

The Battle of Long Island

by Nancy Kress

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Over by the mess tent one of my younger nurses is standing close to a Special Forces lieutenant. I watch her face tip up to his, her eyes wide and shining, moonlight on her cheekbones. He reaches out one hand - his fingernails are not quite clean - and touches her brown hair where it falls over her shoulder, and the light on her skin trembles. I know that later tonight they will disappear into her tent, or his. Later this week they will walk around the compound with their arms around each other's waists, sit across from each other at mess, and feed each other choice bits of chow, oblivious to the amused glances of their friends. Later this month - or next month, or the one after that, if this bizarre duty goes on long enough - she will be pale and distraught, crumpling letters in one hand. She will cry in the supply tent. She will tell the other nurses that he fed her lies. She will not hear orders, or will carry them out red-eyed and wrong, endangering other lives and despising her own.

She will be useless to me, and I will transfer her out and start over with another.

Or maybe it won't happen that way. An alternate future: He will snap at his buddies, volunteer for extra duty near the Hole, become careless with some red- or homespun-coated soldier stumbling forward with a musket or bayonet. He'll kill somebody or - less likely - get killed himself. Or maybe he'll just snap at the wrong person - his captain, say. He'll be transferred out. If he kills an Arrival, General Robinson's wife and daughters are members of the D.A.R.

The two people by the mess tent, of course, don't see it this way. They like the same movies, were snubbed by the same people in high school, voted the same way in the last presidential election Both volunteered for duty by the Hole. It follows that they're in love. It follows that they understand each other, can see to the bottoms of each others's souls. The other military couples hey know - the ones who have divorced, or who haven't the affairs on leave; the angry words on the parade ground at dawn - have nothing to do with them. They are different. they are unique.

When people can see the truth so plain around them, why do they persist in believing some other reality?

“Major Peters! You're needed in Recovery! Quick!”

I leave my tent and tear across the compound at dead run. We have only three people in Recovery; one of the weird laws of the Hole seems to be that they seldom come through it if they're going to recover. Musket balls in the belly or heart, shell explosions that have torn off half a head. Eighty-three percent of the Arrivals are dead a few minutes after they fall through the Hole. Another 11 percent live longer but never regain consciousness. That leaves us with 6 percent who eventually talk,

although not to us. After we repair the flesh and boost the immune system, the Army sends heavily armored trucks to move them out of our heavily armored compound to somewhere else. The Pentagon? We aren't told. Somewhere there are three soldiers from Kichline's Riflemen, a fieldgrade officer under Lord Percy, and a shell-shocked corporal in homespun, all talking to the best minds the country thinks it can find.

This time I want to talk first.

The soldier who has finally woken up is a grizzled veteran who came through dressed in breeches, boots, and light coat. It's summer on the other side of the Hole: The Battle of Long Island was fought on August 27, 1776. Unlike most Arrivals, this one staggered through the Hole without his rifle or bayonet, although he had a hunting knife, which was taken away from him. He'd received a head wound, most likely a glancing shell fragment, enough to cause concussion but, according to the brain scan, not permanent damage. When I burst into Recovery, he's sitting up, dazed, looking at the guards at the door holding their M-18s.

"The General and Dr. Bechtel are on their way," I say to the guards, which is approximately true. I sent a soldier walking across the compound to tell them. My phone seems to be malfunctioning. The soldier is walking very slowly.

"General Putnam?" the new Arrival asks. His voice is less dazed than his face: a rough, deep voice with the peculiar twist on almost-British English that still sends a chill through me all these months after the Hole opened.

"Were you with the Connecticut Third Regiment? Let me check your pulse, please, I'm a nurse."

"A nurse!" That seems to finish the daze; he looks at my uniform, then my face. When the Hole first opened, there was wild talk of putting the medical staff in Colonial dress - "to minimize the psychological shock." As if anything could minimize dying hooked to machines you couldn't imagine in a place that didn't exist while being stuck with needles by people unborn for another two centuries. Cooler heads prevailed. I wear fatigues, my short hair limp against my head from a shower, my glasses thick over my eyes.

"Yes, a nurse. This is a hospital. Let me have your wrist, please."

He pulls his hand away. I grab his wrist and hold it firmly. Two Arrivals have attacked triage personnel and one attacked a Recovery guard; this soldier looks strong enough for both. But I served in the minor action in Kuwait and the major ones in Colombia. He lets me hold his wrist. His pulse is rapid but strong.

"What is this place?"

"I told you. A hospital."

He leans forward and clutches my arm with his free hand while I'm reaching

for the medscan equipment. “The battle - who won the battle?”

They’re often like this. They find themselves in an alien, impossible, unimaginable place, surrounded by guards with uniforms and weapons they don’t recognize, and yet their first concern is not their personal fate but the battle they left behind. They ask again and again. They have to know what happened.

We aren’t supposed to tell Arrivals anything not directly medical. No hint that this is more than a few days into their future. That’s official policy. Not until the Military intelligence experts are finished with whatever they do, wherever they do it. Not until the Pentagon has assured itself that the soldier, the Hole itself, is not some terrorist plot (whose, for Christ’s sweet fucking sake?). We’re “not qualified for this situation.” (Who do they imagine is?) Those are my orders.

But he hasn’t asked for very much future: The Battle of Long Island was over in less than 24 hours. And I, of all people, am not capable of denying anyone the truth of his past.

“The Colonists lost. Washington retreated.”

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh” He lets it out like escaping gas. In Bogota, in the ‘95 offensive, lethal gas wiped out 3,000 men in an hour. I don’t look directly at his face.

“You were hit in the head,” I say. “Not badly.”

He puts his hand to his head and fingers the bandage, but his eyes never leave mine. He has a strong, fierce face, with sunken black eyes, a hooked nose, broken teeth, and a beard coming in red, not gray. He could be anywhere from forty to sixty. It’s not a modern face; today the Army would fix the teeth and shave the beard.

“And the General? Put survived the battle?”

“He did.”

“Ahhhhhhhhh And the war? How goes the war?”

I have said far too much already. The soldier sits straight on his bed, his fierce eyes blazing. Behind us I hear the door open and the guards snap into salute. In those Colonial eyes is a need to know that has nothing in it of weakness. It isn’t a plea, or a beseeching. It’s a demand for a right, as we today might demand a search warrant, or a lawyer, or a trial by jury - all things whose existence once depended on what this soldier wants to know. He stares at me and I feel in him an elemental power, as if the need to know is as basic as the need for water, or air.

“How goes the war, Mistress?”

Footsteps hurry toward us.

I can’t look away from the soldier’s eyes. He doesn’t know, can’t know,

what he's asking, or of whom. My mouth forms the words softly, so that only he hears.

"You won. England surrendered in October of 1781."

Something moves behind those black eyes, something so strong I draw back a little. Then they're on us, General Robinson first and behind him chief of medical staff, Colonel Dr. William Bechtel. My father, who has denied me truth for thirty-five years.

I have never stood by the mess tent with a young soldier. If you join the Army at 20, right out of nursing school, and you stay in it for nineteen years, and you never wear a skirt or makeup, there is only one question your fellow soldiers come to ask. I know the answer: I am not homosexual. Neither, as far as I can tell, am I heterosexual. I have never wanted to feel anyone's touch on my hair in the moonlight.

Dr. Bechtel was assigned to duty at the Hole the day it appeared. If I'd known this, I never would have requested a transfer. I was en route to the U.S. European Command in Stuttgart; I would have continued on my way there. I use my dead mother's surname, and I don't think General Robinson knows that Bechtel is my father. Or maybe he does. The Army knows everything; often it just doesn't make connections among the things it knows. But that doesn't matter. I run the best nursing unit under fire in the entire Army. I'd match my nurses with any others, anywhere. I myself have performed operations alongside the doctors, in Bogota, when there were five doctors for three hundred mangled and screaming soldiers. I never see my father outside the OR.

The new Arrival's name is Sergeant Edward Strickland, of the Connecticut Third Regiment. No modems are permitted in the Hole compound, which used to be Prospect Park in Brooklyn, but officers are issued dumb terminals. The Army has allowed us access to its unclassified history databanks. By this time we all know a lot about the Battle of Long Island, which a year ago most of us had never heard of.

Strickland rates two mentions in the d-banks. In a 1776 letter to his wife, General Israel Putnam praised Strickland's "bravery and fearlessness" in defending the Brooklyn Heights entrenchments. A year later, Strickland turns up on the "Killed in Action" list for the fighting around Peekskill. A son, Putnam Strickland, became a member of the Pennsylvania Legislature in 1794.

My father never had a son. The criminal charges against him resulted in a hung jury, and the prosecutor chose not to refile but to refer the case to the Family Court of Orange County. After he was barred by the judge from ever seeing me again, he lived alone.

In the afternoon, a Special Forces team shows up to make a fourth assault on the Hole. During the first two, medical staff had all been bundled into concrete bunkers; maybe the Pentagon was afraid of an explosion from antimatter or negative

tachyons or whatever the current theory is. By the third attempt, when it seemed clear nothing was going to happen anyway, we were allowed to stay within a few yards of the Hole, which is as far as most Arrivals get.

And farther than the assault team gets. The four soldiers in their clumsy suits lumber toward the faint shimmer that is all you can see of the Hole. I pause halfway between OR and Supply, a box of registered painkillers in my hand, and watch. Sun glints off metal helmets. If the team actually gets through, will they be bulletproof on the other side? Will the battle for Brooklyn Heights and the Jamaica Road stop, in sheer astonishment at the monsters bursting in air? If the battle does stop, will the assault team turn around and lumber back, having satisfied the Pentagon that this really is some sort of time hole and not some sort of enemy illusion? (Which enemy?) Or will the team stay to give General Israel Putnam and his aide-de-camp Aaron Burr a strategy for defeating twenty thousand British veterans with five thousand half-trained recruits?

Head nurses are not considered to have a need to know these decisions.

When the assault team reaches the shimmer - I have to squint to see it in the sunlight - they stop. Each of the four suited figures bends forward, straining, but nothing gives. Boxlike items - I assume they're classified weapons - are brought out and aimed at the shimmer. Nothing. After ten minutes, three soldiers lumber back to the command bunker.

The fourth stays. I wouldn't have seen what he did except that I turn around as three British soldiers fall through the Hole from the other side. An infantryman first, blood streaming from his mouth and nose, screaming, screaming. By the time I reach him, he's dead. The other two come through twenty feet east, and as I straighten up from bending over the infantryman, his blood smearing my uniform, I see the Hole guards leap forward. A musket discharges, a sound more like an explosion than like the rat-a-tat-tat of our pieces. I hit the dirt. The guards jump the other two redcoats.

Beside me, just beyond the dead Brit, I see the assault-team lieutenant finish his task. He's undogged the front of his suit, and now he reaches inside and pulls out something that catches the sunlight. I recognize it: Edward Strickland's hunting knife. He lobs it gently toward the Hole. It cuts through the shimmer as easily as into butter and disappears.

"Major! Major!" One of my young nurses runs toward me. For the second time I crawl up from the English soldier's body.

Another musket discharges. A fourth British soldier, an officer, has stumbled through the Hole and fired. The ball hits the young nurse in the chest, and she staggers backward and falls in a spray of blood just as the rat-a-tat-tat of assault rifles barks in the hot air.

We're in OR all afternoon. I think that's the only reason they don't get to me

until evening. My nurse, Lt. Mary Inghram, dies. The British major who killed her dies. One of the other British soldiers dies. The infantryman was already dead. The last Brit, a Captain John Percy Healy of His Majesty's Twenty-Third Foot under the command of Lord William Howe, is conscious. He has arterial bleeding, contusions, and a complex femoral fracture. We put him under. To treat him and to autopsy the other three English soldiers, we have to remove heavy winter uniforms, including watch coats and gloves. The cockade on Healy's tricorne is still wet with snow.

I am just finishing at the dumb terminal when the aide comes for me. I haven't even showered after OR, just removed my scrubs. The terminal screen says JOHN PERCY HEALY, THIRD SON OF VISCOUNT SHERINGHAM, 1747-1809. (1) ARRIVAL IN VIRGINIA WITH TWENTY-THIRD FOOT, 1781, JUST PRIOR TO CORNWALLIS SURRENDER AT YORKTOWN.

"Major Peters? The General wants to see you in his quarters, ma'am."

1781. Five years after the Battle of Long Island.

"Ma'am? He said right away, ma'am."

What battle had Captain Healy been fighting on his side of the Hole?

"Ma'am"

"Yes, soldier." The screen goes blank. After a moment, red letters appear: ACCESS DENIED ALL PERSONNEL UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

General Robinson's quarters are as bleak as the rest of the compound: a foamcast "tent" that is actually a rigid, gray-green dome, furnished with standard-issue cot, desk, locker, and terminal. He's made no effort at interior decoration, but on the desk stand pictures of his wife and three daughters. They're all pretty, smiling, dressed up for somebody's wedding.

Bechtel is there.

As I stand at attention in front of the two men, I have a sudden memory of a doll I owned when I was a child. By the time the doll came to me from some other, forgotten child, its hair was worn to a fragile halo through which you could see the cracked plastic scalp. One eye had fallen back into its head. It wore a stained red dress with a raveling hem where one sleeve should have been. My mother told me much later that whenever I saw the doll around our house, I picked it up and carried it everywhere for a few days, but when I lost it, I didn't hunt for it. When it appeared again at my father's trial, it must have seemed natural to me to once more take hold of its battered, indifferent familiarity. I think now that I didn't understand to what use it was being put; I don't remember what I thought then. I was four years old.

Nor do I remember anything about the actual trial, only what I was told much later. But I know why I remember the doll. I even know why I think of it now, in the General's bunker. After the trial, my mother took the doll away and substituted

another with the same shape, the same dress, the same yellow hair. Only this doll was new and unused, its red satin dress shiny and double-sleeved. I remember staring at it, puzzled, knowing something had changed but not how, nor why. It was the same doll - my mother told me it was the same doll - and yet it was not. I looked at my mother's face, and for the first time in what must have been the whole long mess of the trial, I felt the floor ripple and shake under my feet. My mother's smiling face looked suddenly far away, and blurred, as if she might be somebody else's mother. I remember I started screaming.

The General says, "Major Peters, Sergeant Strickland says you were the first person to talk to him after he gained consciousness. He says you told him the American colonists won the Revolution and that England surrendered in 1781. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir." My shoulders are braced hard. I look directly at the General, and no one else. The General's face is very grave.

"Were you aware of explicit orders that no medical personnel shall supply information concerning these men's future, under any circumstances?"

"Yes, sir. I was."

"Then why did you disobey the order, Major?"

"I have no good reason, sir."

"Then let's hear an ungood one, Major."

He's giving me every chance to explain. I wonder if General Israel Putnam was like this with his men, all of whom followed him with a fanatic devotion, even when his military decisions were wrong. Even when a movement started to have him court-martialed for poor military judgment after the disaster of Long Island. Robinson watches me with grave, observant eyes. I might even have tried to answer him if Bechtel hadn't been there. Bechtel is responsible for the conduct of his entire medical staff, of course, and for a sudden, horrified moment, I wonder if that's really why I disobeyed orders. To get back at my father,

But I can't say all that out loud, not even if Bechtel were still posted halfway around the world.

"No reason at all, sir," I say, and wait for my reprimand, or transfer, or court-martial. I'm not sure how seriously the Army takes this gag order with Arrivals. I've never heard of anybody else disobeying it.

The General shuffles some papers on his desk. "There is a complication, Major." He looks up at me, and now I see something else in his eyes besides fairness. He is furious. "Sergeant Strickland refuses to talk to anyone but you. He says he trusts you and no one else, and unless you're present, he won't cooperate with Military intelligence."

I don't know what to say.

"This is obviously an undesirable situation, Major. And one for which you may eventually be held responsible. In the meantime, however, you're needed to assist in the debriefing of Sergeant Strickland, and so you will report immediately to Colonel Orr and arrange a schedule for that. If that represents a conflict with your other duties, I will arrange to relieve you of those."

Relief fills me like sunlight. No courtmartial. If I cooperate, the whole thing will be overlooked-that's what the offer to keep my nursing duties means. Robinson doesn't want an issue made of this one slip any more than I do. Slaving beyond the perimeter of the highsecurity compound, along with the Brooklyn Zoo, are hundreds of journalists from around the world. The less we have to say to them, and they about us, the better. No duty goes on forever.

"Yes, sir. There will be no conflict of duties. Thank you, sir."

"You logged onto the library system last night."

"Yes, sir." Of course log-ons would be monitored. The Army knows what I discovered about the Brit captain. The Army knows that I know they know. I like that. I joined the service for just these reasons: Actions are measurable, and privacy is suspect.

"What did you learn about Captain Healy?"

I answer immediately. "That he must come from a different past on the other side of the Hole. A past in which events in the Revolution were somehow different from ours."

Robinson nods. The carefully controlled anger fades from his eyes. I have passed some test. "You will say nothing of that speculation to Sergeant Strickland, Major. Anything you tell him will concern only history as it exists for us."

He's asking me to not do something I would never have done anyway. I am the last person to offer Strickland a doubtful past. "Certainly, sir."

"You will answer only such questions as Colonel Orr thinks appropriate."

"Yes, sir."

"There will be no more anomalies in any communication in which you are involved."

"No, sir."

"Fine," Robinson says. He rises. "I'm going for a walk."

Without dismissing me. The General knows, then. He has cross-filed the personnel records. Or Bechtel told him. Bechtel requested this "walk" to leave us

alone for a moment. The skin over my belly crawls - Robinson knows. I stare straight ahead, still at attention.

A long silent moment passes.

Bechtel makes a noise, unclassifiable. His voice is soft as smoke. "Susan - I didn't do it."

I stare straight ahead.

"No matter what the judge decided, I never touched you. Your mother wanted the divorce so bad she was willing to say anything. She did say anything. She -"

"Will that be all, sir?"

This time there is no soft noise. "Susan - she lied, Doesn't that matter to you?"

"She said you lied," I say, and immediately am furious with myself for saying anything at all. I clench my jaw.

My fury must somehow communicate itself to my father. In the stiffness of my already stiff body, in the air itself. He says tiredly, "Dismissed," and I hear in the single word things I don't want to examine. I walk stiff-legged from the tent.

After the trial, I never touched the doll in the red dress again.

My first interview with Sergeant Edward Strickland, Connecticut Third Regiment, First Continental Army, takes place the next morning. He's been moved from Recovery to a secure bunker at the far end of the compound, although he still has an elevated temperature and the remains of dysentery. Even in a standard-issue hospital gown he doesn't look like a man from our time. It's more than just the broken teeth. It's something unbroken in his face. He looks as if ass-covering is as foreign to him as polyester.

"Sergeant Strickland," commands the Military Intelligence expert, Colonel Orr. Unseen recording equipment whirs quietly. "Tell us all your movements for the last few days, starting with General Putnam's fortification of the Brooklyn Heights works."

Strickland has apparently decided he is not enlisted in this Army. He ignores the colonel and says directly to me, "Where am I, Mistress Nurse?"

Orr nods, almost imperceptibly. We've rehearsed this much. I say, "You're in an Army hospital on Long Island."

"What date be today?"

"July 15, 2001."

I can't tell if he believes me or not. The fierce black eyes bore steadily, without blinking. I say, "What work did you do before you joined the Army, Sergeant?"

"I was a smith."

"Where?"

"Pomfret, Connecticut. Mistress . . . if this be the future, how come I to be here?"

"We don't know. Three months ago soldiers from the Battle of Long Island began to stumble into a city park out of thin air. Most of them died. You didn't."

He considers this. His gaze travels around the foamcast bunker, to my glasses, to the M-18 held by the guard. Abruptly, he laughs. I see the moment he refuses the idea of the future without actually rejecting it, like a man who accepts a leaflet on a street corner but puts it in his pocket, unread, sure it has nothing to do with his real life.

He says, "What losses did we suffer at Long Island?"

"A thousand dead, seven hundred taken prisoner," I answer, and he flinches.

"And the enemy?"

"How reported sixty-one dead, twenty-nine missing."

"How did the enemy best us?"

"Surprised you with a flanking march down the Jamaica Road, with a force you couldn't possibly match."

"How did Put retreat?"

"By water, across the river to New York."

It goes on like that, reliving military history 225 years dead. Six months ago, I knew none of it. Orr doesn't interrupt me. Probably he thinks that Strickland is learning to trust us. I know that Strickland is learning to trust his own past, checking the details until he knows they're sound, constructing around himself the solid world that must hold this mutable one.

From the direction of the Hole comes the muffled sound of musket fire.

This time it's a Hessian, one of the mercenary forces serving the British under De Heister in front of the Flatbush pass. He's the first Hessian to come through the Hole. Screaming in German, he fights valiantly as the OR personnel put him under. By the time I see him, swaddled in a hospital gown in Recovery, his face is subdued in the unnatural sleep of anesthesia, and I see that although as big as Strickland, the

Hessian mercenary is no more than 16. By our standards, a child.

Strickland walks in, accompanied by the MI colonel and a very attentive MP. Are they trying to build his trust by giving him the illusion of free movement within the compound? He's the first Arrival who's ambulatory and still here. I think about how easily the Special Forces lieutenant slid Strickland's hunting knife back through the Hole, which not even our tanks had been able to penetrate, and I bet myself that Old Put's Sergeant's free movement has no more latitude than Put himself did on the Jamaica Road.

Strickland gazes at the Hessian. "A boy. To do their fighting for |em." The rough voice is heavy with sarcasm.

"From De Heister's troops," I say, to say something.

"Put always traded |em back."

"It must have been hard for them, to go so far from their homes," the nurse on duty says tentatively. She has a high, fluttery voice. Strickland looks at her with irony, a much more surprising expression on that rough face than sarcasm, and she flushes. He laughs.

The German boy opens his eyes. His blurry gaze falls on Strickland, who again wears his own breeches and shirt and coat, with the strip of red cloth of a field sergeant sewn onto the right shoulder. The Hessian is probably in a lot of pain, but even so, his face brightens.

"Mein Felowebel! Wir haben die schlact gewinnen, ja?"

The Military Intelligence colonel's eyes widen. Strickland's face turns to stone. Orr makes a quick gesture and the next minute both Strickland and I are being firmly escorted out of Recovery. Strickland shakes off the MP's arm and turns angrily to me.

"What did he mean, 'Mein Felowebel'? And, |Wir haben die schlact gewinnen?"

I shake my head. "I don't speak German."

Strickland looks at me a moment longer, trying to see if I'm telling the truth. Evidently he sees from my face that I am. We stare at each other in the sunlight, while I wonder what the hell is happening. Orr emerges from Recovery long enough to snap an order at the MP, who escorts Strickland back to his quarters.

In my own quarters I fish out the German-American dictionary I bought when I thought I was being sent to Stuttgart instead of Brooklyn. It takes a long time to track down spellings in a language I don't speak, especially since I'm guessing at the dialect and at words I've only heard twice. Outside, two passing soldiers improvise a songfest: "There's a Hole in the battle, dear Gen'ral, dear Gen'ral; there's a Hole

in the battle, dear Gen'ral, a Ho-oo-ole." Finally I piece together a translation of the German sentence.

My sergeant! We won the battle, yes?

I try to think about everything that would have had to be different in the world for Frederick 11 of Hesse-Kassel to furnish mercenaries to the Colonial patriots instead of to the British. I can't do it; I don't know enough history. A moment later, I realize how dumb that is: There's a much simpler explanation. De Heister's Hessian could simply have deserted, changing sides in midwar. Loyalties were often confused during the Revolution. Desertion was probably common, even among mercenaries.

Desertion is always common.

My mother was born in 1935, but she didn't graduate from college until 1969. All her life, which ended in a car crash, she kept the conviction of her adopted generation that things are only good before they settle into formula and routine. She marched against the draft, against Dow Chemical, against capitalism, against whaling. She was never for anything. Shoulder to shoulder with a generation that refused to trust anyone over thirty, this thirty-three year old noisily demonstrated her hatred for rules.

All my childhood I never knew if I was supposed to be home for dinner by 6:00, or 6:30, or at all. I never knew if the men she dated would return again, or be showered with contemptuous scorn, or move in. I never knew if the electricity would suddenly be cut off while I was doing my algebra homework, or when we would move again in the middle of the night, leaving the gas bill shredded and the rent unpaid. I never knew anything. My mother told me we were "really" rich, we were dirt poor, we were wanted by the law, we were protected by the law. At 17, I ran away from home and joined the Army, which put me through nursing school.

My mother is buried in Dansville, New York, which I once saw from a Greyhound Bus. It's a small town with orderly nineteenth-century storefronts and bars full of middle-aged men in John Deere caps. These men, who pay their mortgages faithfully, stand beside their bar stools and argue in favor of capital punishment, confiscation of drug dealers' cars, the elimination of Welfare, and the NRA. On summer weekends they throw rocks at the Women's Peace Collective enclave off Route 63. The Dansville cemetery is kept neatly mowed and clipped. I chose the burial plot myself.

Captain John Percy Healy of His Majesty's Twenty-Third Foot is kept under close guard. Strickland couldn't get anywhere near him, even if he knew that Healy and his winter-clad Battle of Long Island existed. Nor can he get near the Hole, although he tries. The summer sun is slanting in long lines over the compound when he breaks away from the MI colonel and the bodyguard MP and me and sets off at a dead run toward the Hole. His head is down, his powerful legs pumping. As each leg

lifts, I see a hole in the sole of his left boot flash and disappear, flash and disappear.

“Halt!” shouts Colonel Orr. The guards at the Hole raise their weapons. The MP, whose fault this escape is, starts to run after Strickland, realizes he can’t possibly catch him, and draws his gun. “Halt, or we’ll fire!”

They do. Strickland goes down, hit in the leg. He drags himself toward the Hole on his elbows, his body thrashing from side to side on the hard ground, a thin line of blood trickling behind. I can’t see his face. The MP reaches him before I do and Strickland fights him fiercely, in silence.

Three more soldiers are on him.

I’ve seen more direct combat nursing than any other nurse I’ve met personally, but in OR I can’t look at Strickland’s eyes. If he had reached the Hole, he could have gone through, and I’m the only person in the room who knows this. Not even Strickland knows it. He only acted as if he did.

Dr. Bechtel sends for me the next morning. He’s the chief of medical staff. I go.

“Susan, I think”

“[Major,’ sir. I would prefer to be called [Major.’ Sir.”

He doesn’t change expression. “Major, I think it would be a good idea if you requested a transfer to another unit.”

I draw a deep breath. “Are you rotating me out, sir?”

“No!” For a second some emotion breaks through - anger? fear? guilt? - and then is gone. “I’m suggesting you voluntarily apply for a transfer. You’re not doing your career any good here, with Strickland, not the way things have turned out. There are too many anomalies. The Army doesn’t like anomalies, Major.”

“The entire Hole is an anomaly. Sir.”

He permits himself a thin smile. “True enough. And the Army doesn’t like it.”

“I don’t want to transfer,”

He looks at me directly. “Why not?”

“I prefer not to, sir,” I say. Is a nonanswer answer an anomaly? I can feel every tendon in my body straining toward the door. And yet there is a horrible fascination, too, in staring at him like this. Somewhere in my mind a four-year-old girl touches a one-eyed doll in a raveled red dress. Here. He touched me here. And here But did he?

The four-year-old doesn’t answer.

“Strickland is asking to see you,” he says wearily. “No - demanding to see you. Somewhere he saw Healy’s uniform. Being carried across the parade ground from the cleaning machine, maybe - I don’t know. He won’t say.”

I picture Healy’s heavy watch coat, his red uniform with the regimental epaulets on both shoulders, his crimson sash.

“Strickland’s smart,” I say slowly, and immediately regret it. I’m participating in the conversation as if it were normal. I don’t want to give him that.

“Yes,” my father says, a shade too eagerly. “He’s figured out that there are multiple realities beyond the Hole. Multiple Battles of Long Island. Maybe even entirely different American Revolutions . . . I don’t know.” He passes a hand through his hair and I’m jolted by an unexpected memory, shimmery and dim: my Daddy at the dinner table, talking and passing a hand through his hair, myself in a highchair with round beads on the tray, beads that spin and slide . . . “The Pentagon moves him out tomorrow.”

“Strickland?”

“Yes, of course, that’s who we’ve been talking about.” He peers at me. I give him nothing, wooden-faced. Abruptly he says, “Susan - ask for a transfer.”

“No, sir,” I say. “Not unless that’s an order.”

We stand at opposite ends of the bunker, and the air shimmers between us.

“Dismissed,” he says quietly. I salute and leave, but as I reach the door, he tries once more. “I recommend that you don’t see Strickland again. No matter what he demands. For the sake of your own career.”

“Recommendation noted, sir,” I say, without inflection.

Outside, the night is hot and still. I have trouble breathing the stifling air. I try to think what could have prompted my father’s sudden concern with my career, but no matter how I look at it, I can’t see any advantage to him in keeping me away from Strickland. Only to myself. The air trembles with heat lightning. Beyond the compound, at the Brooklyn Zoo, an elephant bellows, as if in pain.

The next day the Hole closes.

I’m not there at the time-0715 hours EDT - but one of the guards retells the story in the mess tent. “There was this faint pop, like a kid’s toy gun. Yoder hit the dirt and pissed his pants -”

“I did not! Fuck you!” Yoder yells, and there are some good-natured insults and pointless shoving before anybody can overhear what actually did happen.

“This little pop, and the shimmer kinda disappeared, and that was it. Special Forces showed up and they couldn’t get in -”

“When could they ever?” someone says slyly, a female voice, and there are laughter and nudges.

“And that was it. The Hole went bye-bye,” the guard says, reclaiming group attention.

“So when do we go home?”

“When the Army fucking says you do.”

They move Strickland out the next day. I don't see him. No one reports if he asks for me. Probably not. At some point Strickland decided that his trust in me was misplaced, born of one of those chance moments of emotion that turn out to be less durable than expected. I wasn't able to help him toward the Hole. All I was able to do was tell him military information that may or may not be true for a place and time that he can't ever reach again.

Curiously enough, it is the Brit, Major John Healy, to whom we make a difference.

He is with us a week before they move him, recovering from his injuries. The broken leg sets clean. Military Intelligence, in the form of Colonel Orr, goes in and out of his heavily guarded bunker several times a day. Orr is never there while I'm changing Healy's dressings or monitoring his vitals, but Healy is especially thoughtful after Orr has left. He watches me with a bemused expression, as if he wonders what I'm thinking.

He's nothing like Strickland. Slight, fair, not tall, with regular features and fresh-colored skin. Healy's speech is precise and formal, courteous, yet with a mocking gaiety in it. Even here, which seems to me a kind of miracle. He's fastidious about his dress, and a military orderly actually learns to black boots.

Between debriefings, Healy reads. He requested the books himself, all published before 1776; but maybe that's all he's permitted. Gulliver's Travels. Robinson Crusoe. Poems by somebody called Alexander Pope. I've never been much of a reader, but I saw the MGM movie about Crusoe, and I look up the others. They're all books about men severely displaced. Once Healy, trying to make conversation, tells me that he comes from London, where his family has a house in Tavistock Place, also a “seat” in Somerset.

I refuse to be drawn into conversation with him.

On the day they're going to move him, Bechtel does a complete medical. I assist. Naked, with electrodes attached to his head and vials of blood drawn from his arm, Healy suddenly becomes unstoppably talkative.

“In London, the physicians make use of leeches to accomplish your identical aims.”

Bechtel smiles briefly.

“In my London, that is. Not in yours, There is a London here, I presume, Doctor?”

“Yes,” Bechtel says. “There is.”

“Then there exist two. But there’s rather more, isn’t there? One for the Hessian. One for that Colonial who attempted escape back through the . . . the time corridor. Probably others, is that not so?”

“Probably,” Bechtel says. He studies the EKG printout.

“And in some of these Londons, we put down the Rebellion, and in others, you Colonials succeed in declaring yourself a sovereign nation, and perhaps in still others, the savages destroy you all and the Rebellion never even occurs. Have I understood the situation correctly?”

“Yes,” Bechtel says. He looks at the Brit now, and I am caught by the look as well - by its unexpected compassion.

The vial of blood in my hand seems to pound against my temples.

My mother told me, when I was eight, that my father had caused the war then raging in Vietnam.

I say nothing.

“Then,” Healy continues in his beautiful, precise, foreign voice, “there must exist several versions of this present as well. Some of them must, by simple deduction, be more appealing than this one.” He glances around the drab bunker. Beyond the barred window, an American flag flies over the parade ground. Couldn’t we have spared him the constant sight of his enemy’s flag?

Then I remember that he probably doesn’t even recognize it. The stars-and-stripes wasn’t adopted by the Continental Congress until 1777.

“This compound is not the whole of our present,” Bechtel says, too gently. “The rest is much different.”

Healy waves a hand, smiling. “Oh, quite. I’m convinced you have marvels abounding, including your edition of London. Which, since I cannot return to my own, I hope to one day visit.” The smile wavers slightly, but in a moment he has it back. “Of course, it will not be even the descendent of my own. I must be prepared for that. In this history, you Colonials fought the Battle of Long Island in the summer.”

“Yes,” Bechtel says.

“My own history is apparently quite unrecoverable. Your historical tactician

tells me that no connection appears to exist between this place and whichever of those histories is mine. And so I cannot, of course, know what might have happened in the course of my own war, any more than you can know.” He watches Bechtel closely. All this is said in that same mocking, lighthearted voice. I can hear that voice in London drawing rooms, amid ladies in panniers and high-dressed curls, who know better than to believe a word such an amusing rake ever says.

Bechtel lays down the printout and steps toward Healy’s cot. Instinctively the Brit reaches for the coat of his uniform and pulls it around his shoulders. Bechtel waits until Healy is draped in his remnants of the British Empire. Then Bechtel speaks in a voice both steady and offhand, as if it were calculated to match the careless facade of Healy’s own bravery.

“You must choose the reality you prefer. Look at it this way, Captain. You don’t know for sure who won the war in your time, or who survived it, or what England or the United States became after your November 16, 1776. Your past is closed to you. So you’re free to choose whatever one you wish. You can live as if your choice is your past. And in so doing, make it real.”

I move carefully at my station, feeding Healy’s blood samples into the Hays-Mason analyzer.

Healy says, with that same brittle gaiety, “You are urging me to an act of faith, sir.”

“Yes, if you like,” Bechtel says. He looks at me. “But I would call it an act of choice.”

“Choice that I am not a prisoner de guerre, from a losing army, of a war I may or may not have survived?”

“Yes.”

“I will consider what you say, sir,” Healy says, and turns away. The epaulets on his shoulders tremble, but it may have been the light. From the parade ground beyond the window comes the sound of a jeep with a faulty muffler.

“I’ve finished here,” Bechtel tells the guard, who relays the information over his comlink.

They remove Healy in a wheelchair, although it’s obvious he doesn’t like this. As he’s wheeled past, he catches at my arm. His blue eyes smile, but his fingers dig into my flesh. I don’t allow myself to wince. “Mistress Nurse - are there ladies where I’m going? Shall I have the society of your sex?”

I look at him. Not even a hint of how Lieutenant Mary Inghram died has leaked to the outside press. Her parents were told she died in an explosives accident; I signed the report myself. When the Pentagon takes the Arrivals from our compound, they vanish as completely as if they’d never existed, and not even an

electronic-data trail, the hunting spoor of the twenty-first century, remains. Ladies? The society of my sex? How would I know?

“Yes,” I say to Healy. “You will.”

The tent is empty except for Bechtel and me. I clean and stow the equipment; he scrubs at the sink. His back is to me. Very low, so that I barely hear him over the running water, he says, “Susan”

“All right,” I say. “I choose. You did it.”

I walk out of the bunker. Some soldiers stand outside, at parade rest, listening to their sergeant read the orders for move-out. Guards still ring the place where the Hole used to be. In the sky, above the Low Radar Barrier, a seagull wheels and cries. The elephant is silent. I have never seen my father since.

You might think I should have chosen differently. You might think, given the absence of proof, that like any jury empowered by the Constitution of the United States, I should choose the more innocent reality. Should believe that my father never molested me and that my mother, who is now beyond both proof and innocence, lied. The trial evidence is inconclusive, the character evidence cloudy. If I choose that reality, I gain not only a father, but peace of mind. I free myself from the torments of a past that might not even have happened.

But I would still be this Susan Peters. I would still watch my nurses tremble with love in the moonlight, and I would still see clearly the deceptions and hurt ahead, the almost inevitable anger. I would still recoil if a man brushes against me accidentally away from the hospital, and still pride myself on never wincing at anything within a hospital. I would still know that I chose Army nursing precisely because here dangerous men are at their weakest, and most vulnerable, and in greatest need of what I can safely give them.

I would still know what Strickland learned: The Hole always closes.

One version of the past has shaped all my of choices. If I decide it never happened, what remains? Will I exist? I, Susan Peters, who runs the best combat nursing unit in the entire Army? I, Susan Peters, who have earned both the Commendation Medal and the Distinguished Service Cross? I, Susan Peters, who can operate on a patient myself if the doctors are occupied with other screaming and suffering men? And have?

I, Susan Peters.

Who was sexually abused by her father, ran away from home, joined the Army, became a nurse, served honorably in the Special Medical Unit assigned to the Battle of Long Island, and have never lied to a patient except once.

And maybe it wasn't a lie.

Maybe there will be ladies where they are taking Captain John Percy Healy of His Majesty King George III's Twenty-Third Foot. Maybe Healy will stand with some young woman, somewhere, in the moonlight and touch her face with gentle fingers. It's possible. I certainly don't know differently. And if there are, then it wasn't even a lie.

Author Nancy Kress has won the Hugo and Nebula Awards for her work. Her next novel, *Beggars in Spain*, will be published by AvoNova in April 1993.