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IN THE MORNING

(Excerpt from a novel "The Third Woman", See [Book Reviews](#))

Aloyzas Baronas

Aldona awoke when her husband slammed the door as he left for work, and could not go back to sleep because a dream had resurrected an uncomfortable memory of something that had happened when she was young. She had taken a slow and exhausting trip by train, on which she had been seated beside a window, her head resting against the pane. The seat next to hers had been occupied by a young mother with an infant in her arms. The mother was unable to lean against anything, and had glanced wistfully at Aldona from time to time. Aldona had known that it would have been polite and kind to offer her seat to this woman, but she continued to doze, and the weary young mother was forced to spend an uncomfortable night.

Aldona often thought about this incident, and felt so very sorry for that mother, whose features she could still remember clearly, although she could no longer recall the face of the child. He had not seemed so attractive to her then as he did later on — as all children did now. She had dreamed that she had at last given up her place to the young mother and that everything appeared to have been settled. And then Juozas had slammed the door... now she could not go back to sleep. Somewhere in the distance a passing train whistled. Aldona climbed out of bed and pulled up the shades. All unpleasant thoughts vanished when she saw what had occurred during the night. Outside, the house-tops were covered with frost which sparkled in the first rays of the rising sun. The whiteness was dazzling, although the trees were still colorless and drab. Birds' nests, abandoned to the winter winds by their inhabitants, were visible through the leafless branches. They were like deserted houses -empty, lonely and sad.

A thud against the kitchen steps brought Aldona back to reality. The newspaper boy had been here and had just tossed the paper against the back door. Aldona hurried to pick it up. The war news was depressing as usual. A division of soldiers had been surrounded by the enemy on all sides and was having difficulty fighting its way out. The front page showed two injured soldiers crawling back to their platoon. The North Vietnamese had lost many more men than the Americans. Aldona felt sorry for them all. She was especially concerned about the mothers. They suffered as much as she did, worrying about little Michael. The words "little Michael" startled her. How could she continue to feel so strongly for someone whose presence had been nothing more than a brief episode in a long war, and which should not have touched either Juozas or herself personally.

The living room still smelled faintly of cigarette smoke from the night before. Aldona opened the window to air it out. She returned to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. She turned on the radio. For some reason she was beginning to feel unusually depressed. It wasn't because she was alone in the house; she had been alone many times before. Her thoughts weighed too heavily upon her. Perhaps if she had something to read they would lift.

She dressed and walked a few blocks to the small neighborhood store, a combination post office and pharmacy, which had a stock of paperbacks, as well. She selected Hemingway's *Green Hills of Africa*, bought it, and was on her way home when she met a woman with whom she was on friendly terms. Mrs. Griffey had been a German war bride, whose husband was now an airplane mechanic. They lived nearby, and, since Aldona understood German, she and Mrs. Griffey often spoke to each other on the street in the latter's native tongue.

"Did you know," asked Mrs. Griffey, "that our Johnny enlisted a few months ago? Now he's serving time in Vietnam."

She spoke in English, although her words were pronounced with a heavy German accent.

Aldona nodded in acknowledgement. The woman continued.

"My brother was killed in World War II; my mother and father died during a raid; and now, my own son is at the front. I'm afraid to answer the telephone, and I tremble every time I pass Western Union. God forbid that my boy should suffer the same fate."

"Certainly it's nerve-wracking, but the odds are with you. Only a few hundred out of thousands are killed. As for the last war — your husband is alive, isn't he? Nothing happened to him."

Aldona spoke convincingly. She very nearly believed her own words. In trying to soothe the fears of her neighbor, she had managed to soothe her own, and her feeling of depression lifted. But Mrs. Griffey wouldn't be comforted.

"Those who have never seen war, those who never had a son at the front wouldn't understand my fears," she said. "You know how things were in Europe from experience. It was hell for the men who fought and even worse for those who were captured. On both sides."

Aldona could indeed remember the unending columns of downtrodden Russian war prisoners as well as the exhausted German battalions returning from the front.

"Yes, war is terrible," she said. "But I suppose there are times when one must fight."

"Certainly, we have to fight," retorted Mrs. Griffey. "And why, I ask you? Because the Russian should have been crushed instead of us Germans. They were always the real threat. There would be no need to fight now if the Germans had been left alone." Her voice rose. She seemed to be remembering and glorying in the seemingly invincible might of the German armies during their prime, the sound of boots on the pavement echoed in her ears). While Mrs. Griffey relived the glory of times past, Aldona could not help remembering the endless processions of Jews, walking in the gutters and swathed in rags to protect themselves against the cold.

"Not everyone felt the same way," she said. "What about the Jews?"

The German woman blushed.

"The Communists have slaughtered more people than the Nazis ever did," she retorted quickly.

"We know that," replied Aldona. "But at that time many people didn't." Her voice was different, almost apologetic. She kept her eyes focused on the cover of the paperback volume in her hands.

"Yes, if the Germans had been allowed to wipe out the Communists, there would have been no Korea, no Vietnam, and no threat from Red China."

Aldona remained silent. They continued to walk together. Rows upon rows of death-bound Jews seemed to be walking before them, each clearly visible to Aldona's eyes. She remembered seeing children being torn from the arms of their sobbing mothers, who tried to clutch them with their last ounce of strength.

The two women stopped on a street corner, waiting for the traffic to pass.

"You can't change anything now," muttered Mrs. Griffey. "War is war, and whoever is touched by it suffers. Look here," she pointed to the cover of the magazine that she had been carrying under her arm, "look at the picture of this wounded soldier with his face hidden from view, and imagine how you would feel if your sons were fighting at the front."

They stood together for a moment longer, then Aldona excused herself and started to walk home. She felt sorry for Mrs. Griffey. There was no doubt that every mother with a son in the war hoped and prayed that he would return unharmed. And yet someone had to die. Aldona did not want Michael to be the one. Death had already brushed him several times during his brief span of years. By law she was not his mother, but who was the real mother, after all? She who gave away her child or she who took it? And what did it matter in the long run? What was nationality? What was charity? What was patriotism, when one considered the countless generations that had marched and fallen time and time again beneath the blow of the dark Angel of God? All who ever lived were destined to feel his breath and to see the blinding lightning of his wings.

If Aldona had expected the book she had bought to free her from such thoughts, she was disappointed. She felt sadder and more depressed by what Hemingway wrote in *The Green Hills of Africa*. She shuddered at the descriptions of hunting and slaughtering. She pitied the helpless animals that fell, wounded, their guts oozing from their bullet-riddled bellies. Why all his senseless killing, she wondered. How had these animals offended man? It seemed that man alone lusted after blood for its own sake, as though he had been created exclusively for destruction and conquest. Man did not even stoop before death, although death merely blinked her eyes before relegating him to the dust of the ages.

Aldona put down the book. From the window she could see that the postman had just begun his rounds on the other side of the street. He would reach her mailbox in about an hour. Sometimes he delivered mail on her side of the street first, and then she received her mail earlier. But it never really mattered, because she was not at home during the week.

Aldona poured herself a second cup of coffee and returned to the book. She had stopped in the middle of a paragraph which described the joy of the hunt and the glory of the kill. Did men die differently from animals, she wondered. Didn't they crumble to the ground, too, struggling with the small leaden token of death in their bellies? It was horrible, yet, for some reason, even though she was repelled by its contents, the book fascinated her. She was accustomed to seeing and handling open wounds at the hospital. It was a part of her job. But there the aim was to save lives, while here the aim was to snuff them out. It made no difference to her that Hemingway was writing about an animal. She could not comprehend how anyone could derive pleasure from the very act of killing. To kill an enemy soldier in self-defense seemed to her more justifiable than deliberately to shoot a helpless antelope, and to glory in its agony and death as though they were something holy or profound.

Aldona sipped her coffee slowly, turning these thoughts over 'in her mind. She barely noticed that the postman was walking up the front steps. He slipped a letter into the mail box, pressed the door bell button once, and went on his way. He had only a few more houses to visit; his mail cart was nearly empty.

Awakened from her reverie by the bell, Aldona went out to get the letter. It was an air mail letter, and she guessed correctly that it had been sent from Vietnam. She trembled at the thought of the news it may contain.