

"I'll have two small pork chops please."

Oct 20th '61

She, the butcher, turned toward the women, looking down his nose and peering her through his bifocals.

"Well," he laughed, "how is my favorite customer today?"

"I guess as well as can be expected these days."

"Yes," I understand," said the butcher. "The war changes a lot of things. You know, I have two shops in the service my self, but I try not to worry. — and don't you worry about your boy. Why a man his size could handle hundreds of those little nips."

"I know, but it's this terrible waiting that wears me down."

"That's something we all have to live with," he sighed. "Yes, I guess you are right."

He butcher snapped himself out of his drifting thoughts. "Now what was it that you wanted."

Two small pork chop, please.

"Well," he smiled, "we just happen to have two left."

"That's good because I'm just about out of stamps," she laughed.

He took the two chops and rolled them up in some such white paper and he tied it up with string and handed it to her.

It was a cold and a rainy drive back to her house and the windows were very fogged when she turned up into the driveway. The groceries were light today as they had been for some time. The past visits to the grocery store. Her son away fighting, her daughter at college, her home empty and quiet. She often decided returning to problems which everybody visited in these times. War creates withdrawal within themselves for protection against change.

She got out of the car, lifted the grocery sack to her and puffed up the steps to the door. She fumbled with the key for a moment then inserted them and twisted them in the lock. A gust of cold air blew the door open. She stepped in and pushed the door closed behind her.

She was awkwardly balancing the groceries and trying to put the key back into her purse at the same time when she saw it. There, lying on the floor a few feet in front of her was a small yellow envelope. With "WESTERN UNION" printed on it. She gasped and dropped the groceries. The bells hit the floor with a long, rolling across the cold wood and echoing through the house and through her ears. She wanted to faint; she wanted to cry; she wanted to scream. Her knees weakened and were trembling and she stepped back grabbing the door knob for support. She did not know what to do. The yellow envelope started at her from the dark wooden floor. Her mind began to protect itself. She would not open it. Her son was not dead as long as she did not touch that envelope. Not another pore pulled at her thoughts. Not five days till Christmas. It could be a Christmas telegram from him or from her daughter who would be home tomorrow. It could be a quick message from any relative or friend. She would not accept this. She would not touch that telegram.

The side walks were wet and dark and cold beneath her feet. Dark, wet leaves were stuck to the cement by the compress.

Thin wet, earthy smells were on the winter air. She did not know how long she had been gone. She hardly recognized the part of town that she was in, nor did she care. She was floating in a sea of confusion, of cares and doubts and foolish hopes and upon every thing she looked she could see the austere yellow paper with WESTERN UNION printed on it. She could not escape but she knew she could not join it. Her son was so far away, far beyond her reach, far beyond her words. If only she could talk to him, could be near to him. If only she could press his warmth close to her as she had done when he was a boy. But there was nothing but cold now. Cold, grey clouds hung low over the shivering, black skeletons of naked trees. An icy wind blew into her face almost stunning her with its frosty severity. She was left alone in the cold world with the leaden agony of a mother's anxiety and a rapidly focusing picture of bitter reality. She could not refuse to believe it but she still could not face it. The grey line of sidewalk led past older and older homes, tall white giants with vacant, unsympathetic, lonely windows. Nearly every one of them such a FOR SALE sign or Rooms for Rent. Old white porches scattered and dead. They weren't crying. They only stared alone the tree tops, hoping for the best, prepared for the inevitable.

The streets were noisy with automobiles and buses now. She was coming into town. She had no idea how long her walk had taken her but she did not here close to the business section. The sidewalks were almost empty. There were not many Christmas shoppers this year. Suddenly she stopped. Her thin white hand tightened on the handle of her handbag. A cab had pulled up about a half a block ahead of her. A tall boy dressed in army green had stepped out and was paying the driver. He was the very image of her son. Tall and straight. But he did not turn to face her. Instead he picked up his grip and headed through a doorway with a big neon grayhound over it. He was her son. He wasn't. He could have been. Her son was — It had to be in the telegram. Those tall letters upon the yellow envelope flashed before her again. She hurried to the bus station door. He was at a ticket window when she entered. She walked slowly toward him, her step slowed almost imperceptibly as she neared. It was almost as if he were purposely trying to keep his head turned away. He was standing behind him. He stared up at the tall figure. Her vision was blurring. She could not see him well. The illusory form before could be her son. She knew but would not accept it — that he wasn't. The soldier turned with his ticket. He was looking down at her. Her vision focused on the friendly face. She felt sick. Her breathing faltered and she gripped the ticket office rail to steady her self. The soldier's expression became concerned. He reached out a hand to help her. She felt almost suffocated by her foolishness. The bitter embarrassment of her embarrassment stifled her. She felt like fainting. She wanted to run away to cry, to hide her foolishness in frustrated tears but she found her unsteady voice saying, "a ticket to — to Woodville please."

Yes, Mom.

Her trembling hands fumbled with her purse. She pushed a five dollar bill through the ticket window.

She took the ticket and turned away from the window.

"Ma'am! --- Hey! Miss --- your change."

The soldier put the change into her nervous hand.

"Do you feel well?"

"No --- No, I don't. It's the cold weather," she said nervously.

"A cup of coffee would fix that. Would you like some?"

He nodded and the tall soldier took her gently by the arm, and they walked into the quiet canteen. The place was filled with uniformed men and all were quiet.

"Sit down, here," he said kindly.

He snapped his fingers "Here coffee please!"

The coffee's warmth helped her, but she said nothing. Back drank quietly. The soldier's gaze was far away; he had his problems too. Then something seemed to snap him out of his thoughts and he turned his smiling face to the woman.

"Well now," he said jovially, "you feel better, I bet. I can tell by the color on your cheeks."

They both smiled, but she could detect hints of worry in his eyes. I must admit I wasn't myself back there.

The soldier smiled "For a moment I thought you recognized me as somebody. I was almost disappointed when I saw that you didn't."

An uncomfortable silence came over them for a moment.

"So you have somebody in the service too?"

"Doesn't everybody," she said bitterly. The effort at smiling faded.

"You're right. I guess there's nobody that doesn't feel the pain of war times."

"You can't know," she said trying to keep the tears back. How can you feel it if you haven't ---"

"I haven't lost someone," he answered. "My younger brother was killed three weeks ago. We just got the news."

"Then how can you sit there like that. How can you even smile --- ever!"

"People have to face these things. They have to accept them. It is more painful if you do not face it than if you do. You can't hide yourself away from it. You can't change what it is."

How can you sit there so coldly and say that. That a death is just another incident to be accepted like a cut thumb or a bruised elbow.

"Both are painful and death is painful. But it more painful for those who are left behind. People are sad, mainly not for the dead, but for themselves. They picture what life will be like without those who are gone. They think of the good times they would have had in the relationships, but in almost every case the mourner is crying for himself, not for the dead who did not suffer."

But to be without life!

Anybody who is born and who held a breath of air in his lungs has lived. Life is a gift. Even a moment of it. Without it you would have been nothing, not even with the dignity of a pile of dirt.

So be, to feel, no matter how short that time may be is still living. That is something that can never be taken away not even by death which in itself is an experience. A life whether ended at six months or a century is a whole worth in its self. We can not judge our lives by the longevity of others. The one who lives a century is no more gifted than the child that lives for six months. If people could see that, they could bear their selfish pain.

He said nothing. He could barely feel his words but they did effect her. She wanted to answer. She wanted to say something but she had been so thorough and so right.

Suddenly the land speaker belated and the departure of a bus. She did not even hear where it was bound but the soldier stood and pressed her hand with his. He smiled warmly and a bit sadly and said, "My younger brother was killed two weeks ago. I do not know who it is that you have just lost but I am sorry for you not the others who have also lost their person dear to you. Help them to see and it will comfort them. Good-bye."

He put a quarter on the table and left. She watch him go. He was right and she took a deep but still nervous breath. She had not been aware of the tears which had streamed from her reddened eyes streaking her make up. She wiped her eyes with a handkerchief then she blew her nose.

Her cold grey walk back home seemed longer even though she had a bit more spirit in her step. The leaf covered side walk was still wet and the dark scrawny trees still stood in the wind. She didn't want to feel any different but she had felt a change in her talk with the soldier. His words rang true - that she was sad because of selfish reasons, but she could never really overcome that. Selfish reasons they were and she recognized them as such but they still dug their claws into her. Her sentimentality made her especially vulnerable to attacks of grief and in a sense she did feel foolish. She wasn't that stoic, she was a mother with a mother's burden of grief to bear.

Her house looked different some how. It looked particularly cold and particularly lonely. Her husband's car was there. Perhaps her daughter was there. They would have seen the telegram. They would have read it and she would have to help them. She mounted the steps slowly feeling as much as sorrow. She stopped in front of the door hesitating. She knew what she was going to say. She reached into her hand bag for her handkerchief. She dried her eyes again to make sure but she knew she would not cry. - That crying was over. She straightened her hair then with her hand she turned the cold doorknob.