

THE POST-WAR KID
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THE POST-WAR KID

BY

Robert Traver

The telegram came to me at the plant from San Francisco. "Put a case of beer on ice," it read. "Me and MacArthur are on our way. Clem."

Nothing more. Not when he was arriving, whether by plane, train or jeep, or whether MacArthur was beast, bird or possibly a new sister-in-law. ^{That was my brother Clem every time.} "I'll be ^{seeing} ~~seeing~~ you," he'd said to me and Lou when he'd enlisted in the Marines the day after Pearl Harbor. He'd just up and quit his swell job out at the plant and enlisted. The funny part was he could have been deferred like a damn if he'd just waited... Well, the next word had been a V-mail note from the South Pacific. "Dear Lou and Leo," it ~~had~~ read, "Wing Ho sends her love. It ain't true what they say about her and her ^{them} sisters." ~~Nothing more,~~ not a line until this wire from Frisco. In the meantime we'd heard he'd been through Guadalcanal and had been wounded at Tarawa. And now he was back in the U. S. A.

That night when I got home from the plant I showed the wire to Lou. She was standing by the electric range in the kitchen wearing one of those cute peasant aprons over her party dress. Her dark hair was swept up on her head, soft-like, with one curly strand running down her neck. I hated to see Lou having to mess around in the kitchen. Our last maid had quit to work out at the plant, so Lou had to get the meals again, like she used to when we were first married. But she was a good scout and never complained. I never minded Lou golfing or playing bridge in the afternoon. After all, the poor kid had to keep herself occupied somehow, with me away all day. The Lord never blessed us with any children to tie her down. The best in the world is none too good for Lou.

Lou was staring down at ^{Clem's} ~~the~~ telegram. "Oh," she said. "He's coming back." She said it in a sort of flat tone of voice, like she was disappointed or something, so I went over and put my arms around her.

"That's O. K. Lou," I said, patting her shoulder. "He won't stay long--he never holds still very long, anywhere. We'll put him in the maid's old room and give him a key and he can run out tom-cattin' to his heart's content. We've got to let him come here. After all, Lou, there's no where else for him to go since Mom died. Come on, smile for Leo like a good girl." I tried to kiss her, but she pulled away, pouting out her lower lip so prettily like she does.

"Oh," Lou said again, still staring at the telegram, which had fallen to the floor.

~~As I sat later when I came home~~ Clem was lying on the sofa in the front room, with his feet up on Lou's new slip covers. I wondered how he worked it. What looked like a bright-eyed black and white teddy-bear was seated on his chest. Clem was pulling its ears. His Marine necktie was tied around ^{its} ~~the bear's~~ neck. ^{The thing was alive.} There was a flock of empty beer bottles standing around on the floor near the sofa.

"What in hell is that," I said, pointing at the dwarf bear.

"Oh hello, Kid," Clem said. Clem had always called me that, even though I was two years older than he was. He sat up, dumping the teddy-bear on the floor and knocking over ^{some of} the beer bottles. "That's my pal MacArthur," Clem said, ^{came stark hands} "Mac, meet me brudder, Leo." Clem winked at the bear. "Leo's a brand new C-card assistant vice-president out at the plant--an essential occupation you know--in charge of production for the wah!

I could feel my face getting red as I shook hands with Clem. "Welcome home, Clem," I said. It was the same old needling again. ^{Could since we were kids} Clem always had a smiling, sly way of making me feel like a goddam fool. Clem reached down and clinked one beer bottle against the other.

"Hi out there!" he called to the kitchen. "We've got a cash customer--fetch out a round of beer. Bring one for yourself, Sis." Clem winked at me, talking out of the side of his mouth like a carnival barker. "Got to celebrate the return of Clem--the homicidal hero of Tarawa--boom-dee-ay! ^{Yep! was so goddam scared he} He fell out of a landing barge an' snapped his whizzle string--an' got decorated!"

Lou came hurrying out from the kitchen with three cold bottles of beer and no glasses. "Welcome home, Clem," I said again, as we stood around and clinked bottles and drank. I thought it was pretty fine the way Lou was entering into the spirit of ~~the~~ things, especially when I knew how she loathed beer, on account of her figure, and would never drink out of a bottle, even back in the dry days when we used to go out and park in my old roadster, ^{anything} ~~and~~ ^{when} it would have been damn handy...

"Isn't that cute," Lou said to me, smiling and looking all flushed and pretty. Clem had given his bottle of beer to MacArthur, and the little devil was holding the bottle in his front paws, spilling some on the slip covers, and guzzling like a veteran.

"Yeah," I said, "it's cute as hell. When do we eat?"

↑

"Steak!" Clem shouted across to me, as Lou came in ^{carrying} with three sizzling T-bones ^{on a platter.}
"How do you promote it? Another priority you ^{get} got at the plant?"

Lou laughed and started to explain ^{Vogel,} the little arrangement we had with Rudolph, the butcher, but I shook my head at her, no. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, dear brother Clement," I said real sarcastic-like, ^{just as Clem would.} imitating Clem. Clem leaned back and laughed his loud, clucking laugh and cut off a piece of steak for MacArthur. Mac sat on a kitchen stool beside Clem, swaying and blinking in wet-eyed adoration. I swear he was a little potted. ~~The bear,~~ I mean.

Clem laughed and talked and told stories all during the meal. Come to think of it ^{when he laughed the corners of his eyes wrinkled and he showed his strong, white teeth.} all his life he had laughed at everything. [^] "The sky's the limit," was his motto. I sat watching him devouring his steak and feeding and patting his goddam bear. During dessert he brought out ^{several} some frayed and greasy snap-shots of some ^{grinning} naked native girls they'd found on one of those Hottentot islands. ^{They didn't leave on a stretch.} Sometimes it makes me sick to think of our boys ^{out there} fighting and dying for the likes of them. Sometimes I wonder what our boys are doing over there, anyway... These snaps were pretty disgusting, but Lou laughed and laughed and said something about Judy O'Grady and the Colonel's lady.

I tried to get Clem to tell us something about his war experiences, and ^{of} our grand overall strategy ^{I had been reading a lot about it in the Reader's Digest.} as he saw it. ^{Clem} But ~~we~~ just peered around stealthily and wagged his finger at me and said, "Ssh! Even the walls have ears...It's all a dark military secret.

I'm on a Mission ^{of} Mystery. How do I know you're not in the hire of ^{Herman the Vermin?} Holman? Or the tool of Tojo?" ^{Clem leered at me.} What the hell ^{were} are you going to do with a man like that? So I ~~just~~ let him go and ^{just} ~~sat~~ watched and listened. Lou sat with her head cupped in her hands, gaily laughing and ~~just~~ drinking in this line of guff Clem was dishing out. It kind of burned my cork. Clem did not seem to understand the significance and dignity of the things for which we were fighting.

^{I watched him as} He sat there in his wrinkled Marine clothes. Somehow, ^{his uniform} though, they looked like they had been tailored ^{for him} on Fifth Avenue. That guy always had a way of looking easy and graceful even in a suit of coveralls. He was ^{dirty} deeply tanned by beer and sun and Scotch,

Another thing, he had developed a nervous twitch. Every now and then he would wince and close his eyes ~~too~~ as though he had a ^{sharp} pain inside. Or like a man that was trying to blot out a bad dream. But most of the time but he did not look healthy. His face was hungry-looking and kind of yellowish underneath. I noticed for the first time his hair was definitely thinning. ^{And} He was getting as gray as an outhouse rat.

Mr. Langford...

Clem was still at it. "So Joe and ^{my pal} ~~I~~ ^(this other Marine in our outfit) tossed dice--my dice--and Joe lost. So he married the girl. Merle was her name. Joe ^{said} ~~says~~ that after the War he and Merle ^{and} ~~the~~ ^{the kid} ~~was~~ ^{was} ~~going to~~ ^{was} ~~live in~~ ^{was} ~~Sydney.~~ Her old man runs a pub there. Yup, ~~good old Merle...~~ "That's what ^{god old} you said..."

I ~~put in my ear~~ "Well, isn't he going to do it," Lou asked.

"Isn't he going to do what?" Clem said.

"Be a man and go back and live in Sydney?" Lou said, smiling.

Clem ~~answered~~ ^{answered} ~~and said~~ ^{very} ~~very~~ ^{quietly}:

"No, Joe isn't going back. ^{You see,} ~~We~~ ^{we} left him behind at Tarawa. ~~I was there and saw it.~~

Lou was all ^{sympathy} ~~compassion~~. "Oh, I'm sorry, Clem. I didn't know..."

Clem's ^{face} ~~bad~~ ^{big} ~~big~~ ^{twitch} ~~twitch~~ ^{again.} ~~Then~~ ^{he} ~~he~~ ^{smiled} at Lou and said real softly. "Yes, now. I was there and saw it. Joe isn't going back -- How's for another round of beer?"

Even the beer quit kicking its drops.

After dinner I maneuvered Clem into the front hall. "For God's sake man, don't you ever wash?" I told him. "I thought they taught you guys cleanliness in the army--"

Clem wheeled on me, and for a minute I thought he was going to let me have it. Then he laughed his irritating laugh and began whispering, "Marines, brother--M-a-r-i-n-e-s!" ~~He~~ ^{it} spelled out in a stage whisper.

"No offense, Clem," I said. "But you might wash the lip stick off your neck. What was she--a modern vampire?"

"Oh, that," Clem said, ^{uncertainly feeling his neck,} and so help me I thought he was going to blush. That would have been something. "Yeah--I wired ahead and had one of my old babes meet me when I got in this afternoon. The little Farney number. Remember the lovely Francine?"

"Yes," I said. "Her name's Novak now and she ^{lives} ~~is~~ out in Seattle. Come again, brother. I don't mind who was mugging you but it looks like hell at the dinner table."

This time I swear he was blushing. I should have had my Brownie.

For a week I didn't see much of Clem. He seemed to sleep all day and was usually ^{with the car} out preparing to take a new ^{beachhead} by the time I got home from the plant. And ^{even} Lou was out quite a few nights on her Red Cross work. ^{Another} ~~One~~ night Lou left a note that she and Clem had gone out to dine and dance. She didn't say where so I listened to Gabriel Heater and went to bed. I didn't mind Clem using the car as I had a C card and was on excellent terms with my gas station. My gas man and I had positively fallen in love. Just the week before he'd picked me up three pre-war six-ply tires. And I was piling up quite a collection of ear rings and bobby pins that I found ^{after Clem's date,} in the car. I figured they'd help out a lot in the next scrap metal drive.

A couple of times I tried to get Clem out to the plant to meet the old gang. I told him that after all he should be building his fences for a good job after the war. We executives ^{out} at the plant were doing quite a lot of post-war planning. But Clem wouldn't go and would just laugh and ^{call for} ~~have~~ another beer. I tried to outline to Clem some of our problems of conversion, when we would all return to free American enterprise, without constant government ^{Washington} ~~interference~~ ^{from the bureaucrats.}

Insert

"Why no, Clem," I said. "We get regular bulletins on these things from our Association. Besides, I've been reading quite a lot about it in the ~~President's~~ Readers' Digest.^{*} It's one of the vital problems of the day — —"

"Oh, ^{so} you get ~~that~~ ^{all these lovely} ^{original} ^{ideas all} condensed and pre-digested for you," Clem said, real ^{bitter}-like. "You don't even have to think, is that it?"

"^{Clem,} I don't think you're being fair about it," I said.

"Yeah," Clem went on needling. "Yeah. Someday some genius is going to condense the Gettysburg Address. Or maybe even the Lord's Prayer. Won't that be wonderful ^{when we} can supplicate Him in, say, seven words!" (*Thun a space*)

Clem just looked at me kind of dead pan. "Where do you get all those ^{purty,} lovely, drooly words, brother?" he said. "Out of the Congressional Record?"

The ^{evening} night Lou drove over to visit her mother in Fowlerville I tried again to get Clem to go out to the plant. We were having a lecture on post-war planning by an expert we'd ^{brought} flown out from Washington.

"Come on out and meet the boys, Clem," I said. "You and I haven't had a good visit since you came home." Clem just stared at me. "Come on, Clem, we'll visit the City Club after and hoist a few." I laughed. "Remember when we used to deliver papers at the Club? Now I'm on the goddam membership committee. Ain't that sumpin? Come on, Clem."

Clem put his arm around my shoulder. I'd never seen him look so ^{grayish and} old, and ~~gray~~. "Leo," he said, and his voice was kind of husky. "Leo, I can't do it. In the first place I've got a date--but that doesn't matter." He looked at me and I swear there were tears in his eyes. "I can't do it, Kid." He wearily shook his head. "I'd scream. I'm telling you I'd scream and blow my top. Don't ask me why." He paused and kind of sighed. "I wouldn't know why. All I know is that maybe you can reconvert your goddam plant-- but none of you will ever in Christ's world reconvert me. Goodnight, Kid. I'm sorry..."

That night ^{after the lecture} I got home around midnight. I was just climbing in the hay when the phone rang. I took it on the upstairs extension. It was Lou. She said the car had broken down at Groves Mill--a little town on the way to her mother's--^{and that} she had to spend the night there. It seemed ^{to me} like she was on the verge of tears.

^{Look,} "I'll grab a cab and come and get you, Hon," I said.

"No--no. I'll be all right," ^{Lou said,} "But don't phone Mama or anything. She'll just worry. I'll see you--" Then we were cut off. I tried to call her back but it was no dice. So I went downstairs and smoked a cigaret and had a bottle of beer. Then I went upstairs. I looked in Clem's darkened bedroom. I could hear someone breathing. I switched on the light. It was MacArthur, the Koko Kola bear, sitting up in bed, propped against a pillow.

He looked at me, watchfully, blinking his ^{shiny black} eyes.

"Goodnight, Mac," I said, snapping off the light. Mac didn't say a word.

NO SPACE

The next day I got a phone call at the plant. It was Clem.

"This is goodbye, Kid," he said. "I just got my orders."

"Look, Clem," I said, "I'll come right in."

"No, no--I'm on my way." Clem said. "Goodbye, Kid."

"But Clem, wait--I'll--"

"I'll write you from Tokyo, Kid. Goodbye," Clem said.

"Goodbye, Clem. Good luck," I said.

2.

It was just seven weeks later that we got word Clem had been killed at Saipan. "In heroic defense of his country," the ^{Commandant's} notice read. ^{Somehow I wasn't too surprised.} Lou took the news pretty hard. For days she acted like she was in a trance. ^{It was really pretty bad. dancing and the like,} I tried to take her out, but she wouldn't go. So I spent nearly every night at home with her. Naturally, I missed quite a few lectures at the plant.

~~the plant~~ Then we got Dr. Krantz, the eminent psychologist, to fly out ^{from New York} and talk to us. I guess he is one of the best in his game. I tried to take Lou with me ^{to listen to him,} but she wouldn't go. She said she was busy with the Red Cross ladies and for me to go alone. ~~So I went along to the lecture.~~

I'm surely glad I didn't ^{miss that lecture.} I was sorry Lou missed ^{it,} this lecture. It was the best we had yet in our post-war series. ^{really} That guy Krantz knows his stuff. That night when I got home Lou was lying awake in her bed. ~~So~~ I undressed and climbed in my twin bed and we lay there in the dark and I told her about Doc Krantz's talk. It was called "Industry and the Psychological Problems of Demobilization."

I told Lou how Doc had given us the low-down on ^{how} ~~that~~ the physical problems of plant reconversion were not the whole story. I repeated how Doc told us that one of our biggest

problems was to get the returned veterans back on the beam again--"once again attuned to the machine," is the way Doc put it. He said that many of the boys out there would be so mentally numbed by the horrors of war that farsighted industrialists would have to lay elaborate plans for mental reconversion, just like we would have to change around our machines to turn out refrigerators again instead of tanks. He said that "a blighted sense of social responsibility" on the part of many of the boys "might prove incompatible with the routine, assembly-line technique of the American way of life." *He really laid it out cold, in language anyone could understand. I could hear Lou turning in*
"You know, Lou," I said. "After hearing Doc tonight I don't feel quite so bad about Clem..."

Lou didn't answer.

"Are you asleep, Lou?" I said.

"No, Leo," Lou said

"Did you hear what I said about Clem?"

"Yes," Lou whispered in the dark.

So I told Lou ^{about} how Clem nearly broke down the night, I asked him to go out to the plant and what he ^{had} said about blowing his top and all. I told ^{her} I figured that Clem was just the kind of guy Doc was ^{talk}ing about, and how ^{afraid} I was he would never ^{have} been able to ^{again} take his place in the normal life of the community--

"Leo," Lou whispered.

Lou was crying. I could hear her sobbing in the dark. "Leo," she whispered.

"Yes, Hon, What is it?" I said.

"We--we're going to have a baby," Lou said.

So help me,
And that's how Lou broke the ^{big} news to me. *Just as simple as that. And me running off at the mouth about post-war planning.*
We're going to call it Clement or Clementine. You see, we don't know yet ^{which} ~~it~~ ^{one} it's going to be.

Written by:
John D. Voelker
Ishpeming, Michigan

[1945]

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Robert Traver

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"Hi out there!" he called to the kitchen. "We've got a cash customer--fetch out a round of beer. Bring one for yourself, Sis." Clem winked at me, talking out of the side of his mouth like a carnival barker. "Got to celebrate the return of Clem--the homicidal hero of Tarawa--boom-dee-ay! Yep! He was so goddam scared he fell out of a landing barge an' snapped his whizzle string--an' got decorated!"

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"Yeah," I said, "it's cute as hell. When do we eat?"

"Steak!" Clem shouted across to me, as Lou came in carrying three sizzling T-bones on a platter. "How do you promote it? Another priority you get at the plant?"

Lou laughed and started to explain the little arrangement we had with Vogel, the butcher, but I shook my head at her, no. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, dear brother Clement," I said real sarcastic-like, just as Clem would ^{of} Clem leaned back and laughed his loud, clucking laugh and cut off a piece of steak for MacArthur. Mac sat on a kitchen stool beside Clem, swaying and blinking in wet-eyed adoration. I swear he was a little potted--the bear, I mean.

Clem laughed and talked and told stories all during the meal. Come to think of it all his life he had laughed at everything. When he laughed the corners of his eyes wrinkled and he showed his strong, white teeth. I sat watching him devouring his steak and feeding and patting his goddam bear. During dessert he brought ^{out} several frayed and greasy snap-shots of some grinning native girls they'd found on one of those Hottentot islands. They didn't have on a stitch. Sometimes it makes me sick to think of our boys--out there fighting and dying for the likes of them. Sometimes I wonder what our boys are doing over there, anyway... These snaps were pretty disgusting, but Lou laughed and laughed and said something about Judy O'Grady and the Colonel's lady.

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I watched him as he sat there in his wrinkled Marine clothes. Somehow his uniform looked like it had been tailored for him on Fifth Avenue. That guy always had a way of looking easy and graceful even ⁱⁿ a dirty suit of coveralls. He was deeply tanned by beer and sun and Scotch, but he did not look healthy. His face was hungry-looking and kind of yellowish underneath. I noticed for the first time his hair was definitely thinning. And he was getting as gray as an outhouse rat. Another thing, he had developed a nervous twitch. Every now and then he would wince and close his eyes as though he had a sharp pain inside. Or like a man that was trying to blot out a bad dream. But most of the time he laughed...

Clem was still at it. "So my pal Joe and this other Marine in our outfit tossed the dice--my dice--and Joe lost. So he married the girl. Merle was her name. Joe said that after the War he and Merle and the kid were going to live in Sydney. Her old man runs a pub there. Yup. That's what good old Joe said..."

"Well, isn't he going to do it," Lou asked.

"Isn't he going to do what?" Clem said.

"Be a man and go back and live in Sydney?" Lou said, smiling.

Clem answered very quietly: "No, Joe isn't going back. You see, we left him behind at Tarawa."

Lou was all sympathy. "Oh, I'm sorry, Clem. I didn't know..."

Clem's face twitched again. It grew quiet around the table. Even the bear quit licking its chops. Then Clem smiled at Lou and said real softly. "Yes, Hon. I was there and saw it. Joe isn't going back-- How's for another round of beer?"

After dinner I maneuvered Clem into the front hall. "For God's sake man, don't you ever wash?" I told him. "I thought they taught you guys cleanliness in the army--"

Clem wheeled on me, and for a minute I thought he was going to let me have it. Then he laughed his irritating laugh and began whispering, "Marines, brother--M-a-r-i-n-e-s!" He spelled it out in a stage whisper.

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"Yes," I said. "Her name's Novak now and she lives in Seattle. Come again, brother. I don't mind who was mugging you--but it looks like hell at the dinner table."

This time I swear he was blushing. I should have had my Brownie.

For a week I didn't see much of Clem. He seemed to sleep all day and was usually out with the car preparing to take a new beachhead by the time I got home from the plant. And even Lou was out quite a few nights on her Red Cross work. Another night Lou left a note that she and Clem had gone out to dine and dance. She didn't say where so I listened to Gabriel Heffer and went to bed. I didn't mind Clem using the car as I had a C card and was on excellent terms with my gas station. My gas man and I had positively fallen in love. Just the week before he'd picked me up three pre-war six-ply tires. And I was piling up quite a collection of ear rings and bobby pins that I found in the car after Clem's dates. I figured they'd help out a lot in the next scrap metal drive.

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Clem just looked at me kind of dead pan. "Where do you get all those purty, drooly words, brother?" he said. "Out of the Congressional Record?"

"Why no, Clem," I said. "We get regular bulletins on these things from our Association. Besides, I've been reading quite a lot about it in the Readers' Digest. It's one of the vital problems of the day--"

"Oh, so you get all these lovely original ideas all condensed and pre-digested for you," Clem said, real bitter-like. "You don't even have to think, is that it?"

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The next day I got a phone call at the plant. It was Clem.

"This is goodbye, Kid," he said. "I just got my orders."

"Look, Clem," I said, "I'll come right in."

"No, no--I'm on my way." Clem said. "Goodbye, Kid."

"But Clem, wait--I'll--"

"I'll write you from Tokyo, Kid. Goodbye," Clem said.

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"You know, Lou," I said. "After hearing Doc tonight I don't feel quite so bad about Clem..."

Lou didn't answer.

"Are you asleep, Lou?" I said.

"No, Leo," Lou said.

"Did you hear what I said about Clem?"

"Yes," Lou whispered in the dark.

So I told Lou about how Clem nearly broke down that night, the night I asked him to go out to the plant--and what he had said about blowing his top and all. I told Lou I figured that Clem was just the kind of guy Doc was

talking about, and how I was afraid he would never have been able again to take his place in the normal life of the community--

"Leo," Lou whispered.

Lou was crying. I could hear her sobbing in the dark. "Leo," she whispered.

"Yes, Hon. What is it?" I said.

"We--we're going to have a baby," Lou said.

So help me that's how Lou broke the big news to me. Just as simple as that. And me running off at the mouth about post-war planning... We're going to call it Clement or Clementine. You see, we don't know yet which one it's going to be.

Written by:
John D. Voelker
Ishpeming, Michigan

THE POST-WAR KID

by
Robert Traver

The telegram came to me at the plant from San Francisco. "Put a case of beer on ice," it read. "Me and MacArthur are on our way. Clem."

Nothing more. Not when he was arriving, whether by plane, train or jeep, or whether MacArthur was beast, bird or possibly a new sister-in-law. That was my brother Clem every time. "I'll be seeing you," he'd said to me and Lou when he'd enlisted in the Marines the day after Pearl Harbor. He'd just up and quit his swell job out at the plant and enlisted. The funny part was he could have been deferred like a damn if he'd just waited... Well, the next word had been a V-mail note from the South Pacific. "Dear Lou and Leo," it read, "Wing Ho sends her love. It ain't true what they say about her and her sisters." Then not a line until this wire from Frisco. In the meantime we'd heard he'd been through Guadacanal and had been wounded at Tarawa. And now he was back in the U. S. A.

That night when I got home from the plant I showed the wire to Lou. She was standing by the electric range in the kitchen wearing one of those cute peasant aprons over her party dress. Her dark hair was swept up on her head, soft-like, with one curly strand running down her neck. I hated to see Lou having to mess around in the kitchen. Our last maid had quit to work out at the plant, so Lou had to get the meals again, like she used to when we were first married. But she was a good scout and never complained. I never minded Lou golfing or playing bridge in the afternoon. After all, the poor kid had to keep herself occupied somehow, with me away all day. The Lord never blessed us with any children to tie her down. The best in the world is none too good for Lou.

Lou was staring down at Clem's telegram. "Oh," she said. "He's coming back." She said it in a sort of flat tone of voice, like she was disappointed or something, so I went over and put my arms around her.

"That's O. K. Lou," I said, patting her shoulder. "He won't stay long--he never holds still very long, anywhere. We'll put him in the maid's old room and give him a key and he can run out tom-cattin' to his heart's content. We've got to let him come here. After all, Lou, there's no where else for him to go since Mom died. Come on, smile for Leo like a good girl." I tried to kiss her, but she pulled away, pouting out her lower lip so prettily like she does.

"Oh," Lou said again, still staring at the telegram, which had fallen to the floor.

Clem was lying on the sofa in the front room with his feet up on Lou's new slip covers. I wondered how he worked it. What looked like a bright-eyed black and white teddy-bear was ^{sitting} ~~seated~~ on his chest. Clem was pulling its ears. His Marine necktie was tied around its neck. The thing was alive. There was a flock of empty beer bottles standing around on the floor near the sofa.

"What in hell is that," I said, pointing at the dwarf bear.

"Oh hello, Kid," Clem said. Clem had always called me that, even though I was two years older than he was. He sat up, dumping the teddy-bear on the floor and knocking over some of the beer bottles. "That's my pal MacArthur," Clem said. "Mac, meet ~~me~~ brudder, Leo." Clem winked at the bear. "Leo's a brand new C-card assistant vice-president out at the plant--an essential occupation you know--in charge of production for the wah!"

I could feel my face getting red as I shook hands with Clem. "Welcome home, Clem," I said. It was the same old needling again. Ever since we were kids Clem always had a smiling, sly way of making me feel like a goddam fool. Clem reached down and clinked one beer bottle against the other.

"Hi out there!" he called to the kitchen. "We've got a cash customer--fetch out a round of beer. Bring one for yourself, Sis." Clem winked at me, talking out of the side of his mouth like a carnival barker. "Got to celebrate the return of Clem--the homicidal hero of Tarawa--boom-dee-ay! Yep! He was so goddam scared he fell out of a landing barge an' snapped his whizzle string--an' got decorated!"

Lou came hurrying out from the kitchen with three cold bottles of beer and no glasses. "Welcome home, Clem," I said again, as we stood around and clinked bottles and drank. I thought it was pretty fine the way Lou was entering into the spirit of things, especially when I knew how she loathed beer, on account of her figure, and would never drink anything out of a bottle, even back in the dry days when we used to go out and park in my old roadster, when it would have been damn handy...

"Isn't that cute," Lou said to me, smiling and looking all flushed and pretty. Clem had given his bottle of beer to MacArthur, and the little devil was holding the bottle in his front paws, spilling some on the slip covers, and guzzling like a veteran.

"Yeah," I said, "it's cute as hell. When do we eat?"

"Steak!" Clem shouted across to me, as Lou came in carrying three sizzling T-bones on a platter. "How do you promote it? Another priority you get at the plant?"

Lou laughed and started to explain the little arrangement we had with Vogel, the butcher, but I shook my head at her, no. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, dear brother Clement," I said real sarcastic-like, just as Clem would *of*. Clem leaned back and laughed his loud, clucking laugh and cut off a piece of steak for MacArthur. Mac sat on a kitchen stool beside Clem, swaying and blinking in wet-eyed adoration. I swear he was a little potted--the bear, I mean.

Clem laughed and talked and told stories all during the meal. Come to think of it all his life he had laughed at everything. When he laughed the corners of his eyes wrinkled and he showed his strong, white teeth. I sat watching him devouring his steak and feeding and patting his goddam bear. During dessert he brought ^{out} several frayed and greasy snap-shots of some grinning native girls they'd found on one of those Hottentot islands. They didn't have on a stitch. Sometimes it makes me sick to think of our boys--out there fighting and dying for the likes of them. Sometimes I wonder what our boys are doing over there, anyway... These snaps were pretty disgusting, but Lou laughed and laughed and said something about Judy O'Grady and the Colonel's lady.

I tried to get Clem to tell us something about his war experiences, and of our grand overall strategy as he saw it. I had been reading a lot about it in the Reader's Digest. But Clem just peered around stealthily and wagged his finger at me and said, "Ssh! Even the walls have ears... It's all a dark military secret. I'm on a Mission of Mystery. How do I know you're not in the hire of Herman the Vermin? Or the treacherous tool of Tojo?" Clem leered at me. What the hell were you going to do with a man like that? So I let him go and just watched and listened. Lou sat with her head cupped in her hands, gaily laughing and drinking in this line of guff Clem was dishing out. It kind of burned my cork. Clem did not seem to understand the significance and dignity of the things for which we were fighting.

I watched him as he sat there in his wrinkled Marine clothes. Somehow his uniform looked like it had been tailored for him on Fifth Avenue. That guy always had a way of looking easy and graceful even ⁱⁿ a dirty suit of coveralls. He was deeply tanned by beer and sun and Scotch, but he did not look healthy. His face was hungry-looking and kind of yellowish underneath. I noticed for the first time his hair was definitely thinning. And he was getting as gray as an outhouse rat. Another thing, he had developed a nervous twitch. Every now and then he would wince and close his eyes as though he had a sharp pain inside. Or like a man that was trying to blot out a bad dream. But most of the time he laughed...

Clem was still at it. "So my pal Joe and this other Marine in our outfit tossed the dice--my dice--and Joe lost. So he married the girl. Merle was her name. Joe said that after the War he and Merle and the kid were going to live in Sydney. Her old man runs a pub there. Yup. That's what good old Joe said..."

"Well, isn't he going to do it," Lou asked.

"Isn't he going to do what?" Clem said.

"Be a man and go back and live in Sydney?" Lou said, smiling.

Clem answered very quietly: "No, Joe isn't going back. You see, we left him behind at Tarawa."

Lou was all sympathy. "Oh, I'm sorry, Clem. I didn't know..."

Clem's face twitched again. It grew quiet around the table. Even the bear quit licking its chops. Then Clem smiled at Lou and said real softly. "Yes, Hon. I was there and saw it. Joe isn't going back-- How's for another round of beer?"

After dinner I maneuvered Clem into the front hall. "For God's sake man, don't you ever wash?" I told him. "I thought they taught you guys cleanliness in the army--"

Clem wheeled on me, and for a minute I thought he was going to let me have it. Then he laughed his irritating laugh and began whispering, "Marines, brother--M-a-r-i-n-e-s!" He spelled it out in a stage whisper.

"No offense, Clem," I said. "But you might wash the lip stick off your neck. What was she--a modern vampire?"

"Oh, that," Clem said, uncertainly feeling his neck, and so help me I thought he was going to blush. That would have been something. "Yeah--I wired ahead and had one of my old babes meet me when I got in this afternoon. The little Farney number. Remember the lovely Francine?"

"Yes," I said. "Her name's Novak now and she lives in Seattle. Come again, brother. I don't mind who was mugging you--but it looks like hell at the dinner table."

This time I swear he was blushing. I should have had my Brownie.

For a week I didn't see much of Clem. He seemed to sleep all day and was usually out with the car preparing to take a new beachhead by the time I got home from the plant. And even Lou was out quite a few nights on her Red Cross work. Another night Lou left a note that she and Clem had gone out to dine and dance. She didn't say where so I listened to Gabriel Heater^t and went to bed. I didn't mind Clem using the car as I had a C card and was on excellent terms with my gas station. My gas man and I had positively fallen in love. Just the week before he'd picked me up three pre-war six-ply tires. And I was piling up quite a collection of ear rings and bobby pins that I found in the car after Clem's dates. I figured they'd help out a lot in the next scrap metal drive.

A couple of times I tried to get Clem out to the plant to meet the old gang. I told him that after all he should be building his fences for a good job after the war. We executives out at the plant were doing quite a lot of post-war planning. But Clem wouldn't go and would just laugh and call for another beer. I tried to outline to Clem some of our problems of conversion, when we would all return to free American enterprise, without constant governmental interference from the Washington bureaucrats.

Clem just looked at me kind of dead pan. "Where do you get all those purty, drooly words, brother?" he said. "Out of the Congressional Record?"

"Why no, Clem," I said. "We get regular bulletins on these things from our Association. Besides, I've been reading quite a lot about it in the Readers' Digest. It's one of the vital problems of the day--"

"Oh, so you get all these lovely original ideas all condensed and pre-digested for you," Clem said, real bitter-like. "You don't even have to think, is that it?"

"Clem, I don't think you're being fair about it," I said.

"Yeah," Clem went on needling. "Yeah. Someday some genius is going to condense the Gettysburg Address. Or maybe even the Lord's Prayer. Won't that be wonderful--when we can supplicate Him in, say, seven words!"

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