The First Lieutenant

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Ruth stopped on the landing to look through the colored glass of the window, but seeing her brother at the foot of the stairs, she wrapped her arm around the newel post and regarded him instead. David was intent on something outside the window. He stood so he was behind the curtain, apparently trying not to be seen from the outside.

“What's out there?” Ruth asked.

“Ssh.”

Ruth hopped down the stairs, counting each one as she landed. “... five, six, seven. That's how old I am,” she said to David.

“Ssh.”

She stood in front of the window. A group of boys, all of them older than David, were standing across the street. Suddenly the group broke and, yelling, the boys raced off.

“That's Arty's gang,” Ruth said. “Good thing they didn't come on our yard, huh, David?” Receiving no response, she said, “We'd show them.”

David turned. “Come on. Let's go get the enemy.”

They ran to the kitchen and, shedding their civilian clothes, they donned the heavy, green coats and rushed to the arsenal to collect the bazooka and their machine gun. The lieutenant hurried ahead of Ruth. He spotted a ruined house and slunk along the grey, shingle wall toward the steps, wary of the enemy at every move. Peering into the darkened interior, he signaled. O.K. She rushed into the house. There was barely time to rest her bazooka on the sagging window sill before they were attacked. With violent blasts which threw her to the floor, she fired. Around her, machine guns rattled. The bazooka blasted, deafening, the shell roaring away into the silence. The lieutenant yelled for a charge and they moved, ducking down the steps. Twenty feet away a hedge offered shelter. Tank! The lieutenant jumped to help her swing the bazooka. They blasted away. The tank stopped.
Out of the tank stepped a commander-in-chief. "I told you kids to quit playing army. David, come take in the groceries. Hurry up now. Ralph will be here any minute." Mom headed for the house. David dropped his gun as Ruth turned to carry the carpet roll back to the garage. After a few minutes David joined her in the garage. They sat on the floor between the old loveseat and the broken washing machine.

"How long you and Mom going to be gone?" David asked.
Ruth shook her head.
David picked at a scab. "You want to see something? You got to promise not to tell."
Ruth nodded.
David got up and reconnoitered around the outside of the garage door. No one was about. Returning, he pulled the old army footlocker form under the loveseat and opened it. He drew out a circular dress hat with braid along the front and took it out of its plastic bag. Holding it up, he said, "See, Dad's lieutenant hat."

Ruth squatted on the floor and looked up at it. The dusty sunlight coming through the window made the red and gold braid shine.
Ruth reached out. "Let me wear it."
David fended her hand off with one arm. "You can't. No one but Dad can wear it."
Ruth pulled at her shoelace. "I remember him," she said. "You do not. You were too little when he died."
"Do so."
"Do not. Only I remember him."
Ruth watched David wrap the hat back up, remembering a sunstained room flashing by as she was tossed in the air. "How's my Little Bug?" Dad said, as his strong fingers stopped the dizzy motion and she laughed at the way his face tickled.
"You don't remember him," David said again.
Ruth smiled.

A car crunched into the driveway and David closed the footlocker. They leaned out of the garage door. It was Ralph. They ran across to the front porch where David sat watching the neighbors. Ruth leaned against the porch rails.

The porch rattled with Ralph's steps. "Hey, kids, your mom inside?" Ruth nodded. She watched Ralph's stomach where his t-shirt showed between the buttons. He was fat. The
door slammed after him and David whispered, "They're over on the porch." He dropped over the rails and ran across to the neighbors. Arty stood up and blocked the steps to the porch. But David still tried to climb the steps. Arty pushed him down. "Get lost, kid." David tried again. A barrage of apples thrown by the gang sent him running for the treehouse. There, he huddled against the wall a moment, then signaled Ruth. She ran out, bombarded with shellfire, leaping across a row of mines they had laid in weeks before to protect the main fortress. Still under fire, she climbed into the fort and joined the lieutenant.

Bullets pounded the fort as the enemy moved into better position. Then silence. Slowly the lieutenant raised his head, staring out over the edge. "I better go up on the lookout."

"You better come right down here this minute, young man. I told you not to take Ruth up there."

Ruth looked down through the cracks at Mom.

"Come on, Ruth. It's time to go," Mom said.

They climbed down and trailed her across the yard. She stopped just before she reached the house, and bending down, picked up two popsicle sticks nailed together into an X. They had been buried in the grass with the point of the nail up.

"What's this? Did you kids put this here?"

Ralph appeared around the corner of the house. He motioned for Mom to come. "I'm coming. Look, David, I want you to pick these up right now. I don't want any trouble while you're here with Mrs. Parcher." She turned to Ralph. "If one of the neighbor kids stepped on these I'd be sued."

Ralph said, "Come on, you'll be late for the train."

On the train Ruth, while giving Mom a cup of water, asked about Dad. Mom put her roughly in her seat and told her to shut up. Ruth sat huddled watching Mom roll the crumpled paper cup around and around in her hand.

They spent two weeks at Aunt Jane's. Mom was away with Dick most of the time. He gave Ruth a doll the first day. He squatted, holding it against his face and told her that the hair matched hers. She looked silently at his smooth cheeks behind the doll's dark curls. "Come on, take it," he said and stood up.
After that Ruth stayed out in the yard all day. At first, she played war among the pines at the edge of the road, leaping out to race across the open and attack the enemy. But Aunt Jane came out and said, "Honey, don't break down the rosebushes like that." Then Ruth hit sticks on the trees but Aunt Jane told her not to. She tried to get Ruth inside to play with the doll. Ruth ran and stayed out. Once she saw a blonde girl standing in the yard across the street. She walked out to stand opposite her. They stared at each other. Ruth smiled and pulled up her stick. She walked toward the girl, shooting. The girl ran. After that, Ruth spent most of her time wandering on the edge of the lawn, watching to see the girl, and pretending to be lost on a desert island. Sometimes Dad came, wearing the hat with the red and gold braid, and saved her.

The night after they got back Mom had a party. She gave Ruth and David supper and sent them outside. David led the way into the garage where he pulled the popsicle stick mines out of a corner. He gave Ruth two. She held them, one in each hand, and followed David out of the garage. They sat out on the back lawn in the dusk. Ruth looked at the stars and said, "First Star I See Tonight" to herself. David looked around with watchful eyes. All was quiet. He turned and whispered, "We got to put these booby traps out to get Arty's gang. We'll crawl over to his yard and plant them so he'll step on them."

Ruth nodded.

When David said it was dark enough they started. David, crawling ahead, kept turning around and signaling for her to come on. When he reached the poplar trees, he stood up and slipped from tree to tree. Ruth stood and ran up to the tree he was at. "Do it like me or they'll see you," he hissed. He ran behind the next tree. She followed. They came to the hedge by Arty's yard. David leaned close. "All right. You go through and bury them."

Laughter came from Arty's house. They sank to the ground and were still for a moment. "Go on." David pushed Ruth.

Slowly, she crawled into the gap in the hedge. She stuck her head out the other side and looked toward the house. She
could see Arty's parents in the window. She tried to back out but David was pushing. "Go on," he whispered.

She crawled half out, pushed one of the booby traps into the ground and threw the other one across the yard.

David pushed hard and Ruth went all the way through the hedge. Suddenly there were screams. The gang came running. Apples pelted into her. The gang danced around throwing hard, green apples. David danced with them. "I told you I could get her here," he yelled. He bent over, picked up an apple and threw it at her.

She ran, fleeing across the yards, the gang hooting after her. She raced across the porch and inside.

Mom hurried into the hall and put a hand over Ruth's mouth. "Ssh, Ssh, what is it now?"

Ruth hung onto her, pushing hard against the satin of her dress.

"Don't get my dress wet. Is it David? Just stay away from him. You should be in bed anyway."

Ruth stopped crying and looked up. Ralph came out and handed Mom a glass. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Go on to bed now, Ruth. Scoot."

Ruth started up the stairs. Mom watched for a moment, then turned back to her party, her voice gay as she told the others that it was really nothing.

Ruth stopped by the blackened panes of the stained glass window and listened to the muted sounds coming from the dining room. Turning, she ran back outside. As she stood on the edge of the porch, she could see that the garage light was on. A shadow of a boy in an army coat showed against the door.

"Now, I'm going to be lieutenant," came Arty's voice.

"Okay," said David.

The shadow lifted a circular hat onto its head.

Ruth backed up to the far corner and lay down, pressed against the rails. She looked up at the glistening new moon. Partially obscured by clouds, it glimmered down on her as she reached out and began flaking the old paint off the porch rails.