



Pen Pals

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

I once had a pen pal. A boy from Kissimmee, Florida. I was ten, he the same age. Other than that, I don't remember anything about him, not even his name. I was reminded of him the other day when I read a fascinating story about pen pal connections that spanned decades. The article was from the *Washington Post*, and I was immediately taken by the fact that the one-time girl grew up in East Grand Rapids only a short distance from where I lived for most of three decades. Twelve-year-old Kristina Olson had gone door-to-door, raising money through Camp Fire Girls in order to send care packages to soldiers stationed abroad. Hers went to Ned Felder in Vietnam. He wrote back thanking her and their correspondence continued most of a decade, sometimes with gifts: a doll adorned in silk, a book about Vietnam.

After Felder returned to the States, his life was consumed with family and work in Virginia, having risen to the prestigious position of associate judge for the US Army Court of Military Review. Indeed, he had come a long way from his impoverished Gullah Geechee heritage, living in a single-room alley shack. But he was convinced that his hard work and the church had paved the way out of poverty toward eventual success. Yes, there were some blacks who would enjoy great accomplishments and prestige. But many more had been left behind amid joblessness and delinquency. For too many of them crime would become a way of life, and prisons would be largely populated with black men.

Kris Olson, growing up in lily-white, well-educated East Grand Rapids, never would encounter race discrimination. A successful life was simply assumed. Happiness would be frosting on the cake. After high school, she entered and graduated from Michigan State University. From there she would land a job in New York City. Her work was in the field of textiles which entailed a lot

of travelling. She had reached the pinnacle of success. In the years that followed, she would marry, take the name Feeney and have children. All was well—that was, until the good life disintegrated.

As hard as she worked to keep her family afloat, things went from bad to worse. Her mother died. Then her father, who had Parkinson's, came to live with the family. After a serious sickness, her husband became critically ill, and medical bills skyrocketed. She moved the family to Texas to save money and worked two jobs. There the desolation just piled up. Her father died, followed by the

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painful death of her husband and then the death of her son, only twenty-seven. He too had suffered severe pain. Fentanyl, although approved by the FDA as a pain killer, can be lethal, as it was in his case.

Kris would move on to South Carolina. Here she thought again of Ned Felder—not that she had ever forgotten him. And so, she decided to look him up and write him a letter. He might have ignored it and thought *enough is enough*. But he didn't. "I was so happy! So happy. This one [letter] is more meaningful than any of the others." He invited her to South Carolina State University on Veterans Day and they watched the football game from the president's box. They hugged and laughed and talked—so filled with emotion that he feared he would cry. And he wondered how it would look if people saw an Army officer crying.

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—Ruth Tucker