Until Easter Comes

Mary Gidel*
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Abstract

“You’d better set the table, Diane; the steak is almost done.” Mom turned each sizzling T-bone, its aroma altering the three hungry mouths in the kitchen. “Better put an extra leaf in the table, too; with everyone home, it’s just not big enough.”
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"Those steaks look delicious, Mom. I wish mine would turn out like that. Bill always complains they're too done." Julie laughed. "Guess it's a good thing we don't get home very often. He's going to get spoiled on your cooking."

"I'm just glad that Bill could get off work. I wanted the whole family to be home this time."

"Mommy, I'm hungry. Can I have a cookie?" Susie pulled on her mother's apron and eyed the funny-faced cookie jar that smiled a safe distance beyond her anxious reach.

"No, dear, supper's almost ready. Help Diane set the table, and then we'll be ready to eat."

"How come we're eating with the good dishes, Mommy; it's not Thanksgiving, or Christmas?" Susie set each plate down very carefully, with the aid of her tongue, which rolled in and out of her mouth. Before, she'd never been allowed to set the table with the good dishes.

"Has Bill heard any more about whether or not he'll have to go?"

"Not recently, but he doubts if he'll be called up. They aren't taking many of the Reserves yet."

"I keep wishing Tom would have gone into the Reserves instead of flying. Then he wouldn't be going now. But he wanted to fly so badly, so I guess the choice was his."

"Hey, Diane, did Mommy tell you that Tom is going to the war? Just like in the movies, where he'll shoot down all the enemy planes and get the Flying Star and oodles of medals, and he'll be famous and get to shake hands with the President and..."

"Yes, Susie. Mother told me."
Fall, 1968

“The steak’s done. I wonder where the men are. Were they in the garage, Susie?’”

“Yeah. They said they were fixing the car, only they weren’t trying very hard. The hood wasn’t even up, and they were just talking—only they wouldn’t let me hear what about.”

“Run and tell them that supper’s ready, and if they don’t hurry, the steak’ll be burnt.”

“DADDY! TOM-MY! BILL! MOM SAYS TO COME TO SUPPER, THE STEAK IS BURNT! Dad-dy, Tom-my, Bill! Mom . . . .” Susie yelled the message as soon as she’d gotten the command, drowning out the scraping noise of the spoon, as Mom emptied the mashed potatoes from the pan to the dish.

“Susie doesn’t realize, does she?” Diane’s voice was a whisper.

“It’s better that way. It’s hard for her to understand, and there’s no need to scare her anyway. Like I keep telling myself—ten months at the most, then we’ll all be together again next Easter. Here they come. Better pour the milk.”

“Boy, Mom, does that steak ever look good! And the gravy—no lumps at all.” Tom surveyed the table, grabbing a quick carrot before washing up.

“I cooked everything especially for you—even apple dumplings for dessert. It might be the last good meal you’ll get—for a while.” She recovered instantly. “I just hope the steaks aren’t tough. Susie, will you say the prayer?”

Waiting for her cue, Susie automatically dropped her head, pressed her hands against each other, and recited. “Be present at our table, Lord. Be here and everywhere adored. Thy creatures bless and grant that we may feast in paradise with thee. A-men.”

The heads didn’t move, waiting for the final “Amen” from Dad:

Mom’s voice melted the silence gently. “Our heavenly Father . . .”

This must be a holiday, Susie thought. Mom always added her own prayer on Christmas, Thanksgiving, and special occasions, and her prayers were longer than Susie’s verse. Susie was getting restless. I wish we’d hurry and eat.

“. . . bless those at this table, dear Lord . . . .”

You’ve been such a good son, Tom. Everything a father could hope for—Boy’s State, athletics, House President, col-
lege degree, jet pilot, Air Force officer—I couldn’t have asked for a better. Even now, the choice was yours, and you didn’t take the easiest way. I’m proud to be your father, Tom.

I sure am hungry. I wonder if Mom noticed the marble under the table. I bet I can reach it with my toes.

We’ve gotten to know each other more as brothers than brothers-in-law, Tom. I wish I were going with you.

“. . . whatever is Your will, Father, we will abide by it.”
The marble, as it clinked against the table leg, punctuated Mother’s sentence.

Gosh, I hope Momma didn’t notice that. I think I can get the marble for sure, now that I’ve got my sock off.

Be careful, Tom. If anything would happen to you . . . Mom and Dad are taking it so well, trying not to worry you one bit. They are so proud of you, Tom; I am, too. We always got along pretty good for brother and sister. It just can’t happen to you.

“. . . and be with each and everyone of us we go our separate ways, and watch over us. In Jesus’ name we ask. Amen.”

“Amen.” Dad made it final.

Susie’s toes curled over the marble, lifting it from the floor. The steaks waited.

“Are we just going to sit here and talk all night? That’s all we’ve done since supper. I’m tired of talking. Can’t we play some games? Don’t you want to play Monopoly, Tom?”

“What time are you going to leave in the morning, son?”

“Around ten. Fred Barker is going to pick me up. It’ll probably be better that way—then you won’t have to take me to the station.”

“How about Uncle Wiggley, Tom? Or, Checkers?”

“Not right now, Susie Q.”

“But you’re not home very often, and we never get to play.” Susie’s lower lip puffed out.

“Susie, it’s too late to play now. It’s way past your bedtime. Get your pajamas on, and Mama’ll—or maybe Tom’ll be up to tuck you in.”

“I’ll be up in a jiffy, Susie Q. Hurry up or the Boogien-Man will get you.” Tom tickled her, making her scream as she darted up the stairs.

“I think it’d be a good idea if we all got some sleep—or
at least tried to. You'll need your rest, son. Tomorrow'll be a long day."

Fred Barker would be there any minute. Tom was about ready to leave. Mom hugged him desperately, keeping the tears checked and her voice steady.

"It's only until next Easter, Mom—at the most. At the rate they're going now, I'll have my 100 missions over before then. I'll be home before you know it."

"Just be home in time for Easter. We'll all get together again then."

"That's right, so don't worry."

"Tom, can I have one of your medals?"

"Yeah, Susie Q, you can have them all."

The car pulled up.

"Take care, son." Father's and son's hands fused together and held.

"I'll see you at Easter. So long for now."

"Until then . . . ."

The car coasted down the street until it turned the corner, no longer visible to the group left standing in the driveway.

**fog**

—mary-lynn barker

*I.S.U., 1968*

the wind was a puddle
hovering an ocean
but breezes swirled
into a saffron sponge.
it washed the sea
closer into closer
until only red lights clung
to the gatetip
and bargehorns guarded
a fretful silence.