

The Angel of Pleiku, Scene Three

Once on Colerain, Arlene hits the gas. Her speedometer needle flutters a few seconds, then shoots past forty. It's a straight shot from here, but the street, bound by snowbanks, remains icy. She's late because Dan left late—of all mornings his Pontiac wouldn't start, and she had to jump the battery. Despite the storm, or any other excuse, she's due for a warning. Trained like dogs, everyone is expected to make the eight o'clock bell.

Ahead at the intersection, the light is red, but for how long? She tests the brakes. "Shit." Gripping the wheel, she releases the pedal, then tries jabbing pumps that result in a series of fishtails. Traffic crosses on Cass, yet she cannot slow the car. "Come on, come on," she yells, punching the brake pedal with both feet. But the light changes and the Dart slides through—sideways. Straightening out before Alber, she manages to stop at the sign. Expelling a sigh, thankful nobody was killed, she glances at her watch—it's five to eight. There's still time—maybe he's waiting, or hasn't arrived yet. Her boot presses forward and the tires spin, protesting with smoke and a high-pitched whine. They finally grab and she jolts forward into the lot. After parking, she kills the engine, flips the mirror down and checks her scarf. Dark, wavy hair spills out from her

forehead, and she suffers a pang of doubt. She's not the most attractive woman in town, but she has feelings, and did everything he asked. She grabs her book bag, pops the door latch and pushes out into the cold.

Rushing down the line of cars, the blue nose of his Galaxie appears, then the windshield. It's deserted. She palms the hood, still warm, then spins toward the school. He's nearly to the entrance, and she begins to run.

The above passage—taken from my novel-in-progress, *The Angel of Pleiku*—obviously concerns more than arriving late for work. Arlene Stephens—wife, teacher and the story's main character—could be any of us. She's fairly unexceptional, at least at this point, and unlike the fantasies so popular today, has no superpowers from which to escape life's troubles. She speeds through the scene, reckless, driven by forces she doesn't understand, and for what? To relive a disaster, hoping to reverse the past? The eight o'clock bell will ring that morning, but for Arlene it heralds the start of an incredible journey—one in which she will confront her darkest demons.

Bringing a character to life places the novelist in a unique position. Although the writer creates the characters and orchestrates their fates, they are reborn in the mind of a reader. Each reader will

transfer his or her own experience, judgement and feelings onto them and the story, making the novel an intriguing form of communication. About five years ago, I gave a lady the first few chapters of my last novel to preview, to see if she wanted a proofreading job. She wrote back stating, although capable of the work, she would decline. The graphic depictions, she said, drew her in too close, triggering memories of abuse. Another reviewer didn't believe any one person (referring to the protagonist) could experience so much misfortune. Well, yes they can, and much worse. Despite my efforts to create empathy, or at least understanding, she was also quite harsh in judging the characters' behavior—a fascinating topic I'll turn to another time.

Arlene interacts with two other main characters—Mark, a young combat vet, and Michael, a Catholic priest. They are on their own journeys, but all three will meet in Binghamton, New York—a small industrial city built at the juncture of two rivers, set among hills near the border with Pennsylvania. The story opens in Wabash, Indiana just before Valentine's Day, 1968—a tumultuous year marking the height of the Vietnam War, the continuing battle over civil rights, the sexual revolution and many other upheavals in American society. Researching and writing about this time has only increased my fascination with it—aided by a strong sense of nostalgia, for it occurs in my childhood. Although Arlene is an adult in 1968, it's a tragic episode from her childhood that sets in

motion the core dramatic issue of the novel.

The story touches on many other issues, or themes—most unavoidable, as they arise naturally in writing about people and the times they live in. Some are openly dramatized, as when Arlene faces sexual discrimination, a frequent occurrence at the time, and when Mark suffers the after-effects of his combat experience. Or they may surface in bits of dialogue, or through recurring incidents or patterns of behavior. In any case, a good piece of advice to follow is *resist the urge to explain*. One should leave room for the reader's imagination, their intellect, their ability to connect the dots. Still, it's a challenge to decide what to reveal and what to withhold, and by how much. As for promoting interest in the novel, as I attempt here, I'd like to discuss more, but there's the issue of spoilers. I can report I'm now writing inside the third and final act, where I've left Arlene alone on a park bench, rocking back and forth. Ignoring her peanuts, the squirrels have fled, while her bottle lies flat on the ground. Precious wine has drained out the neck, yet she continues to rock, shaking her head now and again, and I'm concerned. I'm not sure how to get her back, I'm not sure she'll survive another night.

Stay tuned for future posts concerning *The Angel of Pleiku*, The Vietnam War, anything 1968, Binghamton, or any number of other fascinating topics.