A Gold Stripe and a Star

Jean Marquis*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

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Jane was a bright green flash in the two-tone block of khaki and navy blue as she walked up the wide stone stairway to the train shed. But she felt at one with their color—a part of it—because Bill was beside her—navy blue with one gold stripe and a star.

She stole a glance at him and smiled a little, liking the straight look of his profile under the diagonal line of his officer's cap—thinking, as she had so many times before, how different and somehow stronger it looked when he was concentrating on something as he was now—wedging the misshapen bag into a series of gaps mid-passage.

Too soon they reached the top of the stairs, and Jane heard the sharp click of her heels dully as they walked over to join the buzzing crowd beneath the complicated white on black of the schedule board.

“I don’t want to look,” Jane thought, lowering her eyes to the disorderly clusters of feet, shuffling and pausing. “There’s something so final about seeing a time—trains don’t wait just because you want them to—”

“There it is, Janie,” Bill said, on the crest of an indrawn breath. “The Sportsman—Indianapolis, Richmond, Norfolk—Track 6—Leaving on time.”

He looked down at her, searchingly. “I’ll have to get on and get a seat when they open the gate. That means we have about five minutes—”

Jane nodded, tossing back her straight blonde hair, and settling her jaw in a firm line to match the tightness that was closing in on her heart.

Track 6 was at the end—the gate in a dimly lit corner, and already service men and a few civilians had begun to form in a vague line. Jane leaned back against the ribbed, dry heat of a radiator and felt her eyes drawn to the open face of the large station clock above the stairs. Two twenty-six.

Bill lowered his bag to the floor, and then came over to stand
in front of her—so close that all of the khaki was gone—the world was a dizzying mass of navy blue, and Bill’s grey eyes, locked on hers.

“No time for words, is it, darling?” Bill murmured softly. Jane watched his lips—wanting to remember how they looked forming every word.

“No,” she answered, pushing her hands flat against the metal—not feeling that it was too hot to touch. Inside of her, the words were aching, crying out to be spoken, but she knew that if she dared let them escape they would be swept away by the hard knot of a sob that waited, throbbing, just underneath.

The scarlet line of her mouth twisted in a pain that was almost physical—a deep regret for the words that could not be spoken—a plaint against a world that could so easily cast aside the compelling rightness of their love.

She searched the depths of Bill’s eyes for a flicker of answering torment, and found there only an immediate sadness—conscious of the moment. She remembered the eager, vital edge of his voice when he had told her about his ship and his crew. The seventeen-year-old lad who had so completely caught his sympathy and understanding, the “exec” who would guide the landless weeks and months ahead—would set the stage for a glorious fellowship or mutiny. His eyes were a distant reflection of smooth deck and thin horizon line when he spoke of those things—and she sensed the sharp, unintentional cruelty of the many times when they would eclipse her from his mind.

And then her own mind looked beyond—beyond the large impersonality of the war-mad station to the warm closeness of her sorority house back at school. There she found friendship, as she always had, but it would never again be enough to close the portals of her longing for even a moment. Even the world in which she moved was a constant reminder—with streams of boys in navy blue massing the sloping campus walks.

Her heart moved with the large minute-hand of the clock as it clicked down to two-thirty—and she felt the cold rush of air on her feet as the gate swung open and the line began to move out.

Jane watched the tight muscle leap against Bill’s cheek. “This is it, I guess,” he said. His arms closed around her and she knew the tormenting tenderness of a kiss that meant, this time, not just “so long,” but “good-bye, my darling, until—”

She clenched her hands on the smooth shelf of his shoulders—
bit back the last-minute impulse to let the words come, and the sob, too. Did he know what she was feeling without that—would he want to know, or was it something to be kept inside, for her alone?

“I can’t say it either, darling,” Bill muttered into her hair. “Please try to read between the thoughts—and know that I’ll be thinking of you every minute—thinking of you just as you are now.”

“—I’ll be thinking of you every minute—.” Then he didn’t understand—he couldn’t see now how much more keenly she would know the incompleteness of every minute and hour until they were together again.

She could say, “Take care of yourself, darling—just for me.” She felt the hollow echo of her words as they came out, but the corners of her lips lifted in salute.

The sob was a fire within her as she watched Bill’s broad back disappear through the gate. And the sob became an emblem, stamped on her heart—a shining emblem against a field of navy blue—a gold stripe and a star.