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The Bargain

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THE BARGAIN

PATTI DAVIS

It was a waiting game; Mark's lottery number was low—in the fifties, if I remember—and we knew that, any day, his draft notice would come.

For weeks, it was a subject tossed into the smoky, late-night air when our living room was crowded with friends passing joints and Gallo wine through the orange waves of candlelight.

"You could go to Canada," was one suggestion.

"I'm not going to be driven out of this country by a war that's completely wrong," was Mark's answer.

"Your parents should get you a good lawyer—get out that way," was another idea, pondered over in the dope-haze of nights that ran together.

Parents were never discussed in those days, except in terms of their possible value in aiding someone to escape the draft. But Mark's father fought in World War II and he believed in following your country's orders. Whoever America calls the enemy should be killed.

We were in college—sort of. We went to the classes we liked, missed those that didn't interest us, and pursued a more noble form of education: we learned about Vietnam. We studied napalm and defoliants and the fact that thousands of boys were being sacrificed in a war that had no reason and made no sense.

I knew Mark wouldn't go; he'd get out of it, I just didn't know how. At night, I would press against him and wonder if I'd have to visit him in jail and then come home to a bed that felt too wide. We'd been together less than a year, but we'd each made room for the other. The closet was divided in half, I moved things into the top two drawers of the dresser, and we each had our preferred side of the bed. I couldn't imagine him not being there.

When the draft notice came, he taped it to the bathroom mirror. He stared at it when he brushed his teeth, when he shaved, and at various other times during the day when I would find him standing in the bathroom, staring at it as though he could change it with his eyes. He was making a decision, and I knew he had to make it alone.

"I don't want anyone to come over tonight, okay?" Mark said one evening when we were spooning cans of baked beans into a saucepan, nutrition not being a big priority.

"Sure, do you want to be alone?" I asked. "I could go out...."

"No, you need to be here."

"Mark, what's going on?"

"Please don't ask," he said. "You'll know soon enough. Everything will be all right. You're just going to have to trust me on this one."

We went into the living room after dinner and smoked a joint, and I could tell he was retreating to some dark, secret place in his soul. Joni Mitchell was singing "Woodstock" when he stood up and went into the kitchen.

We are stardust, we are golden...

Caught in the devil's bargain...

I've played that scene back in my head a thousand times—the loud, sharp sound, almost like a door slamming, but different. It was the sound of metal hitting wood. And Mark standing in the doorway of the living room with his hand wrapped in a dishtowel and blood soaking through so fast it was dripping onto the floor.

"Jesus God, Mark, what did you do?"

"I cut off my finger," he said in a voice so calm it frightened me even more than the blood pouring from his hand. "Sorry about your cutting board."

I drove him to the emergency ward with a bath towel covering his hand and his face turning pale. They stitched up what was left—which was nothing—he had severed the finger below the second knuckle.

"Too bad you didn't save the finger," the doctor said. "We might have been able to re-attach it."

"It went down the garbage disposal," Mark said, giving me a look that told me to keep quiet. This was a household accident, a kitchen mishap, that would just happen to get him out of the draft.

"It was my statement," he said weeks later, holding up his unbandaged hand, studying the gap where a finger once was. "I couldn't do something ordinary—I couldn't just escape to another country. I took a stand—no one can ever say I didn't. I mutilated my own body rather than open up on some other bastard who thinks his cause gives him the right to kill. That was a game I couldn't have played."