

A Handsome Man

by Will Hall

My, but he was a handsome man. So handsome, it hurt to look at him. It surely did. Made you want to just about burst every time he walked by.

Now don't tell me that's something young girls say, don't I know better than anyone? I hear Katy and her friends talking after school, trying to outdo one another with tales. But me and Joseph, we were of a different sort. I knew it from the day we met. Him, bundling groceries at the A&P with arms like smooth tree trunks. Me, standing in line next to Mother while my heart thudded and my insides tingle like when you sip the fizz off a glass of tonic on a hot day.

Least, that's the way I remember it.

Of course, after all those years, you can't help but forget things. Like two days, when Pete -- he's my niece's youngest -- found that photograph.

He came downstairs before supper, dust balls hanging from the elbows of his sweater, and showed the picture right to me. "Is that the pilot?" he asks, and Emily stops peeling onions.

"I told you, never mind about that," she says, and grabs the picture. But I'm sitting next to her, and seen it already. My stomach jumps a little when I do. It was Joseph, you see, all decked out in his blue Air Corps uniform, his hair slicked back, grinning like some movie star with those white teeth of his. I had put the photograph up in the attic with some old magazines after Emily and the children moved in. Hadn't thought about it since.

"That's him," I say, and start chopping the onions. "Only he wasn't a pilot, he was a navigation officer."

"What happened to him?"

I want to tell Pete all sorts of stories. I want to tell him that Joseph saved a whole fleet of planes, that he got a medal out of it, that he's a senator or something now. But all I can say is, "I don't know, Pete."

"Oh."

We don't talk about it after that, but I know Pete's just itching to get me alone so he can ask me some more. Finally, after supper, I let him. I'm sitting on the porch, just taking the cool air and watching the headlights come one, way out to the Interstate, when Pete sits himself on the step in front of me.

"What kind of plane did that man fly?" is what he says first.

"I don't rightly know. Some sort of bomber, I think." And then I have to explain about the War, and where Japan is, and all the time I'm thinking, why don't I know what kind of plane Joseph flew? I used to. Even knew the name him and others painted on the front. Can't remember it now, though I don't recall as it was mine.

"A B-29? I bet it was a B-29," Pete says, like he'd been there. "I saw a movie on TV with B-20s."

Peculiar, but I can't think of Joseph that way. Can't see him spread all over a giant picture screen a hero like Tyrone Power. The only picture I seen him in is six inches square with an imitation-pewter frame.

Pete wants to know did Joseph ever shoot anybody. I explain how he was the navigator, he didn't do any shooting. But I don't think Pete hears me. He's at that age, you know.

He's got the picture propped up on his knees, and stares at it bug-eyed. "Don't look at that too close now, you'll end up wearing bifocals like me," I say.

"Was he a captain?"

"He wasn't any captain, and I think it's high time you helped your mother with the dishes, don't you."

He gets up, and I tell him, "Leave the picture be." Pete sets it down careful on the porch railing. When I go to bed that night I stand the photograph on my vanity, where it used to stand years ago, next to Mother's hairbrush with the silver handle.

I don't fall asleep for a long time. Instead, I just lie there, trying to remember

everything I can about Joseph. There's a lot I forget, but I do recall a dance we went to at the Grange, just before he took the train up to Fort Dix. Yes, I remember well: the way he stood at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for me with those sweet-heart roses, ivory-colored and tied with satin ribbon.

Mother took the picture of him with her Kodak that night on the porch. It was warm out, but Joseph was already in full uniform, looking like whatever he did would be important someday. I was in peach organdy, a real department-store dress I had worn to my cousin's wedding in Lynchburg that summer.

I waited for Joseph to pin the corsage on me, but he got all thumbs and ended up just handing it to me, the way the postman might hand you a letter. That's what I remember best, lying there before I fall asleep: those beautiful flowers, and pricking my finger on the pearl-headed pin they came with.

When I come downstairs the next morning, Katy is already there with Jennifer, a kind of sloppy-looking girl who just moved into the big house down the road. They're sitting at the kitchen table, giggling like they do, but they hush when I come in.

"Nine o'clock is time for school, I believe," I tell them. Jennifer looks over at Katy, and grins a little.

"It's Saturday," Katy says, and goes back to a bowl of that sugared cereal with the tiger on the box. I set to making batter cakes.

"I can make you two some real breakfast, if you're done with Mr. Tiger."

"Oh, Grant," is all Katy says, and looks at Jennifer. That's what Katy calls me, you see. It's short for "great aunt."

I get the butter from the icebox, while Katy and Jennifer talk about something called the Sing-Along Microphone. For \$19.95, the cereal box says, you can recreate your pop favorites as a genuine high-fidelity microphone, amplifier, and built-in cassette player. Just like the stars. Katy and Jennifer are gabbing about how much fun it would be if they could save up enough for it. I want to tell them watch your money, don't be fooled by something you read on the back of a cereal box. But they off and go up to Katy's room, waiting for Emily to get home. They wouldn't listen anyway.

Emily's promised to take the two of them shopping at the new mall in town when she finishes her shift and the marketing. I been to that mall once, didn't much care for it. Too much walking, and no place to walk to. I don't understand what the girls see in places like that.

But Emily's got sense in her. She won't let Katy buy any makeup, though I have seen Jennifer wearing some candy-colored stuff on her mouth once or twice. Katy wants to wear lipstick too, says it's only fitting for a girl in eighth grade. I wish she wouldn't waste her time with truck like that.

I have a few chores this morning, so I go upstairs to change linen, starting with Emily's room. I dust too, and straighten the photograph of Frank she still keeps on her nightstand. He was her husband, and I sometimes think that was a mistake. Of course, I'd never say that to her face. Emily and me got an understanding. We know what it's like, not being able to have someone you care for.

Frank, he started out a true gentleman, but after Pete was born he began drinking and took up with a waitress in Nottoway County. With Joseph, it was the War. I wanted a ceremony in June, when he'd be home on leave and it still wouldn't be too warm for an outdoor reception. Not a large wedding, mind you -- my people couldn't afford much anyways -- but tasteful. I was going to wear Mother's dress, and my older sister, Martha, was sewing these imitation seed pearls into her old veil. She was going to make a bride's handkerchief too, with tatting around each edge.

Joseph believed how none of this was right. "There's men dying over there every day, I might be one of them," he said when he got home. And I could have been some stranger, the way he said it.

I started talking about the arrangements we had made, about the veil and the dress and all, but Joseph said we had to wait. Six months, maybe a year. "Now just isn't the right time," he said.

I did wait, and I did write him steady for the duration, even when his letters got fewer and fewer, and finally just stopped. But right then, I remember, all I could say was how pretty soon Father was going to cut the dead beeches out back for firewood that winter, and how would it look to have

a wedding reception in a yard full of tree stumps?

Pete's playing outside, so I work on his room next. It used to be Martha's room when we were growing up, and she took good care of it. But Pete, he's cut from different cloth than his grandmother. He claimed the room for his own when they all moved in, and I don't and I don't think he's made his bed since.

I strip the sheets, put all his coloring together on his little desk. It's already covered with picture of his, drawings of spacehips, I guess they are, and planes, and Army tanks. He's got a gift, you can see that plainly.

After Pete's room, I pass by my own, when I hear Katy and Jennifer laughing inside. I keep the door open mostly, but now it's shut tight, and I stand outside for a second, like it was someone else's room and not mine. Then I hear some more laughing, and Jennifer's voice.

"Can I help you?" I say even before I get the door open. Katy and Jennifer whirl around from my vanity like they seen a ghost. Crash goes a bottle of toilet water, crash goes a handmirror, the hairbrush, and Joseph's picture.

"What on earth do you two think you're doing?" Katy's got her pretty blonde hair parted over to the side, like a boy's, and she has my lipstick smudged on her mouth. "That doesn't belong on you," I say. "It's an old woman's shade."

"We were just practicing. Jennifer was helping me," Katy says, and looks over at her friend. Jennifer just watches me like she's not too worried about what I'm going to do.

"You don't need practicing, and you don't need any lipstick at 13 years old. Least not 'till you're grown enough to mind others' privacy."

Katy's face is as red as clay, and I know she's got to be feeling ashamed in front of Jennifer. So I just tell them, "Clean up this mess," and go to hang some washing outside.

Emily doesn't get home until afternoon, too late to take the girls to the mall. They're sure it's a lesson for playing with my lipstick. Truth is, Emily's just too worn out to spend the rest of the day traipsing about. So nobody talks much for the rest of the day. The girls read one of those fancy

magazines Jennifer gets. Pete watches the television set. Emily and I start the chicken for supper.

While it cooks I go upstairs to my room, which still smells like a dance hall from all the perfume. I sit down with the picture of Joseph, pull out a few shards of glass stuck in the frame. Then I pull off the backing and take out the photograph, real careful. The edges are still white and new-looking where the frame covered them, but one corner's all torn and dog-eared. I never noticed the tear before. Strange, how it sat in the frame all these years, hidden, like some kind of cancer.

Trimming it would make the picture look a whole lot better, so I get out my sewing shears, cut both edges down to get rid of the tear.

Now those edges are thinner than the other two, so I trim *them* down too. And just to even everything up, I go back and take a bit off all four sides.

But somehow it's not quite right. I cut the edges off altogether now, and trim down the picture just so. I cut a little more, trying more, trying to make everything even. I try not to make the photograph too wide or too tall, I try to keep Joseph's face right square in the middle. I'm cutting away, and the picture almost looks right, but it's getting smaller. At last there's hardly anything but Joseph's head and those broad shoulders, and you can't even see much of them. It's no more than one of those pictures they put on your driving license, just a face staring at you out of nowhere, and you can hardly tell whose it is.

Shreds of Joseph are all over the floor. Just you imagine, all that work, to fix a man's picture the way it should be.

I pick up the scraps and the picture, and slowly drop them in the rubbish. Just you imagine, after I kept that picture all these years. Foolish, wouldn't you say? I should still be angry, but I can't help for laughing.

Foolish. I know it. And at my age too. ■