

LETTERS TO AYLA

grateful for the close friendships that burgeoned.

I'm blessed with you! Gigi.

Gimme Shelter

Hi Pussycat—

Before we were married, Papa bought an eleven-year-old black Plymouth—a four-door job that looked like one of the cars in a silent movie. We loved that car. We called her Leapin' Lena. We were lucky to have Lena. During the war, most corporations that had formerly built automobiles were busy manufacturing tanks, jeeps, or airplanes.

Lena had many idiosyncrasies—among them a gas tank that leaked. Papa easily took care of that problem. He kept a large bar of Ivory Soap in the car. When Lena started to leak (we should have called her Leakin' Lena) Papa turned off the ignition and rubbed a heavy layer of soap over the leak. Voila! No problem—at least for a few miles.

Lena got us where we had to go. During the first three months of our marriage, we were often on the move. Papa and his fellow troops were given twenty-four hours notice that they would be leaving their present post for another base. We moved north up the East Coast. There was excitement in this harried traveling. But it was also sobering; we understood that the new location could likely be a point of deployment for the men. Both the European and Pacific Theaters of War were constantly in need of replacement troops. Many men were killed; many others were severely wounded. Because Papa's company was stationed

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on the East Coast, we all assumed that they would be leaving for Europe. Outwardly we tried to be calm. We didn't discuss deployment; we moved on as ordered. It was especially difficult for the men who traveled with families. A few weeks after our wedding, the company was ordered to report to Camp Davis in Wilmington, North Carolina.

I was encumbered with an item I refused to give up—my ironing board. There was good reason for my insistence. Officers were responsible for their uniforms. Papa wore wool dress uniforms which had to be dry-cleaned. His duty uniforms were cut from heavy cotton khaki. For the sake of economy I washed those by hand. There were no laundromats; I scrubbed the khakis in a sink on a scrub board, using a heavy bar of laundry soap. Rinsing heavy wet shirts and pants would have been comical were it not so disastrous. It took a long time for them to dry. Then came the problem of ironing. Stringent rules applied. On the back of each shirt there were to be three sharp creases, equidistant from one another by the exact inches prescribed in the army manual. The creases on the front of the pants had to be dead center. Lucky for us, Lena had four doors. So when en route to the next post, we angled the ironing board across the back seat and through one of the rear windows.

In 1944, it was a two-day drive from Florida to North Carolina. Savannah, Georgia seemed a good midway stopover. We reached Savannah late in the afternoon. Papa stopped and asked for directions to a convenient hotel. We were directed to the DeSoto Hotel. In short order, Lena—with my ironing board hanging out the back window—circled the impressive driveway that led to a magnificent lobby. A liveried doorman met us.

My hair hung to the middle of my back. I wore saddle shoes and bobby socks. I looked about sixteen. Papa was twenty-one, in uniform of course. A service man in war time wore nothing else, not even when on leave. Amazed as the doorman might have been, this major-domo nonetheless smiled and greeted us

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politely. Papa explained that we wanted a room for the night. His Majesty asked to see our wedding license. I had tucked it into a small suitcase that was close at hand. He read and reread it before he determined that it was legal. We were granted admittance to the grand hotel.

Lena was turned over to a parking valet. We were ushered into the lobby like a duke with his duchess and led to one of the most exquisite rooms I'd ever seen. From a bank of windows, we could see and hear waterfalls that dropped from a high wall into a magnificent pool. There were flowers everywhere. We were agape.

The next morning after a breakfast befitting such opulence, we steered Lena northward to Camp Davis. We made several stops along the way to tend to her gas tank. It was June; air conditioning was a fantasy. So were portable bottles of water. We were very thirsty and in the middle of quiet farm country. In the distance, we saw a cluster of small buildings, which proved to be a barn, silo, and farmhouse. Despite the fact that in many parts of the South servicemen were reviled, we stopped and knocked on the porch screen door. A smiling old man greeted us. We asked if we might buy some water.

"Whatcha mean buy? C'mon over to the pump."

He handed each of us a large tin cup and pumped them brimful with the coldest, clearest, freshest water that we had only dreamed of finding. We drank several cups. We thanked him profusely and started back to the car.

"Hold on a minute."

He shuffled to a nearby shed and came out with a large jug which he filled, capped, and handed to us.

"One for the road!" he laughed.

Obviously he didn't hate US Army men or their women.

Later, driving along another country road, we were startled when a little girl dashed out in front of us. Papa stopped the car; he got out and walked toward the child who was standing

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in the middle of the road, sucking her thumb and staring at us. Papa knelt in front of her. He was angry but spoke softly. She screamed. From out the front door appeared a harridan. Papa explained what had happened. She said nothing—simply glared at him, then at me. As we drove away, we saw her shaking her fist at us. Neither of us spoke for many miles.

Camp Davis had no housing available to married soldiers. Where were we going to live? It was summer; the beach was jam-packed. The beach area in Wilmington had tight rows of weather-beaten cottages. We settled for a subterranean hole of a room for the night. When the tide came in, we seemed dangerously close to drifting into the Atlantic Ocean. Our good friends, Bob and Gina Lenihan, drove in soon after we arrived. They were fortunate enough to get the “suite” next to ours. It was shelter—of a sort.

The next morning as we waited for Bob and Papa to return from duty, Gina said, “Let’s go for a swim.”

The ocean was inviting, a relief from the dense humid air. We walked into that heavenly water where we stayed bobbing and floating until we decided it was time for lunch. After we showered (I shall not describe that facility), we hung our suits on a clothesline nearby. We walked to a hotdog stand on the beach. When we went to retrieve our bathing suits, we found Gina’s but not mine!

Within a few days, Bob and Papa found another shelter. We left gross behind and entered grandeur.

I'm hugging you. Gigi.