

Marry That Girl, Solly

by Steve Finan

Private Solomon didn't want to fight. But Mr Churchill said everyone had to. He said it was the right thing to do. Everyone had to make sacrifices. Don't you know there's a war on?

Private Solomon went off to war and the parting from his sweetheart, Marie, was the stuff of heartbreak.

Sweetheart Marie said they must always think of their special times. The night the mist turned Featherstone Barn into Troll Castle. The French way to not fall down steep grassy slopes. The storm above the beech trees. The mystery of Father Culpepper's torn shirts. As parting grew near Sweetheart Marie made him tell all the stories of their best times again. The youngest child in the graveyard. Mrs Bogs controlling her uncontrollable sneezes. His grandfather's strangely blue stomach. The best way to put out a fire in St Ansell's Valley. Such sweet songs. All the things that made two people 'us'.

Private Solomon promised not to be killed. Sweetheart Marie promised she would make a home for him to return to. A cottage with roses around the door

Private Solomon had a hard war. Not that they ever talk about it, these men. A battlefield makes you close-mouthed. No-one of that generation boasted because they all knew so many more gave so much more. They it was who deserved the praise. They who would never hear it.

Private Solomon remembered. He laughed over his grandfather's stomach, smiled about St Ansell's Valley and wished and wished that he'd said 'with the flowers in your hair at the dance at Featherstone Barn' when she'd asked how he would picture her when he was gone. The best way to not fall down steep grassy slopes was forever on his mind, no matter what it was that everyone said the Army put in the tea.

Private Solomon suffered things no man should have to suffer.

Private Solomon lay in a trench the night the Heinkels laid waste to the airfield. They said cover up or the shockwaves will punch out your eardrums. He lay there, hands dutifully pressed to his ears, with his platoon, as death rained from an enemy they couldn't see. Nowhere to run, no way to fight back. Life depended on luck. The ground thrummed and even the best of the lads cried. He thought no man can call himself a warrior who can only lie down. The beech trees seemed a long way away.

Private Solomon stood at the gates of the factory built to kill. It was the smell that horrified him. No-one, ever since, in all the books he'd read or films he'd seen about that terrible place, mentioned the smell. That camp killed a little bit of everyone who saw it. Private Solomon and Private Bert had looked at each other. But there were no words to say. In the back of lorry on the way back Private Solomon tried hard to think only of the Father Culpepper's shirts mystery, not of what he'd seen.

Private Solomon picked up the arm of Private Bert when an 88 shell took him. They huddled together waiting for the medic and Private Bert asked again and again if his arm would be sewn back on. With a catch in his voice Private Solomon said it would. Private Solomon said he would give the medics the arm and, look, he was dousing the end with water so it would be clean to sew back on. Bert died before learning there was to be no sewing. The last words he said were, 'Marry that girl you always talk about, Solly'.

Private Solomon won the war, though he wasn't really ever sure that he'd done much but keep his head down and keep moving forwards. He didn't think he was a hero. A few of the lads seemed madly keen to fight. And a few were petrified of dying. Most just did what they were told. But though you fight and die and at the time never know when it will end, there comes a time when the soldiers who lived have to try to find the other world where their lives used to be.

Private Solomon walked out of the station just as dawn appeared. He'd strained to see Featherstone Barn as the train passed Hox's

Hill. He smiled and his thoughts danced. The smell of his village was the same. How good it was to be home where the air was best. The waves still lapped the shingled shore. The sun still rose over Compton Point. He threw stones into the surf as he had done so long ago when he and Poor Rosie were just children. Poor Rosie had been gone for many years but his mother still talked of her so fondly. Though it was still ridiculously early, he went to see Sweetheart Marie. He pictured her bow of a mouth, he could almost smell her clean hair. He'd carried an acorn from France in his battledress pouch. He'd kept it through scenes that would defy belief so that they could plant in their garden. He knocked upon her door.

Sweetheart Marie would be so glad to see him. This was what they had dreamed of. Solomon would be a man reborn. A man given a second life. He would patiently wind the wool with Sweetheart Marie and listen as she complained of Mrs Greensmith's strange ways with buttons in the shop. Then they'd walk all the way to Ippford Cross and talk until their mouths forgot how to make words.

Sweetheart Marie wasn't there, Candid Mother said, not meeting Private Solomon's eye.

Sweetheart Marie hadn't been able to wait. It had taken years for the war to be won. She was a girl with a life to live. Don't you see? It wasn't easy for her. She tried so hard. Don't you see, Private Solomon, don't you see what it was like for her? It was terrible being here all alone. She didn't know if you would ever come home. You should have written more often. You should have said more in your letters.

Sweetheart Marie had painted seams on her legs and gone out to the dance halls in the town. She'd found Generous GI who worked in planning. Generous GI had been there for her. He had chocolate. Private Solomon wasn't there for her.

Sweetheart Marie couldn't wait, don't you see. She was grown to become a woman with needs. You're a good man Private Solomon. You understand don't you? It was so hard being here, just working in the shop. It was so hard to wait so long while nothing happened. Sweetheart Marie was moving to Milwaukee, wherever that was.

Private Solomon hadn't really known how to write of love, of those things. He had carried their shared memories, though. He had thought of the walk down to Mrs Greensmith's shop when he and all the men beside him reckoned they'd "had it" that time when II SS Panzer-Division had fought like gods for Hill 212. Though II SS Panzer Division really should have had all his attention, all the while he'd been thinking of kicking through the fallen leaves on Appledown Street. That was the day he'd picked up the acorn.

Sweetheart Marie couldn't have known. He thanked Candid Mother for telling him what had happened to Sweetheart Marie while nothing was happening to him.

Private Solomon turned around, walked down Marie's neat garden path and softly shut the gate.

