

enough food to go round, spending many hours in damp bomb shelters, no wonder their health was suffering. I wished I could talk to them. It was five years since my last Christmas at home with my family.

I finally fell asleep. The sleeping arrangements must have been very comfortable, because I didn't even hear Sue's father get up in the morning.

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I was awakened by a tender kiss. As I opened my eyes I felt like a prince in fairyland. At first I didn't know where I was, until I saw Sue standing over me saying, "Good morning, Darling. Merry Christmas. Everyone is up already, you had better get up too." I reached up and pulled her face close to mine, kissing her and wishing her also a merry Christmas.

The two chairs her father had slept in were already back in their places. It didn't take me long to get dressed and washed and then I went to join the others.

The dining room table was set very festively. As I walked in, everybody wished me a merry Christmas. Sue's mother and father were busy in the kitchen preparing breakfast. I could smell eggs and bacon. Daisy, who was sitting next to me, leaned over and whispered, "We can open our gifts after breakfast." Sue came out of the kitchen with a plate full of toast, which had been fried in butter. It smelled delicious. A pan full of sliced and fried tomatoes followed this. Then her mother served fried

eggs and some more toast.

Sue whispered to me, "This is my dad's favorite breakfast, I hope you like it." "Of course I will," I answered. After a year in the battlefields and nearly three years as a prisoner of war, it was like a king's table to me.

Pat and Daisy were first to finish their breakfast and asked if they could leave the table to open their gifts. However, they were told to wait until everyone was finished. After breakfast, we were all asked to go into the living room. It was a wonderful experience for me, to be part of the Christmas celebration in the circle of such a nice family.

We all gathered around the Christmas tree. I had secretly put my gifts underneath it with the rest of them. Pat was chosen to pick up the parcels from under the tree and hand them out. As it happened, I received the first present. It was a beautiful razor set from Sue and I was thrilled with it. She must have known that I needed one. Next came my gift for Daisy. When she saw it was a doll's cradle, hand made and hand painted, she was thrilled with it. Everyone was pleased with my gifts, which made me feel very good.

For Christmas dinner we had turkey and all the trimmings, followed by another glass of port wine. What a feast that was for me. I couldn't remember when I had last eaten such a delicious meal.

We all helped clear the table. Pat and Daisy showed us what they had learned in their ballet lessons. They were both very graceful. Then we sat and talked with Sue's parents. Her mother could not stress enough that I should go back to Germany to see my family. She said, "We love you very much Karl, but we want you to do what is best for you in the end."

I told them that I loved their daughter very much but realized I was only a prisoner of war. She was quick to correct me on that, "No Karl, you being a prisoner of war has nothing to do with it. To us, you are what you are as a person, and that is the only thing we see." It made me feel very good to hear that.

Sue reminded me that we intended to go for a walk to the place where I used to work. It was a cool but otherwise beautiful Christmas day, so Sue wore a coat and I borrowed one of her dad's cardigans.

I did not recognize the former building site. The large tree next to the old farmhouse, which was our shelter when it rained, was still there. The walkway, that Sue used to go on to her cousin's house, was gone. It was now a paved road, flanked by houses. We walked along the road

until we came to a spot, about halfway down, where I stopped and said to Sue, "Well darling, judging by that group of trees over there, which they left standing, this is the spot where we first set eyes on each other." I took her into my arms and gave her a kiss.

Sue replied, "You know, Darling, this is the most important spot to me in the whole world."

"Yes dearest, if it wasn't for this spot, and if you hadn't picked up the very first note that I dropped here, we would never have got to know each other," I said. "What did you really see in me, a prisoner of war?"

"I don't really know," she answered. "All I know is that I liked you, but now I know that I love you." We held hands and walked around the place where our romance started.

For quite a while we didn't say anything more. We were both remembering the time when our love for each other began to grow. It was like a tender plant, which begins to grow in springtime but is so fragile that there is no guarantee it will survive the frost or the hail. However, the more difficulties we encountered, the stronger our love grew.

The afternoon was turning quite chilly. At the top of the new estate we found a barn belonging to a farmer. We went inside to get out of the cold and kissed some more. A tear rolled down Sue's cheek and she whispered, "Oh Karl, I don't want to think about tomorrow and I wish it would never come. Please tell me that you will always love me."

I answered, "Will you always love me, Darling?"

"Yes, I will always love you Karl, as long as I live," was her answer. When I told her it might be some time before we saw each other again, after I was sent back home to Germany, she kissed me and said, "I will wait for you my Darling."

It was getting dark as we left the barn and walked home, holding hands. Daisy ran to meet us saying that she had something to show me. She went upstairs to fetch the cradle I had given her with bedding, pillows, and a comforter in it, which her mother had sewn for her while we were gone. She also had a doll in it and she was obviously very pleased.

Supper was just about ready and we were both were hungry. After supper, Sue never left my side all evening. We all sat around a glowing fireplace and talked. The atmosphere was very cozy. Daisy played the piano, while Pat was ballet dancing. Grandma Cooper had been taken

back home during the afternoon by Sue's father, so I was to sleep in the guest bedroom for the last night. It was agonizing for me to think that we might not see each other again for a long time.

Pat and Daisy went upstairs to bed and Sue's mother brought up the subject of my repatriation. She said, "I can't possibly imagine what it would be like not to see my family for five years." I told her that I was concerned about my father. The war years and concern for my brother and me must have taken their toll on his health.

When I returned to Germany about four months later, I learned that, when the French occupied our village, the French soldiers went from house to house, looking for young girls. My father managed to hide my two sisters in the attic of our house. He literally built a wall of bundled kindling wood around them in one corner. The French soldiers searched the attic, but did not find them. These and many more things must have been very worrying to my father.

By now everyone had retired for the night. While I was sitting in one of the armchairs, the door opened quietly and Sue came in to say good night. I motioned her to come and sit on my lap and soon she was in my arms, crying softly. We both realized that the end of my time as a prisoner of war in England was not too far away and there were no words to console us. After a while I said, "You had better go, Darling, before I keep you here all night." With that we got up and went upstairs to our rooms.

It felt like heaven sleeping in a real bed. I lay awake for a long time, reliving the whole weekend. The last thing I wanted to do was think about the next day. But then I remembered the words of Sue's mother; that I must be looking forward to seeing my family again after so many years. I guess I had to start thinking about that.

The night went by all too quickly. Unlike the day before, I woke up very early. I lay in bed, listening for sounds of people moving about, but I didn't hear anything and I didn't want to wake anyone, so I decided to just stay where I was. My train was not leaving till 1:30 p.m. so I had another full morning to spend with my darling Sue and her wonderful family. I had grown to like them all very much during these three days.

After about half an hour, I heard someone walking in the hallway and a gentle knock at my bedroom door. Sue came in and sat at my bedside. "I couldn't sleep any more, so I thought I would come and see

you.” I held her close to me and stroked her hair, which was falling over my face. We whispered softly for fear of waking anyone up.

Then she went to get dressed and soon I heard Pat and Daisy running in the hallway, chasing each other, and their mother telling them to be quiet.

By now everybody was up except me. Daisy called out, “Good morning Karl,” and then ran away, giggling. It was time for me to get up and get ready. I came downstairs and made a point of saying “Good Morning” to Sue. She returned my greeting as if it was the first time we had seen each other.

I had a sausage and a fried egg for breakfast. Mother told us that we would have an early dinner, so that I could have a good meal before I left, and she was going to put up a couple of sandwiches for me to take on my trip.

After breakfast Sue and I went for a walk along Pasture Lane. We had a lot to talk about. I told Sue what a wonderful family she had and I hoped that one day I would be able to repay their kindness.

Time passed all too quickly. For a few moments we just gazed up into the sky. We watched the clouds drift by in front of the morning sun. They were changing color from white to pink and then to bright yellow.

Sue wanted to know if I ever had a girlfriend before. I answered, “Yes, I did have a girlfriend once, when I was 18, just before I joined the German air force. But she was nowhere near as beautiful as you are.” Then I put my arms around her and gave her a long kiss, to put an end to her questions. I said, “I have never, nor will I ever, love anyone the way I love you, Darling.”

We were beginning to feel cold so we went back to the house for a hot cup of tea. We all sat cozily around the fire, Sue very close to me holding my hand. Pat and Daisy wanted me to tell them another story so I told them a little about the place I grew up in.

“I lived in a small village, nestling among the hills, most of which were covered with large birch trees. Achalm was my favorite hill. On top of it stood a large ruined castle dating back to the 16th century. The path to it was still there which the knights had taken when they raided the surrounding villages. In the middle of the ruin stood a very tall tower, which was rebuilt in later years. The door to the tower was open and anyone who was not afraid of heights could get to the top via some

wooden steps inside. On the way up, you could look through the openings, which were used by the knights to ward off enemy attacks with bow and arrows.

“As a boy, I used to love roaming the hills and mountains. Around Achalm there were meadows, where hundreds of sheep used to graze, watched by a shepherd. There were also huge chestnut trees, which I used to climb to gather the chestnuts and make baskets out of them for my sisters to play with. There were a lot of deer in the woods, which we liked to watch, especially at dusk when they came out onto the meadows to graze. Since we always carried a knife we would cut the best looking white thorn branches to make our own bows and arrows.

“During the winter I used to go to school on skates when the roads were icy, and on skis when there was a lot of snow. I made the skis from old wine barrels with the help of my older brother. In my later teens, I made my own skis from birch wood. I used to ski, hike and climb on every hill in and around our village.

“Most of the farmers in the village kept goats for milk. Every morning during the summer months, a young man, who was known as the goat herder, led the goats from the village onto the mountain meadows. He carried a horn, which he blew while walking through the streets early in the morning. All the farmer had to do was open the gate where the goats were kept and they would follow the goat herder. The boy would watch the goats while they grazed on the meadows all day. In the evening they would follow him home. When he walked through the village, the goats would go back to the places where they belonged, all by themselves.”

It was soon time for dinner. We had a roast with gravy, potatoes, and a vegetable. It was superb, but Sue hardly ate anything. My appetite was not all that good either.

As soon as we had finished eating, Sue’s father went to bring the car round to the front of the house. Sue’s mother gave me a big hug, wishing me all the best for the future. I thanked her for her hospitality and said I hoped that we would meet again. Daisy wanted to know when I would come again. Sue explained that I had to go home to Germany first. Mother and the two girls all waved to me as we left.

Sue and I sat in the back seat. She held my hand very tight and was fighting back the tears. At the station we walked arm in arm to the waiting train. On the platform I put my arms around her. She was crying softly.

“If only we knew what the future held in store for us.” I told her that as long as we didn’t give up hope, the sun would shine for us again.

We kissed once more before I climbed the steps into the train. Sue held onto my hand until the train started to move. Once inside, I went to the nearest window and Sue walked along with the train until it picked up speed.

The train ride back to Peterborough seemed endless. I wanted to be back at my work in the post office, to take my mind off the last three days. Now I loved Sue more than ever. I longed to be in her arms, to feel her face, to look into her eyes, and to touch her tender lips with mine.

My dreams were interrupted when the conductor came into our compartment to check our tickets. He told me it would take another hour before we arrived in Peterborough.

After he left, the lady who sat opposite me started a conversation. She wanted to know where in Peterborough I was going to and told me that she and her husband owned a farm and had three of our boys working for them for quite some time. They were sorry to lose them when they were repatriated back to Germany. She didn’t think they would ever get anybody again who worked so hard for them. I told her that I too had once worked for a farmer, but was now the mail orderly of the camp.

The time now passed much more quickly. The lady told me that her husband was coming to the station to pick her up, and if I needed a lift, they would gladly drop me off at the camp gate.

In Peterborough, when we got off the train, the lady offered to wait in case I wasn’t picked up. However, I soon spotted our driver. On our thirty-minute drive to the camp he filled me in on everything that had happened at the camp during my absence.

He dropped me off outside my Nissen hut. I heard Struppie getting very excited inside. His greeting was the perfect welcome home.

The hut was cold, and so was the post office. First I had to bring in some wood and make a fire in my potbelly stove. It didn’t take long before it felt comfortable. Struppie followed me very closely when I went to the kitchen for a cup of tea.

For quite some time after that wonderful holiday I had sleepless nights. I was afraid that our greatest wish, to be together forever, would never come true.