

Downward Drifting

by Patricia Schultheis

From *Fiction* Number 54 (2008)

WE CLEANED FOR our mothers. Off boats and kerchiefed, they stood at conveyor belts, boxing brassieres or culling cartridges, their hands growing cramped, their ankles swollen, until, shift over, they scarcely could climb onto buses and ride to third-floor flats whose mean little rooms we, their daughters, had cleaned.

Nine, ten-years-old, down on our knees, scrubbing linoleum fissured into battlefield maps. Like slender sappers, our arms tunneled under radiators that pocked the backs of our hands with blisters.

Tall and strong, by twelve I could run the carpet sweeper, iron my big brother's shirts and start the supper before Mama's bus stopped.

By sixteen, I'm at Bridgeport Brass, taking the early bus home to pull the wash off the line and peel potatoes while Michael, at the kitchen table, his books unopened, listens to the radio. Turning the dial for Glenn Miller one September, he catches instead the static telling his own fate. Jackboots into Poland. Horses against tanks.

So innocent, Michael almost believes himself that night, telling Mama, "I'm going to get a job at Remington Arms, Mom. Or Sikorsky Aircraft. They'll be hiring now." As if the Warsaw cobblestones weren't already calling his name.

Ignorant of life beyond the most elemental but rich with memories and a survivor's genius, Mama knows the wild eyes of cannon-crazed horses, the boot . . . the blast. So she lets her son leave that one night to enjoy his vague, boyish dreams under the corner streetlight. "Wash the dishes, Helen," she says.

In June, when the letter for Michael comes, I wear my Sunday shoes to the Brass the morning he leaves. Red ankle straps, they're a protest, partly for him, but more for myself, sixteen and seeing the endless line of my days: Mama, mute at the table, the stovepipe needing polishing.

But, with so many needing miracles, who am I to beg?

Still, one comes. A mean Bridgeport rain. Me, missing the bus, and a car, careful to not splash, pulls up with a grin. "Hey, need a lift?" It is war. People help out. That grin! I jump in. His name is Stanley.

Before the virgin's altar, down on my knees beside Mama who fingers her beads for Michael, while I beg forgiveness for the miracle of Stanley's kiss.

"Wait for me," he gasps the morning he leaves, scarcely able to pull his lips from mine. "Wait for me and write."

Three years, sweeping up toast crumbs. Mama, too worried to wipe them from her own chin, let alone the floor. Then getting on the bus, flattening my bag on my lap. A white sheet. "Dear Stanley . . . The landlord says I can plant a lilac bush in the backyard. Kay, that girl I told you about from the Brass, knows where to get white ones." "Dear Stanley . . . The foreman wants me to switch to nights. It's been raining cats and dogs. No letter from Michael in a while."

Kay's elbow bumps me the morning the foreman comes down the line. Mama won't open the door. The boy with the telegram knocked until the landlord called the Brass. When I get to the flat I hear her moans while I

fumble for my key, all the while, beneath her moans and my own chattering dread, hearing, too, my own ugly prayer: "Thank God, it's not Stanley."

Lilacs on the altar, Kay my bridesmaid, and a hole beside Mama in the pew at St. Michael's, the morning I, veiled in unnatural white and stunned in my own shining moment, march toward Stanley's grin, so bright it blinds me to the stain of brains blasted into his eyes at Anzio.

I say a vow and give a lie. It's this: that I would forsake all others. And I truly would but for one, my heart's true tyrant, the bud Stanley's planted in my belly. So I vow "forsaking" before the ring slipping down my finger passes my first knuckle.

Beneath a froth of passion and wonder I bury my lie, and we name our bud Michael. Then, as if to balance the scales of love, two girls, one for each of their father's knees, Rosemary and Diane.

So, three bottoms to wipe, six elbows to scrub, six ears, six knees. A yard with lilacs to trim and a three-bedroom rancher to clean. My arm a metronome shining the picture window framing my days. The trucks delivering broadloom to Gladys on the corner. French provincial to Margery across the street. And me, pressing my lips against the meanest of our early American bought on time.

Kay calls: her brother's lost in Korea. I bring a cake and pinch my lips against my own complaint: Stanley's coming home, firing his lunchpail over the counter. "God damn it . . . another bill! God damn it!" His grin, a memory carried further away down the line of our lives, his Anzio eyes tacking for a target, usually finding Michael.

Then, John F. Kennedy four weeks dead, and the slaughter of the innocents is on our picture window. A galaxy of diluted Bon Ami Christmas stars sponged by Michael. He squeezes behind the game on TV to raise the blind's metal slats and turns to Mama, sitting mute beside Stanley.

"See, Grandma," Michael says, "that big star in the corner is Jesus, and the others are the babies Harold killed looking for him. The slaughter of the innocents. The little stars are supposed to be babies going to Jesus."

And Mama, smiling, nodding, hearing in Michael's thirteen-year-old voice her boy's eager innocence. But Stanley, a foreman then at Sikorsky Aircraft hears a bad call in the game and gives a three-beer growl, "For Christ's sake, Michael. Will you get away from the TV? I can't see the game. Just get away, will you?"

So Michael picks up that "Get away. Get away," and shoulders it up the hall to his room. In the kitchen, I tell Rosemary, "Wipe that drip from the gravy boat's lip."

Two years later a knock at the door. Kay with a cake: So sorry about your mother. So sorry. Down in Georgia to see Billy graduate boot camp. So sorry.

I, glad for having run the vacuum that morning, say, "It was time." We eat her cake. Wrapping words around wounds, I repeat how it was: so few in the pews at St. Michael's, Mama's rosary around her fingers. A packet of letters from my brother.

"I almost put them in with her. But, at the last minute, I didn't," I say.

"In the end, what difference does it make?" Kay says.

Fall and the days are short. Kay stays. The kids come home. But not Stanley. Overtime at Sikorsky Aircraft. Double shifts. Helicopter blades slicing Vietnam's green heat. Chop. Chop. Chop.

"Hope Billy doesn't go over," says Kay.

"A girl's brother in my class already has," says Rosemary.

"In mine too," says Diane.

Michael says nothing, goes up the hall to his room. Chop. Chop. Chop.

When he leaves, the dust in his room defeats me. Rosemary begs me to move Diane out of their room and into his, but I stand, pan in hand, by his bed still littered by his leaving.

"God damn it, Helen, you can't make a shrine of it," Stanley says. But I, mute, think maybe God has damned me to do just that. What but a shrine can atone for the lie I told so long ago?

The morning the knock comes, I squeeze behind the picture window to lift the blind's metal slat. There are two. White caps. Blue tunics. Brass buttons so shiny that new suns must have been pressed into their young chests. Rosemary comes down the hall, lets them in.

In its triangle case, the flag moves. First on top of the TV. Then up the hall to our bedroom. Finally, to Diane's room when she leaves. She brings her boy named Michael from Arkansas when Stanley goes. That morning, almost every pew in St. Michael's is filled with his men from Sikorsky Aircraft.

Now, sometimes Kay calls. I say I should clean the closets. "In the end, what difference does it make?" she says. Rosemary, her condo converted from a third-floor flat two blocks from Mama's old bus stop calls too: "What did you do today, Mom?"

I have my lies ready: "I cleaned the oven." "I scrubbed the floor."

How can I explain the time I spend watching the downward drifting dust? How it rides the slatted light. Downward, homeward drifting. Like souls returning from having been blasted so far away. How can I explain the time I spend watching that?

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