

V-J Day

by Mary Alston Capps

August 14, 1945.

Vincent had kissed a lot of girls before then - and a lot of women after. But there had never been a kiss like that one. And because of that photo apparently the whole country, damned near the whole world, thought so too.

He'd tried to get her name after they kissed, but the crowds in Times Square were too great and the celebrations too noisy and as he tried to find her again, he found himself both surprised and annoyed when he realized exactly how many sailors *and* nurses filled the streets. If it had been a day other than the celebration of the end of the War, he was pretty sure the cops would have warned him off of hassling every woman he saw in a white dress, but for the moment every sailor, every soldier was a hero. He wasn't part of the final push in the Pacific, but he'd seen enough, done enough to know he'd had his fill and never wished to discuss war or killing with anyone ever again. He wanted a family, children, love, and with the spark he felt in that kiss, he thought he might have found it.

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Eventually he did marry. She was a good woman who tried very hard to make him happy but, even though he never complained, she somehow knew she was competing with the ghost of a memory. They weren't able to have children, which made her feel even more worthless. When she passed away in 1977, they said it was cancer. But he'd looked in her eyes often enough to know it was sadness that took her, the kind of sadness that comes from hopelessness.

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He retired shortly after her death and, between his Navy pension and a few small but profitable investments, he was able to live comfortably and even do a bit of traveling. He'd followed the stories that surfaced in the 80s in *Life Magazine* about the identities of the

sailor and the nurse. He knew who the sailor was, regardless of the other claims. He didn't doubt those other swabs sucked face with any number of nurses that day, but that photo — well, that was him. Some days, he still felt that young; other days, not so much. He had written down the names of the women claiming to be the nurse, but put the list in a drawer and forgot about it. Now, almost 30 years later, he found their names and felt a motivation, a purpose, a spark light inside him.

He pulled out his road atlas and marked each of the cities where they were last known to have lived, planning his trip so it would take him through each city, and then back home to New York. There were just three names, which was good, because one of them was in Los Angeles. He'd hit the other two first, as they were closer — one in Connecticut and the other in Maryland. He took the car in to Karl, his mechanic, got the oil changed and the fluids all topped off. Karl suggested, for a trip that long, he'd better put new shoes on his trusty chariot, so he dropped it off at the tire store and told them he'd be back the next morning to pick it up.

He took the subway home, lost in thought about his upcoming journey, when a young man interrupted his reverie. "Excuse me, sir, I'm doing a photoessay for a journalism class at CUNY and I just took your picture. Could I trouble you to sign this release form? I don't know if it will ever be published, but just in case, I'd rather have all my paperwork in order!" The kid was a little too earnest, but at least he was polite. He read the standard boilerplate release and signed it. As he returned it, he asked if he could see the picture. The young man handed him the digital camera with his photo on a small screen. He was more than a little appalled by the image. He looked lost, bedraggled, lonely, sad. But he didn't feel any of those things - well a little lonely sometimes, but never like that man in the picture looked.

So he decided to get cleaned up before his trip. After all, what if he found her? He certainly wouldn't want to frighten her! He thanked the young man, wished him luck with his project, and headed to his neighborhood barbershop. He exited the train and

spryly scaled the stairs to the street like a man half his age. He took a deep breath as the sun burst through a cloud, smiled at the world and, as the unexpected hand of fate gripped his heart, he collapsed.

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A young nurse came in his room. He was feeling a little stronger and in need of some company, so he made an effort to smile at her. "Good morning", he croaked. His throat was rough from the intubation.

"Save your strength, sailor! You had a close call there! But you've got a pretty tough heart!"

She was cute. Not beautiful, not pretty, but cute — the kind of cute that endures. And she looked familiar. He asked what her name was.

"Jeanette — named after my Gram. She was a nurse too. Mom couldn't do nursing though. She didn't have the stomach for it!"

She noticed he was smiling, so she laughed and chattered on about her mother and her grandmother and being a nurse.

"Is she still alive?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Your grandmother. "

"No. She passed away last year. I still miss her."

"So do I."

"Wait, what? Did you know my Gram?"

"I think so." He was wheezing.

She came over to his bed. He was pale, his breathing labored. She hit the button for Code Blue just as he flatlined.

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When it was all over, before they took him away, Jeanette came over and gently kissed his forehead.

"Goodbye, Pops."

