

Soldier's home

by David Ackley

Sheets, unstained, brilliantly white, tucked taut under the mattress. Pillowcases the same, with ironed creases. A patchwork quilt, of bright swatches, the colors sharp against one another, blues, reds, yellows. Patterns of clovers, birds, triangles, daisies. Was it there before? Looks new. Light streams in through the window panes making rectangles on the top of the work table. The rack on the wall with a little twenty-two, four-ten over-under that the boy used to hunt rabbits and partridge. And below it the Mannlicher-Schoener, called *the world's most beautiful sporting rifle*, spoils shipped home, oiled and waiting; recalling the infantry sergeant who took it grinning, relishing the scowl of the SS Colonel's widow. No dust anywhere. A braided rug soft and lumpy underfoot. A mother's hands twisted the differently colored cloth together like braiding pigtails. Stitched the braids spiraled together into long ovals. Fishing rods in the corner, a fly rod, bait-caster with reel. Some deep feel of the arm, casting, water spurling past. In the closet will be the vest, loaded with flies and lures. A car hums by outside, drawing the quiet back behind it. There is a ceiling, above that a roof. From downstairs come higher pitched voices, conversing.

That there are a downstairs, and high voices.

Bath water steaming hot from the faucet, sink into it, the water darkening with the grime of France, Luxembourg, Germany with never time or hot water or soap enough to completely scrub from the pores. Except the hands, held up dripping to look at: still clean, white, soft; all that scrubbing up for their blood-soaked work.

A reddish streamer in the water.

