Janey’s Decision

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Abstract

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“Western Union calling Miss Jane Williams.” Jane’s voice quivered a little as she asked the man to continue. “Arrive Saturday morning. Raise in salary. Marry me immediately. Love, Bob.”

Janey heard the clicks of the neighbors’ receivers being hung up, and slowly replaced her own on the hook.

Mom looked up as Jane came back into the kitchen and began stirring the pancake batter again. “Mom—” Jane beat the batter hard and fast for a minute. “That was Western Union.”

Mom squeezed another orange and laid the shell down.

“Bob is coming. He wants me to marry him now.”

Mom cut another orange in half. “Well, Kitten, you have finished college. It’s up to you.”

“Yes, I know but—”

Mom poured the orange juice into the glasses. “Of course, you could work a year before you get married.”

Jane dropped some batter into the skillet and watched the bubbles form before flipping the pancake over. “I know—but Bob is so insistent!”

Dad came in and set the half-gallon pail of milk on the edge of the sink. He poked Janey in the ribs with a stubby forefinger, then walked over to Mom and laid his hand on her shoulder. She looked up and they stood there smiling at each other.

Janey swallowed hard and shoved the stack of pancakes into the oven to keep them warm. “Dad—Bob is coming Saturday.”

Dad settled himself on his chair and took a gulp of coffee. “Getting a few days off from his job?”

“He—he got a raise.” Jane turned another pancake.

“Seems as if Bob is coming up in the business world.” Dad reached for the sugar bowl. “He’s different from Tom—but Tom was a nice kid, too.” Dad picked off two pancakes from the plate Janey handed him.
"Bob wants me to marry him—now." Dad looked at Mom, and she smiled back guardedly. Janey pulled up her chair and swallowed her orange juice without tasting it.

Breakfast over, Dad snapped open his watch. "I could use some help in the hayfield. Any volunteers?" Mom and Janey looked at each other, winked, and Janey saluted. "Private Williams reporting for duty, sir!"

Dad laughed. "Think you can still drive the tractor, Snooks?"

Mom stacked the dishes beside the sink and stirred up soap suds with her hand as hot water poured into the dish pan. "I think these windows could stand a washing."

Janey looked at her. "Washing windows now—when we're getting all the dust from the hay fields?"

"Well—" Mom's eyes twinkled. "If we are going to have company—and a wedding."

Janey stopped short, then grabbed a dish towel. Wedding? Her wedding! She picked up a tumbler and wiped it absently.

The noonday sun beat down unmercifully. Heat rose from the motor of the tractor and floated around Janey's head in waves of burned gasoline and oil. "Hey! Knock off a minute, will you?" Dad's voice came to Janey over the roar of the tractor. She cut the motor and turned in the seat. As Dad climbed to the back of the hay wagon and tromped heavily on the hay, Janey pushed a stray curl under her turban and leaned on the steering wheel. "Mrs. Bob Rogers," she mused. "It would be nice—I guess."

At Dad's "Go ahead!" she started the tractor forward again. Her eyes began to burn from the hot stinging wind. She bounced about on the seat as the tractor lurched and creaked across the rough field, but her hands were strong and steady as she guided it over the rows of drying hay.

As the long afternoon dragged by, the bumping went on endlessly. The steady hum of the motor numbed her senses and she leaned forward and squinted her eyes to keep them trained on her course.

When the last forkful of hay had been pulled up into the hot, dim barn, Janey dropped off the tractor and staggered a little as she brushed the dust from the creases of her shorts. Mom was at the gate with a big pitcher of icy lemonade and a stack of fresh oatmeal cookies. Janey let the cold liquid trickle down her throat and moisten her parched lips. She bit into a cooky and gave Mom a warm glance.
“Tired, Snooks?” Dad asked as he patted her arm.
“No, just sorta—groggy.”
“You’re still a mighty good little farmer!” Dad smiled at her.
“Four years of college didn’t take that from her, I guess.” Mom smiled, too, as she took a cookie.
Dad straightened his suspender. “Guess I’d better get the cows.”

Janey put her glass back on the tray. “Let me do it, Dad. I haven’t been down by the creek since I got home.”

“Guess I’m not as young as I used to be. I’ll feed the hogs.” He started off across the yard.

Janey whistled for Laddie and they started for the lower forty. Laddie saw a rabbit scurrying for his burrow but though he yelped madly, he could not get through the stout fence in the lane to chase it. Janey laughed at him.

She roused the cattle from beneath the trees along the creek. They rose slowly and, still munching their cuds, started up the lane. Janey patted Laddie on the head and he looked up at her. Then, his tail held high, he trotted after the cattle.

Janey strolled along beside the wide creek. She climbed high on a mound of earth and sat down, letting her feet hang over the edge which dropped sharply down to the stream. She loosened her sandals and laid them on the moss beside her, leaned back against a stout old tree and felt its rough bark against the back of her head. She untied her kerchief and shook her short black curls.

“Mrs. Bob Rogers.” Her life in Cleveland—Bob—tall and dark, his eyes flashing with laughter. Bob—moving about their expensive apartment mixing drinks for the guests who would always drop in. Bob—putting his arm across her shoulders at the office saying with pride in his voice, “This is my wife, Gang.”

It would be a busy, carefree life. “Bob is smooth—but definitely!” the girls at school had said.

Janey shifted uneasily and lay down on her stomach to look into the stream. The water swirled along the edges, but in the middle of the creek it moved smoothly and quietly without a ripple... 

“I’ll build my dock here, Tom.” She started, remembering those words. She and Tom were ten then. He had crossed the fence which separated their land and found her by the creek with a boat Dad had just given her for her birthday. They had
set about building docks of sticks and twigs they found beside the creek. When it was nearly dark, Dad had found them sailing her boat on a string from Tom's pocket, followed by a fleet of bark boats. Mom had cried when Dad brought her into the kitchen.

Over the years it had become a habit for her to meet Tom there under the old oak tree at sunset. Later, the boats were put away in the cupboard, and they discussed their basketball tournaments and junior proms on the same mossy bank.

Two years ago, Tom had been late one night. His face was strained and his eyes were uneasy. "I have something to tell you, Janey." She had sat with her hands tightly folded while he told her he had joined the air corps that day. There he had said goodbye to her.

The weeks had dragged by until September came, with a flurry of shopping and packing before she went back to school. She thought of the campus with its shady walks and the way it looked in winter when snow hung on the banks of the river. There were rainy days too, when fog rose from the river. Gray, rainy days reminded her of the day when a telegram had come for her from the War Department. "We regret to inform you..." Tom... shot down at Pearl Harbor...

Through the efforts of her roommate, she had met Bob. His bright remarks, his gay attitude had helped ease the pain and helped her forget the way Tom's mouth twisted into a grin. There had been nights of dancing on the terrace... canoeing... golfing with Bob. It was easy to drift along with the crowd and forget...

One day when Janey was walking by the river on the way back to the dorm she had heard a voice say, "I'll build my dock here." She turned quickly and saw two small boys on the bank with a little boat.

She saw again the creek at home and heard Tom's voice. Tom...

Janey walked for hours that night. She didn't feel the rain on her cheeks. Her heart pounded and she could not breathe. Pain pushed against her ribs until she felt as if they would burst under the pressure. The clock was striking midnight when she staggered into the dorm and sank down upon her bed.

In the weeks that followed, she plunged feverishly into college activities. The night before graduation, she took Bob's fraternity
pin. The girls had screamed with delight when she came into
the dorm wearing it. “You and Bob were meant for each other!”
they said. “Of course I love Bob,” she told herself. “I can’t live
on memories forever.” . . .

At last Janey moved a little and felt the hard earth carpeted
by soft moss beneath her. Life on the campus faded as she came
back to her surroundings. She reached for her sandals, put them
on, and stumbled through the darkness back home.

She saw the light of Dad’s pipe on the front porch. “Hi, Dad.”
The porch swing creaked as she sank down beside him.

Dad puffed on his pipe. “Hungry?”

“No, not very.”

She put her feet up on the porch railing as Mom came out of
the door to offer her a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of
milk. She smiled and laid her hand on Mom’s arm a moment
as she bit into the sandwich.

“Have you been down by the creek, Dear?” Mom asked.

“Yes. It’s so peaceful there.” She hesitated, then, “Cleveland
is a long way from here, isn’t it?”

“About five hundred miles, I believe.” Dad tapped his pipe
against his shoe.

“It’s a nice city, I guess,” Mom contributed.

“But I—I kinda like the farm . . . the rolling hills and the
quiet sunsets. . .”

“There are nice things about the farm . . . and a lot of hard
work, too.” Dad put his pipe in his pocket and stretched his arm
along the back of the swing.

“I’d miss Laddie though, and the creek.”

“You’ve had fun on that creek, haven’t you?” Mom asked slow-
ly.

Janey swallowed hard. “So much fun with—Tom.”

Dad slapped a mosquito sharply. “Tom was a real kid. I’ll
bet he showed those Japs plenty of action . . .” his voice trailed off.

“Well, Bob is nice too. A little different from us, of course.”
Mom stirred in her chair.

“I—I don’t miss Tom as much as I used to.” Janey set her milk
glass on the railing.

“Time is a great healer,” Mom offered quietly.

“But I’ve been doing some thinking.” Janey paused. “I don’t
really love Bob. Oh, it isn’t because of Tom, exactly. He would
want me to be happy with someone else. But . . . I just . . . sort of tried too hard to forget.”

Mom and Dad were silent as Janey continued, “I’ve been like a little girl lost in a big woods at night. I—tried to find my way out with Bob. . . .”

“You had a lot of fun with Bob,” Dad cleared his throat.

“Yes, fun . . . but . . .”

They were silent again, listening to the crickets singing in the blackness.

“I’d like to stay near home for awhile. I might get a job teaching near here next year. Then I could come home and . . . and help you with some of the work.”

Mom rose and laid her hand on Janey’s head. “It’s your decision, Dear,” she said softly.

Dad put his big rough hand over hers. “Yes, Snooks, we could use your help now and then. It gets kinda lonesome here in the wintertime, too.”

Janey laid her hand on Dad’s knee. “I think I’ll wire Bob now and tell him not to come.” She rose and walked with a firm step into the dining room.

When Western Union had received her message, Janey climbed the stairs, walked down the hall to her room. She took the jewelled pin from her box and wrapped it carefully for mailing. Then she slipped out of her clothes, tumbled into bed, and slept soundly.