

The Key

by Sheila Luecht

She usually wandered around E-Bay when she was bored. Her favorite places to look were original oil paintings from the turn of the century on. She also looked at antique silver, estate jewelry, diamonds and real estate. Photographs were also a favorite. Since she was a bit obsessed with WWII, you might find her going through any collections which held those kind of images. She had seen a number of photos from that era in her lifetime, that was her parents time. When they were young they were participants in that war. She had seen their albums and cherished their pictures. Her older sister had sent some off to an air museum in the southwest. Her dad had been in the Air Corps, her mother in the WAVES. Her father had been stationed in South America, her mother was stateside. In the last several years she had finally seen some photographs that her father in law took in the Pacific. He was in the Navy. His pictures were a bit more brutal, less art, more battle. Dead Japanese. She was not as connected to those pictures, to that place. Her real persona was stuck in Europe. Her interests seemed to make her want to see those places, those pictures. So she did, whenever she had the time.

In an hour before dinner one day about seven years earlier, she had seen a photo that haunted her. It was being listed by a store called Old Boston and she could not stop thinking about it. She saved it on her watch list. Normally her husband was the person on E-Bay, she periodically sold some clothing or purses, old toys and things like that but really had not done so in years. That picture would have been hers but the price seemed high. She didn't think about it too much, life got in the middle of it. Then in the last six months she was forced to slow down to recover from an injury. She had the opportunity to sit and re-evaluate things, even that picture. She tried to find it on E-Bay but seemingly couldn't. She assumed it was sold. Then she tried to remember her passwords and with the help

of her husband was able to recover her account. During all that time, through all the E-Bay changes and upgrades, her watch list was still available and the picture still there. It was the only item there. The price had gone down. Her husband bought it for her.

No idea yet, why it was so important, what could it possibly mean to her? Was it someone who she knew, a distant relative, a character for her novel, something was just so strangely haunting about it that she could see it even when she did not have it in front of her. When it arrived the store owner placed a note inside, "If you ever find anything out about this picture, be sure and let me know too." He sells only original pictures. He had purchased this one in a set of two, with the information that it was during the liberation of France. A man by the name of Peter had taken the picture, the last name was unreadable.

When the picture arrived she didn't open it immediately. She set it aside and then after some hours had passed opened it. It didn't seem quite as she as seen it on her lap top. It seemed grayer and more washed out. That did not bother her, it was haunting just the same. As she held it in her hands it became even more sad and disturbing to her. She put it back in the envelope and placed it on the table next to the reading chair she was sitting in.

She sat in the alcove under the stained glass window she had commissioned with the theme, the River of Life. She wondered about why she needed this picture so much. She had set it there, so she could no longer see it, just covered, slightly out of reach. Why? She began to think about it and decided that it definitely had a story to tell.

Here was a woman, dusty with the white powder of fallen bricks and mortar. She is squatting over a man who lies on a stretcher on the ground. She looks directly into the camera. In her left hand she is holding a skeleton key, her right is seen almost caressing the

man's head. She appears unharmed, although her front tooth looks chipped. She is dressed in a frock that would be typical of the times, another woman leans over her, her tennis shoes have no laces, she is covered with some dust too. There are American soldiers in the picture, in the background, not appearing to be attentive to the woman and the man she is concerned with.

There are others in the picture, but only someone far in back, dressed in black, perhaps a child, also looks in the direction of the camera. When she studied the picture even more it seemed to her that a small child might also be on the stretcher. She wonders why does it matter. Why? Is it something so strange to ingest, so utterly bizarre that she cannot speak it aloud, or think it without wondering about her own sanity?

Why does she think that she is in the picture? Could she be the woman, come back? Or is she the child? The more she thinks about it she decides to look again at the picture. She stares at it and suddenly it seems to be alive, in the moment.

The alcove is now empty.

