

## The Things They Carried Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong Summary & Analysis

O'Brien recalls a crazy story that Rat Kiley told him. Rat's reputation for over exaggeration was well known in the platoon. But with this story, Rat always insisted it was true. When Rat Kiley first arrived in Vietnam he was assigned to a small medical detachment with seven other guys. There was almost no supervision, it was an indefensible area, but it was never attacked. The wounded were brought in by helicopter, and then stabilized before being sent to a hospital. The highest-ranking officer, Eddie Diamond, enjoyed smoking dope.

No one gets upset with Rat for exaggerating stories because they always felt something when he was recounting some memory blown way out of proportion. Rat's stories weren't borne out of fact, but feeling. Rat was first stationed in a pretty peaceful place, where the war seemed like a far off thing. Their lack of supervision gave them a kind of freedom that felt like home.

A decade earlier the base had been used as an outpost for the Special Forces and when Rat Kiley came there was still a squad of six Green Berets that used the compound. But the Greenies, as they were called, avoided contact with the other men. One night Eddie Diamond joked that they should pool their money and get some village women to come to the compound. The guys talked about it jokingly for a while, but one medic Mark Fossie wouldn't let it go and kept saying it was possible. Six weeks later his girlfriend arrived at the compound.

The Greenies are mentioned here as a way of foreshadowing their role later on in the story (which Mitchell Sanders points out later, too). Mark Fossie found a way to go around the rules and defy the conventions of war and bring in his girlfriend from Ohio.

The girl, Mary Anne, was around seventeen, recently graduated from Cleveland Heights Senior High. Mark Fossie and Mary Anne Bell had been together since they were kids, and knew from the sixth grade they'd get married one day and live in a house near Lake Erie with three kids. There was a plan, and they were in love.

It's clear in the telling of the story—how Fossie and Mary Anne had such plans set in stone—that Rat's foreshadowing the breakdown of those plans. Mary Anne is described as an idealized "American Girl", which makes what happens to her come to symbolize what's happening to all of America in Vietnam, just in a kind of stylized way that makes it less easy to overlook.

The other medics envied Fossie, because Mary Anne was attractive. She was young, but she was curious, and she went around asking how everything worked on the compound. She spent time on the perimeter and learned Vietnamese phrases. The guys teased her and called her their "little native."

What's important about Rat's description is following the slow trajectory from innocent to curious. She picks up things quickly. This curiosity foreshadows a change that is imminent in Mary Anne.

The war and Vietnam fascinated Mary Anne. By the second week she begged Fossie take her down to the village at the bottom of the hill. The next morning Rat Kiley and two other medics went along with them as security. Mary Anne walked through the village like a comfortable tourist. Rat said it was weird to watch, because she couldn't seem to get enough. On their way back, she stripped to her underwear to swim in the Song Tra Bong. Diamond said she had, "D-cup guts, trainer-bra brains." Someone said she would learn, and Diamond responded solemnly, "There's the scary part. I promise you, this girl will most definitely learn."

Mary Anne's comfort in the village is troubling at first because maybe she's naive, but it's ultimately foreshadowing how this life she finds so appealing in the village is one she'll take up in her own way. When Diamond says that Mary Anne will "learn," he means that the war will ruin her innocence, or worse: her unknowing recklessness is going to get her killed. The irony is that she will learn, just not in the way he expects.

At the end of the second week, four wounded soldiers were dropped in, and Mary Anne was quick to help, and learned how to clip an artery, pump a plastic splint, and shoot morphine into a patient. When the action heated up, her face took on a new look: serene, her eyes narrowed into focus. Fossie was proud of her, but also incredulous at how she seemed like a different person. Mary Anne stopped wearing makeup and jewelry; she cut her hair short. Eddie Diamond taught her how to disassemble an M-16 and shoot it. She practiced for hours, shooting at empty ration cans, and she was naturally good. She had a new confidence and authority in her voice. Mark Fossie suggested once or twice that maybe she should start thinking about going back to Ohio. Mary Anne laughed and told him all she wanted was already here.

Fossie is proud of his girlfriend, but he's beginning to see the change in her behavior and it scares him because this is clearly not a side of her he's ever seen in his entire life. She changes just as all the men in the war change, but somehow, because she's a cute girl, that change is more troubling. Fossie's suggestion that she go back to Ohio is a kind of plea, he knows deep down that he's losing her (just the way so many veterans of the war were lost to their loved ones when they returned changed by their experiences), but she shrugs him off because she's become infatuated with the action of Vietnam.

Mark Fossie and Mary Anne: still slept together and had their plans for when the war ended, but Mary Anne had changed the details of the plan. Perhaps not three kids, maybe not a house on Lake Erie, but they'd still get married—just not immediately.

The war changes Mary Anne and what she wants. It gives her a taste for new things in life, removes her innocence, liberates her in certain ways.

At night when the men played cards she would tap her foot like she was sending a message, and when Fossie asked about it she said it didn't mean anything, she'd never been happier.

Mary Anne's tapping foot seems like a kind of communion with the land, and also an impatience with inaction. She doesn't want to play cards; she wants to experience Vietnam and all it means.

Two times she returned really late to the compound, and then one night she didn't come back. Fossie, who thought Mary Anne was sleeping with someone else, shook Rat Kiley awake but they check all the bunks and she's nowhere to be found. She returns the next day and they find out she had been out on ambush with the Greenies.

And she finds a way to connect to Vietnam intimately—to join the green berets on combat missions, to truly immerse herself in the war with elite soldiers. She has completely transformed, completely immersed herself in the war.

When the sun rose, Rat said he saw Mary Anne come into the compound tired but happy. She gave Mark Fossie a quick hug after she dropped her gear. The six Greenies didn't say a word. Fossie seemed dazed, but then he yelled at her that they would discuss this now. No one knew for sure what happened between them, but later at dinner she was withdrawn and wouldn't answer questions about being out on ambush. Later Fossie told Rat that there wouldn't be any more ambushes or late nights. They had reached a compromise; they were engaged.

Fossie seeks to lay down the law, to tie Mary Anne back up in the social obligations such as engagement that bind people to act "morally" and as they should. But it is clear that Mary Anne is restless with these restrictions, even though they work on her for a while. Fossie's victory here is obviously hollow, and his insistence it isn't makes it seem hollower still. Mary Anne has changed. She can't just be changed back by a compromise and some rules.

Over the next few days the interactions between Fossie and Mary Anne were tense. In front of everyone, they kept up the charade. They talked about their big wedding, but there was an intensity in the way they talked. Close to the end of her third week, Fossie started to make plans to send Mary Anne home. She withdrew even more. The next morning Mary Anne was gone and so were the Greenies. Rat said Fossie had expected it on some level, but he was overtaken with grief. He keeps repeating, "Lost."

Fossie felt the need to keep Mary Anne on a tight leash, and when he started to make plans to send her home, this tension finally reached a breaking point and Mary Anne disappeared. Fossie was just trying to keep her, to stop her from changing, but she had already changed. She is lost to him because she's left behind the social obligations he wants her to hold dear. She wants the war.

It was almost three weeks before Mary Anne came back to the compound and Rat saw her go into the Greenies' hut. When Mark Fossie heard Mary Anne was back, he stood outside of the Greenies fenced off area all day. After midnight Rat and Eddie Diamond went out to check on him. There was music playing from somewhere in the dark, and there was a woman's voice but the words weren't English. Fossie pushed the gate open and rushed the door. Rat and Eddie followed behind. There were candles burning, sounds of tribal music, and the smell of incense and something indescribably powerful, like a kill. A decaying black leopard head was on the post at the rear, strips of skin hung from the rafters overhead, there were bones of all kinds everywhere. Rat could make out the figures of the other resting Greenies. Mary Anne emerged, wearing her pink sweater and white blouse with a cotton skirt. But she was also wearing a necklace of human tongues. Mary Anne told Fossie there was no point in talking, he was in a place he didn't belong, and she gestured like it was the whole of Vietnam. She said he hid in this compound and didn't know what was out there. Sometimes she wanted to swallow the whole country to have it in her. But it wasn't bad—when she was out at night she felt closest to her body. She said everything without being melodramatic. Rat helped Fossie up and they went outside and the music and Mary Anne's voice could be heard again. Fossie asked them to do something; he couldn't "let her go like that." Rat listened to the music for a while then said, "Man, you must be deaf. She's already gone."

Mary Anne is a walking contradiction, much like everything in the war. She is wearing her pink sweater and nice culottes—the things she was wearing when she arrived. But the tongue necklace she's wearing marks a grotesque opposition to the girl Mary Anne used to be. She has transformed, but she is still herself. She keeps insisting it's not bad—but that's because there's no way to tell right or wrong while you're at war. It's not "bad" because there's no such thing as "bad" in war. Her appetite for the war, combat, and the land is almost like that of a junkie looking for a next fix. She can't get enough of Vietnam, of the excitement of war. It makes her feel completely alive and also completely herself, and she believes wholeheartedly this is the only place on earth she can feel that way. Somehow this transformation is horrific in Mary Anne, but it is not so different from the soldier who went AWOL in "How to Tell a True War Story" but then came back because the peace hurt so good he wanted to hurt it back. The soldiers become addicted to the intensity of the war; Mary Anne just embraces this addiction completely.

Rat Kiley stopped there in the story, which drove Mitchell Sanders, up a wall. He asked what happened to Mary Anne. Rat said he couldn't know for sure, a few days later he got orders to report to Alpha Company, and that's the last he ever saw the compound or Mary Anne. Sanders was furious and said Rat couldn't do that, it was against the rules of storytelling to not have an ending. Rat said everything he's told up until now is what he experienced, but after this point it's things he's heard.

Rat Kiley stops because that's as far as his first hand account goes. He's trying to prove to everyone that this all happened; he saw it. The next part is what he's heard so you can never know if it's fully true. Sanders claim about the rules of a story complements O'Brien's argument from "How to Tell a True War Story:" you know a war story is true if it has no end.

A few months later, Rat ran into Eddie Diamond in Bangkok while he was on R&R. Rat suddenly said that he loved Mary Anne, everyone did. She made you think about the girls at home and how innocent they were, how they could never understand the war. Rat promised after the war, it would be impossible to find anyone like her. Eddie told him he heard from a Greenie that Mary Anne had disappeared for good. They didn't find a body or equipment or clothing. There was a weeklong air search, and the compound was overrun with officials. But nothing ever came out of it because the war had to go on. Fossie was sent out on duty but got injured and was given a medical discharge when sent to a hospital back in the States. When the Greenies went out at night they felt like something was staring back at them, the whole rainforest. A few times they nearly saw Mary Anne. "She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land." She was in the same outfit she had worn in their hut, her pink sweater and culottes, and necklace of tongues and she was dangerous, ready to kill.

Rat confesses to loving Mary Anne because she's the only woman he knows of who could ever understand what Vietnam does to a soldier because she lived it. But Mary Anne was insatiable about the war and the rush of terror and joy it gave her. She wanted to be a part of the land and be completely lost in it, like she had already become lost in herself. She was calm when under attack, and she was fine with going off alone. The Greenies believed she was still alive, but not in a physical way—there was a spiritual element to it. She had achieved her goal in becoming a part of the land—but it swallowed her whole instead of her swallowing it.