SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER

STORY

SERVICEMEN'S ISSUE

THIS ISSUE OF STORY *highlights the work of men who have seen war at first hand. Returning now, most of them, to their homes, they have here re-created the essence of their wartime experience in some of the most outstanding short stories of today.*

40 CENTS

BE IT EVER SO HUMBLE

by

L. Outlaw-Shallit

L. OUTLAW-SHALLIT, ex-staff writer for the *Philadelphia Record,* enlisted in the WAC in 1943 and is now serving as an education officer at Army Service Forces Convalescent Hospital, Camp Upton, L. I., advising and instructing veterans. She says, "Humorous, friendly, passionately eager for democracy, haters of hokum, they are the hope of the world. 'Be It Ever So Humble' represents the desires of many of them for a chance for decent living for all—for a revolt against the fraudulent picture (given by advertisers and the movies) of an America where everybody is happy because everybody has everything he needs."

BURNS had been home only a few days when he began to remember the house and the people in it and the dog. That is, he began to remember them as they really were, and he saw that they were no different: his mother's hair was grayer and his father's back more bent, but that was all.

He had been away for four years and now, as he sat in the kitchen and listened to the drip of the pipe that had dripped four years ago, he tried to understand what had happened to home while he had been away. It was only when he tried to understand that he knew nothing had happened.

Still, while he was in Italy and in the early days of the advance, he had sat in mud that swirled around him like a repugnantly patterned velvet, and at that time the memory of home breathed upon him like a blessing from the lips of a beautiful woman.

He remembered the day he sat on the stump of a shattered tree he had never seen in bloom. He was tired and stinging in the head and he listlessly stirred with his fingers the cold food in his mess kit. The china of home was the china of the glossy magazines, white cups sprigged with lilac. White fingers touched the cups; there was body ease of deep chairs, comfort of warm rugs for the feet, white, folded linen for the table.

The men talked about home, of course. That was all they talked about. You'd think they'd find something else, after the four years. But the talk of home and the people in the home went on and on. And the homes grew. They got bigger. Bigger than the biggest tank, and more real than the mud.

That was it. How funny, that the home got bigger. Not "funny, funny," as the cute girls used to say in school, but damned funny, the way a soldier says it when he knows something, somewhere, is wrong, kaput, screwed up, snafu.

His home got bigger. Now that he thought about it, he knew it had grown bigger on him while he talked and thought about it. It was a kind of back-

ward procedure of what happened when you grew up and went back to places that had always seemed so big, and you found out that they were really little, but you had been littler. Now that you were big you knew the house was small; you knew it the day you left, but the longer you stayed away the bigger it got. It seemed full of rooms.

Over there, his house had many rooms, and they were all clean and orderly and made for him. Oh, they weren't hung with brocade and dollar signs. That wasn't it at all. They were —full of color. (You never thought about color until you got over there and there wasn't any color, and then you wanted reds and oranges and purples, all together.)

And in the house you wanted the warm, woman body of love. That was all.

He remembered his own voice, telling the fellows, "We've got a dog . . . Mickey . . . white (and boy, when he's had a bath, believe me, he's *white*) and that sonofagun jumps all over me when I come in. And then there's dinner . . . big biscuits (my mother makes 'em) and plenty of butter. And no one ever touches my room. I don't let 'em. My books and pipe rack and everything. They're all there."

Talking and listening to his words, he grew warm and he had a new fever, a fat, choking excitement. There wasn't enough for him to say about home, and when someone said the word "Brooklyn," he twitched in a spasm of passion. The word on an envelope might have been a mouth pressed on his. There, in the mud and cold, it was love for him, the word Brooklyn and the home talk.

Only once, when Rose, his buddy, showed pictures of his home did Burns remember. Rose, a short, pinched-faced fellow, whose father owned a chain of dry-goods stores in New York, showed his pictures. They were snapshots and the house was on Long Island. He took them out of an envelope and looked at them and smiled at them as if they could smile back. And he showed them to Burns.

Burns remembered the glossy pictures. Rose's home was solid and ivy covered, like a picture in the suburban real-estate section. It had a long path, with some flowers bordering it, and a woman stood in the doorway and waved. She was white haired, her hair tight and perfect, like the women in the ads who holds the cooky jar and beams at her imaginary family.

The shine on the woman's slippers had caught the sunlight and the picture had caught the shine.

"My mother," Rose said, and for a minute his voice sounded different, it lost its careless roughness.

And then, briefly, Burns's picture of home returned to him—a frozen black-and-white picture of the house the way he had seen it with his eyes, and even there, in the mud, he could hear the drip of the kitchen pipe and for a little while he remembered his hatred of the drip and he knew the white linen wasn't in his house. Not really.

All the days made the same faces, whether the men rested or fought, and in this fat and sluggish monotony of time home came again and he thought about it and it was as if he said, "All right. It's not Rose's. It's mine. It's not the same." And he began to polish the difference and it began to shine. Because the difference he accepted was the difference between Rose's house and his

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Until now he had been hearing the word. The word "home" had been singing in his ear and lulling him, running love caresses up and down his body.

But on the third day at home he shook it from him and he got up and he looked around. That was when he knew that he had hated home on the day he went into the Army, the day so soon after he had left high school. He had hated it then and he had left it with nonchalance.

The three-room flat was not at the water front, but one "avenoo up," his mother said. It was a remodeled flat, and the owner called it an apartment. It was on the ground floor, so the basement pipes ran through it and the heat from the pipes blackened the walls and the ceilings. The floor was parquet, but it was scratched and sullen, reflecting no light.

The furnishings—well, his family were poor people. They had always been poor; not starving, but "scraping along," his mother said. And now Pop was old and he had the pension and a few thousand dollars too—"so we can relax in our old age," his mother said.

They had been relaxing ever since his last two years of high school. Just like that, they started relaxing and getting fat and old and quiet; so his words to them grew limp and discouraged, and finally he didn't talk. It wasn't that he was unfriendly; it was just that his mind was talking in words they couldn't answer.

They didn't clean after them, either. When he was in high school, when he said good-by to the kids at the door because he didn't want to bring them inside—that was when they started dropping things and leaving them and hanging things on doorknobs and leaving the dog's leash on the floor when they brought him back from walking.

His folks were relaxing, so his Pop went to the beer parlor on the corner every night and his mother, fat enough to hate movement, would sit and read the *News* and her legs would sprawl. Her legs had sprawled when he was in school, too, and he hated the sight of the two big woman legs spread out, the papers falling at the swollen feet.

They had been good to him. It was only that it was so long ago—the days when they had seemed alive and full of love and wonderful. (In those days his mother was pretty, plump, and high colored, and she had worn white pointed shoes and ruffled chiffon dresses. He remembered looking after her as she walked down the street.)

He supposed he loved them. When he had come home they had kissed him and fed him and they were excited. But the excitement stopped after the first evening, and they went on living as they had been living all along. As if he weren't home at all, as if everything about him hadn't changed.

Now, sitting in the kitchen the way he used to sit when he was in high school, at the same table where he used spread his books and papers, he thought about it. The uncovered bulb in the hall glowed sternly. His mother's head rested on her shoulder. She was sleeping. The old dog, gray from the unwashed floor, sullenly toyed with a large bone. Crumbs of meat from the bone were spread around the room, and they left grease spots on the faded linoleum.

Even this he could remember, so that looking down on his O.D. sleeve and

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the wear-and-care-of-the-uniform crease in it, he wondered if he had ever been away.

He got up and walked around the room, drumming his fingers on the table and stepping over the grease spots. He hadn't thought about it at all—what he would do when he got home. He had just thought about home, because home and school were all that he had left behind him. Yesterday his father had said that Sperry's could use him because he knew about machines, and it was a war job and it paid. He supposed that he should go down and talk to them tomorrow. He hesitated and looked around, as if he expected to talk to someone, but his mother was asleep. The dog looked at him with suspicion. Too old to bother with him any more, didn't even wag his tail. Yes, that was a change. Mickey had been young when Burns left for the war.

He walked into his room and groped for the light. The bed was unmade. The dust clung to his books and the battered pipe rack. He looked around him with distaste. Slowly, carefully, he began to remove the sheets from the bed and to turn the mattress and to smooth the sheets and to fold them up and under, up and under.

HE had been working for Sperry's for a week when he passed the department store. He turned around and went back and looked at the improbable window displays. Inside he was caught for a minute with the lights and the colors and the lamps hanging from the ceilings, because it was spring and the Easter fashions had come. He felt blues and pinks and greens and the winking of gold jewelry and the feminine softness of silks move toward him and he backed away and stood, almost frightened, until he remembered.

Then he found the elevator and stood pressed against its wall and he kept his eyes on the long brown hair of the elevator operator, a girl in a white suit with an extravagant red "M" on it. At first he thought it might be her initial, but then he remembered that it stood for the name of the store. Advertising. He rode all the way to the top and then she turned to him and looked at him and she spoke sharply. (Did she think he should be in uniform? Was that the reason for her anger?)

"Well? Well, mister? Whatcha-want?" She chewed her gum, demandingly.

"The — er — household furnishings," he fumbled, and his mouth worked. She frightened him, with her jaw clamping on the gum, clamping hard and viciously on it.

"Sixth floor!" she said, banging the doors and pushing the button.

It was deep, rug quiet on the sixth floor. At first the rugs were all that he could see. Like colored grass, they stretched before him, and he remembered Rose and the house. He walked forward.

ONE night in the movies he saw the story of a soldier who had come home. The soldier was young and his nose turned up and he kept saying, "Golly. This is It." He used long words about the battles he had been in and how it felt to be in them. He spent from an unending supply of dollars and he had one stripe on his sleeve. And this soldier, who worked for Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, came home and they had banners in the street because he had killed so many Japs, and on all the white porches (where
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white porches (where roses clambered) the people (and all the pretty girls in the town) waved at him, and in his own house his family sat around a big table with candles on it. All the ladies wore evening gowns, very low cut, and the mother held the boy in her arms (she wore a black fancy dress and she didn't look bulgy anywhere) and she said, "Now I know how all the mothers feel . . . everywhere in America." Sparkle rings. Fall tears. Narrow-chested man who works for Metro-Goldwyn Mayer and is seen often at Twenty-one, what do you say? I didn't hear you. Oh, you say, modestly, with the charm that has won the hearts of the nation, you say, "I tried to make it the story of America's GI . . . the typical soldier who comes home to the typical family." Mr. Luce's magazines called it the "Movie of the Month."

AT the end of the week he gave his mother some money from his pay envelope (neat Manila envelope coming through the wire grating; gone lines, twisting, turning, forming in the rain before the v opening of the tent; gone the signing of the first name, middle initial, last name, and the bark, "Count it before ya leave!" Now just Manila envelope, and pretty fat).

His mother nodded and put the money in her bosom, with the plucking-pushing-down movement she used to make when Pop brought money home. She didn't say anything except, "Have some more potatoes." The dinner was good; his mother was a good cook. But the dishes never seemed clean. He saw a scar of old food on the cup and he scraped it off with his nail.

If she had new things, if somebody bought new things for her, he began to say in his mind.

On the night the things came from the department store he got a call from Rose, who got out of the Army when he got out. Rose was inviting him to his house. Rose's voice sounded funny over the telephone, remembered-forgotten. When? The next night. The Long Island Railroad. Islip. Yes, that was it, the lisping name heard long ago in Italy. Islip.

But he was too excited about the new things to think much of Rose. First there was the set of dishes. White, with lilac sprig. And then there were the curtains, a soft and billowing rose. The lady said they would wash, yes, and his mother could return them if she didn't take to the color. And then there was a big fluffy lavender bath mat. They were all there, in the vestibule, when he came in.

His father and mother were sitting at the kitchen table. His father smiled lazily when he came in. He said, "How's the soldier?" but he picked absently at his teeth and didn't wait for an answer. He got up from the table and put on his hat. "Down for a beer," he said, the way he had said it when Burns was in high school.

"Well, how are ya, Phil?" his mother asked. "What's in them packages?"

"Oh . . . some things," he said, carelessly, but suddenly he felt like a giver and he imagined his mother's smiles when she saw the goods; so he ran into the vestibule and brought them in and piled them on the old couch. He untied the strings and tore the boxes up and dragged the things out, clumsy in his excitement. There didn't seem to be much when he had unpacked them, but there would be more, he said, falling over his words, there would be more every week.

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His mother touched the bath mat. "Airsatz," she said. "Everything's airsatz today. Nice, though. Pretty color, ain't it? Are you expecting company?"

He bundled the rubbish carefully.

"No . . . mom," he said, slowly. "Just sort of . . . fixin' up."

"Oh," his mother said. Her dull, olive eyes were blank. "Well, they're nice. You going to hang the curtains?" She looked at him with doubt.

"I'll hang them," he said. He went into his room and lay down on the bed. In the kitchen he could hear the pipes dripping, and the pages rustled as his mother picked up the *News*.

THE men thought about other things, sometimes, twitching hard times when their limbs longed for other limbs. They moved from hate to love for the magazine girls. The girls with scattered limbs and breasts. Sometimes they stared at the pictures as if their memory of woman was not a real thing, as if they were just learning that she lived. And other times, they pushed the pictures from them and cursed as they cursed the enemy. The pictures were long, tall, no waist, high cupping-handful breasts and tender satin thighs and round arms to seize and long, long legs to tangle with and hair that fell to waist and turned in and shone like floss. They were the girls they fell upon and broke in two with their angry, part-time love.

In Italy on quiet days when they waited for the order to move up, there was rain. Always. They built a theater. Well, it was really a matter of planks over the mud and boxes on the planks and the boxes were seats. Then, every night, it was the movies. The rain and often the same feature, but it was the movies. The film flickered and cracked and the voices turned adolescent and sometimes faded off altogether and deserted the figures—left them grotesquely mouthing for a generation tuned in to sound. But, anyway and notwithstanding, there were the movies, and Betty Grable with a neat bit of thigh and a plump chicken breast, and there was Hedy Lamarr, icy and white, and a man ached to despoil her with his mud fingers of love.

Every night, always, the crowded-together, shoulder-to-shoulder feeding. Every night, always, the love-me, never-leave-me, the soft mouth, the bare shoulder, and only imagination to span the hours after the last Will Hays-sponsored kiss.

HE didn't call his mother that night but went straight to Rose's on the 5:05. On the way out he argued with himself about the telephone call he had not made, and he began to feel guilt, hot fingered at his neck. Angry, he thought: I'm changed. I'm older. And he tried to catch by the elbow the four years away and the longness of his legs and the foul and lovely short words flung at the mud. But he had it all mixed up with a sweater he found in his closet at home: the sweater said "Commerce Hi" and there was its wool smell and he was a truant at the Paramount Theater. He sat in the back row in ecstasy over the Big Apple. But always, when he was late, he had called her. Behind his eyelids with the picture of the kitchen and his silent, bent-over parents. He could not keep the confusion, a phlegm, from his throat.

He found it necessary to take a taxi at Islip. The taxi was an old sedan and its price was fifty cents for servicemen and a dollar for civilians. He handed

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the driver fifty cents and the man looked at him and kept his palm opened. Burns wanted to smite the palm, but the driver was an old and toothless man. "Sorry . . . sorry," Burns muttered. The old man shook his head angrily.

Burns looked around as he climbed out of the cab. His eyes followed the path. Beyond windows, lights were warm, round spots. He hurried to Rose's door.

Burns looked for the baggy fatigues and the no-shave face, but Rose was plumper, even in this short time, and his skin was pink. His hair looked as if someone had taken it from him and brushed it and returned it with a smile. His suit was an expensive one (there must be a label on the inside, at the neck—a cream silk label with a manufacturer's florid signature); he wore a light-colored fuzzy sweater under the suit and under the sweater he wore a cream-colored shirt. He padded, dog-like, in brown suede loafers. He was smoking a pipe.

Rose's house was the snapshot in the dirty hand, a long time ago, but suddenly Burns was afraid of Rose and he couldn't find much to say to him. He was not afraid of Rose's mother. She was soft, and her lips turned up gently, and the little silver bracelet on her arm clinked against the glass-topped table when she gave him a drink.

Their voices were quiet in the big room until the doorbell rang, and Rose jumped up, full of action, and winked at Burns. Burns knew it was Ann, Rose's girl, the picture in the helmet. Now all Rose's pictures were moving around, but his own pictures—

(Last week there was the girl he had known in high school. She had dark stains under her arms and her stockings were rolled at her knees, so a white, unhealthy bulge showed above her garter. That girl's name was Frances, and his mother said she was a "good, hard-working girl," but when he sat in the dark with her, her mouth was loose and too wet. Lost, lovely, curving bodies and clean, long hair and rising sweet to smell and cupping breasts. Frances smacked when she sat down, and her bleating voice angered him.)

Ann, Rose's Ann (oh sweet, slick magazine and flickering screen), moved freely in a silken dress. When she bent there was no gap in her clothing and no wrench and bulge in her body. Her fingers were round and delicately pinked. She smiled often, but slowly, and she said soft things. "It must be good to be home. Robert (Robert? Rose?) talked about you so often. Do you live in New York?"

Later Rose showed him the books. "Burns, you like books," he said, and invited him into the little square room, lined with book shelves. Burns looked at them and lifted them, but he could see none of the titles. He sensed that Rose was embarrassed with him, now. Out of the mud only—"Burns, you like books?" He knew that Rose was eager to be back in the other room with the silken Ann, the clinking-bracelet mother, the warm, round spots of light.

At the door he turned to Rose and looked for him. He looked for Rose's eyes as they dreamed of home. But Rose's eyes were filled with the body of the dream. This is mine; home I can touch.

"I'd—like to invite you to my place sometime," Burns told them, fingering his hat. They smiled at him, but he knew, even in their quiet kindness, that they knew he would not invite them.

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OUTSIDE he felt alone and tired. There were three blocks from the subway to his house and over the apartments the cool, discerning moonlight lay. In a dream, he saw Italy and remembered that once, when things were quieted, he went to a concert and heard a diva sing in Italian; he learned a little Italian because it was soft and full of love. In Germany he saw some of the captured pictures, the Gainsboroughs and the Rubens. He remembered the rose of the new curtains, like the colors in the paintings. Well, he thought, it's all mixed up. Drearily, he thought, I'm home and it's all over. The Red Cross girl on the boat had said, every day, "We're a morning nearer home."

When he got to the door of the house he knew that soon he would have to leave. He didn't know where he would go or what he would look for. But he would have to leave. He sighed and put the key in the door.

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