Notes during a time of Civil War

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Approx. 2,600 Words

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Dear Mr. Rayson:

Greetings from Purgatory. Thank you for your letter dated 1/14/01. Enclosed is a copy of *Notes During A Time of Civil War* for you and Karen Hoffmen to read. As I mentioned in my previous letter, I sat down to write this story for and with Karen in mind. Needless-to-say, she's got first 'dibbs' on it. However, if she's not interested, then I have no qualms with your using it for one of your other projects. If either of you do decide to use it, all I ask is for one or two contributor copies of the issue in which it appears. If both of you decide not to use *Notes*, then I'd appreciate your letting me know ASAP. Ceila Bandon at 7-Realms Publishing has expressed an interest in *Notes* for their *"Women At War"* chapbook series, but I've put her off until I hear back from you & Karen.

If in the future you happen to need some solid S/F for one of your zines, you need but ask and I'll see what I can do. Just send me info on the particulars (i.e. theme, word count, deadlines, etc.) so I may better understand you needs.

Please convey my best regards to Mrs. Hoffmen and let it be known that her work is appreciated and admired. I hope I'm able to read more of her thoughts in the future. But, as I'm sure you well-know, this Hell is an extremely encapsulated society and sometimes finding her work is rather difficult. In fifteen more months, though, this will all come to an end ☺. Thank you for you generous offer of sending me a copy of *Primer Report*; I will certainly cherish it. In case you're not familiar with Fla. DOC regulations on incoming magazines, the only way they'll allow them in is if it comes directly for the publisher – FYI.

My condolences on the passing of your father on January 8th. It's a strange aspect of life that most of us never fully realize how much we truly appreciate a person until that person is no longer with us – then it is too late. Keep his memory alive, Anthony, and he can never fully die.

Once again, thank you for your letter and offer to middle this project between Karen and myself. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Cordially,

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THE WEEK AFTER THE SHELLING STARTED AGAIN, we heard that the United Nations wasn't going to send peacekeeping forces in. They still recognize Washington DC as the only official government in what used to be the United States, and if Washington said this was a police action or an ethnic redistribution or whatever, nobody outside the continent was going to argue with them.

But it sure looked like war from where we were, right on the border of the Occupied Zone. And it happened too fast for any of us to comprehend. One day we heard They had taken Dallas, and the next day They were coming down our street with their light tanks and their ugly-green uniforms. Nobody was prepared. How can you be prepared for a thing like that?

They herded us together, the women who were at home on the block, yelling and hitting us with their rifles if we didn't clear out fast enough. I saw Diane Crenshaw pushed out the front door of her house. Her forehead was bleeding and the boy behind her was yelling something about the penalty for looting. She had tried to get a coat and some food to take with her, I think. Actually I don't know what she was trying to get; a coat and food would have been the best things to have, but we didn't know that then. We were dazed, I suppose; some of us barefoot and in housedresses, some of us crying.

Tom, my husband, was at work. I haven't seen him since. The children, most of them, were at school. We haven't been allowed to see them either. They tell us they are being well taken care of, but who knows?

We heard a shot inside Rachel and Mark's house, and Rachel screaming. She's not screaming now. She doesn't talk at all, matter of fact – Bobby Lee, who was too young to start kindergarten this fall, and so shy that he always had a handful of Rachel's skirt clutched in his fingers. We used to tease her that by the time she got Bobby Lee ready for school, every garment she wore would be hand-painted in Kool-Aid and pizza sauce.

There's red on her skirt now, but I can't see if it's a handprint. It doesn't look like Kool-Aid.

Jim Sanders was home. They killed him in front of Sarah. She keeps forgetting what happened, asking where Jim is; then she starts to cry, wipes her eyes and says, "Thank God Sally's away at UT Denton. Denton's not a strategic location, is it? They wouldn't take Denton?"

I think if they've got Dallas and Austin, what are the odds they didn't take Denton? Best not to say anything, though. Not to flaunt my luck. Emily was home from school with a cold, so I've got her with me. At least I know she's safe.

I hope Tom escaped when They came through the business district. Some of the younger men were talking about going up in the hills, maybe he went with them, maybe he's not lying dead on a downtown street – I heard they were marching the men out and shooting them in groups, tipping the bodies into the middle of Congress Avenue to be cleared away by bulldozers. Not my Tom, though, surely some of them got away in time. Maybe maybe maybe... who am I kidding? At least Emily is too young and I'm too old to interest them, they took away all the pretty young women like Diane Crenshaw somewhere else, you know what for.

We're at the supermarket on Balcones, all of the women they didn't take somewhere else. All of the ones from our block, maybe from three or four streets; I don't know everyone. They told us to get to work, loading can goods and frozen goods onto dollies, wheeling them out onto the trucks. Where is all the food going? Don't ask. One woman said something and the guard hit her across the mouth with his rifle and she fell down bleeding in the frozen food aisle. We had to step around her to continue work. After a few minutes she got up, slowly, and took her place in the line. Emily stays very close to me, very quiet. Thank God, at ten she is old enough to know when to keep her mouth shut. Perhaps if we do exactly what they say and don't make them angry it will be all right.

I keep saying "the guard," as if pretending he was a stranger would make it better. Actually it's Joe Whatisname, the assistant manager. The man who sold me a book of stamps and a TV Guide last week. Funny, I guess I always knew he was one of Them, but I never thought anything of it. We've been living side by side in peace for so long; if I had thought about it, I would have said we didn't have those kinds of problems here; we're all human beings, we know how to get along with one another.

I guess Joe Whatisname didn't feel the same way about it.

All yesterday we loaded cans and cartons of food and They never gave us anything to eat, though They did let us go to the water fountain and the rest room at the back of the store. One at a time, with a guard. Today Emily whispers that she's hungry. We're working in fruits and vegetables today, not so fresh after last night with the refrigeration units turned off and all these bodies huddled on the floor, heating up the room. I slip her the bits and pieces I find: a cabbage leaf, a broccoli floret, and a whole handful of grapes. I keep one of the grapes for myself. It bursts between my teeth, sweet and succulent and moist. A mistake; now I know how hungry I am. I'm dizzy with it.

Soon all the women are following my example. Sarah Sanders is careless – she crunches a half of a carrot where the guard can hear her, can't pretend not to notice. He shouts and draws his gun and aims it at her. For a frozen moment I think she's going to be killed, then Joe comes running over and tells the boy to put his pistol away. It's going to be all right, I think. Joe is telling him that they are civilized, they don't shoot women. Noncombatants. Prisoners. But he goes on. Rules must be obeyed. Lessons must be learned.

Joe is calm, giving his orders: I can't believe what he's saying. The fluorescent lights overhead flash on his gold-rimmed glasses. Two of the boys in their green uniforms force Sarah to the floor, one kneeling on her shoulders, one holding her ankles apart. I hold Emily close, pushing her face into my stomach, trying to cover her ears as Sarah screams in outrage, shock, and then raw pain. Five of Them, five of Them and none of the rest of us did anything to stop it. We're cowards! I hate us. But what could we have done?

The first few nights I thought I would never be able to sleep on the cold floor. I hadn't thought of myself as old, hardly even middle-aged; but in the mornings my bones ache and I feel like an ancient crone crippled with rheumatism. By now, though, we've just about cleared the entire store, and at night I am so tired I can sleep anywhere, in any position, as long as I feel Emily's soft hair under my hand and hear her regular breathing. Emily is safe. They do feed us now, not enough, never enough, and it's usually half-spoiled, but I pick out the best bits for her. my not survive this but she will. She must. One of us has to live for all of us. I lie under the bar

shelves and read the signs until I fall asleep: COFFEE, TEA, SOFT DRINKS, SCHOOL SUPPLIES. We should start a school, there are a few children, all girls, but we're so tired at night.

Now, since last week, they come back into the store every night after we've finished with the rice bucket. They point at one, two, three, five of us, and take the women away. The same women night after night for a while, then one night it's a new group and we never know who or why. Rachel was in the first group. In the morning when she came back she wouldn't meet my eyes. We all know now why they take the women, but we don't talk about it. But I was wrong – we are not too old for them.

I wonder what happened to Diane Crenshaw and the other young women?

They took me tonight. The office building behind the supermarket – they're using that for a barracks, and one floor is just for the women. They locked me into an office alone, took the other women farther down the hall.

Now someone's unlocking the door. Oh, good, it was all a mistake, they never meant to –

I can't look at his face. Oh, it hurts more than I thought it would. I'm dry and scared and his hands are clenched tight on my shoulders and he's battering his way into me. I wish I could faint.

It's getting better now. If I stare at the spots on the ceiling I feel nothing. Not the other women, not my own bruised slack body. Nothing. It's as if they had opened a hole inside me and I'm bleeding away through it. Four so far tonight. Don't count, don't think, just get through the night. The key in the lock. And again. How long until dawn? I feel nothing. I could fly away through the window, all my insides have leaked out and left me as light as air, but I must go back for Emily. They haven't broken me yet. There it is again: the key in the lock. It means nothing. You cannot rape nothing.

My week is over: now they're taking other women. Emily was scared but she stayed by Rachel at night, she says, and she knew I'd be back. She knew I wouldn't leave her. No, I

promise. I will never leave you.

Sarah Sanders was in an earlier crew. It broke her. Poor Sarah, she didn't have an Emily to stay sane for. She claims she is pregnant by Them – at her age!

Last night, in the dark, she pried a jagged strip of metal off the edge of a shelf and tried to abort herself. I think she has punctured something; she bleeds and bleeds. Trying to kill a fetus that could never exist, alone in the dark with the pain. "You should have used it on Them," I tell her. They would have punished her, of course, probably killed her outright, but could it have been worse than dying like this? Green pus is oozing out of her body now, we have nothing to wipe it with, and the fever going higher and higher. At least she is warm, somebody says.

It happened before dawn. They took all our watches, so I will never know what time Sarah Sanders died, but it was before dawn. Four days of the fever and pain, and then she shivered all over and died. Lucky Sarah.

Tonight, when They come in, one of Them points at Emily. No! No, there's some mistake. They can't take her. She is such a little girl. My baby. I scream and They pry my hands loose from her wrist. She's crying that I hurt her, holding so tight. Something slams into my head. Blackness, stars. I stagger toward the door. No, no, I cry, take me, not Emily, she's just a baby. I tear my blouse open, shoving sagging breast at them, grimace in a parody of lust. Take me instead, I'll show you a good time, she doesn't know what to do but I'll do anything you want, I know tricks you never dreamed of....

Emily's eyes wide and dark, staring at me, staring at me, staring through me, the last thing I see, such a darkness, those eyes, such a darkness you could fall into and drown. Of course they don't take me instead. Am I such a fool that I still think this is about lust? It is about destroying. Breaking us.

An old woman slaps me, tells me to shut up and stop wailing, they'll bring her back in the morning.

I crouch in a corner, with her in my mind, every step, the doors, the elevator, the long row of offices, the lonely waiting. Now she is hearing the key in the lock.

Emily...

In the morning she comes back, walking stiffly, a little block of ice to be warmed in my

arms. I hold her and sing baby lullabies, feed her sips of the cold rice gruel, beg her to live, to come back to me. She breathes but does not talk. Her eyes are an accusation: you did not protect me.

They come again in the evening and take her; and this time I do not fight or cry. This time I save my strength for what good it may do. For my daughter, whom I cannot protect.

Emily. Emily. Emily.

Sarah Sanders was not having delusions after all. We are all pregnant, the healthy ones, the sick ones, the ones who thought they'd gone through the change of menopause years ago, the little girls. Even Emily is high and round with – what? Too sick, to malnourished, too old, too young, what can we be carrying but death and hatred? No babies can come out of this.

Emily has not spoken for weeks now.

Rachel has miscarried. It killed her. The thing ripped its way out of her body, the monster, the thing that never was, never could have been a baby. Sharp blades, knives with jagged edges poking out of her stomach. It was a nightmare construct of murder, but a weak little one. Somebody stamped on it, reduced it to a crumpled mass of sharp edges that leaked pink fluid. We hid it in the night bucket, pulled Rachel's skirt back over her poor torn body, told Them she died of a fever like Sarah Sanders. All this with no discussion, no argument. We know that They must not find out, though we don't yet know why.

I can feel it moving in my body. And I know now that it wasn't just the miscarriage that killed Rachel; these things kill in being born. Already the growing blades have cut the taut skin of my belly in places; I wake and find new pink stains on my clothes. It is worth it; one last pain, and then I can sleep knowing that I have given birth to Death. We think they will all be born on the same night; we are all growing at the same rate. Death will be born into the world, and we will die. So will They. We will all die together then.

Except Emily. Last night I watched the sharp edges moving and pressing under her smooth young skin as she slept. Then I put my hand over her mouth and nose and leaned down, hard, while her legs kicked. Until they stopped twitching. It was the last thing I could do for her, the last love in me. After all, I had promised: "I will never leave you."