On a Strange Sound

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Abstract

A GIRL hears a bugle at Iowa State, and she wonders at the strange sound. She studies her home economics, and the campus is green, and a uniform is something she sees going into a movie downtown. And then she reads in her newspaper that her country is at war, and before she is accustomed to war, with its pleadings that she give her money and accept less food, she hears a strange sound: a bugle, whining over her campus where only the bells were heard before...
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A girl hears a bugle at Iowa State, and she wonders at the strange sound. She studies her home economics, and the campus is green, and a uniform is something she sees going into a movie downtown. And then she reads in her newspaper that her country is at war, and before she is accustomed to war, with its pleadings that she give her money and accept less food, she hears a strange sound: a bugle, whining over her campus where only the bells were heard before.

Why doesn’t she stop when she hears it? Why doesn’t she stop walking and marvel at its strangeness?

She does not stop because she is one of a million who do not stop and marvel at their war. It has come upon them suddenly, and yet it has crept in among them without their even noticing. It is one thing to see a man dead, and it is another to go on living so that more do not die like him. A thousand men in uniform, on a college campus, is not a strange thing when it happens slowly and in the relentless, calm, almost imperceptible way in which a nation fighting a war trains its men.

In the first years she could not understand why men should give a year of their lives in military service. The nation waited for her to understand, and then the nation called its men into service, and the girl watched them go, and it was not strange to her because it was happening around her, and things that happen around her are not strange. Nor did it seem more strange to her that younger men, boys, left for the military service, and that the country was really fighting, and that now her food was rationed and she did not ride in her car, and her campus was no longer green, but olive drab and navy blue.
And this will go on for two years more, or maybe three, or six, or ten, and this girl will not walk on her campus any more. But another will walk there, and this one will never have seen the green, only the olive drab and the navy blue; so it will not seem strange to her when the bugle whines.

America is getting used to a bugle. America will be whirled around and down the whine of a hundred bugles, and one day the sound of the familiar whine will stop; then the silence will be strange. People will stop walking across their campus; they will listen to the unfamiliar silence. “Is this the silence that is called peace?” they will say. “How silent the campus is, and how green.”

Yes, and the thousand men in blue and the thousand men in drab will understand more than some, and more than the girl who heard the bugle; it is the silence for which they have been waiting.

10:30
Keith Shillington

I stand and watch my beakers boil and fume
And see the gases from their wide mouths spewed
To float in sullenness about the room—

No witch of Hecate has ever brewed
Such seething broth as mine to catalyze
A festered brain into its solitude.

Sharp fingers of ammonia rake my eyes
And bring glass tears to cloud my hollow gaze.
Faint-ribboned wisps of aldehyde arise

And slither off into the nether haze,
Their life’s work done. I wearily plod
From bench to shelf, from shelf to bench, in a daze,

Catering to carbon’s whims until I nod
And wonder which is slave and which is God.