kept near her invalid bed. Then she started to look at her mother's jewelry, and at her poems from Pi Phi, her sorority at Stevens College before the

end of World War II. I read some of the mountain of citations and memorials that Col. Denman had won. Silver Star near Zeitlin, Germany. Bronze Star, Vietnam. Distinguished Service Cross. Photos of Fort Bliss, El Paso, Leavenworth, Ansbach, Frankfurt, Alexandria, Arlington, Saigon.

*Army wives, army wives, hurrah for the Army wives . . .* Where would we be without them, wives who tend the hearth and raise the kids while the husbands are off fighting in Germany and Vietnam? When Col. Denman had to lie low in a marsh in Vietnam, trying to ambush some Vietcong who never came by, at least he had company. Mrs. Denman and Alex and her sister Dale had to hear that their father's quarters in Saigon had been blown up by sappers in 1964, and they had to stay up all night in terror all by themselves.

Saturday

**A**ll day long, friends and neighbors came to offer condolences to Col. Denman in his little living room. A doctor who had attended the late Mrs. Denman's arthritis. A neighbor who brought chicken. Another neighbor, also a doctor, with hilarious tales about a small town Southern medical practice. The preacher, likewise an Army brat, with stories of his own father's life in Army blue.

The father and my erstwhile wife talked about how Mrs. Denman would have wanted the ceremony to go. They tried to recall her favorite hymns and psalms. "Perhaps 'The Old Rugged Cross,'" I suggested helpfully.

"Exactly," Alex said. "That was one of Mother's favorites."

"And perhaps 'Rock of Ages,'" I added.

"Yes," Alex said. "Trust Ben to remember everything."

"What was that Psalm that Mother read when I was in Vietnam?" Col. Denman asked in his plaintive, widower's voice. "About protecting us."

"Perhaps Psalm 91," I offered. "One of my own favorites."

The minister looked at the list thoughtfully. Of all the people in the living room, guess who was the only one crying. That's right. Little me. "Ben should be a professional mourner," Alex suggested. Ha ha ha.

"Maybe you should talk about the time Mother arranged for all of the families in the battalion to be evacuated to Marseilles in 1956 when we thought we were going to war during the Hungarian uprising."

The minister made more notes. I went into the kitchen looking for orange juice. There wasn't any, but there was Tang. It was at least fifteen years old. It reminded me of how Mrs. Denman used to serve it and tell me that it was what the astronauts drank.

Later in the afternoon, I took Mr. Perfect to the swimming pool at Eden Isle. There were two middle-aged women there, teachers from Memphis, and they loved my boy. They played with him in the pool while I read proofs of my latest book. A family with beautiful children came and played with Tommy. A beautiful manicurist came and played with Tommy. He jumped on them and did cannonballs, and they all loved him.

I've been taking Tommy to the Malibu Riding and Tennis Club for two years now, twice a week, and no one ever plays with him there except me.

In the evening, we had barbecue and talked about the passage of time. This is the most amazing thing of all: time, which is a solid wall of fact, concrete at the moment, passes and is gone forever. People who seem to be part of the very fabric of earth die, and only memories are left. This happens to us. God help us, poor creatures who have to live in real life, where time passes.

Outside, on the golf course next to Col. Denman's condo, cicadas electrified the night. I called home and got a message that a stooge of the Milken army was going to write something mean about me in his little magazine. What a waste of time for both of us.

Monday

No need to guess who gave the eulogy at Mrs. Denman's memorial service at the First Presbyterian Church of Heber Springs, which is set in a lovely grove of pines. It wasn't easy. I was crying like a faucet stuck on open. The only way I could bear to speak was to keep reminding myself that I was an actor, someone who could *act* as if he weren't crying.

My speech was a tear-jerker, though. About how Mrs. Denman used to look so happy when she took a trick at bridge—she was a killer at the game. About how she loved her catalogues. About how she taught her daughters to be proud of being Army girls.

I stood in the receiving line and about 200 incredibly polite men and women, mostly retired, passed through and told me how much they were moved by my talk. The amazing thing is that not one of them looked crazy. How can that be, when every person you see on the street in Beverly Hills looks just the opposite?

Back to the Little Rock Airport, for a flight to Washington. Again, friendly, kind-looking men and women and chil-

dren. As I admired their regular features, even smiles, and open faces, a family of ratty-looking people with warped, ratty features walked by. I recognized the wife from Hollywood. Her husband is a foreign film director. Of course. The only horrible-looking people at the airport, and they had to be from L.A.

Good-bye, Mrs. Denman. At least you got to spend your life among people who were kind. Among people like you.

Wednesday

It's raining in Washington, D.C. It's mid-August and actually cold. It's especially cold here at the Chapel at Fort Myer, Virginia, right next to Arlington National Cemetery. It's sad, too, because this is the exact same spot where Alex and I were married twenty-four years ago, and now we're here for a service for Mrs. Denman, who will be interred next door.

We waited in a small waiting room off the chapel. It's the exact same room where, on June 23, 1968, my ushers and best man waited before my wedding. Oh, yes. I was thin, then. Duncan Kennedy was an usher. So were various pals from childhood. My brother-in-law

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was best man. We were so young. I was 23, and very nervous indeed. Alex came down the aisle looking so beautiful in her white gown that I thought I would pass out. Mrs. Denman looked nice, too, as Linda Fairstein, celebrity D.A., escorted her to her seat. Col. Denman, in his dress whites, looked also great. Then we had a big party and Alex and I went for our honeymoon in Rehoboth Beach, which used to be a lot nicer than it is now.

That was then. This is a funeral. This is now. We're not going to any parties at the Bethesda Naval Hospital Officers' Club. No usher or best man is going to be waiting to tie tin cans to my car. No bridesmaids with cleavage will be flirting with the ushers. This is not the beginning of anything for the living except a long period of missing a mother, a wife, a mother-in-law, a friend.

*Monday*

**B**ack to New York, to the studios of Comedy Central in the HBO Building on East 23rd. This is my big night for comedy convention coverage. I get to react to Pat Buchanan's and Ronald Reagan's speeches. I love Pat, and he's been a pal, but he's easy to make fun of. For the life of me, I don't get why he's always making fun of lesbians, though. What is so funny about being a lesbian, after all?

I also liked Reagan's speech. There's something endearing about the guy. Superstar quality. When I watch him, I just get the feeling that everything will turn out all right in the end. Never mind the homeless covering the sidewalk outside the studio. Never mind the twenty-five murders per weekend in Los Angeles. Never mind the inability of young Americans to read and write, not to mention add and subtract. No, forget all of that. Reagan makes me think everything's going to be all right.

I got back to my hotel and there was a fax waiting for me from my assistant. More angry words from defenders of Milken. They all seem to think I have a personal grudge against the guy. That's not even close. I hardly even see him as an individual, although of course he is. I think of him as the objective correlative of a number of distasteful social and historical currents. He's hardly a human being at all, but rather a force of the tides of history and sociology and political science. More

than that, almost a force of nature. He's fascinating, but I certainly don't hate him, any more than I would hate a typhoon.

Wednesday

**B**oo-hoo-hoo. My last night at Comedy Central I said my few funny lines, made up a rap about Bush, and sang it:

*Yo, Bush, funky white President man,  
Have you done the best you can,  
To help the people in the street,  
Without houses like yours so neat,  
Have you helped our kids today,  
Or have you looked the other way,  
While we are starvin' and dyin',  
And you're in Abe Lincoln's bed, lyin'?  
Or have you looked far out to sea,  
So our sufferin' you wouldn't see,  
And thought about your sons so fly,  
While we pine and suffer and die?  
Give us a thought every once in a  
while,  
My chile is your chile, no man is an  
isle.*

My host, a genius of humor, Al Franken, looked on in frank amazement, and so do I even as I remember it.

I also made up a rap directed to Al when he made cruel fun of my idol, Richard Nixon, repeating the wicked canard that Nixon used to walk on the beach at San Clemente in wing-tips:

*Yo, Al Franken, funky New York  
Comedy man,  
How much do you even know about  
Malibu sand?  
How can you dare to diss my Milhous  
man about his shoes,  
When just hearin' it give me serious  
blues?  
Funky Al Franken, delicatessen lovin'  
man,  
I happen to live above Malibu sand.  
I can tell you this for sure,  
That on my wonderful Zuma shore,  
The deffest folks wear wing-tip  
boards.  
And don't wanna hear your East  
Coast snores,  
'Bout my long-lasting Nixon man,  
Of whom I am a righteous fan.*

Monday

**B**ack home at last, Tommy and I are kicking a huge beach ball at each other. The weather is per-

fect, and he's in ecstasy at how often he can kick it by me. Sometimes though, he kicks it up into the bushes. "I can't reach that yet, Daddy," he says. "You have to get it for me."

Inside, we tossed around a midget football. Sometimes it went under the table and he crawled for it, and sometimes it went on top of the filing cabinet and I reached for it. "That's how we'll do it, Daddy," he said. "You'll reach for the high stuff and I'll get the low stuff,

'cause you're big and fat and I'm little and thin."

"I'm not that fat," I said.

"Yes, you are, Daddy," he said.

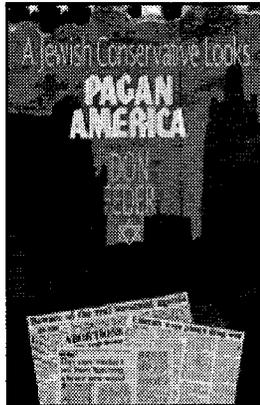
Sometimes, in fact about every two minutes when I'm with him, I have to pick him up and kiss him for a minute or two. "No more kissing," he says. "No more kissing, please."

"I'm sorry," I tell him, "but I can't help it. Anyway, it's my job. That's why I'm called Daddy." □

## A Jewish Conservative Looks at Pagan America by Don Feder

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**A Christian America:** "Should America be a Christian nation? It comes down to this: In any society, someone's values must prevail. If America isn't animated by the Judeo-Christian ethic, it will be governed by less enlightened doctrines. For the consequences of the latter, check out the latest statistics on drug use, date rape, and mental illness."

**Abortion:** "How do you make them (abortion advocates) understand that a right requires a moral foundation? . . . we are cannibalizing our children, uprooting future generations for current lifestyle consumption. . . . In order to avoid confronting the ugly reality of this 'choice', we pretend that the life within is only a lump of protoplasm?"

**Homosexual Rights:** "A healthy society is life-affirming. Homosexuality is the metaphysical negation of life. Incapable of reproduction (giving life), it can replenish its numbers only by seduction."

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## Newsweek Acts Up

by Terry Eastland

I suppose it was inevitable in a presidential campaign year focused more than any before upon matters involving homosexuality that one of the major newsweeklies would devote major space to the subject. No less inevitably, *Newsweek's* eight-page cover story of September 14, "Gays Under Fire," was a thoroughly botched and biased job.

For starters, take the basic premise: that "gay America's struggle for acceptance" has netted "modest gains" but provoked "a powerful backlash" (no sting left in that cliché) in the form of "a well-coordinated counteroffensive by the religious right." Throughout, that "struggle for acceptance" was sanitized by *Newsweek*, with no mention of ACT-UP or Queer Nation or any other of the gay extremist groups. Nor was there any reference to the new reading material finding its way into public elementary schools, such as *Daddy's Roommate* and *Heather Has Two Mommies*, which teach the moral acceptability of gay living. One would think that parents who hold opposing views might themselves be said to feel "under fire," but *Newsweek* did not present their testimony. Why complicate the story line?

*Newsweek* spoke of "gay-bashing," a term not only left undefined but also used so indiscriminately as to suggest that anyone disapproving of homosexuality is guilty of it. (Most in the news media would concur: on a recent "Good Morning America," Vice President Dan Quayle found himself denying that it was "gay bashing" to say homosexual life-

styles are wrong. He was later singled out in a *New York Times* headline for a related bit of incorrectness: "Quayle Contends Homosexuality Is a Matter of Choice, Not Biology.") In any event, from the examples *Newsweek* provided, it would seem that only the religious right has a problem with homosexuality. Yet a poll commissioned by the magazine belied that notion: while 78 percent said homosexuals should have "equal



rights in job opportunities," 58 percent disapproved of "legally sanctioned gay marriages," and 53 percent said homosexuality is not "an acceptable alternative lifestyle." (Ever the organ of progress, *Newsweek* commented: "Fifty-three percent still don't consider homosexuality 'acceptable' behavior." Emphasis mine.)

Playing the historian, *Newsweek* said "it's possible to trace the right wing's anti-gay campaign to a bullwhip" that was "photographed hanging from the late Robert Mapplethorpe's derriere [sic] and featured in his 1989

retrospective partially funded by the National Endowment of the Arts." Swallowing the gay activist line, the magazine advised that the bullwhip came at "an opportune moment for the religious right," because "the Berlin wall and the contras had fallen." In other words, in desperate need of new targets to fuel its paranoia, the right turned to putting gays in their place. A serious treatment of the subject would have examined the different understandings of moral authority at issue in this debate.

*Newsweek* did pause to say where the religious right—simplistically equated with Protestant fundamentalism—got its "anti-gay animus": the Bible. The magazine's exegesis of an unnamed passage from Corinthians (I Corinthians 6: 9-11, evidently) consisted of a single, banal sentence: "Corinthians promises that homosexuals (along with fornicators, idolaters, adulterers and thieves) shall never inherit the kingdom of God." Readers weren't informed that Protestant fundamentalist churches are hardly alone in their negative views of homosexuality. Or that, as the *New York Times's* religion writer Peter Steinfelds recently reported, there's plenty of debate over the issue in mainstream Protestant and Catholic precincts. *Newsweek* evidently didn't even bother to consult its own religion editor, Kenneth Woodward, who could have alerted its writers to what America's churches and synagogues teach about homosexuality. Such reporting might even have allowed the magazine to understand its own poll, wherein support for equal job rights did not translate into approval of homosexual "lifestyles."

*Terry Eastland is the author, most recently, of Energy in the Executive: The Case for the Strong Presidency (The Free Press).*