This Is It

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Abstract

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ANNE took her badge from the M. P. at the gate and walked swiftly down the black-top road leading to the main part of the camp. It was 8:15 and she had told Don she'd come out about eight. In the November fog, it looked gloomy, or was that because this would be the last day?

That is, it would probably be. It might not be the last day, she corrected her thought. But the rumors—. They heard that the mess sergeants had been instructed to feed the men two meals today. Of course you never could tell what the army would do, but it looked like this was it. This was it—overseas—she gave a little shiver as she walked in the damp, cold fog. It was colder than Texas had been before—that must be what made her shiver so.

The camp looked still and hushed with the fog settling over it. It had an air of tense expectancy without the usual morning buzz. Anne walked faster—she felt uneasy without knowing why. But she would see Don soon—he would come to the guesthouse, their usual meeting place, and they would laugh together as they went to sit out under the trees.

Then Anne noticed the guards. They were silently patrolling the road. Was that Don's barracks they were guarding?

Her heart gave a jump, and she began to pant as she half walked, half ran. Yes—it was Don's barracks. That meant they were restricted already. But Don would get to see her—he must.

She stopped on the corner by the chapel and the guesthouse. From here she could get a view of the end of the barracks. There were some soldiers standing on the steps, and even at this distance she could make out the bulky outlines of their gas masks, their O.D. shirts and pants, leggings and helmets. They were in their traveling uniform—she had seen it too many times before not to recognize it.

She gave a half panting sob and ran to the guesthouse nearby, but Don wasn't waiting for her. There was just a girl standing by the window crying in silent shaking sobs. She rushed back to
the corner. The soldiers were still on the steps. One of them waved at Anne. Was that Don? The figure didn't look any different from the rest.

She sat down on the boardwalk and hunched her knees up to her chin. Suddenly her legs were tired. She meant to stay here till she found out something. Something—and this was the best place to watch. A figure waved again and Anne waved back. Was that Don?

A woman came out of the guesthouse holding a flaxen-haired child in her arms. "Have they gone?" she called and picked her way across the rough gravel to the boardwalk where Anne was sitting.

"Not yet." Anne's voice felt hoarse and she could hardly withdraw her eyes from the figures by the barracks long enough to answer the question.

"I saw my husband a few minutes ago. He got out and came over." The woman shifted the little girl in her arms and her voice sounded thick with unshed tears. "I hope he doesn't get caught going back."

"Oh!" Anne got up and the words came all in one eager breath crowding the lump in her throat. "What do you know? What time was that? Were they all restricted then?"

"They've been restricted since 6:30. He sneaked over about eight. Said he thought they'd be gone by 8:30, but it's quarter of nine now." The woman patted the little girl methodically.

"Oh—then I couldn't have seen Don no matter what time—" Anne's voice trailed off in a quiver.

They turned as a girl in a wrinkled blue suit stood beside them watching.

"You're waiting too?" Anne asked.

The girl burst out angrily, "Yes, he's only been in the army four months. Was transferred to this company three days ago while I was on my way down here. I got to see him a little while last night."

Anne forgot her own grief for a moment. "That's tough, really tough."

The girl went on angrily. "Well it wouldn't be quite so bad but I drove all the way with my little three-year-old boy. He's asleep in the car over there." She gestured toward a dusty blue car parked in front of the guesthouse.

The woman with the flaxen-haired child nodded silently.
The girl in the wrinkled suit turned to them questioningly. "Where is there an orderly room across the street? A friend of my husband told me I might be able to get the first sergeant there to call for me. I might get to see my husband for a few minutes now"—the girl's voice dropped bitterly—"to say good-bye."

The figures disappeared inside the barracks and Anne turned to the girl. "I'm going with you," Anne announced. A new hope surging within her. If she could only hear Don's voice and see him close again. They'd already repeated over and over again all that there was to say but just to see him—just to know—

The woman with the child started toward the guesthouse. "I've got to dress my kid warmer. Tell me what you find out."

"Where is this orderly room?" the girl asked.

Anne felt a new cheerfulness. "Just across the street and down a piece," she said, mimicking the Texan's phrase.

The man behind the desk in the orderly room was small and red-faced. His thinning hair was streaked with grey and his sleeve was covered with the black of a master-first-sergeant.

"Can I help you?" he asked, looking up from a desk covered with papers.

The girl broke in immediately, "I'm Mrs. Adams. My husband's in the 321st—he was transferred there three days ago, and I must see him so he can tell me what to do—I just got here and we haven't made any plans or—"

The sergeant looked at her kindly. "I'll see what I can do." He picked up the phone and called a number. "Murphy, Saunders speaking. Say, there's a Mrs. Adams here. Says her husband's just transferred to your company. Yes."

Anne held her breath. She could feel them weigh the woman's request. Could they give her this—women were such a nuisance to the army.

"Five minutes? All right, I'll tell her."

"Meet him right outside here. He's on his way over now. You have just five minutes," the sergeant said crisply.

The woman's voice shook, "Thank you." She turned and left

Anne held herself stiff as the sergeant turned to her, "And you?"

"I want to see my husband, too," Anne said, "even if only for a minute." This didn't sound like her voice begging.

"I'll see what I can do for you." He turned to the phone
“What’s your name?”

“Mrs. James.” Anne watched him pick up the phone again and call the number. “Busy”—and he wrote on some papers as he held the phone with the other hand.

Anne walked to the window. She turned and walked back. Oh, hurry, hurry—and her hands clasped and unclasped again.

He dialed again and Anne stood still. This time he said, “Murphy, Saunders again—A Mrs. James is here and wants to see her husband—”

“Oh”—all the death of her hope was in that one word. She struggled to hold her face still.

“But I’ll tell you what you can do,” the sergeant went on, watching her; “from over back of the N.C.O. Club you can watch them loading behind the barracks.”

“Thank you,” she breathed almost in a sob and darted out.

The woman with the little girl was standing across the street.

“Come and watch them load,” Anne said as they met.

“Yes, from near the Non-commissioned Officers’ Club.”

They walked down the road and Anne boldly turned at the corner. She could see the trucks in the distance through the trees.

The woman pointed, “But that sign—visitors not allowed beyond this point.”

“I know,” Anne said, “but come on.”

“Are you really going up beyond here?”

“I will if you will,” Anne said, stopping and taking her eyes from the men and trucks in the distance.

“Well—” the woman sounded uncertain, “I’ve got to give this kid her breakfast.”

“Just a little way,” Anne coaxed. “We can see them closer then.”

The woman’s urge was stronger than her uncertainty and she followed slowly. “This is as far as I can go,” she said after they had gone a little way. “I’ve got to give my kid some breakfast, so I can’t stay here long.”

“I’m going on,” Anne said—she felt pulled on as if she must see what was happening.
She stopped abreast the small grey building on which was the sign, N. C. O. Club. From here she could see the men gathered in small waiting circles, in one’s, two’s, and three’s. Barracks bags and other indistinguishable equipment were piled in bunches over the ground. Men were carrying folded beds and mattresses out and stacking them in piles on the ground.

A soldier half-leanling alone against the dull grey wall stood up and waved guardedly.

Anne stared at him—was it—yes, it was Don. She waved her hand cautiously down at her side so as not to attract too much attention.

He moved a little farther down the wall—farther away from the groups of men. He sat on a box propped there and leaned on his carbine.

She was still so far away that all she could recognize was his familiar outline. This wasn’t herself, Anne, watching all this pantomime.

This was someone else watching a guard as he made his beat shorter and concentrated it in front of a soldier leaning on his carbine alone against a wall. Watching the guard turn—he must be looking at someone. A man with a big black patch on his sleeve and a black head of hair finally came and talked to the soldier. They both walked over and talked to the guard with much gesturing. The man with the black patch left, and the soldier stayed by the wall.

The groups of two’s and three’s began to circle closer together. There was a mumble with an occasional “here” faintly penetrating the fog.

She heard or thought she heard “James.” The soldier by the wall waved to her and ran to the circle of khaki forms, still carrying his carbine.

It was like a strange grotesque play being acted on a stage before her.

A little group of men came out of a building. They talked and pointed. One of them got on a motorcycle. She heard the distant pop of its engine, and then it was on the road coming toward her. Anne felt strangely cold.

The motorcycle stopped in front of her and a man was speaking—what was he saying?

“Pardon me?” she said politely.

“I said you are in restricted area,” the officer repeated sternly.
Oh—she had seen the sign but what were signs when she might see Don? But one doesn’t tell an army officer that. “Oh,” she murmured apologetically, “I thought I was allowed as far as the N. C. O. Club.”

“No,” the officer said with cold finality, “you are not.” And then he vanished, his motorcycle trailing long fingers of smoke behind it.

Anne turned back. She saw only a huddle of khaki-clad forms now. She slowly followed the paths of smoke past the sign out of the forbidden area.

She felt numb with cold and the air was damp and clammy. She heard the sound of a train whistle, faint in the distance.

A few minutes later she was watching the pantomime from a raised manhole cover near the guesthouse. The buildings blotted most of it out, but she could see the trucks loading the men—herding them like cattle—whisking them away. She was hardly aware that the woman and her child were there beside her watching softly as she was.

She started violently as a jeep slewed across the ditch and stopped in the gravel in front of her. The woman clutched her baby closer.

A boy with gold bars on his shoulders looked up at them.

“You watching those men?” he asked courteously.

“Yes.”

“Don’t go to the train,” he said.

Anne and the woman looked at each other before they spoke. “We won’t,” they said in one voice.

“Our husbands have already told us not to,” Anne added.

“Yes,” the boy said confidentially, “it made quite a stir last time, so it’s best that you don’t go.” And he was gone, leaving the two self-conscious at the attention they were attracting.

A truck from the area sped by them, but it was empty. All the trucks of men had been whisked out the back way to the loading area of the tracks over at the loading depot. Finally Anne could see only a small cluster of men left. Then they, too, were spirited away.

The woman looked at her.

“You can’t tell what the army might do,” Anne said; “they’ve changed orders before.” But there was a growing dullness. A numbness—that it wouldn’t happen this time.

The child looked at her mother. “Where’s Daddy?” she asked.
“Daddy’s gone on the train,” the mother looked at Anne soberly over the child’s head.

“Daddy gone on train,” the child repeated wisely.

The woman tried to smile at Anne, but it wasn’t much of a smile.

At the corner by the chapel, Anne glanced down the street—only the barracks, the steps, and the silent trees beyond. Don had left no message for her at the guesthouse. When she called the orderly room of his company just to make sure, there was no voice to speak and stop the faint incessant jangle in her ear.

She put the phone down and her hand slipped from the phone as if it had no bone to hold it stiff.

She drew a deep breath, “There’s nothing to wait for. I guess I’ll take the night train home.” Home, that didn’t mean Don laughing and teasing her—that meant going back to her parents—where the army always said a woman should stay in the first place.

Anne felt tired and her whole body ached. She had a queer sense that she would know this feeling well in time.

The woman looked at her. “Have a nice trip!” she said.

Anne turned to go. “Yes, you have a nice trip, too,” she said. As she turned away neither of them was smiling.

Interim

Carolyn Carlson

A spring afternoon ....

Deep tones drifting through fingers curved over the keyboard,

Climbing at last on dust chains that cling to the sun.

Recessed chatter of blue-ringèd cups—amber air twisting upward from amber tea.

And flame balls in adagio at candletips;

In the background, a delicate shuttle of voices.

Time draws her cape over her swiftly moving shoulders—and softly glides on.

her face was a prettiness of color . . . anonymous mouth, eyes ever oblique, soft eggfoam bangs.