

## *The Lemon Tree*

EMILY SWAINE

I was walking back to camp with some new supplies when I noticed all the boys standing around, smiles on all their faces. My grip around the load I was carrying gave in and it fell to the ground. I ran straight to Captain. The post was in. Letters didn't come around too many times but when they did we were like little boys on Christmas morning. I scrambled through the pile of white papers but when I saw her delicately written letters arranged to spell out my name my heart froze and for a second my breath left me. I staggered towards my lemon tree where I read during any free time we had. I climbed up to my branch. It held me in just the same way that her arms did. Her letter smelled like moth balls and peppermint. I knew those smells. I could easily picture her sitting up in her favorite corner of the house when she wrote it. Tucked away in the attic was a small space lit by a window that overlooked her garden. We would sit up there for hours counting the butterflies and stuffing our faces with peppermints I stole off Ma. Of course I can't remember how many butterflies we last counted. I hadn't sat up there, with her next to me, in over a year. I got sent to war along with the rest of the boys. Except George, my best friend, he was only seventeen when they started the draft. He got to stay at home, work at his Pop's store. At least my girl is being looked after, he's a good buddy, he and Ma will watch over her while I'm away. The envelope was thick today and I couldn't wait a second longer to read her sweet words.

*My dearest Billy,*

*The days don't get any shorter. I'm sure it's worse where you are but its hard breathing here without you. You got me worrying and you know how I feel about worrying, makes me wrinkle and I'm too young to wrinkle. My heart aches thinking about you being in danger, but also because I'm so hopelessly in love with you that it just hurts being so far away. I'm sitting up in our spot writing this. It's getting colder and the butterflies won't be out for much longer. I hope this is the last time I have to count them alone; it is not that easy all by myself. I like to think that they'll bring you home to me when they come back next spring. George is looking out for me real well. He stops by once a week to check up on me, its real sweet of him. You take care of yourself now Billy. You promised you'd come home and I'm holding you to it.*

*Forever and Always,*

*Jenny*

As much as I loved getting her letters they only reminded me about how much I missed her and how far from her I really was. I kept her picture in the chest pocket on my jacket. It was my favorite one. She was in that white summer dress sitting on a branch down by the lake. The wind was blowing hard that day and her dress swirled around mixing with her long brown curls. But my favorite part was her smile. Jenny's smile could light up the darkest room, but there was something special about that day. That was the day I told her I was falling in love with her and there wasn't a damn thing she could do but to fall with me. I folded up the letter, removed some old thin pages from my pocket and placed the new pages next to the picture. I always exchanged her

old words with the new. Kept her fresh in my mind and heart, right where she belonged.

The attack came around dawn. The lights were dreamlike but the noises and the screams, they were terrifying. We ran drills daily preparing for exactly this, but when it happens it's hard to think straight enough to remember it all. You do what you can to stay safe, to keep your buddies alive. It's not about being the hero. It's about playing the game and watchin' out for those on your team.

Only nine men made it through the night. Nine of twenty-three, and I was one of them. To many of the men here, a night like that would cause them to think of the short time they have left of their lives, but not me. I began that day thinking of a life that had only just begun. I would make it to the end. I would go home to my beautiful Jenny and I would make her my wife. I could picture us out back in the summer with the kids chasing the butterflies around the yard. No, our life was not over, or anywhere close to over.

After the attack, we didn't have to move camp or nothing like that, but we had enough work to keep us busy the next few days. We spent hours rebuilding. I wasn't really there though, at least my mind wasn't. It was 2,000 miles away with a girl I loved more than anything else in the world. It was that day that I decided to marry her. We had a few minutes for lunch and I climbed up my tree and nestled myself into her arms.

*My beautiful Jenny,*

*There was an attack last night but please, sweetheart, do not worry. I am ok, I promise. It's hard losin' some of the guys, but Captain is trying to*

*keep our spirits high. I never imagined being away from you would be so painful but it is your love that keeps me going. Knowing that I will be coming home to you makes the sun rise every day.*

*You deserve better than a letter but I must ask you now for I just can't wait another minute. I know that my heart will not beat for any other the way it beats for you and if you feel the same, my love, then marry me. If you do I know that the sun will rise for us every morning.*

*All the love that I have, forever and always,*

*Billy*

She said yes. I was blind to the happiness that was possible in this world. When she agreed to be my wife the war no longer existed in my mind. That's why I loved her no matter what; the rest of the world faded away if only I read one of her letters or daydreamed of the time we spent together or thought of the memories we'd make soon enough.

After that night there was a dry spell of fighting and loss. We had weeks of sitting around wasting time. Jenny and I exchanged more letters over the next two months. She told me of the happenings back at home; birthdays I was missing, talk around the town and of the time she spent with my mother and George. They seemed to be getting on just fine. She wrote that he was coming by more often. They spent a few afternoons on the porch during the cool fall days and played games in the living room when it was too cold to be outside. I was happy that they were becoming friends. It was nice that they could look out for each other, keep each other company while I was gone. Ma wrote too. She kept me up to date with the news of the

family. She said Jenny hadn't been by in a few weeks. She had been visiting Ma every week when I first left but not so much these days. The days were beginning to grow colder and colder. I found one of the few places the sun still hit, away from the rest of the boys and leaned upon a rock to slip away into my dreams for a few hours. I woke up shivering to a gray dusk sky. Next to me was a bit of dinner and a small white envelope.

My Billy,

*I'm sorry I have not written lately, been trying to keep busy. It is cold here. The days are becoming shorter and the sun does not rise as brightly. I went to visit your mother just a few days ago. She seems to be doing alright. Better than those first days you were gone. I hope with all of my heart that you are surviving over there. We all miss you; Ma and George, Lily too. You wouldn't believe how big she has gotten, she misses her big brother. It's hard for us all, in different ways, sitting over here, living life, while you're over there fighting for us. It's been especially hard on George. I think some days he feels guilty that he's not standing next to you. I try and tell him he's doing his part at home. Keeping the business running and taking care of me. He stops in to see your mom too. Brings her goods from town or something new to read, keeps her mind off worrying about you.*

*Love always,*

*Jenny*

There was no forever. There was an always, but no forever. Since that day by the lake, we promised each other that our love would last always and forever. I'm sure she did not realize; I'm sure it was an

honest mistake. After all, always is still always, even without the forever, and always sounds perfect to me.

I wrote her back, happy that she and Ma were being taken care of. Jenny seemed to know a lot about what was going on with George, but I guess they needed something to talk about while they were visiting. I didn't mention anything about it in the letter but I did ask her if I should write and check up on him. He and I had exchanged a few letters but one day he stopped writin' back, so I stopped writin'. I got her response a while later. She said not to write George. She wrote that he was going through some things at home and that he was being taken care of. Jenny also told me that she had been visiting him at his home lately. She told me it was just easier for him some days. She said it was especially warm one day and that a few butterflies returned. Jenny was sitting out on the porch that day with George. She told me how he helped her count them that day. My heart trembled a little. Counting butterflies was ours. We'd done it since we were six, never with anyone else, just us two, but she never could do it on her own. It was a good thing, then, that George was there to help her just this once.

The next morning my heart flew, I couldn't speak. My breath was thin and quick. For a few moments I couldn't see straight and the ability to stand seemed to have left me. I was going home. If there were any warm days left I would be there to count the butterflies. Jenny would finally become my wife, George would stand beside me as my best man and Ma would be able to smile again.

*My one and only,*

*Today is the beginning of always. Jenny I am coming home to you, to our future. Our life will begin soon and I will hold my breath until it does. I believe in our love for look at the roads it has already traveled. It is worn in and old in age yet its soul is young and undoubting. We have lived this life for too long alone, but those days will die soon. For when I return home, you will never wake to face a day on your own.*

*Forever and Always,*

*Billy*

We spent one last night at camp. It was cold and the wind howled. By midnight the rain was pounding down on us. The lighter sleepers were woken by the beats of thunder and the blazes of lightning. The night was long, but when morning came the storm had gone. The wind had wounded camp, but it was alright because it would no longer be our home. As we began packing I realized that my lemon tree had been ruined by the storm. It hurt me to see the broken parts of the tree. It was the one thing left here that reminded me of our love and now it was gone. Every part of the tree was shattered. The trunk was split in two, the unripe lemons were scattered on the ground and her arms lay broken. Her arms, which had held me for so many days, were gone. It would be okay though. I would go home and she would wrap her small, warm arms around me and all would be right again.

The trip was lengthy, bus rides and airplanes. Hours spent sitting, waiting. I could not stop thinking of what it would be like to touch her again. I wondered if her skin would still be warm and soft as it brushed against me as we walked side by side, if her cheeks would still blush

with every kiss, if her hand would sweat ever so slightly as I held it tightly in mine. Would those big brown eyes be as bottomless as when I left so that I could still spend hours looking into them?

It was late afternoon when the buses rolled into town. It had taken us four days to make the journey home. The streets were lined with men and women, boys and girls. They were yelling and screaming. Some had signs while mothers had treats waiting in their arms so their boys wouldn't go another minute without real, home cooked food. Some wore smiles, others wore tears. The buses moved through the sea of people and at last the breaks screeched and the tires stopped spinning.

We looked at the mass of people waiting to welcome us home and then we looked at each other. Some of the boys still had road to cover. This wasn't home to everyone. The goodbyes were quick. There was no hesitation to feel happy in being home, but there was a pain that came knowing we might never see each other again. We were saying goodbye to family and saying goodbye to family isn't a natural occurrence. Mostly, everything went unspoken. Saying goodbye to these guys meant we were saying goodbye to a part of our lives that we wouldn't want to live again. We would talk about it, maybe, to our families or to our grandkids one day, but no one would understand the way these men would. With that, we were all an irreplaceable part of the lives of many men and knowing this, we stepped off the buses with heavy hearts.

My eyes fluttered from face to face. I was searching for a dark brown pair to meet mine. I would recognize them instantly. They flickered, slightly, with a hint of gold but the darkness that they held was so distracting that the gold tended to melt away. My eyes first met another familiar pair. This pair, however, did not belong to my Jenny but to my



sweet, sweet mother. I searched the remaining eyes, hunting for the only two in the world that mattered. I changed my focus to find any other familiar face. No George. No Lily. No Jenny.

I forced my way through the crowd and fell into my mother's arms. I could feel it in the way she held me, but what it was I could not be sure. There was comfort in her arms, but I felt fear as well. She did not want me to look into her eyes. She feared that I would be too wounded by the truth I saw in them.

I wept silently as my mother clutched my arm. The cheers of happiness and relief were swept away with waves of grief and pain and replaced with the devastating sounds of my breaking heart. We slipped away, unnoticed, from the blissful families and made our way home.

I don't really remember the days that followed. They blurred together as if one day never ended and so the next could not begin. I sat on the old green rocker that looked out over the lake. Sometimes I rocked, but I didn't really have the energy for that so most of the time I just sat, staring into a world that seemed so empty to me. Some friends stopped by. I did not speak to them when they came. My eyes remained fixated on the window. I listened, occasionally, to what they had to say, I didn't really see the point in listening though; none of it would bring her back. Nothing would bring my sweet Jenny back into my arms. The only person I wanted to see did not come. I didn't even hear from George. I wanted to be angry at him, but if he felt even a shred of the hurt that throbbed inside of me then I would understand why he could not come.

The man standing in front of me was not me. He wore a black suit with a black tie and pain in his eyes, but as I finished buttoning my

jacket, so did he. As I flattened my hair, so did he. As I cried, so did he. I did not recognize this man for he was not in the plans I wrote for my life. I could not bear to look at him any longer and so I left. I went downstairs, past blank faces, through the back door and stumbled down to an old tree branch down by the lake. I held a picture in my hand of a girl I would love, forever and always. She sat on this same branch years ago but it wasn't the branch I needed. The branches of a lemon tree that no longer existed, in a place where I would never return, they were what I needed; her arms around me just one last time.

The grass was a vibrant green but the sky was dark. We sat in rows. She lay, still, before us. Her cheeks were not flushed, her skin was not warm and her heart did not beat. I sat, still, like her, only my heart beat feverishly beneath my shirt. My skin was numb to the touch of my mother's hand and my eyes were locked on my darling girl. The pastor spoke words that I did not hear and the people around me cried silent tears. My eyes saw only her, but as they began to lower her into the cold, dark earth I lifted my eyes to find an unsettling sight and I began to wonder; even if the truth is so cruel that it kills you, isn't it still better than any lie? Sometimes, people lie to others to spare them unimaginable pain. Sometimes, we lie to ourselves because the truth presents us with things that we do not choose, that we do not want to believe. And so, as I lifted my eyes, I saw lies and I saw truth. I saw in George's face the same person I saw in the mirror. The same pain that ran through my body ran through his. The same love that would live on in me would also live on in him. □