



CAPTAIN WITHERS'S WIFE



Captain Withers's Wife

In 1963, on an American base in France, Amy Withers loaded her husband's hair-trigger automatic pistol, called the military police, wrapped her newborn baby in a hand-knitted beige afghan with a purple border, and waited at the front window of her commonplace bungalow. The policeman arrived, parked his car near the curb, and walked toward the house. She opened the front window from above and shot four rounds into the air.

The policeman backed away. "We got a call . . ."

"I called," Amy yelled. "I want the commander."

The policeman swore. "You need a shrink," he mumbled.

"I heard that, you creep." She shot another round into the air.

Amy grabbed the baby, left the afghan on the floor. She opened the door and shoved the baby out, grabbing his clothing over his spine and supporting his bottom with the right hand still holding the gun.

"I'm afraid I'll hurt him."

"I'm not calling the commander!" He crouched behind the car, his gun drawn.

Amy closed the door and went to the window. Her next bullet made a hole in the rear door window of the police car.

The policeman crawled into the front seat from the passenger side, keeping his head down. He called for backup. A second car arrived with a superior officer. From a

safe distance, and with a bullhorn, the new officer demanded Amy's surrender. When Amy didn't respond, he zigzagged toward the front door of the house with a weapon under his flack vest. Crouching, he knocked.

The door opened six inches and the automatic came out. He couldn't see the woman.

"Give me the baby," he said standing up.

"I want the commander. "

"The commander can't come."

"Captain Withers has left me without a dime."

The superior officer grabbed for the gun. Amy lurched back and shot above his head. He flattened against the wall at the side of the door and reached for his pistol. Amy came out, the baby cradled in her arm, and pointed the automatic at the superior officer's left eye. He removed his hand from the vest and showed her his palm.

"Look," said Amy pushing the child forward so he could see without moving. "You know my husband. Blond. Blue eyed. Does this look like my husband?"

The kid was really small. The eyes were darker than any he could ever remember in a baby. And the thin hair swept on top of the pink scalp like a wave breaking on the shore was black, not blond.

"It's on your conscience . . . anything happens," Amy pressed.

The officer relaxed a little. "Mothers can't kill their children."

"Just call the commander. Use my name. He knows me."

She slammed the door shut with her foot and went back to wait in front of her window where she could watch all the activity on the street. The baby cried when she wrapped him in the afghan and put him on the floor.

“Hush,” she said. “You got me into this mess.”

She reloaded.

By the time the superior officer returned to his command center, he had decided to contact the commander. He did not like the commander, who was only a full colonel temporarily appointed as commander until a general could be found. The superior officer half-smiled at the opportunity to annoy the commander with leadership trivia. The call went out from base communications, and within thirty minutes the commander – who was divorced and liked to party – was found in a private room at the officer’s club.

“We got a dependent with a gun threatening to kill her baby,” the senior officer said over a static-filled line.

“Take her in. You can’t let it get out of control,” the commander barked.

“It’s Amy Withers. That’s what she said to tell you.”

The pause at the commander’s end of the line was brief but definitive. “She’s crazy. Call the doc. Send her to the loony bin.”

“I should wait for the doc? Do nothing?”

“You deaf?” The commander rang off.

The superior officer smirked to himself.

When the call about Amy came, the doctor – in his bungalow of the type specially assigned to high-ranking officers of major and above – was sitting on the edge of a bed massaging his wife’s nude back. She was face down, the bottom part of her body under a sheet, her bent arms splayed out on each side of the pillow supporting her shaved head, flawlessly done daily by her best girlfriend, whose head she shaved in return.

“Don’t answer it,” his wife said in habitual, cold, detached words that he had learned to ignore over the last ten years of marriage. At least when they had been stationed in Minnesota, she had enjoyed horseback riding and private yoga instruction. But now she rarely ventured beyond the perimeter fence that surrounded the base, reluctantly playing bridge in the cramped living rooms of older women who dealt cards with a flask of gin cradled on the floor between their ankles.

“I’m on call, J.D.,” he said reaching for the phone. She slapped his arm and he paused. The phone rang again.

“You didn’t tell me you were on call.” She believed the twice-weekly massage he gave her for back pain would, if divided into parts, lose its therapeutic continuity. “Don’t go.”

The phone rang again.

“I hate this place,” she said, but he heard “I hate you.” Maybe he hadn’t been around enough early in their marriage, or maybe he should have left her with her mother in Florida when he was assigned overseas, but was he really to blame? After internship she insisted he go into general practice in the military when he had been accepted for a residency in psychiatry. Her headaches – and sudden bouts of fatigue in moments of

affection – had all but extinguished his desire for her. And last month she vacationed with her friend at Mont Blanc without him.

When he answered the phone she stood up with her back to him, covering herself with a towel, and went to the bathroom to dress.

The doctor climbed into the commander's limousine parked a safe distance from the front of Amy Withers's house. The commander was a lanky swarthy man with a high voice, whose appearance on the scene of domestic unrest was unusual and puzzling.

"She's crazy, doc. You need to give her a tranquillizer or something. Commit her so we can fly her back emergency," the commander said as the doctor closed the door.

"Who is it?" the doctor asked. The base was small. Everyone knew everyone.

"Withers's wife."

The doctor's heart beat hard and fast. Amy Withers. Just her name made him feel her presence. She had strong efficient limbs and a face of natural beauty, a smell of freshness, and a hushed way of speaking. More than a year ago she had walked into his office. She was distraught. Her husband played around. She blamed herself for failing to recreate her mother and father's almost perfect marriage. To help her cope, the doctor increased her appointments to twice a week; soon, he knew everything about her, and she began to stop talking in mid-sentence and stare out a window, her eyes moist from lost dreams and her body rigid with longing for an omen of hope. The silences were so intense he was, in the beginning, afraid to intrude; but when he sensed her need and finally asked his softly worded questions about what she believed, what she wanted in

life, what her dreams told her, he was captivated by her openness. She was unable to lie about her world or herself, even by omission. One time she stared and he did not look away, their eyes filled only with each other, and he could only recover his composure by thumbing through his appointment calendar for no reason, his heart quickened with joy and dread.

Toward the end, she came as often as every other day. Even though anticipation of her arrival crowded his mind and only the sight of her dampened his longing, he was meticulously professional at every session. He hid his reverence when she was near as best he could and he kept the sessions to exactly thirty minutes, unfailingly mentioning at the end of their time how much progress she had made. Then, without warning, ten minutes into the final session, he was consumed by an urge to compliment her, to tell her how he admired her resilience, how he loved the indescribable blue of her eyes, how he had come to measure the timing of his breathing to the exact intake of her own air. He stood silently to face the window, his back to her.

“Are you sick?” Amy had asked. He terminated the session immediately, making an excuse about an emergency. That afternoon, speaking to the receptionist, he assured that all future treatments for Amy Withers were referred to a colleague.

Amy never spoke to him again. On the few occasions when he would see her in the waiting room, or at the base commissary, she would avoid his gaze. He waved to her once, but she turned away. Soon, she stopped coming to the clinic.

The doctor squirmed on the limousine’s leather seat.

The commander straightened his career service ribbons from habit. The doctor was oddly distracted, as if unaware of the severity of the problem. “Look, Doc. You got to talk to her,” the commander said.

“Storm the place,” the doctor said.

“She’s good with the gun. She could have killed the MP.”

The doctor desperately sought a solution that would avoid contact.

“You talk to her then,” the doctor said.

“I’m through talking to her. She’s nuts.”

“What’s she want?”

“Money! She can fly back on a government plane as a dependent. And she’s on standby. But Withers has cut her off. She wants me to garnish his salary to guarantee her income. Make up back pay. She’s thought about it. I don’t even know if I can garnish a Captain’s salary without legal proceedings.”

“Do what she wants. Withers is a cheating son-of-a-bitch. ”

“I’m working on it. But she says she’s afraid she’ll kill the kid.”

“Her baby?” A baby was news to the doctor and confusion made him avoid the commander’s stare.

The commander frowned. “I can’t afford a wrong guess on what she might or might not do,” he said waving his hand in dismissal. “You got something to knock her out?”

A call came in over the radio and the limousine driver lowered the window separating the front seat from the back. Staff members at headquarters had not found the administrator who could solve garnishment problems , the driver said. Yes, they were

hurrying! The commander reached across the doctor for the door handle and shoved him out of the car. “Commit her!”

“You need a plan,” the doctor said.

“Goddamn it. You keep her calm. I’ll be back in touch.”

From the street, the doctor searched the front of the house for signs of Amy. The sun had set but he could see the front window was open a crack . . . he could not see her or a weapon.

On the narrow path, he tried to stride confidently toward the house, stumbling once on a crack in the concrete obscured by the dark. He reminded himself that the woman he remembered would not shoot him. The front door opened. He paused at the threshold. He saw the standard living room of all base housing--a couch next to the wall with a framed picture of an American flag over it. A small lamp glowed on a side table.

“Hello,” he called as he stepped up on the stoop. Amy was behind the door, out of the line of fire. Could she hear him? Noise from the vehicles arriving in front of the house drowned out the chatter of neighbors who had been evacuated and huddled near a canvas-backed supply truck that provided coffee and pastries, the engine running, the headlights creating long shadows on the street and sidewalks.

“Mrs. Withers?” The doctor entered cautiously. She closed the door behind them.

“My God. Why would they send you?” Amy asked.

“The commander sent me.”

“I don’t need a doctor. Especially you!”

“The commander wants you hospitalized. I was on call .”

She was not insane. Her dark blue eyes still mirrored a rational determination he had always admired.

“I need money to go home.”

“The commander’s working on it.”

“That bastard.”

“We could wait at the hospital,” he said.

“So I won’t kill my child?”

“Does it have milk?”

She slumped onto the two-seater sofa, the gun on the cushion next to her. He stayed near the closed door. She put her head in her hands – her fingers buried in her golden hair – her elbows on her bare knees, the hem of her wrinkled dress carelessly resting at mid-thigh. She did not cry.

“It’s only a baby. But I hate it enough.”

He pulled up a straight-backed wooden government-issue chair.

“We’ve been eating at Mary Wheeler’s house,” Amy said. “My father died in April and mother’s alone on social security. And my husband has cut me off.”

“He has to support you.”

She leaned back, her hands loosely by her sides, her head extended with her chin up slightly. The front of her dress gaped where a button was lost.

“No one likes your husband. But he can’t be so bad that he won’t support his child.”

She exhaled. “It’s not his.”

“Oh, Amy. Does he know?”

“Of course he knows.”

“Did you tell the commander?”

“I didn’t need to tell the commander.”

“If he new, I’m sure he could find some way to get you support.”

“What’s he going to do? He sent you.”

“He’s working on it. He wants me to calm you.”

“He wants to get rid of me.”

The doctor felt sympathy at first, then betrayal. How often he had thought of her since her therapeutic sessions, always in an aura of her dedicated longing for him. He assumed an unstated lifetime of dedication to each other that those silent sessions had implied.

“How could you?” the doctor said.

“Don’t judge me,” Amy retorted, “I was alone on a week-long religious retreat. I needed someone. The commander said he loved me. I was a fool to believe him.”

She sat up straight, both feet on the floor, a space between her back and the sofa so that her hair cascaded behind her when she used both hands to gather it off her shoulders.

“I’m sure the commander will do something,” he said leaning forward, his forearms on his thighs, his eyes fixed on the reflection of the lamp on his black patent leather shoes.

“I’ve tried for weeks. He won’t even see me.”

“Well, he was working on it when I came in.”

“And he wants to commit me!”

The doctor had his hands together, his fingers interlocked. His knuckles had turned white. “I’ll wait with you,” he said.

She leaned back again. The gun slipped from the cushion to the floor discharging a muffled shot into the wall behind the sofa toward the kitchen. She brought it closer to her carelessly with her foot and picked it up. “Don’t even think about trying to make a move. I’m a good shot.”

He had not thought about it. He was not a hero.

“You’re partly to blame,” she said. “Those sessions.”

The shot had unnerved him; his mouth was dry. He looked to the baby on the floor near the window. It dozed, spit dribbling down the side of its face.

“Weren’t they helpful?” he asked hoarsely.

She didn’t speak, turning her gaze to him. He looked away.

“You cared,” she said softly.

“I was glad to help,” he answered.

“No. You wanted me. I needed that.”

He had longed for her over these many months, and he had fought against his need to act, to risk contacting her, to tell her why he terminated that last session.

“I won’t shoot the child,” she said. “I could never do that.”

“You’re not a murderer,” he said.

“I’m afraid for him,” she said. “No love makes the innocent dry up and blow away . . . it’s like murder . . . in a way.”

The baby cried and fell silent again.

“Should we take a look?” he asked.

“He’s all right!” she said. The baby did turn quiet, lying unaware, and with a trace of a contented smile.

“We can work this out safely in the hospital,” he said.

“With me sedated so I won’t know who I am?” she said.

He could see her thoughts on her face. Screw you and your plans to restrain me. You are a repulsive icon for unstated promises never kept, implied expectations never fulfilled. Could you ever seize a moment? No! I hate you for that.

“I’m not leaving until I get support,” she said. The tension in her legs caused her knees to flutter.

She shifted her automatic from one hand to the other. The doctor stayed seated on the chair, his mind a jumble of memories and emotions. He was again obsessed by her presence, aware how alert she made him feel even when she was consumed by anger.

The doctor walked to the window. The silence now in the room, intensified by the sound of the bustle outside, held fear and uncertainty, so different from their therapeutic sessions that had pulsed with longing and potential. The difference hurt.

Amy and the doctor waited in the dim lighting of the living room and didn’t speak for a while. Then the doctor went to the bathroom. Amy changed the baby’s diaper. Then they sat again, he in his chair, she lying on her sofa, her legs up, the automatic on her breasts rising and falling with her breathing.

“It can’t be long now,” he said.

He forced himself into his professional mode. He would not try to disarm her. It would only result in disaster. He hoped to rationalize with her – without threats and violence – for a stay in the hospital to resolve her fears, and to satisfy the commander. “You’re not what you pretend,” he said. “Life has pushed you to the limits.”

She said nothing.

“All those hours we had together. I know who you are, what you suffered. Don’t destroy what you can be.”

Her eyes were closed but she was wide-awake.

“It’s being here in a foreign country,” he said. “No support. No one to turn to.” You held on more than most of us could.” He knew things could only get worse for Amy, but he tried to remain upbeat.

The baby whimpered again but only for a few seconds. The doctor’s stomach growled and he could feel the beat of his heart.

“I loved you,” he said. He looked away, surprised at the sound of his own words. He wanted to bring her to the pain of his reality.

She sat straight up with her feet on the floor, the gun resting in the valley made by her dress between her legs.

“You never loved me,” she said. “You teased me. You sucked me into fantasies I could never have imagined on my own!” she said.

“No!” he said. “I cared.”

“Your wife fills you with hate.”

“I was always thinking of you.”

“Everyone knows you hate her. You have a void, doctor, a deep void; and I was someone that made you know you were still alive. That is not love!”

“I’m a professional, Amy. I was helping.”

“Those long silences. That wasn’t being a doctor. And it wasn’t just to help me!”

He couldn’t look at her.

“Look at me. Tell me how you love me, now. That you’ll take me away. Make everything all right.”

He had loved her. “I’ll take you to the hospital,” he said. “I promise you I will make it all right.”

“Liar. You won’t take me . . . support me.”

“It was love. I didn’t do it to fill a void.”

“Where were you all those months? Even now you’re here because you were on call. If you love me, say it. Say it with meaning!”

He hesitated. “I love you,” he said, but he was afraid of her now, unsure of what she, and he, had become.

“Liar!” she said again.

“What more can I do?” Even to himself, he seemed to be pleading.

“Be honest. You lech.”

He walked to the window. There were even more vehicles now.

“Get out,” she said. “You will never accept me. Married or divorced. Child or childless. It was enough for you to sit there and enjoy the potential. You’re sick.”

“I’ll wait until the commander comes back. I’ll help you negotiate.”

“I’ll always be Amy Withers. Vulnerable patient.”

“You need support. That’s only fair,” he said.

“I’ve waited too long.”

“I’ll help, Amy. Let me help,” he said. He tried to smile and when she didn’t respond he returned to his chair.

“Don’t go out of your way,” she said. And she positioned herself on the sofa so it was obvious she was through talking.

To his staff, the commander said he was tired of dealing with a pilot’s hysterical wife and he couldn’t see placing himself, a Base Commander, in a position of danger, no matter how low-risk the danger might be. In truth he could not face Amy’s career-smashing truths and accusing glare. He sent his adjutant, a tall, deep-spoken man whom he found industrious, if not overly intelligent. The adjutant calmly knocked on the door.

Amy jumped up from the couch and opened the door cautiously, making sure the commander was alone. It was not the commander, but she let the adjutant in, closing the door and backing away. The adjutant did not salute when the doctor stood. Amy waved with her pistol when the adjutant tried to move; he stopped. The three of them stood in a lopsided triangle facing each other.

“Where’s the commander?” Amy asked.

“I’m fully empowered to deal.”

“You’ve brought the papers? Cash?”

“Yes. I’ve brought papers for application for an exclusive account at the American bank on base. Money can easily be transferred to the States. You sign and I’ll take the papers by tomorrow to establish your account for deposit.”

“What money?”

“Part of your husband’s salary.”

“Half of my husband’s salary! Guaranteed. Notarized.”

“I don’t know what percentage they’re working on, but fifty per cent sounds reasonable. I’ll pass it on.”

“And cash to make up for the last six months deposited. I’ve been cheated.”

“The judge advocate is working on a settlement. Your husband has been contacted in Beirut and will be back the day after tomorrow.”

“He’ll never agree.”

“The commander will convince him.”

“And no money now?”

“You can live in the hospital. No charge. Maybe the commander can establish a line of credit at the commissary.”

The doctor moved closer to the two. “Be straight with her, lieutenant. Don’t bullshit.”

“Hey. It’s only until the legal stuff is worked out. You know the system, Doc. Christ, it’s a nightmare.”

“She wants what is rightfully hers,” the doctor said.

“I know her pain,” said the adjutant to the doctor.

“No you don’t!” Amy said. “You don’t know what it is to be abandoned.”

“We all know Withers is not the perfect husband,” the adjutant said.

Amy moaned.

“This woman has been wronged, Lieutenant.”

“We’ve gone the limit on this one, doc. A lot farther than I think we should have, to tell the truth,” the adjutant said.

“You’ve done nothing,” Amy said.

The adjutant shook his head. She picked up the baby in the afghan, the automatic still in her hand. The adjutant moved toward her. She waved the gun at him. “Stay back.” The child cried.

Amy shoved the baby toward him. He made no move to take it.

“You take care of him. You love him. Raise him to be a confident, resourceful human being.” She pushed back the afghan from the baby’s face so the adjutant could see.

The child certainly didn’t look like Withers. He paused looking puzzled.

“Let her go,” the doctor said. “Take the baby.”

“I plan to,” said the adjutant. He reached out with his right palm and pushed the baby and Amy back, and turned to the door to call for help.

The shot rang out as he gripped the doorknob, before he opened the door.

“Oh, God. Dear God,” Amy cried.

The Doctor reached out, leaning toward her. The barrel of the gun, discolored now with the infant’s gushing blood, waved without purpose at odd angles as Amy struggled to remove her son from the bloody afghan.

“Oh, God,” she cried. “He was so innocent.”

“You’ve killed him,” the adjutant said.

“I didn’t kill him,” she screamed. “The gun went off.” She slumped to the floor on her knees laying the little corpse on the couch, still trying to get the child’s legs free

from the tangled afghan. The gun barrel jerked toward the doctor and discharged again. A sharp pain pierced the doctor, and his legs gave way. He crumpled to the floor, watching her gaze shift from terror to the wild calmness of despair, then she put the gun to her temple and squeezed the trigger. As she fell forward facedown, her arm draped across the doctor's chest. She took only a few more breaths; he reached out, the flat of his hand on her ribs, and he felt the last beat of her heart. Unable to move his legs, he waited for the adjutant to uncover his eyes. "Get an ambulance," the doctor said.

The doctor allowed his wife to see him in his hospital room three days later. He'd been operated and been assured his injuries were not life threatening. But he had needed time to think before talking to her.

She stood by the bedside and took his hand in hers without lifting it off the sheet.

"You're letting your hair grow again," he said. It had some length and had been teased to the stiffness of synthetic carpet.

"My friends don't like it. But I'm glad you noticed."

They suffered a silence without looking at each other.

"It must have been terrible," she said, "Your patient! Everyone says she was crazy from the day she arrived."

He couldn't speak of Amy. She wasn't crazy, even at the end.

"What did you think of her?" she asked.

"She had a lousy marriage. No one would help," he finally managed.

"You liked her?"

He weighed versions of the truth. "I did."

She let go of his hand without moving. “Did you love her?”

He hesitated. “No,” he said avoiding her stare.

“There’s a rumor she saw you almost every day for weeks at a time.”

“She was sick,” he said. “She needed help.”

“I really don’t care if you were screwing her. But I do care if people think you were.”

“I wasn’t screwing her. It wasn’t like that. She was my patient.”

His wife rubbed her eye with her knuckle to wipe out some speck of irritation.

She sat on the edge of the bed. “Does it hurt? My sitting here?”

“No. I’ll never have feeling again. Or movement.”

“The doctor told me,” she said.

“I’ll be in a wheelchair forever. At least with full disability. I was in the line of duty.”

“I’ve made arrangements. We can go to Mother’s house. I can have a special room for you on the first floor with wheelchair access.”

“We can live close to normal,” he said. “I may still be able to have a limited practice.”

“You’ll do no such thing. You’re my disabled husband. We’ll do for you. I’ve ordered bookshelves for your room. A radio/television/stereo combination. And I’ll be going back to work. I’ve already been accepted for a legal-secretary job at a firm I knew well before we were married. With the government check, we’ll get along just fine.”

She was almost exuberant, eager to get on to a new life. She seemed released from some oppressive, crushing restraint.

“All that in just three days?” he asked.

“To tell the truth, I’d been thinking about it for a while. Going back to work. You’re being hurt like this just moved it up a year.”

“I’m almost surely impotent,” he said. “Can you stand an invalid husband?”

“Nonsense talk,” she said, moving off the bed. She bent and hugged him, and then kissed him on the forehead.

“I’ll be back tomorrow. I’ve arranged for early return for both of us on med-evac. The movers will pack at the end of the week. I’ve sold the car for more than it’s worth.”

She shut the door. He was glad she was gone. When he closed his eyes, Amy Withers was on her couch with her hair pulled back, her blue eyes deep as tiny oceans. He couldn’t erase this memory, especially detailed in silent times, and his chest tightened with a dull pain unrelated to his injuries.

His wife returned with a shiny chrome urinal she hung on the side bedrail.

“The nurse asked me,” she said. She blew him a kiss as she left. He had never seen her blow kisses – to him, or any man.

From his bed, looking out the small hospital-room window, he could see only treetops and the French clouds that obscured the blue sky.