

“The War Department Regrets to Inform You . . .”

Martha Weigel

WHEN Jan stepped off the bus, she looked around—where was that tall fellow with his hat over one eye, and the wide smile? No, Jan, not this time. Doug isn't here to meet you, he will never be here again. Her smile faded, and she didn't look at the bus driver as he helped her down the steps. She squared her shoulders when she walked back to get her bag. Inside the familiar bus depot, she noticed the same smells, stale cigar smoke, stale gum, whiskey, and the odor of people, that had been there so many times before.

She pushed through the crowd, noticing the many uniforms, the old people with tired faces, the young women with strained faces. The blue haze of smoke dimmed the picture, and Jan seemed to see everything as if in a dream. She was tired, and all that she could feel were her feet. They seemed so large and swollen. She looked down—no, they were the right size.

She scanned the people about her, tall ones, short ones, pushing with their baggage, trying to get seats on the outgoing bus. It had been four months since she had been here—the night that Doug had put her on the bus for the last time. He had kissed her goodbye quickly, and said, “Don't worry about me, honey, I've got you to come back to, and I'll come.” But he hadn't come—only the telegram came in his place.

“The War Department regrets to inform you . . .” Jan was pushed rudely by a young woman, who rushed to meet a tall soldier. Jan turned away, and she felt a rush of hot tears—no, Jan, don't cry, don't let down—you will never stop. She sat down on her suitcase, carefully pulling her coat down, and tucking her feet as close to the bag as possible. Why didn't they come? Would

his parents have changed—would they be glad to see her? She heard his mother's voice, "You must come down this weekend, dear. We want to see you so much."

She buried her face in her hands, and only dimly heard the sounds about her . . . "One way to Dubuque" . . . Oh, Mary, it is so good to see you and the baby" . . . "Bus for Omaha." Jan looked up, and rubbed her tired eyes. Her lips felt dry and thick, her hair was heavy on her neck. Why didn't they come? She fished in her pocket for a nickel—I had better call; maybe they didn't realize that this was the bus. She got up slowly, and laid her gloves on the suitcase. As she started for the phone booth, she noticed a couple coming in the door. Why, that's his dad, but he seems so—stooped. His overcoat was hanging, not fitting—and his mother in black with a startling white face. Her eyes tried to smile, but they were red and swollen, and the smile had a hard time coming through. Doug's father had his arm protectingly around his wife's waist—he wasn't smiling, and only his eyes gave Jan greeting.

Jan couldn't control the tears—she dropped the nickel, and rushed forward. His mother held out her arms, and Jan fell gratefully into them.

"We are so glad to see you, daughter." Jan's tears wet the black dress, and mingled with those of the other woman. It was such a relief to let the tears come at last—someone was stroking her hair. The hardest part was over—she was with Doug as close as she could ever be now.

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