

Brownie Memory

by Jed de Sousa

"Can you take a picture of us together, Mister?" asked Joan, hurriedly shoving her Brownie camera into the hands of a conductor.

"Miss, I just don't..." he replied, but was broken off by her incessant cries of "Please, please, please!" until he reluctantly raised the eyepiece to his face to frame me and her in the picture.

"I got a trainload of G.I.s to get to Portsmouth and you're only about the hundredth gal to ask me this today!" Before he squeezed off the shot, the conductor craned his head to one side and bellowed a tumultuous "Booooooard!" just as I turned to plant a giant kiss on Joan's cheek.

"Oh, Ted!" she nervously giggled as she straightened my tie so as not to give the other guys on the train ammunition against me. This day, in these circumstances, though, any of these grunts would have given their right arm to be staying home with their girl, their wife, their normal life. The war had turned the whole country upside down and it wouldn't get righted any sooner waiting on two would-be lovers to steal one last kiss on the platform of the biggest troop train headed for the coast.

But I could see that this wasn't going to be easy for either one of us. The conductor tossed the Brownie back to me and I scrambled to get my duffel up the stairs and through the maze of khaki and starch to be near a window. I had almost lost sight of Joan when I squeezed into an opening and caught her jumping up and down, frantically hollering my name and waving.

Up ahead, a gush of steam and a mighty blast from the whistle drowned out my words, but she could make them out in my lips. "I love you!" was what only she heard, the sound swallowed by a thousand other men trying to say the same thing and not one of them being heard above the din.

The train began to move in fits and starts and I could see pools of tears welling up in her eyes even this far away. I hung my right shoulder out the open window, grasping at her fingers which were just out of reach. Joan began to walk fast beside the train, looking for any hope in my eyes that all of this might have been some terrible mistake and that, just maybe, I would jump back off the train and into her arms again. We both knew that this time would come, pray as we did for yesterday to stay forever.

"I love you," I mouthed again, and she could read in every nuance of that simple statement. She could see in it the crimson shades of shared sunsets and taste the salty air of afternoons we spent together on the beach. In my lips she could see the smiles and laughter over silly jokes or listen to my reading poetry to her until late at night. Joan mouthed the same words back to me, and I wanted the love to envelop me like a warm blanket on a cold night. I thought that if there was any way that I could get off this train, she could be my savior.

But the train picked up speed and Joan was finding it hard to keep up. "Ted! TED!" she screamed and she began gesturing to me for something. "The camera, Ted! The camera!"

Omigosh! I still had it with me, and with that realization I felt it in my hand and in one motion underhanded it to her as she stopped in her tracks to catch it. My aim was off, and it landed a couple of feet from her, smashing on the ground. Joan knew that the camera would fall short of her catch and, instinctively, she snapped off her sweater and threw it around the shattered pieces of plastic on the ground, scooping it up to keep it covered. Her eyes briefly lost touch with mine, but only briefly. Eventually, they met again, but by that time the train was moving too fast for her to keep up with it.

The coast and my destiny were ahead of me and who knows what tomorrow was to bring. And somehow, I sensed that my future no longer lied with the woman on the platform, my love and my life. I watched as Joan clutched her balled sweater tightly under her chin, the tears streaming down and making dark spots on the fabric. For all the times she told me that I was her strength and her comfort, I felt totally powerless and helpless to stop her pain... and mine. With

all her wishing, she couldn't make the train stop. For her big, tough G.I., I didn't have the ability to make time stand still. As the two brown marbles of her eyes faded into the morning mist, I sunk into my seat and felt my heart sink into my chest.

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Eight weeks later, a special package returned to Joan from where she had dropped it off in the pharmacist's care. When Mister Cambridge, the druggist, brought it to her at the counter, she eyed it with great anticipation.

"Shall I open it for you, Joanie?" Mister Cambridge asked.

"Yes, yes, yes! I need this!" was all she could say. As the druggist pored over the contents, he delivered from its corners her sweater, which had been sent with the damaged camera, to keep it hidden from the light. It had been pressed and came wrapped in tissue, along with the broken shards of the Brownie camera in a small box. With this, a letter from the developers at State Photographic, to whom the camera had originally been sent.

"Dear Miss Appleton," it read; "We thank you for your patronage and we are returning the items that you originally sent to us. We regret to inform you that most of the negatives were destroyed by light entering the camera's mechanism, but we were able to recover some of the images, although their quality is less than satisfactory. We have enclosed them, along with your original shipment, at no charge...."

Hearing that, Joan delicately unwrapped the remaining item, a large stiff envelope. In it, she found only two photos, one of her taken by Ted at the beach several months back, and the other, half yellowed by exposure to the light. It was the one taken at the station, Ted's lips pressed against her face, the exposed portion of film cutting diagonally between them.

Joan began to smile and then to laugh for a moment, staring into the photo and beyond its two dimensions. As laughter turned to tears, she reached into her pocket to pull out the last letter that Ted had

sent her, the last letter he wrote to her, a day before he was killed in an ambush of his platoon. Joan neatly folded the letter around Ted's picture and placed it back into her pocket and cried into Mister Cambridge's shoulder for a very long time.