

9- Away To War

We were back in New York a week after we married. John, as I said, had asked Mother to come with us. Although he did not particularly care for her, he did like her wacky sense of humor. John liked people who had a sense of humor and could laugh. There was no reason for Mother to be home, as by this time my stepfather was in the Army. And, unknown to me, John too, was thinking of becoming involved in the war in some way. One of the reasons for Mother's presence was because she would soften the blow when he told me he was going off to war.

It was satisfying to be back in our apartment on East 51st Street, in wonderful New York. I think New York is like an action capital of the world. Oddly enough, we did not receive too many wedding gifts, and what we had seemed mostly for me. But we were off and running, attending one party after another in our honor in the weeks that followed. Life was one big party. Sometimes, if things didn't go John's way, he would become slightly sadistic. He loved his women to be very beautiful and to be dressed up. One night, we were going out and it was snowing, and Mother and I wore furs, beautiful dresses and velvet slippers.

"Will you call a cab, please John?" Mother politely asked.

"No! We're going to walk."

Why he said that I don't know, and so we walked, in the snow to the Chombard, one of New York's most exclusive restaurants. We arrived sopping wet. Mother and I looked like drowned rats while John had a big grin on his face. He had a way of downing other people, and he enjoyed seeing us in that state. I shall never know why he liked to sometimes act in the manner of downing a person. But then, he was a creative giant and a very complex person, behind his greatness.

Mother stayed with us for two weeks, and then went back to Los Angeles. I settled down to everyday life as Mrs John Steinbeck. John liked antiques, and gradually we began to acquire some very nice things.

Many New York duplexes are really old brownstone houses remodelled, and ours was one of them. John liked to putter about in the garden and, as spring came along he bought six perfectly huge pots, planted tomato plants in them, and decided he would begin his own victory garden. He hung the pots on the fences, and when he took a break from his writing, he sometimes would take a paint brush and try to fertilise the blossoms "a la bee". He was unsuccessful, and we had no tomatoes. I believe the plants came up, took one look at the filth in New York City, and went right back into the ground.

One very nice happening came from those early days of our marriage. John was out walking Willie when he met George Frazier, and then George's wife, Mimi. They, too, had a sheepdog. John brought them home for dinner, and we became great friends.

In those early days, John kept talking about the war. "I've got to get into it. I've got to do something," he kept saying. "I have got to be part of my time!" He was his old restless self again, in the same restless category as Hemingway. He hated it when nothing was happening, and, although he loved to putter in the garden, he knew life was not exactly thrilling him trying to grow tomatoes! Finally, John made an appointment with Mrs. Ogden Reid at the Herald Tribune. She was the wife of Ogden Reid, the owner, and had a great deal to do with the running of that then great newspaper. "I'd like to be a war correspondent," he told her. She thought it was a great idea. John told her he could do a better job than John Gunther, the war correspondent. He said he could give a different point of view on the war than the usual. But

there was one slight problem - he did not have a passport. It had been taken away from him after he and Carol had returned from visiting Russia in the thirties, and after he had given iodine to Spain. Apparently, the lady who signed the passports in those days "hated my guts," he told me. "She didn't like *The Grapes of Wrath*, and thinks I'm a Communist." For my money, I thought he had no hope of getting a passport, but I should have known better.

John felt the war was going to last a long time and he wanted to be in the European theater. Why? Before we were married, Harold Guinzberg, the president of Viking Press, went to England, and when he returned he managed to get John involved with the O.W.I., the Overseas War Institute. From that, John got his brainstorm that he wanted to be a war correspondent.

The O.W.I. was like the Red Cross then, everyone sat around and talked about the "good war" but nobody did anything. I have to give John credit; he was the kind of man who said, "Hell, if we've got a bucket of crap, let's shovel it out, not just stare at it!"

Well, he did not tell Mrs. Reid he had no passport. He said he "overlooked" it. The Reids invited us to dinner. She was a marvellous woman, vastly intelligent, very beautiful, but, above all, one hell of a businesswoman. Over dinner we discussed John covering the war in Europe for the Tribune. It was all agreed, and then John dropped his bomb. "Well, you'll have to help me get a passport. I don't have one anymore, ", he said in a quiet tone.

After that initial shock wore off, Mrs. Reid broke the silence. "I'll take care of that," she said. We returned to our meal.

Back in our apartment, John said, "Honey, I hope you don't mind." He always called me "Honey" whenever he figured he might be in the wrong or he was going to blast out with something that might or would terrify me.

"No, of course not, but do you really have to go?"

"Yes I do, it's something in me. I must get into this war somehow."

I did not say anything. I did not particularly care for him going to war. We had only just been married, legally, that is. But I knew full well that once John made up his mind, only an act of God would stop him.

The following days he went to lunch with his agent or a friend, so he told me. What he really was doing was working on his passport and with the Tribune to get overseas. John always was a very secretive man, another part of his nature. And then one day he came home and said, in his usual soft-toned voice, "I think it's going to work out, darling." He was somewhat vague. "What is, darling?" I asked.

"Mrs. Reid will be able to work something for me." He did not say what. Shortly afterward, when he was out on one of his afternoon meetings, he called me.

"What do we have for dinner?"

"Baked beans, Boston style."

"Good, I'm bringing a guest," he said, but did not say who.

John adored Boston baked beans, especially the way my mother made them, which is the way I made them. That's where they boil for one whole day and you bake them for two days. John had no trouble eating a quart of them. That night, he brought home a charming man, Sam Spewack, the playwright, and we had a Boston baked bean dinner. John said nothing about going to war. The next morning he arose early and left. Again he did not tell me where he was going. By seven he was in downtown New York. At eleven he called and asked me to dig out

his birth certificate. I still did not know what was happening. Three o'clock that afternoon he and Sam Spewack came home. He was in a great mood.

"I've made it! I've had my physical. Let's have a celebration," he said with pride.

He poured several large Scotches, Cutty Sark, which was hard to get in those days. We drank them, on the rocks, and they sat around making small talk about how terrible army nurses were. John and Sam compared their physicals. Suddenly, John grew quite pale and went to the bathroom. The next thing was what sounded like a series of machine gun shots, then another series, then the toilet flushing. John had thrown up the beans! Sam and I tore up the stairs and found him out cold on the bathroom floor. We got him onto the bed and undressed him. His right arm was badly swollen, and his upper arm was as big as his thigh! He was allergic to tetanus.

It took two days for him to get over that reaction. He was in a kind of semi-coma and a great deal of pain. I kept his arm in ice packs, and he could not hold down any food. By the fourth day, he had recovered. It was daylight, and I heard him moving about. He was packing. "I'm leaving," he said, just like that, completely out of the blue. He had, secretly, bought a Navy flyer's bag and hidden it in a closet. He was packing bare necessities. I was in that usual wakeup daze, but I asked if he wanted any coffee.

"I don't have time," he said.

I jumped out of bed and put on a robe. He finished packing and went downstairs. He said nothing. I did not know what was happening. Then he said "I'm on my way. I must be part of my time. You'll hear from me." That was that. No explanation, no kisses, no nothing. He opened the front door and left. I went into a state of shock, and started to cry and beat the door with my fists. All day long I walked about in a daze. I called his agents and they said "Isn't that wonderful." Wonderful for him, but hell for me. Still, I should have known being married to John Steinbeck was going to be a daily adventure. And, despite what some of his friends thought, I wanted his happiness as much as I wished mine.

Anyway, at two the next morning the telephone rang. Marie Arnstein, my neighbour and friend, told me she saw John while she was working at the Red Cross. "He told me to tell you goodbye, and you'll hear from him as soon as possible," she said. What could I do? Simply nothing. There I was a bride of a few weeks and my husband had packed and left to go to war - without so much as any explanation as to where he was going, and not even a goodbye kiss!! Just like that. But that was John Steinbeck, creative genius, very secretive, often impetuous and impenetrable.

I did not hear from John for six weeks. I knew what was happening because I read the Tribune. The newspaper called me and said he had landed in London, but I still had no idea where he was! Then, six weeks later, and after reading his copy from London, I received a letter. How nice of him! He told me how much he missed me and how sorry he was he had left me the way he did. Letters were frequent after that. Naturally, I was relieved that he was still alive and still loved me. I loved him.

"I love you very much....I miss you so much..." he told me. In one letter, he told me that he had seen a fortune teller and she said we would have four children. In each letter, he expressed his love for me with great nostalgia. At first, I admit I was not only shocked but I was scared every minute that he might get killed.

John went to France, then Africa, Salerno, through Italy, and I lived on in New York, always anxious for the mail, just like so many women whose men were at the front. In one letter, he told me funny stories about capturing a German. In another, he told me he had been on a ship with Douglas Fairbanks, Jr... "I always thought he was such an aesthetic snob, but I have discovered he's quite a nice guy," he wrote me. In fact, he often partied with Fairbanks, then a ranking officer in the British navy, and with other reporters like Quentin Reynolds.

John always sent me presents, usually via his personal mail and delivery service – men of the Armed Forces. My doorbell would ring and perhaps a Naval Commander would be there with a golf bag. And at the bottom of the bag would be some package or other, perhaps an antique bottle, a scarf, pieces of silver, some kind of gadget. Another time, in one of his letters, John said we must get Willie a wife. He had been in England and had seen some beautiful sheepdogs. I must say that John's letters were highly connubial. He wanted everyone to have a wife, for everyone to be mated.

That long, lonely summer of 1943 Mims Frazier and I went to Connecticut and bought a sheepdog, a high quality one, and duly introduced her to Willie. Willie hated her, and we had to get rid of a very expensive dog.

The months rolled on, and John's letters reflected that he was now bored with the war and thought it was "stupid." It annoyed him, he wrote. Meantime, he sent me Ernie Pyle, the legendary correspondent loved by the fighting men. Ernie arrived in the middle of summer....in his winter uniform! And New York in the summer is one blisteringly hot city. Ernie was always physically cold. He had on his long underwear, too, but sat shivering in the apartment drinking straight Scotch.

It didn't take Ernie and me long to become friends for he was such an easy man to get along with; he was a real human being. His presence turned the dullness of summer into a time of continuous interest. President Roosevelt had asked Ernie to go to Washington and receive an award, and Ernie was terrified. He was a quiet, humble and shy man, and he did not know quite what to do about that kind of honor. He asked me to go with him, and I did. We went by train, and I tried to get Ernie to dress up for the event. He would not. He refused to take off his dog-toed shoes, and I think he met the President in one of those old Army winter uniforms. Ernie later told me he had trembled through the whole presentation and was embarrassed about it. After the White House ceremony, Ernie and I went back to New York and spent many wonderful evenings with his friends, talking about John, the war, the hope for peace, and I became a hostess for Ernie's gatherings which were never dull. Of course, I could never hear enough about John from Ernie.

John arrived back in New York in mid-October 1943. He had written to me that he wanted to be home for Christmas. He had been in England working on an army propaganda film with his pal Burgess Meredith, who wanted him to stay. So did the Herald Tribune, because his columns were so prolific and popular. I had no warning about John's return. He hated greeting people as much as he hated goodbyes. I shall never know why he did not tell me when he was coming back, but he was always one for surprises.

He flew back to New York from England with his friend little Charlie Lytle. His luggage was lots of boxes and packages, but, most of all, he had with him six quarts of Gordon's English Gin, and two quarts of Fernet-Branca.

I was at home, alone, when the doorbell rang. He had a key of his own, naturally, but this time he was loaded down with packages, his kit, portfolio, attache case, and the briefcase with the liquor. It was early that October morning, and quite chilly when I opened the door and saw

him standing there. I almost died. He wasn't exactly sober, but he looked understandably tired, very tired; in fact, he was quite weak. But he had had a fine time drinking on the plane. I flung myself into his arms and started to cry. He gave me a big kiss and a hug and said, simply, "I want a hot bath and ice, lots of ice." And came in.

I was so excited I did not know what I was doing. I threw on a coat and ran to the corner delicatessen and bought ice. We sat and drank and talked - for forty eight hours solid. Amazingly, neither of us became drunk. Happy, yes. "The war won't last much longer, but if it goes on another eight months that means it will go on for another two years," he said in between Scotch and gin. As history proved, it did last another two years, until 1945. Finally, after this forty eight hour talk marathon, we went to bed. It was beautiful. He was alive. And how!

It took him, naturally, a few days to unwind, and then we began to see everybody. It was back to the parties, parties all the time. John Steinbeck had come back to New York.

All John wanted to eat was raw onion sandwiches and drink...milk! He ate dozens of raw onion sandwiches, and drank quarts of milk. And a few Scotches in between. I did not care what he ate or drank. He was home, alive - and mine, all mine.

Two weeks after he came home a delayed reaction set in, and he did not feel well. He became depressed, and he kept turning his head and rubbing his neck. I asked him what was wrong, but he did not know. John wasn't the kind of man who would willingly discuss his health. I managed to drag a story out of him, and that in itself I knew was quite an accomplishment as he never, ever particularly cared to talk about himself.

He tried to make light of the story. "I was in Salerno, and going behind a guy in a minefield. I don't think I made a very good soldier because the guy told me he had a minesweeper, and once he turned and said, 'Mr Steinbeck, I think you'll cut a more military figure if you put your helmet on right.' I had it on backwards.

"Then those babies started coming. Boom! Boom! Everybody dove into a foxhole. I went for one, and as I landed got hit on the back of the head with an oil can. It sure stunned me. Ever since then my head and neck have bothered me."

"You better see a doctor."

John was terrified of doctors. I don't think he ever believed in them, but he went, after a struggle. An X-ray of his neck showed that he had an arthritic spur and a cracked bone at the base of the neck. John went through big shots of vitamins. He was down, really down, very depleted, and said he felt "very old." He was still a young man - forty-one. The doctors told him that he was exhausted and needed a little male testosterone. They started to shoot him full of male hormones. He did feel better after that treatment, and then he went to an osteopath for his neck. Again, his old restlessness came alive, and he was getting excited because Christmas was coming. John was a big sentimentalist about Christmas, and that attitude probably went back to his childhood. He loved Christmas for it meant parties, and John did love parties.

That first Christmas as Mrs John Steinbeck was a sensational one, day and especially the nights. We were both quite passionate. During this wonderful holiday season, and Christmas and the New Year is always wonderful, really somehow special in New York with excitement, and snow, we went to one celebration that was out of this world. Mildred Bailey and her husband, Red Norvo, the great musician, threw a party. What a blast! I shall never forget it, nor, I imagine, did anyone who was there. Everybody in show business was there. In the crowd were Humphrey Bogart, Virginia Mayo, Burl Ives, the Robert Ruarks, George and Mimi

Frazier, the great pantomimist Jimmy Savo, and all of Red Novo's band. Hazel Scott was there, too. She later married Adam Clayton Powell. Perhaps I may have been ahead of the times in those days: we did not care about color, just friendships and talent.

It was a huge party, and every singer, ever entertainer, great jazz musicians, everyone performed. Mildred had invited a whole group from Harlem, including that great negro key man, Eddie Haywood. Mildred was working at Café Society then, so naturally she got up and sang. That evening was the first time, too, that I met Robert Capa, who was John's partner when they did *A Russian Journal*. John adored those kinds of parties. If you loved life, music, good friends, who wouldn't?

In our home, of course, we had a traditional Christmas tree, and John was like a child with it, prancing about, decorating it with tinsel and bells and lights. We put a red stocking cap and ribbon on dear Willie. Secretly, we had bought each other presents, and John had bought me several gifts from England and had them stored away for Christmas, including some beautiful Georgian silver.

For three days I cooked for our Open House, and all kinds of people came Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. John Mealy, of Life magazine, took photographs, and we just had a great big party with everyone getting royally toodled. The partying went on for hours, and when it ended John and I and Willie took a long walk in the snow. They were such precious moments in my life.

It was such a wonderful Christmas. Life then was a heaven, a world of two people very much in love and so very happy.

And I was pregnant with our first son, Thom.

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