

Sad News

by Kevin Myrick

She saw the car come up the long, dusty drive past the tall cotton in the fields before it pulled up in front of the big house. It was Army green, a Dodge or maybe even a Chevrolet, with a white star painted on the side. Behind the wheel as it parked in front of the porch was a young man, maybe 18 or 19 and an officer not much older in the passenger seat. They got out wearing their crisp brown Army jackets and khaki pants; she saw the cross on the lapel of the officer's shirt and just knew. These men brought sad news from faraway places.

The man who got out of the passenger seat stood for a moment and looked at the big white farm house. He was tall, his eyes framed with black rimmed glasses that reflected light from the sun into her eyes. He looked young — too young for such duty — and more like the young Casher boys from down the road. Pudgy cheeked and a little round in the waist. Yet she stared at his eyes as she leaned against the doorway and watched him come up the stairs, his shoes echoing heavy foot falls.

"Can I help you fine gentlemen?" she asked as she wiped her hands with a dish rag. She was in no condition to be receiving anyone - she still had on her apron and was half-covered in flour from baking a birthday cake for Mrs. Rogers - but nonetheless they were here. These fine men, God bless their souls, were the harbingers of death.

She'd heard from the ladies at church, the blue star ladies whose eyes seemed perpetually shrink-wrapped in tears, about these visits from the Army chaplain when their boys died overseas over Germany or France, or of the exotic islands of the Pacific she couldn't pronounce. He finally spoke after a moment of the breeze blowing and the chimes clinging in the background.

"Ma'am, are you Mrs. Jonathan Wright?"

The screen door creaked open as she walked through onto the porch, holding her hands together for fear of them shaking. The driver stayed behind by the car and pulled out a pack of Lucky Strikes and a shiny lighter from his pocket.

"Yes," she paused for a moment, choking back a sob. "Is my husband dead?"

"No ma'am, but I'm afraid he is missing in action."

"Oh god, oh god," she held back the sobs for as long as she could. "What happened to him?"

"His B-17 was shot down over France."

Her knees gave way on her suddenly and she collapsed onto the porch. The young chaplain came over and took her in his arms, consoling her grief as tears ran down her soft, red cheeks. It reminded him of when he was young and his mother cried at his father's graveside. He was a son-of-a-bitch and yet she loved him even after he was dead and buried. Maybe it was the same for all women who love their men, good or bad.

Her sobs gave way after a few minutes and she composed herself the best she could. A southern lady, she thought to herself, should take even the face of death with some composure.

"Oh look at your jacket, I'm afraid I've covered it with tears."

"It's quite alright ma'am, I've grown accustomed to my shoulder catching tears."

She paused for a moment and looked over the young captain's eyes,

those sad deep blue eyes that looked to contain so much heartache and pain.

"I'm afraid I've been terribly rude and not asked your name sir," she said.

"I'm Capt. Jay Magruder," he replied, holding out his hand. She took it, holding it for a moment and noticed the smooth but rough texture of a man who has seen hard work in his years but hasn't done heavy lifting in a few years. Not like her husband's strong hands at all.

"Captain Magruder, is it possible my husband is still alive?" She squeezed his hand; hope was the only thing keeping her together at the moment.

"He and his crew were reported to have gotten out of the plane before it crashed. They might be alive yet, but we don't know."

"So there's a chance?" Water formed in her eyes again. Some happy news comes from the sad.

"Yes, there is a chance."

"Captain, will you pray with me for his safe return then?"

"Of course I will."

"And please, call me Helen."

They stated their beliefs by starting off with "Our Father, who art in heaven..." and prayed together on the porch for her husband to come home safely. Inside, the smell of burning cake came through the screen door and hit her on the porch. But she held onto the captain for longer still. God hadn't been able to save her cake from ruin, but maybe he could save her husband from death.

