

“Love” (Chapter 2)

Many years after the war Jimmy Cross came to visit me at my home in Massachusetts, and for a full day we drank coffee and smoked cigarettes and talked about everything we had seen and done so long ago, all the things we still carried through our lives. Spread out across the kitchen table were maybe a hundred old photographs. There were pictures of Rat Kiley and Kiowa and Mitchell Sanders, all of us, the faces incredibly soft and young. At one point, I remember, we paused over a snapshot of Ted Lavender, and after a while Jimmy rubbed his eyes and said he'd never forgiven himself for Lavender's death. It was something that would never go away, he said quietly, and I nodded and told him I felt the same about certain things. Then for a long time neither of us could think of much to say. The thing to do, we decided, was to forget the coffee and switch to gin, which improved the mood, and not much later we were laughing about some of the craziness that used to go on. The way Henry Dobbins carried his girlfriend's pantyhose around his neck like a comforter. Kiowa's moccasins and hunting hatchet. Rat Kiley's comic books. By midnight we were both a little high, and I decided there was no harm in asking about Martha. I'm not sure how I phrased it—just a general question—but Jimmy Cross looked up in surprise. "You writer types," he said, "you've got long memories." Then he smiled and excused himself and went up to the guest room and came back with a small framed photograph. It was the volleyball shot: Martha bent horizontal to the floor, reaching, the palms of her hands in sharp focus.

"Remember this?" he said.

I nodded and told him I was surprised. I thought he'd burned it.

Jimmy kept smiling. For a while he stared down at the photograph, his eyes very bright, then he shrugged and said, "Well, I did—I burned it. After Lavender died, I couldn't . . . This is a new one. Martha gave it to me herself."

They'd run into each other, he said, at a college reunion in 1979. Nothing had changed. He still loved her. For eight or nine hours, he said, they spent most of their time together. There was a banquet, and then a dance, and then afterward they took a walk across the campus and talked about their lives. Martha was a Lutheran missionary now. A trained nurse, although nursing wasn't the point, and she had done service in Ethiopia and Guatemala and Mexico. She had never married, she said, and probably never would. She didn't know why. But as she said this, her eyes seemed to slide sideways, and it occurred to him that there were things about her he would never know. Her eyes were gray and neutral. Later, when he took her hand, there was no pressure in return, and later still, when he told her he still loved her, she kept walking and didn't answer and then after several minutes looked at her wristwatch and said it was getting late. He walked her back to the dormitory. For a few moments he considered asking her to his room, but instead he laughed and told her how back in college he'd almost done something very brave. It was after seeing *Bonnie and Clyde*, he said, and on this same spot he'd almost picked her up and carried her to his room and tied her to the bed and put his hand on her knee and just held it there all night long. It came close, he told her—he'd almost done it. Martha shut her eyes. She crossed her arms at her chest, as if suddenly cold, rocking slightly, then after a time she looked at him and said she was glad he hadn't tried it. She didn't understand how men could do those things. What things? he asked, and Martha said, The things men do. Then he nodded. It began to form. Oh, he said, those things. At breakfast the next morning she told him she was sorry. She explained that there was nothing she could do about it, and he said he understood, and then she laughed and gave him the picture and told him not to burn this one up.

Jimmy shook his head. "It doesn't matter," he finally said. "I love her."

For the rest of his visit I steered the conversation away from Martha. At the end, though, as we were walking out to his car, I told him that I'd like to write a story about some of this. Jimmy thought it over and then gave me a little smile. "Why not?" he said. "Maybe she'll read it and come begging. There's always hope, right?"

"Right," I said.

He got into his car and rolled down the window. "Make me out to be a good guy, okay? Brave and handsome, all that stuff. Best platoon leader ever." He hesitated for a second. "And do me a favor. Don't mention anything about—"

"No," I said, "I won't."

1. Basically, what happens in this story?
2. For what could Jimmy Cross never forgive himself?
3. How did Jimmy get a new picture of Martha playing volleyball?
4. What becomes of Martha and Jimmy's love for her?
5. What does Jimmy ask Tim to do when he writes his story?
6. What does he tell Tim NOT to mention?
7. In what ways is this story about the narrator?
8. How has Lt. Cross' life turned out?
9. What is the significance of the story's title?